‘HE WAS A REAL BABY WITH BABY THINGS’

A Material Culture Analysis of Personhood, Parenthood and Pregnancy Loss

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Abstract
This article explores the ways members of pregnancy loss support groups in the US use material culture to deal with the ‘realness problem’ of miscarriage, stillbirth, and early infant death. I examine goods purchased or made for the child-to-be during pregnancy; goods given from the child-to-be during the pregnancy; goods given to, or in the memory of, the ‘baby’ after its death; and things acquired to memorialize the child within the family. Through the buying, giving, and preserving of things, women and their social networks actively construct their babies-to-be and would-have-been babies as ‘real babies’ and themselves as ‘real mothers’, worthy of the social recognition this role entails.

Key Words ◆ baby things ◆ memorial goods ◆ personhood ◆ pregnancy loss

After Hannah Campbell’s son was stillborn in 1987, having died in utero at six months gestation from Trisomy 13 (a genetic condition which accounted for his cleft palate, six fingers on each hand, and the fact that his intestines were outside his body), she put the ID bracelet, picture, and baptismal certificate the hospital had given her, along with his baby blanket in a picnic basket on the floor of her closet. ‘Marc’s things’ stayed there for four years until Hannah decided to follow the example of some of the people she had met at a pregnancy loss support group and moved his things to the top shelf of her curio cabinet along with her Waterford crystal collection. In addition to the things that she collected at the time

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of his birth, things which have some direct connection to the child, she has added goods to his memorial collection. 'His shelf is acquiring new items to remember him. Family members have given me a Waterford baby block, a Hummel boy called "I'll protect him" and a Hand of God statue cradling a child' (Campbell, 1992). She concludes her account published in a pregnancy loss support newsletter of her decision to publicly display these goods by saying 'Bringing them out helps me and others be reminded of him on a daily basis. He was a real baby with baby things.'

In this article I explore the notion of 'real baby' and the ways that members of pregnancy loss support groups use the 'realness' of material things to assert their claim that a 'real baby' existed and is worthy of memory, and that they are 'real' parents, deserving the social recognition this role entails.

THE 'REALNESS PROBLEM' OF PREGNANCY LOSS

In my book *Motherhood Lost* (forthcoming), I argue that middle-class women in the US who experienced a pregnancy loss – miscarriage, stillbirth, or early infant death[1] – during the 1980s or 1990s were caught in the middle of two contradictory sets of cultural forces – the increasingly important role of the fetus in the public imaginary, and a deep-seated cultural taboo concerning pregnancy loss. A number of socio-political, demographic, and medical developments in the US since the mid-1970s including the legalization of abortion in 1973 and the trenchant and ongoing debate it engendered, the demographic shift towards a smaller family size, and towards a later age for women to have their first child, changes in the medical management of reproduction including a host of new reproductive technologies have moved up the time and pace with which many US women begin to socially-construct the personhood of a wished-for child.

Women now may begin to actively construct the personhood of their wished-for child from the moment they do a home pregnancy test. Each cup of coffee or glass of wine abstained from, and each person informed of the impending birth adds to the 'realness' of the baby they are growing within. They may follow the weekly physiological development of their 'baby' with a home pregnancy manual and each prenatal visit contributes to and confirms the growing sense of the 'baby's' realness and to their growing sense of themselves as 'mothers'. This may be especially true of those visits where one hears the heartbeat, sees the baby moving on the sonogram screen, or is informed of the baby's sex. They may start making or acquiring things for the baby, preparing a place for it in their homes, in their lives. They may have quit their job, or taken maternity leave, or bought a new house. They may have given it a name or nickname, and have started talking to it, or trying to influence its personality by playing music for it. Their friends, neighbors, and colleagues may also have begun to participate in the social construction of the expected baby by asking the mother how it is doing, speculating on its sex and personality, buying presents for it, and putting on a baby shower.

Once a pregnancy loss occurs, however, would-be parents are confronted with the second set of cultural forces. A deeply rooted cultural taboo still limits the social acknowledgement and support that bereaved parents are given and the incipient personhood of the wished-for child is often revoked. When the pregnancy ends without a baby to bring home, the very people who have encouraged the mother-in-the-making to take on this role and may have participated with her in the social construction of her 'baby' often withdraw their support for these interrelated projects, and act as if nothing of any significance took place. The cultural denial of pregnancy loss challenges the validity of the cultural and biological work already undertaken in constructing that child and belittles the importance of the loss.

These contradictory forces create a number of special problems for individuals who undergo a pregnancy loss in this context. In this article I focus on one of these, what I call 'the realness problem of pregnancy loss'. A number of women describe this problem in their narratives of loss published in pregnancy loss support group newsletters. For example, in a piece addressed to a 'baby' she miscarried at 11 weeks, Lisa Jeffries explains the realness problem this loss creates for her both in terms of knowing how to mourn and remember this loss and how to get others to participate in this process. 'I will remember you in so few ways it hurts. Because I never knew you. And yet you were real and alive in me. I wish I could hold on to something about you. I wish I could show everyone how real you were to me. So then you would be real to them. And then they would know, as I do, that we've all lost someone special in you' (Jeffries, 1998). Another example is found in a piece by Anne Ciany of Anne Arundel, Maryland entitled 'I'm a Mother Too' published in the Mother's/Father's Day issue of a support group newsletter. Anne describes how after her first child was born prematurely and died after 18 hours she sometimes finds herself asking 'am I a mother?' and explains that family members tell her 'that I am not really a mother because I have never experienced raising a child and all the work that is involved'. But despite her occasional doubts, Anne maintains that she does feel like a parent because 'we have/had a son, we didn't give birth to an "it". Collin was real; he existed. If we have/had a son, then we must be parents. If not, what are we? Give us a title if we aren't parents. . . . We've lost so much. Don't deprive us of our motherhood too' (Ciany, 1999).

