

VOICES IN THE KITCHEN:

COOKING TOOLS AS INALIENABLE POSSESSIONS

by David Sutton and Michael Hernandez

ABSTRACT

This article examines the different ways that cooking utensils can come to embody personal and collective family memories. Because they are relatively durable, show signs of age, and because they travel with us from place to place, certain cooking tools take on the status of biographical objects, used to tell the stories of people's lives and their ancestors, as well as to prepare their daily meal. They also are decommodified, taking on the value of 'inalienable possessions' which are incorporated into people's identities and their sense of continuity with the past [cooking, inalienable possessions, material culture, memory]

KEYWORDS

Cooking, Inalienable Possessions,
Material Culture, Memory

A cook, no matter how well equipped, is apt to favor some tools over others. One may be a sauté pan, loved for the way its handle lies in the palm like a smooth, heavy stone. Or perhaps a spatula, bent from age and rounded to the contours of the bowl it scrapes. Or a rolling pin whose grain is bright from years of absorbing butter in pastry doughs.

Amanda Hesser¹

Amanda Hesser describes how tools form a sort of continuity in the ever transient domain of material objects we transact in the kitchen. Cooking tools, as the durable objects that we take with us from place to place, or hand down in a family (usually maternal) line, come to be storehouses of memories which help tell stories of people's lives. Annette Weiner speaks of 'inalienable possessions', objects that, because of their association with social memory and identity, are removed from the normal circuits of commodity or gift exchange. While these objects are publicly valued in the Melanesian societies where she worked, in Western capitalist modernity such objects are often discarded in the name of progress. Nadia Seremetakis,² speaking of this loss of memory as a condition of

modernity, suggests that such objects are consigned to the rare ‘decommodified attic’, which ‘trip up the closures of public memory, official history, and the idea of progress’. Memory objects exist as testaments to previous social formations and sensory regimes, which can ‘trigger desires’ in their owners.

These approaches suggest a certain fetishism. Not, however, the impoverished fetishism of the commodity described so well by Marx in which objects come to life at the expense of people who are deadened or objectified.³ Rather it is the fetishism recognized by Mauss,⁴ who stresses the way that objects and subjects blur into each other, as the objects themselves become personified, taking on the histories and identities of their owners and recipients, while the identity of subjects becomes tied to the objects they possess. This interrelationship of subject and object was recognized by Marx as well, in his image of *homo faber*, that is, the way humans shape themselves in the course of producing objects: ‘By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.’⁵ Thus, the fetishism we describe here is not that of ‘false consciousness’, but, rather, fetishism as a recognition of human imbrication in the material world. As Cohen writes, fetishism ‘implies...nothing more than a heightened kind of recognition...A world devoid of fetishes would be like a world without memory, without language or meaning, uninhabitable by human beings...[Fetishism] is simply us, as yet incapable to the presence of the spirit in things.’⁶

This notion of ‘the spirit in things’ is reflected in ‘new materiality studies’,⁷ which stress not simply the way people give meaning to objects, but the “unity of self and object”,⁸ the ways that objects have agency to define an environment and ‘afford’ different possibilities for their use.⁹ While this approach to the co-constitution of subjects and

objects can be applied fruitfully to all sorts of objects, including industrial ones such as computers¹⁰ and refrigerators¹¹ a number of studies suggest a special relationship with objects that endure long time spans, which become “special things”,¹² household possessions which ‘possess’ us as well, often in an eerie ‘ghostlike’ fashion.¹³ This returns us to Weiner’s notion that certain objects, because of their materiality, lend themselves to ‘dense’ interactions.¹⁴ We suggest that kitchen tools, precisely because of their material durability (in some cases) constitute dense objects; because they *last, and yet change with us*, they are neither ephemeral nor unchanging. Thus, they are, in some cases at least, particularly good vehicles to capture and objectify lives, biographies and shared memories.

Amanda Hesser describes objects of this kind, the three bone-handled forks that have been passed down in her family for several generations. These forks carry the aura of tradition with them, many of them traceable to the turn of the 20th century, if not considerably earlier. They are linked to family history by being passed down at life-cycle rituals, one she received from her grandmother on her thirtieth birthday, another from her grandmother on the occasion of her wedding. The bone-handle itself takes on a certain significance, evocative, like a relic, of the once living creature to which it belonged.

