

# MEMORY'S MATERIALITY

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The 2003 University of Massachusetts, Boston excavation season at Sylvester Manor, a seventeenth-century provisioning plantation in Shelter Island New York, yielded an unexpected object in an unlikely place. In the midst of a large waste pit, we encountered the primary deposit of a ceramic vessel, with a heavy decorated collar in a tradition consistent with a Native American historic period style known as Shantok. Broken at the bottom, it appeared to have been dropped and left in place. When the various pieces had been reassembled we found it also featured a handle attached vertically to the side, virtually never seen in Northeast Native tradition ceramics. This rather beautiful item in a mean and startling location encapsulates the central trajectory that I struggle with in archaeological interpretations at Sylvester Manor: that the documentary records identified the early plantation's labor force as enslaved Africans, while the archaeology of the central working areas has given us apparently Native American materials (for a more complete description of the project to date, see Hayes and Mrozowski 2007). In our despairing moments as archaeologists asking "what happened here?" we often think that the answers were only recorded in the memories of long-gone actors. Yet memory is not so impenetrable to us, if we consider the numerous modes of memory's operations, particularly as it is embedded in the material world—such as this ceramic vessel. As Henri Bergson (1991 [1896]:13) pointed out, "memory... is just the intersection of mind and matter."

The material power of memory was suggested by Michel de Certeau (1984:77–90), who argued that narration and practice are fundamentally associated. Narration itself is a practice, wherein one's history and actions are made coherent to oneself through a performative act. The point of the narration is not what it describes, but the act of giving structure to that which is learned or experienced. This concept fits comfortably with post-structuralist notions of history, especially Hayden White's narrative emplotments (White 1978:58–63, 84–99). For de Certeau, the strategic or tactical element in narration is the conversion of minimal force to maximal effect through the "mediation of a body of knowledge" which is drawn from *memory* and made to

be performative action. He describes memory as "the return of a time" and "that silent encyclopedia of singular acts" (de Certeau 1984:86), comparing it to the craft and wisdom of *metis* in Greek mythology. Thus the "art of memory" is in its tactical and transformative employment. The application of memory-knowledge at the "right moment" can create sources of power for those who use it with craft, to rupture a stable field of relations. As powerful as memory is in our everyday practice, however, it is seen as fragmentary and incapable of existing long outside of its mobilization, "in decay when it is no longer capable of this alteration" (de Certeau 1984:86).

In the present, the ceramic vessel at Sylvester Manor has acted as such a rupture to our stable expectations for the spatial setting. As archaeologists we regularly employ memory in our work, in the classification of features and materials based on prior knowledge. Gavin Lucas has explored this practice further by semantically linking the notions of *collecting*, as something which (in crude terms) archaeologists do, and *collective* memory (Lucas 1997). Archaeological collection stems in part from the desire to bring structure and order through classification, just as the performative act of narration structures our understanding of past experiences and one's life history. Collection and recollection imply that something is lost or forgotten that needs to be reacquired for completion, and a desire for possession, so our collection and reconstitution of the past makes it belong in part to us. The addition of the vessel to our collection immediately began to alter our collective constitution of the past, pressing us to revise the narrative told to ourselves and to others.

In the prior context of action of the vessel, the rupture to the field of relations was likely of different character. Perhaps most bluntly, the vessel may have been a physical testament to the presence and tradition of the Manhanset, indigenous to Shelter Island, in a new colonial context where they were in danger of losing their authority. Interestingly, though, this was not a straightforward representation of tradition. The ceramic tradition in which the vessel was made is termed Shantok, featuring dramatic decorative elements and dense, fine shell temper, named after the first

examples recovered from Fort Shantok in the Mohegan territory of Connecticut in the Contact or early historic period. For many years, the distribution of this ceramic type was presumed to be the result of population movements following the 1637 Pequot War against English colonists (Rouse 1947; Smith 1950). Others have considered it solely Mohegan, with its dispersal indicative of postwar Mohegan confederacy (Johnson 1999). More recently, however, closer analysis of these ceramics has shown that the clay composition and manufacturing techniques employed are highly variable. In light of this, an alternative explanation of the Shantok tradition would be that the pottery was being produced by many different Native American groups while utilizing a distinct, emblematic decorative style. Rather than being representative of one group, Shantok may have been the material expression of a broader pan-Indian identity, a *collective* appeal emphasized at a time when the English threat became overwhelming (Goodby 1998, 2002; Lavin 2002; Rubertone 1989). Thus the memory invested in this ceramic vessel may have been meant to evoke an artfully reconstructed collective memory, in an appeal to political and traditional values.

