

## **In the Palm of Your Hand: Lobster Rolls and Contradicting Performances of Regional Identity**

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The rocky coast of Maine, guarded by lighthouses immemorial and braved by rugged fishermen in weathered boats, must present to the nation the most picturesque image of America's Northeastern Seaboard. Maine's landscape draws upwards of sixteen million visitors annually,<sup>1</sup> all pursuing "The Way Life Should Be." There may be many opinions concerning the allure of Maine, but as the state's material culture may suggest, "The way life should be" necessarily requires lobster. There is no shortage of brightly colored, cartoonish lobster memorabilia in the overflowing souvenir shops that plague Maine's coast. Almost always bright red, a color that lobsters only turn when cooked, the souvenirs sold to tourists mirror the freshly steamed bodies of lobsters served at shacks to visitors and Mainers alike. The lobster's status as an icon is unmistakable. What is more apparent is this dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972): 66.

between iconography and commodity. In Maine, depictions of lobsters are plentiful, depictions as food are king.

The abundance of lobster-related material culture in the regions surrounding the Gulf of Maine demonstrates the American Lobster's economic, cultural, and culinary importance. Lobster boats, traps, shacks, souvenirs, and specialized utensils are highly visible. Despite its breadth of cultural influence, the American lobster's primary importance is of course its culinary use. Rather than focusing on the lobster shears, crackers, and picks that often aid in the consumption of American lobster or related industrial materials like traps and boats, this essay will discuss the materiality of a ubiquitous item of New England fare, the Maine lobster roll. Like other expressions of Maine's material culture, exploring the histories and meanings embedded in the state's food will serve as a valuable dive into the intricacies and contradictions of regional culture. As a material object, the Maine lobster roll is composed of ingredients layered with regional histories while exhibiting formal qualities appealing to American culture more broadly.

The discipline of material culture is often concerned with enduring materials, objects that may be passed down through generations and stand as lasting representations of their given culture. In many cases these objects may even survive to be encountered after the culture has dwindled. Cuisines and the "edible objects" that compose them, however,

are inherently ephemeral in comparison to more durable or stationary crafts. These types of artifacts are known as “embodied material culture. [a] special kind of material culture... created specifically for immediate destruction, but destruction through the transformative process of ingestion into the human body.”<sup>2</sup> As destruction is a required component of any food item’s cultural script, to study edible objects as material we must study codified, composed items or meals, of which the lobster roll is one, and individual ingredients which are only as accessible as they are repeated in soil and flesh.

A culture’s cuisine is emblematic of who a group is and who they are not, and as foodways are among the most conservative and persistent aspects of culture, they endure metaphysical shifts of identity and difference.<sup>3</sup> Codified food items survive as living historical records, being continually layered with modern histories. However, individual edible materials or objects do not alone represent the varied identities and histories of a culture but stand as

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas, 66.

<sup>3</sup> “These Are America’s Best Lobster Rolls,” *Food & Wine*, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.foodandwine.com/travel/americas-best-lobster-rolls>. While it is true that the more recognizable composition of a lobster roll always includes a toasted New England split-top hot dog roll, a hamburger style bun does seem to serve as a culturally acceptable variation. This is evident by the fact that The Clam Shack, a Kennebunkport institution and valued lobster roll vendor, serves their rolls on locally made hamburger buns.

markers within patterns of “meal formats.” “Meal formats,” as they are described by Dietler and Mary Douglas, are characteristically synonymous with “cuisine.” That is, the patterns of eating behaviors and repetition of form.<sup>4</sup> The dishes that compose a cuisine, codified and repeatable compositions of food items, are referred to in this essay as “edible objects.” These objects stand as artifacts and markers of the lived experiences within a given culture as well as the culture’s history, geography and regional identity.

It is important to note that the codification of edible objects does not only require a recognizable assortment of ingredients, but also proper composition. The composition and preparation of ingredients into recognizable and codified forms hinges on proper technique. Not unlike carpentry, culinary technique (knife skills, the size and shape of cuts, different applications of heat and general attention to the treatment of ingredients) is what properly constructs edible objects and the traditions that shape cuisine more broadly.