Amanda Hesser describes the fork as an interesting conjunction of memory and imagination. Her experience of the material qualities of the fork lead her to a reverie that stretches back considerably beyond the known grandmother from whom she inherited it: ‘On one fork, a concavity has been worn into the back of the handle by a right-hander’s index finger. Someone loved this fork, long before I did. It’s hard to imagine just how many years it was used to conform to that finger. What did he or she eat with it?’¹⁵ Thus,

for Hesser the use of her bone-handled forks, which she describes as an extension of her own hand, becomes ‘a set of fine claws to deftly manipulate things I cannot touch’,¹⁶ a daily point of contact between past and present.¹⁷ She contrasts her forks with modern, brand-name kitchen tools, ‘which can be admired for their design or efficiency... You may like your OXO peeler, but it’s doubtful that you will ever feel such affection for it’.¹⁸ Here the suggestion is that these modern tools, because they are made of materials that tend not to show signs of age and wear, are not appropriate forms to suggest continuity and change, durability and great age, even if, as Bruno Latour points out, these too are hybrids, with some of their elements being thousands or millions of years old.¹⁹ This contrast between traditional and modern objects in itself may be an outcome of Western capitalist modernity and its attendant nostalgia. Eco sees nostalgia as a ‘neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories’ produced by capitalism.²⁰ Svetlana Boym suggests that unlike former socialist societies, in which objects of past regimes ‘were carefully purged from sight’, in the West ‘objects of the past are everywhere for sale. The past eagerly cohabits with the present’.²¹ While such items as cast-iron skillets and old wooden cutting boards are indeed typical items found at ‘antique’ stores, available for purchase and display as representatives of a lost past, we were struck in our research by the continued reliance by some of our informants on these tools, not simply as memory objects that represent the past, but as ongoing elements of their everyday lives, useful tools which, by their continued usefulness, foil the culture of replaceability on which capitalism thrives.

Methodology

In our research on everyday cooking in Greece and in Southern Illinois, we have been attentive to the different ways that kitchen tools are used, stored and talked about. During a research meeting we realized that several of the interviewees had similar memory recall responses to kitchen tools. Here we present three interviews that capture different aspects of the relationship of these tools to personal and collective memory and imagination. The interviews on which we draw are based on our ongoing projects focusing on cooking, skill and memory, which we have been conducting in Carbondale, Illinois since 2002. Although working together, each researcher has his own focus and approach. Michael Hernandez's research focuses on the embodied memory of traditional dishes and how the uses of kitchen tools reinforce family memories. Hernandez's research also includes the use of visual anthropology methods to capture embodied practices and compare them to the verbal responses made by those he interviewed. He has interviewed and filmed 10 subjects as part of this ongoing Ph.D. research. David Sutton's research focuses on the relationship of skill, memory and the senses in the everyday practices of cooking.²² Sutton's research is particularly focused on the island of Kalymnos, Greece, where he has engaged research with over a dozen participants. He has also pursued research in Southern Illinois on similar issues for comparative purposes. The participants were referred to the research team either by individuals within the Department of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University or by Carbondale citizens that contacted the research team directly. Each interviewee agreed to complete a 3- to 4-hour uninterrupted session and one follow-up interview. Each session contained three parts: a pre-interview, the preparation of a meal, and a post-interview. The sessions were conducted in the home kitchen of each participant.²³ A week before each session, each

participant was asked to prepare a 'traditional' family meal as defined by their respective family parameters. The team collected ethnographic information by employing face-to-face interviews. These interviews, as well as the preparation process of each meal, were audio- and videotaped.

While much of the research on human-object relations focuses on the domestic setting,²⁴ our research focuses on the kitchen itself as a space in which people not only use objects, but use some objects to transform other objects, which are then transformed through the emotionally-charged process of ingestion.²⁵ Seremetakis²⁶ contrasts the multisensory kitchen and the deodorized parlor/museum, arguing that the former makes for particularly strong ties between kitchens, food and memory.²⁷ Here we highlight the kitchen as a fruitful site for research on materiality.

Mr Hubbard: The Patina of Family History

Mr Hubbard is a 65 year-old middle class German American male living in Carbondale, Illinois. Mr Hubbard worked for thirty-five years as a construction worker for a local independent contractor. Currently widowed, he was married to his wife for 42 years. He remembers his wife's cooking as 'not the best in the world'; he says, 'There were nights that my boys and I would smile and eat food that either looked or tasted like coal from the basement' (personal interview). As he talked, one could tell thorough his eyes that this man loved his wife and his family. His eyes moving towards the stove, he noted, 'I cooked as much as possible. Besides wanting my sons to have a good meal, I was afraid that I was going to wear my teeth out before I was fifty'. Pulling out his upper teeth he said, 'They lasted until I was 54'.