A corollary process involved is forgetting. Scholars have framed the “art of forgetting” as a process that operates materially at several levels (Forty 1999), such as separation, exclusion, or iconoclasm. These are cast in terms of power imbalances, as in ideological constructions of social memory. Consider that the Sylvester Manor vessel was dropped into a trash pit, and one could imagine that its destruction and burial were European strategies of forgetting through exclusion and iconoclasm. There may have been a process of forgetting on the part of the Manhasset, by subsuming their tribal identity in favor of a broader pan-Indian identity as suggested above (Goodby 2002; Lavin 2002). Forgetting in such a case as this may have been necessary; it was Maurice Halbwachs’s view that collective memory often must be forgotten or changed in order for a society to survive (Halbwachs 1992; see also Spyer 2000).

Given that memory is an active process, it is necessary to also explore the particular material *modes* for this action. The most salient scholar on this is Paul Connerton, who outlined the distinction of inscribed and incorporated practices in the “sedimentation” of social memory (1989). Intended as a heuristic device for the analysis of social memory, he describes *inscription* practices as those that are written or recorded in some fashion perhaps outside the body (as in text or images), or verbalized in repetition and mnemonic reference. Inscribed practices emphasize the sedimentation of ritual in repeated and constant forms that can be made portable as ideological coda (see also Rowlands 1993). As the sedimentation of a collective political memory, the Sylvester Manor vessel could be viewed as just such portable coda, literally inscribed (incised) with emblematic designs. Perhaps it was the case that the inscription was made



Figure 1. Handled Shantok-style vessel, partially reconstructed (photo by author).

by the Manhasset to be given to the Africans working at the plantation. Consider that the handle may have been suggested by an African laborer as a useful addition. Poetically, it recalls Georg Simmel’s description of handles as bridges between worlds, and as invitations to engage (Simmel 1959).

*Incorporated* practices, on the other hand, are centered in the body, as postural or behavioral ritual, but without being “permanently” inscribed so that the memory of such social identifications must be carried in the person. Connerton wrote that “bodily practices of a culturally specific kind entail a combination of cognitive and habit-memory” (1989:88), or in other words, knowledge and information as well as the embodied understanding of how to move through the landscape and posture the body. The incorporation of social memory in a ceramic vessel might be read in its craft of manufacture, embodied skills that can be identified by the knowledgeable actor but not by outsiders. To investigate the way in which skill-memory has been incorporated in this vessel and similar ceramics at Sylvester Manor, I have been conducting a series of tests on those materials, to assess chemical composition, type and processing of aplastic inclusions, and firing temperature. Taken together, the results suggest an intriguing possibility. The abrupt change to finely crushed, dense shell temper would have also meant a change in firing temperature and conditions (see Feathers 2006:91–93). The skill suggested in these results is fine control of those conditions, which may have been contributed by the enslaved Africans of the plantation, if they carried with them the memory of iron-smelting practices common among many West African communities. This raises an interesting question vis-à-vis the debated interpretations of Shantok pottery: if the consistent forms and decorative styles embodied a collective pan-

Indian political network, were the variable manufacturing techniques and base clay compositions a subtle albeit recognizable expression of local identity? Could enslaved Africans have been incorporated into those networks as well? And what does this suggest about the role of women (as potters) in such expressions (Goodby 2002)?

Such an interpretation would indicate that these modes of memory sedimentation are not mutually exclusive. In some instances a combination of inscription and incorporation may be in operation (Connerton 1989:78–79). Inscribed practices obviate the need to carry information purely as memory, as the memory is materialized and made more broadly available, but there may also be a limit to who one wishes to broadcast to in the community. Incorporated practices are more malleable and capable of transforming as needed because they are held within a closer community (perhaps by gender), while inscribed practices can be viewed as giving a fixed and naturalized character to social memory. Michael Rowlands (1993) has noted that incorporated practices often engender secrecy and exclusion, for example, in closely held memory of certain places in the landscape. Thus memory resides in discourses of absence and re-presenting. We should perhaps begin with the assumption that any place or object is implicated in memory both overt and covert, and the shifting between these is part of their tactical use. Here we begin to reconfigure the apparent contradiction between documentary and archaeological evidence at Sylvester Manor.

The re-presenting of memory is also an effect of archaeological practice itself. This is particularly true in the understanding of materialized memory, as archaeology could be thought of as a set of inscribing practices. As Lucas notes, “[t]he nature of archaeology... might be described as a presenting of absence—or making discursive the nondiscursive. . . . For our world is not transparent; it is not fully constituted: there are gaps, shadows, silences, and absences which are not simply outside of discourse, but are often structurally excluded by discourse” (Lucas 2004:117). This, I believe, is what I am trying to do with the material analyses at Sylvester Manor: identify the places and practices where unspoken, or at least unwritten, memory may have been embedded. The gaps and silences surrounding the lives of Native Americans and enslaved Africans at Sylvester Manor—an almost palpable silence, in the documentary record—might be thus finally refilled, made memory anew.

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