### **A Handheld Archive**

Human interactions with and alterations of the landscape have been described by Henry Glassie as “a

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4 Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). Bobrow-Strain synthesizes the social histories that led to the adoption of industrial white bread in their book. Their work would serve as a useful point of reference for any interested researcher.

palimpsest, the people's own manuscript, their handmade history book."<sup>5</sup> Material culture should generally be approached in this manner, with the assumption that objects hold within them archives of human history. While the landscape endures time much better than meat, grains, or produce, as products of the landscape it would follow that they may carry related history. Glassie claims that, while the landscape is an archive of sorts, it has "no pat answers". Instead, he suggests that the landscape sits patiently awaiting analysis, and that "We cannot understand... unless we know the language."<sup>6</sup> While the language of cuisine has been discussed by scholars like Mary Douglas whose work will be discussed later on, the matter requires further attention because unlike the landscape, food does not sit patiently. Food is preferably made and ingested multiple times a day, literally and figuratively feeding culture. Ingredients, meals, and cuisine provide a pattern for our days, weeks, and yearly celebrations and remain in constant dialogue with traditional and adaptive elements of human culture.

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Groening, "Another Good Year for Maine Tourism - Island Institute," accessed April 18, 2023, <https://www.islandinstitute.org/working-waterfront/another-good-year-for-maine-tourism/>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Dietler, "Culinary Encounters: Food, Identity, and Colonialism," 2006, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Culinary-Encounters-%3A-Food-%2C-Identity-%2C-and-Dietler/e01eea0facbc26d1647b5c7e588611df6bc256f2>.

Cuisine should be read as a historical text just as closely as the landscape because it is an intimate marker of specific cultural groups in practice and inclusive of humanity in concept. Glassie's assertion that, "Few people write. Everyone makes things" can and should be applied to the study of food.<sup>7</sup> Everyone is either a cook or is closely acquainted with someone who is. Everyone eats. What people eat specifically is emblematic of restrictions of place, class, gender, and embedded understandings of cultural norms. The patterns of human experience are what birth cuisine. To paraphrase Maine food historian Sandy Oliver, foods are not invented but rather descended from people and their histories.<sup>8</sup> The intimate relationship between food and people is what makes edible objects such valuable archives.

As an artifact of New England culture, the lobster roll's archival memory begins the moment English colonists in the region encountered an American lobster. The American lobster's physical similarities with its European counterpart meant that it would have been recognized as a food source.<sup>9</sup> However, initial economic struggle coupled with the abundance of American lobster meant that it was

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<sup>7</sup> Dietler, "Culinary Encounters," 223.

<sup>8</sup> Dietler, "Culinary Encounters," 224.

<sup>9</sup> Sandy Oliver, "What You Hear about Lobsters, and What's True - Island Institute," accessed 2023, <https://www.islandinstitute.org/working-waterfront/what-you-hear-about-lobsters-and-whats-true-2/>.

devalued as poverty food early on. Folktales concerning the status of lobster often conflate the gnarled crustaceans with literal trash, claiming that the animals were reserved for pig feed or fertilizer.<sup>10</sup> Being fed lobster frequently enough in the early colonies was said to be so inhumane that it could push people to riot. A commonly retold folktale concerning a Massachusetts Bay Colony prison depicts just that scenario. After being fed lobster continually the prisoners supposedly rioted until the colony was forced to place a limit on the frequency with which lobster could be humanely served to prisoners.<sup>11</sup> The extent to which lobster was labeled a low-stock commodity continues to be debated. Sandy Oliver, a food historian from Maine who has written much about her state's relationship with lobster, claims that while lobster was considered an economic meal and could be the source of embarrassment for impoverished families, it was certainly not the inspiration for riots as myth suggests.<sup>12</sup>

The archival memory of lobster is also fraught with contradiction, telling a story of competing

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<sup>10</sup> George H. Lewis, "The Maine Lobster as Regional Icon: Competing Images over Time and Social Class," *Food and Foodways* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 1989): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.1989.9961958>.