Mr Hubbard looks older than he really is. His face is sun-worn and reminds one of leather. In a decades-old family picture hanging over the window, he was clean-shaven, but these days a thin short, patchy, white beard frames his face. He is wearing a white plaid shirt with small red and black lines woven through. The right arm of the short sleeve shirt is rolled up, revealing a small tattoo on his upper arm.

Even though Mr Hubbard joked about his immediate family, when it came to his childhood family his attitude changed. During the interview Michael Hernandez and Mr Hubbard discussed his mother passing away. He described his childhood and his mother. He remembers spending a great deal of time with his mother: ‘There were no children my age around. My brothers were much older and spent most of the time hanging out in the woods with their friends’. Most of his memories about his mother revolved around the kitchen. He talked about helping his mother cook by cranking the butter churn or mashing potatoes with an old wire masher. Michael had asked if he had inherited any items from his family that resided in the kitchen. Mr Hubbard began talking about several utensils. At one point, however, he walked to a wall of pots and grabbed a small cast-iron skillet. His kitchen was fairly large for a post World War II house. The room was 15 feet square. The kitchen table sat next to two large windows. Opposite the table was a bank of cabinets with a sink in the middle. The wall to the right of the sink had a door in the corner and the stove and more cabinets across from the refrigerator; next to the refrigerator was the wall of pots hanging from an accordion-style, expanding rack. He began to tell Michael how he remembered his mother telling him stories of how this particular skillet could be traced back in his family to the time of the Civil War (1861-1865). This is part of the interview:

Mr H: I remember setting in the kitchen one day when my mother was cooking Sunday breakfast. She was telling me that she had gotten the skillet from her mother and she had got it from her mother.

M: So it has been in your family for three generations?

Mr H: No the skillet goes way back to the Civil War. I had an old relative that fought in the Union Army. He was a great man. He was some sort of head man in his company....My mother told me stories of him standing his ground and killing confederates to protect his family's land.

M: So he fought in the army. Is that important to your family?

Mr H: No...well, that's not all of it. We are proud of him in other ways. There was a time that he came to a house of a woman that did not have a husband. They (the relation's company) were walking and I guess they saw a rundown farmhouse or something. They decided to stop and do some work to help her out. The woman asked them to spend the night on her land. They did not ask for anything.

M: So how old is the skillet?

Mr. H: The skillet is really old.

M: So your mother and grandmother had it...Who else had the skillet before them?

Mr H: I think her mother (his great-grandmother) had it... I'm not sure [pause] but I do know that my great (counting his fingers) great, great, great, great uncle--hell, I am not sure how many greats--but he used it in the Civil War to cook with.

M: That is an old skillet.

Mr H: You can tell that he used it on an open fire because of the wear marks on the metal.

M: That must have been heavy to carry around with him all the time?

Mr H: I guess it was...They did not have the cheap lightweight stuff that we have now. My guess is that not everyone would have one. It was probably used to cook for the group of guys [army company] he was in.

Michael asked to see the skillet. The inside of the skillet was smooth and well seasoned.²⁸ The outside of the skillet was textured with years of build up. The bottom, like the inside, was smooth in texture, but was uneven or warped as if it had been hit against a hard surface. Michael asked how often he used the skillet. Mr. Hubbard answered, 'I use it all the time, when I eat. It is the only thing I fry in'. Later he also revealed that he used it outside of the kitchen: 'It is the only thing I take when I go camping. I also like using it outside on the grill to fry fish in during the summers'. Notice that his relationship to the skillet, as a pan that can do service outdoors over a campfire, recalls his ancestor's use of it during the civil war. As he continued telling these stories, many a proud family past moment became evident. The story he told outlines a brave, compassionate and loyal man in the Union Army. At the end of the story he reflected on how his childhood family, his own family, and his grandchildren live by these rules.

There was a mark of the manufacturer on the back. Later Michael traced the marking to a Tennessee factory. This company, as far as Michael could determine, did not start to produce items until the late 1890s, about 30 years after the Civil War. This discrepancy doesn't invalidate Mr Hubbard's memories, but suggests that perhaps at a certain point

this skillet came to stand for an earlier skillet that had perhaps been lost or broken. The story had been kept intact, despite the memory being now held by a later generation skillet.

The fact that the skillet was used by his ancestor was important to Mr Hubbard because ‘not everyone would have one...[and he]...cooked for the group of guys’. In fact, it was common for the enlisted men in smaller companies to cook for themselves or share cooking duties using their own utensils.²⁹ In the case of larger regiments or infantries from the South, personal slaves owned by the officers were brought to the field to serve as cooks.³⁰

Thus, for Mr Hubbard this skillet stands out among the various tools that he has kept as a reminder of warm memories of his mother and his childhood. The skillet stands out because it has become a repository of family history, both a daily tool, and an externalized reminder to remember (and to pass on) the stories of important ancestors, stories that convey particular moral values that he believes in and for which his family stands. It acts, then, much like Weiner’s inalienable possessions, which through their ongoing human associations come to stand for the values of the group. And much like Hesser’s bone-handled forks, it shows the signs of its age in the patina of seasoning and the burnt-on carbon-deposits. The fact that it may not actually have been the same skillet is, in a sense, irrelevant to the felt material connection it provides to family history, a daily taste of the past.

D Gorton: Life History; Becoming a Cook

Mr Hesser’s pan materializes multi-generational family history and values. For D Gorton, cooking tools, by contrast, trace his own personal biography. It is a biography, however,

which he places within a life of travels, and which he places within an awareness of larger socio-historical transformations. D Gorton grew up in Mississippi in the 1950s, and was active in the Civil Rights Movement. He later became a *New York Times* photographer and traveled widely. He now lives in Carbondale with his wife, Jane Adams, a Professor of Anthropology. D comfortably charts his biography, and larger socio-political changes in the US in relation to changing food practices. He recalls the replacement of fresh fruits and vegetables in Mississippi by Birdseye: ‘I still taste cantaloupe from my childhood, because it was fresh from the fields; that’s my baseline’. In our first interview on February 24, 2002, we asked D and Jane to talk about their changing relationship to food and cooking. For D, cooking was part of his coming of age, and cooking tools play a significant role in the story.

David: *When did you learn how to cook?*

D Really cook?... It was after college and after I moved to the west to Los Angeles, and it was the 1960s and for some reason people discovered what they thought was organic foods, and I was part of that whole wave of people that had been involved in the civil rights movement of the South. I was more than involved...I was in a leadership position and the war movement, and a lot of us went West. A lot of people did...it was a generalized movement to the West. I wound up in Los Angeles and in LA I was part of that group...on the coast in Venice there were the first cafes I have ever seen that were organic places to eat and to buy foods. For some reason, it could have been the group I was with, but everyone started cooking.... We would meet two or three nights a week at different peoples’ houses and that was our entertainment. Besides talking about

work and art it was one long conversation over a meal and everybody would find new recipes and talk about them or about new restaurants, which was hard because LA was not a good town to eat in at that time.... But that was how I learned how to cook and I went to school, went down to Santa Monica, and I went and did a course in French cooking.

D goes on to develop this theme of a culinary awakening in American culture.

David Did you like French food?

D I love that food. I really did I enjoy it. It was really different than what I grew up with...it was that road food that we have all eaten all those years. I got to the point that I could not eat that road food anymore. When we would drive across country during the civil rights movement and eat at those greasy spoons, that I always loved stopping at before when I was in college. Eating things, like... chicken fried steak and bread and things and you fill up on it. There was, I guess, on some levels it felt good when you eat it. It was healthy, it was not healthy...I'm sorry, it was filling. I got tired of it and it got to the point that I could not stand it. And I remember that at that point I drove back and forth to my home in Mississippi [from LA] And I brought my own omelet pan. I would teach people to make omelets in Mississippi. It was like being a missionary...[talking in a high LA upper class voice] 'You won't believe what we have been learning in Los Angeles'. [Mimicking the people he was teaching using a surprised face] Everybody was going, 'Really? How do you do it?' I was basically scrambling eggs.

Here D reflects on his own changing relationship to his home in his eventual rejection of the food of his childhood and wanting to share his new discoveries with his friends and family in Mississippi. His shift in tone of voice suggests that he recognizes class elements in his missionary approach to omelet making and his changing relationship to those friends and family who did not leave Mississippi. A few minutes later D. picks up the thread of the 'new world' presented by the atmosphere in California in the 1960s:

D We would do things like go and find French cooking knives, and I actually got one in there [pointing to his kitchen] which you cannot get anymore, which were all steel, they were not stainless steel, they were that rolled hammered steel, which were the best there is. I think that the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) got rid of them or they rusted to death. And we were going out and buying things like that. We bought quiche dishes, if you can believe that, making quiche. We were at the front end of the question 'Do real men eat quiche or not?' We debated that early...we were premature pro-quiche....

David: Do you still have those tools, are you attached to them?