<sup>11</sup> Marina Santos, "Lobster Lore," MIT Sea Grant (blog), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://seagrant.mit.edu/lobster-lore/>.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver, "What You Hear About Lobsters."

identities, both lived and imposed.<sup>13</sup> While folktales discredit lobster as a legitimate food source for early colonists, historians tell us that lobster was sought after by English settlers as early as 1605. The Archangel, captained by George Weymouth, recorded having caught “about thirty very good and great lobsters” upon arriving in the Gulf of Maine.<sup>14</sup> Wealthy urban families outside of Maine also developed a notable taste for lobster by the early 1700s. Being caught in the Long Island Sound, lobsters were shipped to New York City and Boston, where they were sold live or boiled, respectively. These wealthy families, who would become “summer people,” frequently visiting Maine to escape the city, are the same people Oliver claims would have assumed lobsters were used as fertilizer after encountering canning refuse in fields. Around the same time, lobster boats from Boston began traveling north after the lobster stocks of Southern New England were overfished. As a result of apparent economic opportunity, the Maine lobstering industry began its crucial development.<sup>15</sup>

Analyzing foodways and learning to speak the language of food can unveil valuable social histories.

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<sup>13</sup> Lewis, “The Maine Lobster as regional icon.”

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Billings, “The First Recorded Lobster Catch,” in *The Maine Lobster Industry: A History of Culture, Conservation & Commerce* (Charleston: The History Press, 2014): 9.

<sup>15</sup> Oliver, “*What You Hear About Lobsters.*”

Mary Douglas states that the meanings of foodways lie in the “patterns of social relations” that they represent.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, as wealthy visitors, colloquially referred to as rusticators, developed a taste for the poverty food many Mainers reluctantly subsisted on, the animal became a symbol of the state and its people. Especially after the Civil War, lobster was in high demand and Maine was regularly visited by wealthy out of staters who seemed to associate rugged coastal Mainers with the American lobster.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between rusticators and coastal Mainers, which is geographic, identificatory, and classist, proposed a cultural conflation between the American lobster, Maine, and its people. The canning industry, which began its initial success in the Northeast in the early to mid-19th century, was dominated by lobster in Maine. A survey of the state’s fishing industry written in 1898, which marks the near end of Maine’s lobster canneries, claims that until that point, “Maine [was] the only State in the Union in which lobsters [had] been canned”.<sup>18</sup> This means that West Coast Americans and inlanders would have likely only encountered lobster labeled as being packaged in Maine. Despite the abundance of lobsters in the gulf of Maine, encountering lobster as a Maine

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972): 61.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, 304.

<sup>18</sup> John N. Cobb, “The Lobster Fishery of Maine,” *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission* 19 (1899): 241–65.

specific commodity may have been more meaningful for Americans. First-hand experience with Maine lobster would have helped it become symbolic of an archetypical Northeastern coastline pictured on the can.

Along the Maine coast, people continued to grapple with lobster as a representative food into the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Maine's hesitancy to accept its association with its own poverty foods is evident in that the earliest documented recipe for lobster salad comes from "The American Frugal Housewife." Written by Lydia Maria Child, the cookbook was published in 1832 and "dedicated to Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy".<sup>20</sup> Although the dressing for Child's lobster salad takes the form of a vinaigrette and not mayonnaise,<sup>21</sup> this is the earliest written documentation of what would become the filling for the Maine lobster roll. Child's inclusion of lobster salad in this cookbook clearly illustrates how hesitant Mainers were to consciously accept these kinds of foods into their cuisine.

Educated coastal Mainers began accepting the lobster as a representative food around the turn of the century and had such romantic views of the lobster by the mid-1900's that it assumed the role of statesman.

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, 305

<sup>20</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 2004, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13493>.

<sup>21</sup> Child, 120.

A notable poet and Mainer, Robert P. T. Coffin, wrote in the 1940s that,

*...this thorny Yankee of the crab family goes away from you and other danger tail-end-first. . . As my best New England uncles used to do, he protects his brain by advancing with his rear into the unknown. He gazes still on tradition and authority, and goes forward backward, as best Yankees do. . . He is the archest of arch-conservatives, the Republican of the deep. He is a Yankee, all right.*<sup>22</sup>

This relationship between Mainers, their exports, and non-Mainers seems to represent the pattern by which American Lobster became “Maine Lobster” and an icon representing the people along the coast.