D: I have that knife. That first French knife. The front of it, the nose of it, got popped off when I was in Pennsylvania trying to open up oysters. They were beautiful, beautiful oysters from the Chesapeake Bay, and I didn't know how to cut the muscle that holds the shell shut. I broke the front of the knife off with it [the oyster] and it sat around for a long time, and we cut it so that the front end has a very strange shape to it. It's all steel; there is no stainless steel in it and that's my favorite. You are right about utensils, getting attached to them. There

are certain things that Jane likes...there is a big steel pot that you like a lot.

[Looking at Jane] I guess that Dutch oven...no?

Jane: I like my cast iron. I have a cast iron Dutch oven with a lid and I have a cast iron skillet. D has a cast iron skillet too, but I like mine better and I have a omelet pan that was actually my ex's ... and I really like your skillet [talking to D] that little one that I always make eggs in...It's like a little omelet pan but a small one.

The French knife in question has been D's traveling companion, accompanying him on the many moves in his life, and reflecting that life in certain events. Later, as D begins to prepare a meal, he takes out the knife and elaborates further on its story:

D: This is my wonderful, wonderful old knife I got many, many years ago. With the blunt nose on it [lifting up the knife to show David] because it gotten broken off by an oyster that attacked it. It attacked my knife.

Jane: Acton did that [the reshaping of the knife], didn't he?

D: He finally fixed it for me. For many, many years it was kind of broken off and had a weird shape at the end so Acton got a Drimel and grounded it [the broken edge of the knife]. It is a lot sharper than it was before.

David: So do you have to sharpen it?

D: Every day, every time I use it. It's wonderful because it actually sharpens it for me, my all around knife like the Chinese always have that one blade that looks like a chopping type knife.

David: Like a cleaver?

D: Like a cleaver.

The knife carries its history not only in its daily usage, and the daily sharpening it requires, but in its changing shape through time, recalling moments and places: his son grinding down the end, the ‘oyster incident’, etc. His son was also a constant and imposing presence in the kitchen through a beautifully crafted pot-rack hanging from the ceiling.

In a later interview, on September 14, 2003, D prepares one of his ‘missionary omelettes’. This leads him to reflect on the qualities of the steel pan that make it superior for omelette making:

D: See how thick it is, it holds the heat very evenly.

Jane: It has copper in it.

D: Not this one. Other pans we have are copper, with a tin coating...but when you put it on the stove it overheats, the tin just goes, and so when you scrub it you wound up with a pretty rough copper surface. With my pan that’s not a problem. You know, I was lucky in that for years and years I worked as a journalist all over the world and I took the opportunity to look at food, because you’re doing a story on a restaurant in a particular place. And I went into the kitchen in the Four Seasons in New York...and one of the things they did for omelet pans like this is they had a drill with a wire brush on the end of it, and they had some guy back in the corner with a drill going ‘rrrrrr’, and I said, ‘Why are you doing that?’ And he said, ‘It’s gotta be smooth, it’s gotta be real smooth, otherwise stuff’ll adhere to it’.

Here D’s travels become a chance to expand on his knowledge of different foods and professional cooking procedures. His curiosity allows him to increase his appreciation of

the material qualities of pans, and by extension, his own pan. A few minutes later he reflects on the social environment that gave rise to the store where he bought his omelet pan. He describes the neighborhood of Brentwood, near UCLA, where two different groups of people began to congregate: one interested in health food, nudity and other alternative lifestyles; the other interested in foods that they had tasted in France, wanting to eat interesting food.

D: So these stores started opening up. One of the things about these early movers, the people who put these stores together, was that everything in them was stone authentic. It was tedious in a way. But it was thrilling when you first went in there. So [raising the pan and tapping it] that's probably the kind of thing that some guy in Lyon, France used; this is it. You can't get something like this anymore. You understand the point of my little story? So when I got into it, it was at a point where everything was very authentic, in the mid-to-late sixties.

This discussion broadened into reflections on cultural changes in the U.S. at the time more generally and how they were reflected in changing taste, which, for reasons of space, we do not include here. Once again D's omelette pan, which he continuously touched and tapped while relating these stories, acts as a material reminder congealing personal and social history. In this case it is less his own travels or experiences than the fact that he was at the proverbial right place at the right time to see, and participate in, the transformations occurring in US food and cooking practices. That small piece of tempered steel seemed to bring together in its sensual properties - its heft, the ring as he tapped it, the ease with which the long handle allowed him to swirl the omelet as it

cooked—the personal and the political, D’s changing relationship to his own Southern background and to the developing counter-culture movement of the 1960s.

Georgia Vourneli: Displaced Memory

In our third story we see the effects of a more direct displacement: a mother who has cooked in the same kitchen all her life trying to make familiar dishes without the kitchen tools that have been her constant companions. This leads to an interesting set of reflections and altered practices. Georgia Vourneli lives in Thessaloniki, Greece. She has been married for 28 years and has two sons. Georgia visits her son Leo in Carbondale, Illinois once a year. Through Leo we had the opportunity to video tape her cooking several ‘traditional’ Greek dishes. During the taping process she remarked on the type of food we have in the United States and continually apologized for the food’s appearance. She was particularly upset about preparing these dishes without the right tools. She noted, for example, that the rolling pin she was using was not the same as the one in Greece. She does not like ‘modern’ rolling pins (the ultra-smooth model with low-friction ball bearings, and a larger, heavier dowel), but instead uses a smooth stick, produced by a carpenter for her mother in their home village, which allows her to feel every nuance of the rolling action and its effect on the elasticity of the dough.

Michael: You talk about not having the right cooking tools.

G: Yes.

Michael: Do you have special tools that you like and where did you get them?

G: I got them from my mother’s home place from the village. She had a carpenter make them for her...a rolling pin and a special round wooden table so she can

open up (roll out, *Greek: anigo*) her phyllo. It is low and my mother would set down and put the table on her lap and she would do the pie.

In a later interview, by phone, when she had returned to Greece, she expanded on her description of the table, evoking images of her childhood in a village in Greek

Macedonia:

G: We had a small, round table to roll out phyllo dough for pies (*Greek: pites*, spinach pie, leek pie, cheese pie). All the houses in the village had one. It was round and short. It only had two legs and it was only a few fingers high from the floor (n.b. typically Georgia used ‘fingers’ to measure ingredients, e.g. ‘two fingers of olive oil’). You put your feet under it, brought it close to you, and opened (rolled out) the phyllo. We kept it in the warehouse (barn), next to the flour. We would use it to make bread too. We kept the dough in a wooden kneading trough.

In the midst of this description, her husband interrupted, claiming that his wife’s family ‘were gypsies, they did not have furniture, their entire tribe (*fili*) would sit on the floor’. He claimed that the table in question was inherited from *his* mother, ‘it was short, round, made of boards that we had used to make the roof of the house and the tobacco shed, before we started building roofs out of aluminum. We took the boards to the village carpenter, and he made it’. Georgia responded that it was *his* family, being from Turkey, who sat on the floor. Their son, prompted by this discussion, added his own memories of the table: ‘I can see in my mind my grandma sitting in her front yard on the floor opening dough...there would be people or children playing in the yard, doing house chores, small animals here and there...’. This reflects the social nature of everyday cooking for many

Greek women, that many cooking processes were performed outdoors, so they served as a gathering place for neighborhood women to socialize, comment on each other's techniques, and apprentice their daughters in cooking skills.³¹

The table here is not just a site for different family members to call up and visualize bucolic memories of childhood; it also becomes drawn into contested memories and claims, half-joking, to family status. Not surprisingly, her husband's memories focus on object, whereas her memories dwell on the cooking processes associated with that object. While 'tradition' can often be a mark of 'backwardness' in Greece, this tends not to be the case when tradition involves food and cooking, where a discourse of naturalness and nationalism predominates.³² In this case, the traditional article is not a sign of 'backwardness', but to the contrary, proof for each side of the family that they were superior because they had furniture.

Returning to the original interview, Michael asks about other kitchen implements:

Michael: Was there a time that you could not use your pot and did the food taste different?

G: Oh, yes, foods have to be cooked in a pot...I do not like fried food and I like food that is cooked in the pot

Michael: Did your mother use this pot?

G: Yes. It [the pot] was made of copper. They were different sizes [making different sizes bowl gestures with her hands].

Michael: Was it your mother's favourite pot?

G: Yes

Michael: Where did she get it?

G: From her mother.

Michael: Why did her mother give it to her?

G: My mother had lots of utensils that she would give them out to her daughters and she got them from her mother.

Michael: What is your favorite tool?

G: A bowl...I have a favorite pot.

Michael: Where did it come from?

G: From my mama.

Michael: What do you use it for?

G: I use it for everything.