The issue of class is one of the most pertinent aspects of historical memory that is expressed by the Maine lobster roll. Lower classes, drawn to lobsters as a form of subsistence, consequently assumed an imposed conflation with the animal as wealthy classes developed a taste for it. However, those same Mainers have a long history of incorporating lobster into cookery and indeed, sandwiches. There are documented cases of school children being embarrassed of their lobster salad sandwiches and attempting to trade them for a more typical baloney sandwich. Repurposing leftover lobster salad as a

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, 305.

sandwich filling was common among poor families and working fishermen.<sup>23</sup> The practice was convenient, stretched already strained resources, and accommodated movement and labor. According to historian Sandy Oliver, the first proto lobster rolls were most likely sold to tourists by lobstermen between the 1890s and 1910 in order to use up stock that was on the verge of spoiling. The first tourists to eat one of these lobster rolls would have most likely been a wealthy rusticator who would have associated the crustacean with luxury. Again, social interactions between classes are where the lobster roll is derived.

### **Formal Analysis**

Currently, there are two modes of lobster rolls in New England, each with its own codification. These modes both define the boundaries of New England and divide it. Although both variations are present throughout the region, their spheres of influence roughly follow the divide between Southern and Northern New England. The North being loyal to mayonnaise and the South to butter. Although the lobster salad sandwich has been around since the 19th

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<sup>23</sup> Brian Kevin, "The Definitive Oral History of the Lobster Roll," *Down East Magazine* (blog), August 7, 2018, <https://downeast.com/food-drink/maine-lobster-roll/>.

century,<sup>24</sup> what has now been codified as the Maine lobster roll includes commercial white bread inspired by a standard hot dog roll. The American hot dog bun descended from German-American cuisine in the late 19th century and was only popularized around the 1910s.<sup>25</sup> It was somewhere after the turn of the century and most likely in the 1940s when the first standard, recognizable expression of a lobster roll was sold.<sup>26</sup>

The Maine style is composed of cold lobster salad, just thick enough to hold its shape after being spooned into a roll. The salad features picked chunks of meat and bits of celery, as well as mayonnaise which could potentially speak to French influence from the north, as some of the only immigration Maine experienced during the 19th century was from French Canada.<sup>27</sup> The salad itself holds together a set combination of ingredients in the creation of a new, composed object. The addition of mayonnaise and celery, as well as the salad's temperature marks this as an object of economic frugality. Lobster lends itself to being pre-cooked as it spoils quickly and the use of chilled meat and the incorporation of a filler like mayonnaise is a recognizable attempt to stretch the

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<sup>24</sup> Holly Jennings, "New England-Style Bun, from HoJo's to Homemade - *The Boston Globe*," BostonGlobe.com, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/food-dining/2013/07/02/top-loading-buns-typical-new-england-for-lobster-and-clams/QiEC0fUGxJl2MwNizjYxdL/story.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, 304.

<sup>26</sup> Dietler, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, 307.

lobster's yield. As a category, economic meals also signify a new whole as they hold sparse resources together in order to create an alterable object falsely representative of abundance. Regardless of the erroneous presentation of Maine lobster rolls overflowing with luxury seafood, the fillers that mark this dish as an economic one have come to define its composition.

The rolls, characteristically soft and golden, are baked in a specialty pan that ensures they rise and bake together. The result is that when pulled apart, individual rolls are left with pale edges, exposing the bread's crumb. As a result, New England style rolls are uniquely suited to be toasted in butter. These rolls are a regional culinary expression that borrows from broader American meat formats.<sup>28</sup> The characteristically fluffy, enriched white bread that has become a staple of general American culture and is featured in both styles of hotdog rolls, was popularized during World War II as a result of health scares. Anxiety over proper nutrition and emerging industrial progress made the promotion of this type of bread a natural cultural progression. The incorporation of typically American white bread into the lobster roll's agreed upon composition, especially with a slight variation meant to better accommodate local foodways, places this regional artifact in dialogue with

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<sup>28</sup> Henry Petroski, "Form Follows Failure," in *The Evolution of Useful Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992): 22-33.

edible objects representative of the nation more broadly. Further research concerning the meanings and histories embedded in Industrial American bread should be pursued in an attempt to contextualize the nation's sandwich culture and better interpret its foodways.<sup>29</sup>

New England style rolls are always opened from the top in an attempt to keep the salad contained and not retreating from the roll onto a plate. The roll makes this a physically mobile meal, inviting the consumer to walk with it along Maine's picturesque coast. Henry Petroski claims in his essay, "Form follows Failure," that, "we may find food indispensable, but it is not necessary to eat it with a fork. Luxury, rather than necessity, is the mother of invention."<sup>30</sup> While it has been stated that food is descended from culture rather than invented by it, Petroski's argument does aid in analyzing the form of the lobster roll. Dropping the fork, as well as the multitude of tools necessary to crack and cut away the shell, serves several purposes which will be explored in the next section of this essay.

### **The Importance of a Mobile Form**

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (101) (December 1, 2009): 67–70, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-055>.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Glassie, "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies," *Prospects* 3 (October 1978): 1–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0361233300002544>.

Lobster rolls, and sandwiches more generally, exhibit mobility in at least three ways. The first is, of course, physical mobility. The lobster roll, like other sandwiches, scripts the user to employ the roll as a kind of edible container or utensil which allows the consumer to carry and eat their food as they complete other tasks. Robin Bernstein describes the objects that surround us as “script[ing] meaningful bodily movements.”<sup>31</sup> The movements scripted by food include eating, movements aiding the act of eating (sometimes specific to a particular category of food), and digestion. Sandwiches, as handheld foods that very commonly do not require utensils, invite us to move with them as the movements involved in their consumption are not anchored by cutlery or flatware.

The second way in which Maine lobster rolls exhibit mobility is economically. From analyzing the archival history of this edible object, it has been deduced that its contents represent a cuisine of frugality. The repurposing of lobster salad into sandwiches represents the beginning stages of codifying modern lobster rolls, but also the movement of materials across forms. In this way, the lobster roll is historically mobile in an economic sense, making use of leftover materials in a way that shifts funds, language, and materials. When repurposing an object, especially as a component of a greater whole, resources are stretched, and form is altered in a way

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<sup>31</sup> Oliver, “What You Hear About Lobsters.”

that potentially requires new labels, language or cultural scripts. An in-depth study of Maine's economic history in relation to lobstering and the sale of lobster rolls lies outside the scope of this essay. However, the way that lobster rolls help to ration or extend the use of a valuable resource remains a notable aspect of the object's form and history.

The third, and arguably the most culturally pressing manner in which lobster rolls exhibit mobility is socially. Food generally exhibits social mobility as ingredients and cooking methods are moved and adapted across neighboring or otherwise related cultures. Marshall Sahlins has noted what anthropologists have known for some time now, "cultures are generally foreign in origin and local in pattern."<sup>32</sup> The lobster roll is a sound example of this as it is composed of a regional ingredient that has been adopted as an icon of regional culture, enveloped and delivered to the consumer in an encompassing container representative of an umbrella culture. The ubiquitous status of sandwiches across the United States makes them representative of dominant American culture while serving as familiar packages for presenting "difference." In an American context, sandwiches serve as a vehicle of culinary identity, a way to tell other Americans who you are through food.

For the American public at large, sandwiches are familiar, scripted objects that are appealing to and

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<sup>32</sup> Bernstein, 67-70.

prevalent in popular culture. Sandwiches across the country are associated with and representative of ethnic, economic, and cultural identities of cities, states and regions. They present identities that are distinct in their Americanness but assimilated. The lobster roll is no exception, utilizing regional ingredients and regionally specific techniques that are layered with the history of Mainers. Eating a lobster “in the rough” (from the shell) may now be familiar to some wealthy or middle-class Americans outside of New England but it is ultimately a part of the New England cultural repertoire. The lobster roll’s form, like other sandwiches, serves as a conduit through which regionally specific artifacts may be enjoyed and understood without the burden of required cultural knowledge. The Maine lobster roll, more so than any other edible object composed primarily of lobster, introduces the American public to the culture of Mainers. Familiar behaviors of engagement make for an approachable, enriching, and mobile presentation of a regional and state identity capable of spreading archetypical understandings of regional culture without much friction.