Here we see the matrilineal tradition that Georgia associates with authenticity. As with Hesser's bone forks, these kitchen tools were part of the dowry items, the inheritance passed down from mother to daughter. In the absence of these tools Georgia feels physically displaced; the habits of hand and eye associated with these tools have been interrupted. At one point her eye casts around her son's apartment and settles on a wooden broom. Feeling it in her hands she asks her son whether he can cut up the broom to use as a rolling pin. This reflects the fact that even wooden rolling pins available in the US are deficient because they are tapered, whereas the rolling pins with which Georgia is familiar have an even circumference throughout. When speaking of the tools left behind, she used her hands to simulate the actions of the tools themselves. When describing the rolling pin she held her hands straight out and began to roll as if the rolling pin was there. Her hands were held palms down, closed-fingered and arched with her fingers curled up. Then she began to rock her hands from tip to wrist at the same time, forwards and

backwards. When describing the wooden table she outlined the table size. When she talked about her mother placing the table in her lap, Georgia simulated placing it in her lap. Thus, the memories evoked here by the absent article of everyday use are not visual, as in the scenes of childhood described above, but rather tactile and kinesthetic. Such bodily memories are similar to those captured by writer Terri Kapsalis,³³ in describing her own grandmother, who rarely cooks anymore because she has gone blind: ‘Yiayia mourns the days when the kitchen was hers. She cries as she recounts a list of dishes she used to make. Her hands are grasped together, solacing one another as if they are having an agonizing memory of their own’. While Georgia’s sensory displacement is temporary, it is illustrative of the way that cooking tools connect social memory to habit memory, strengthening both in the process.³⁴

Conclusion

For Mr. Hubbard it is the moral values and family history that are kept alive in his daily encounters with the cast-iron skillet. For Georgia it is the sensory properties of the missing tools and table that are highlighted: the way that they conform to her body in a familiar way. Georgia’s case also raises issues of how these objects become part of conflicting histories and family disputes as they are taken by Georgia and her husband to materialize different, competing family pasts. In D’s case, while sensory aspects are important, it is the way his omelet pan and knife become conjunction points, bringing together his own life story with broader trends and changes in American society and food practices. They also provide a chance for D to reflect on travel: they are his companions in a cosmopolitan life, providing relatively stable anchors (they change, but remain) in a sea of movement. All these cases involve different kinds of displacements, spatial and

temporal, short- and long-term. And in each case we see how these kitchen objects materialize present or absent social and sensory relations and regimes. For these reasons we can speak of these kitchen tools as ‘inalienable possessions’, in the sense of objects that are valuable because they have been removed from the stream of commodities and have acquired an almost totemic personal and family history so that they could not be sold, but only passed down from one generation to the next. They are both Maussian objects, personifying the history of individuals and families, and Marxian tools, shaping in their use the identity of their owners.³⁵ But can we say more than that? David Graeber recently argues that to bring Marx and Mauss together we must develop a new theory of ‘value’ in anthropology, free from the specter of economism and scarcity (that value is not simply a function of people’s desire to acquire or to keep objects). He argues for a view of value as the importance of actions, a sort of labour theory of value, but with ‘labour’ extended to all human creative activity. As he puts it:

Value emerges in action; it is the process by which a person’s invisible potency - their capacity to act - is transformed into concrete, perceptible form...Rather than having to choose between the desirability of objects and the importance of human relations, one can now see both as refractions of the same thing. Commodities have to be produced...social relations have to be created and maintained; all of this requires an investment of human time and energy, intelligence, concern. If one sees value as a matter of the relative distribution of that, then one has a common denominator. One invests one’s energies in those things one considers most important, or most meaningful.³⁶

In such a view we can easily wed Marxian self/object production to Maussian personification: the value of an object is a reflection of the actions that people have performed with this object, its history. Graeber elaborates this point in discussing the heirloom objects familiar to the anthropology of exchange - greenstone axes and chiefly

stools--noting that the value of an heirloom 'is really that of actions: actions whose significance has been, as it were, absorbed into the object's current identity whether the emphasis is placed on the inspired labors of the artist who created it...or the fact that it was once used to cut off a mythical giant's head'. We find this a useful perspective to think of cooking tools in these cases as certain kinds of heirlooms, a fact not changed by their everyday, rather than extraordinary usage. Their aura - and there is a certain amount of fetishism here - in the best sense where fetishism is simply a form of memory comes from the history of the actions taken with them, the many meals they have produced by the current and previous owners, their everyday and extraordinary encounters with food (D's knife 'attacked by an oyster', Mr. Hubbard's skillet 'fighting' in the civil war, Georgia's table, a site of gendered sociability and bone of marital contention). It is also significant that in each of these cases, as with Hesser's bone-handled forks, these objects change over time, taking on a patina of age, ageing with their owners. Thus, in the same way that we can speak of cooking knowledge as sedimented in the body,³⁷ prior cooking successes are sedimented in the well-seasoned skillet; the flavor that it imparts is a direct product of its previous actions in cooking. In all of these respects, tools have the potential to become voices in the kitchen, speaking to us of other times and places as they go about the business of preparing our daily fare.