### **Deciphering the American Table**

In Mary Douglas’ 1972 essay, “Deciphering a Meal” the greatly respected British Anthropologist states that, “Meals require a table, a seating order, restriction on movement and on alternative

occupation”.<sup>33</sup> Throughout her essay, which is highly recommended to any aspiring food studies scholar, there is a thorough attempt to decipher what defines a meal. However, Douglas does not attempt to define the setting of the meal, which she claims is required for any gathering worthy of the description. I would like to propose that the table Douglas describes in this essay is a metaphysical one, dependent on a culture's meal formats and culinary scripts. Any setting that binds one to a gathering of social patterning and hierarchy, physically or otherwise, should constitute a “table.” As Douglas says, “The meal puts its frame on the gathering.”<sup>34</sup>

Douglas draws from readings of traditional domestic meals following a typically British format. It's clear from her work that she would not consider a lobster roll a meal for several reasons, but as fully revisiting her formulas to better fit an American context lies outside of the aims of this essay, the issue will not be pressed. Instead, only Douglas' insistence that meals must restrict movement will be addressed, with the presumption that a lobster roll is in fact a mobile meal or at least a course that invites you to move with it.

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<sup>33</sup> Kevin Slane, “New England Lobster Rolls and Philadelphia Cheesesteaks: A History of Two Regional Icons,” *Boston.Com*, January 30, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas, 61.

As handheld meals script physical mobility, the landscape necessarily becomes a setting for culturally imbued bodily movements. The scripts of mobile things also suggest varying performances, as they are naturally and necessarily acted out in differing settings. As mobile things invite us to interact with our environment, I would like to propose that there are ideal environments to perform the scripted behaviors suggested by them. There is a hierarchy of setting embedded in mobile things within which we are invited to perform their script most ideally. While interacting with mobile foods individually, one is not as directly bound by the same “patterns of social relationships”<sup>35</sup> that may be present at the table that Douglas discusses, even if those social hierarchies are present, as I suspect. However, one is more directly bound by archetypal understandings of place and cultural script, a gathering of ideas rather than of people.

To return to the Maine lobster roll, it must be said that the Maine coast is the ideal setting within which the sandwich invites you to dance.<sup>36</sup> To walk the streets of Chicago with the sandwich would place the object’s script in a contextually confused and consequently meaningless setting. Mobile foods, especially ones that stand as icons of archetypal state identities, must be eaten in context to be fully

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<sup>35</sup> Glassie, Henry, 1-49.

<sup>36</sup> Glassie, 1-49.

understood. They offer more answers while being walked along their streets, their paths, and their coasts. The lobster roll serves several purposes. However, its social mobility is of the utmost importance in the pursuit of deciphering the American table. The assimilation of many identities under an umbrella culture suggests movement itself, which is mirrored in the nation's embodied material culture. As American identities are often in flux and continually encountering outside forces through immigration, mobile foods present "foreign" Americans and their states as they are to the general public, inviting the consumer to become acquainted. Like the Lobster roll's script, this invitation is not only symbolic but physical, calling you to the idyllic Maine coastline where the language of this particular food item will be best interpreted and deeply understood.

### **The Ambiguity of regional identity and importance of continuing discussions of food**

I have been very careful throughout this essay to reference coastal Maine as often as possible. This is because regional identities do not neatly follow state borders and while all who live in Maine's territory are Mainers, not all Mainers see the lobster as a representative icon or attainable food source.<sup>37</sup> Here we encounter the ambiguity of regional identity. The foods we eat represent who we are and tell us who we

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<sup>37</sup> Oliver, "What You Hear About Lobsters."

are not. They stand as archival, edible objects through which we can study social histories and cultural developments through time, so they must be contextualized. Properly interpreting the language of food is not only dependent on the interpreter and their willingness to act out cultural scripts but also on setting. This is a truth that both benefits the culture from which the object is derived as well as outside cultures that could be wrongly accused of having a convergent relationship. It is important to engage with archetypal understandings of place, yes, but when done properly there will be some level of exclusion. It is imperative that in experiencing and analyzing culture we do not continue to impose identity.

Studying food and learning its language is a pursuit that has proven to be fruitful. In the case of the Maine lobster roll, its archival memory outlines a history of class relations and industry. The sandwich's form suggests at least three modes of mobility inherent in its material form. Those being, physical, economic, and social. The social mobility of the lobster roll and sandwiches more generally, is the quality that is most meaningful to American culture. The intersection of place and regional identity is inherent in regional culinary expressions and a complete survey of American foodways will not be complete without addressing this fact. The ways in which various regional differences are presented in material culture through familiar forms are emblematic of America's diversity under an encompassing nationality and this

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truth is ultimately the loudest aspect of the Maine lobster roll's speech and script.

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