NOTES

First and foremost we are grateful to D. Gorton, Mr. Hubbard and Georgia Vourneli, for their participation and sharing of stories and insights. Thanks to Peter Wogan for his careful reading, to Mary Chamberlain for her guidance, and to Joanna Bornat and the editors of *Oral History* for their insightful comments and suggestions.

1. Amanda Hesser, 'The Torch is Passed, Handle First', in Holly Hughes (ed), *The Best Food Writing 2003*, New York: Marlowe, 2003, p 15-18.
2. C.N. Seremetakis, 'The Memory of the Senses: Pts. 1&2', in C. N. Seremetakis (ed), *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, p 10.
3. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I*. Ernest Mandel (ed), Ben Fowles (trans), London: Pelican Books, 1976 [1867]. Further discussion in Louise Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
4. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, I. Cunnison (Trans.), London: Routledge, 1954 [1925].
5. Marx cited in David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dream*. New York: Palgrave, 2001, p 268.
6. Leah Hagen Cohen, 'Glass, Paper, Beans: Revelations on the Nature and Value of Ordinary Things', New York: Doubleday, 1997; Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat", in P. Spyer (ed), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, New York: Routledge, 1998.
7. Sherry Ann Chapman, 2006, 'A 'New Materialist' Lens on Aging Well: Special Things in Later Life', *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol 20, p 207-216.
8. Bruce Hackett and Loren Lutzenhiser, 1985, 'The Unity of Self and Object', *Western Folklore*, vol 44, p 317-324.
9. James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979; M. Csikzentmihalyi and E. Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, London: Routledge, 2000.
10. Elaine Lally, *At Home with Computers*, Oxford: Berg, 2002.

11. Joy Parr. 1999. *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral and the Economic in the Post-War Years*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
12. Sherry Ann Chapman, 2006, 'A "New Materialist" Lens on Aging Well: Special Things in Later Life', *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol 20, p 207-216.
13. Daniel Miller, 'Possessions', In Daniel Miller (ed), *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, Oxford: Berg, 2001; also see J.S. Marcoux, 'The Refurbishment of Memory', in Daniel Miller (ed), *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, Oxford: Berg, 2001, p 69-86.
14. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992.
15. Hesser, 2003.
16. Hesser, 2003.
17. Cf. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, London: Routledge, 2000, p 204.
18. Hesser, 2003.
19. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p.75.
20. cited in Boym; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p 38.
- 21 Boym, 2001.
22. David Sutton, 'Cooking Skill, the Senses and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge', in E. Edwards C. Gosden & R. Philips (eds), *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg, 2006.
23. Georgia Vournelis' interviews were conducted in her son's kitchen.

24. Martine Perrot, 'The Domestication of Objects', in Jocelyn de Noblet (ed), *Industrial Design: Reflections of a Century*, Paris: Flammarion, 1993, p 364-371; and many of the essays in the journal *Home Cultures*, launched in 2003.
25. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume II: Living and Cooking*, in association with Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol. Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998; Deborah Lupton, 1994, 'Food, Memory and Meaning: The symbolic and social nature of food events', *Sociological Review*, vol 42, p 665-685.
26. Seremetakis, 1994
27. David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, Oxford: Berg, 2001; Jon Holtzman, 2006, 'Food and Memory', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol 35, p 361-378.
28. One seasons a cast iron skillet to prevent it from rusting.
29. Civil War Diary of A. L. Peel. <http://myweb.cableone.net/4jdurham/peel/61peelmayjune.html>, Accessed March 1, 2005
30. (Lee 1918). Lee, Rev. Wm. Mack 1918. History of the Rev. Wm. Mack Lee, Body Servant of General Robert E. Lee Through the Civil War, Cook from 1861-1865. (no publisher) Rare Book Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill published on the web at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/leewilliam/lee.html>. Accessed April 6th 2005
31. Sutton, 2001
32. Sutton 2001. Michael Hernandez and David Sutton. 2003, 'Hands that Remember: An Ethnographic Approach to Everyday Cooking', *Expedition*, vol 45, no 2, p 31-37.

33. Terri Kapsalis, 'Yiayia's Hands', in Allen Weiss (ed), *Taste Nostalgia*, New York: Lusitania Press, 1997, p 32.
34. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
35. Ingold, 2000, Chapter 16.
36. David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dream*. New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 45.
37. Sutton, 2001.

Addresses for correspondence: David Sutton: dsutton@siu.edu; Michael Hernandez: mhernan@siu.edu