In this essay I show how members of pregnancy loss support groups use things to deal with this problem. In an earlier article (Layne, 1999a), I focused on the way meanings are inscribed in the 'uses and trajectories' (Appadurai, 1986) of goods purchased for, made for, or given from the child-to-be during the pregnancy; goods given to, or in the memory of, the 'baby' after its death; and things acquired to memorialize the child within the family. Here I focus more closely on 'the things themselves' (Appadurai, 1986: 5). I examine the categories and qualities of goods that feature in each of these different contexts and explore the cultural and historical particularities of these goods.

I am limited in my ability to perform a material culture analysis because I do not have direct access to the things. The material I examine is more like that used by Barthes in his analysis of the fashion system (1983), i.e. not the objects themselves but the linguistic representation of the objects in a particular narrative genre. The descriptions of baby things in these narratives reveal a pattern to the types of physical qualities thought worth recording in verbal depictions of such goods.

Gorenstein has identified a number of principles that 'are of general utility in the interdisciplinary study of material culture' including that 'cultural themes' are 'expressed in the design and physicality of the object,' and this may be done through either a 'physical or evocative homology' between the object/s and a theme, and that cultural themes expressed in objects are 'sentiently apprehended' (1996: 1).

I argue that the objects used to construct the 'babyhood' of the embryos/fetuses/neonates that bereaved parents have 'lost' do so through use of both physical and evocative homologies. As I will show, babies and their things share a number of physical characteristics. In addition to qualities like smallness, or softness, the predominant quality or theme being communicated by bereaved parents through their baby's things is 'realness', to use a native term. The irrefutable 'realness' of physical things (even of simulacra)[2] is sentiently apprehended. Things are sentiently apprehended in the same ways that living children are, but that dead children (once they have been buried or disposed of) no longer can be. They can be touched, held, caressed, hugged, and gazed upon. Sometimes they can also be smelled as in the case of flowers or heard as in the case of a musical toy or wind chimes. Like children, they can also be cleaned, protected, and displayed for the admiration of others.

In the face of the denial of pregnancy loss, the use of things to make the claim that a 'real' child existed and is worthy of memory is an example of a de Certeauian 'tactic' by which members of subordinated groups use dominant resources for their own interests and desires. As Gorenstein notes, 'although most cultural themes embedded in objects are normative and convey and reinforce the generally held cultural themes of a society, the objectification of sentiently-held cultural themes make objects the perfect vehicles for conveying themes that are not commonly accepted in a community' (1996: 8).

PREGNANCY LOSS SUPPORT GROUPS

This article is based on research carried out since 1987 on three pregnancy loss support organizations in the US: UNITE, a regional group with, as of 1995, 10 support groups serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey; SHARE (Source of Help in Airing and Resolving Experiences), the nation's largest pregnancy loss support organization with, as of 1995, 97 groups throughout the US, and the New York Section of the National Council of Jewish Women's (NCJW) support group in New York City. Over 900 such groups were established throughout the US during the 1980s. My research is also informed by my personal experience of multiple miscarriages, and has involved attending support group meetings, participating first as a 'parent' and later as a 'professional' at annual conferences and other special events sponsored by these groups, interviews with founding members of these and other groups, and a textual analysis of the UNITE and SHARE newsletters.

The membership of these organizations, like that of most self-help groups in the US, is predominately white and middle class. All three groups are ecumenical and include Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant members. Most support group meetings are attended by couples but women write the vast majority of the newsletter items. Some founders of pregnancy loss groups are supporters of women's right to chose, while others clearly feel their work in this area complements their anti-abortion stand. It is not safe to assume that individuals who participate in groups share or even know the position of their group's leaders on abortion.

First trimester miscarriages are by far the most frequent type of pregnancy loss, but later losses are proportionately much more frequently represented in support group newsletters. Of the 447 losses reported in the newsletters (UNITE 1981–1994, SHARE 1984–1994), 56 per cent refer to a loss which takes place after 24 weeks gestation (of which 25% were stillbirths; 18% were newborn deaths following a full term pregnancy, and 13% were newborn deaths after premature birth). Given the fact that the later the loss, the more 'baby things' and personhood an embryo/fetus/child is likely to have, it is not surprising that the narratives of loss with the most elaborated accounts of material culture (i.e. those on which I focus in this article) are those which describe losses which occurred either later in a pregnancy or after birth.

GOODS GIVEN TO THE BABY-TO-BE DURING PREGNANCY

In the US, pregnant women and members of their social networks often make or purchase items for a baby-to-be during the pregnancy. The timing and intensity of this process varies widely.[3] Some women begin to buy or make things from the moment their pregnancy is determined; some even begin buying goods for their future children in anticipation of a pregnancy (see Layne, forthcoming). Others wait until the later months of their pregnancies to begin buying. Ethnic and religious background, family traditions, and previous reproductive experiences influence these choices.

In addition to purchases made individually by expectant parents, gifts are often given collectively to babies-to-be at baby showers. These ‘rituals of consumption’ (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) are also important rites of passage, taking place most commonly if it is a woman’s first pregnancy. Narratives of loss indicate that presents are sometimes given to babies-to-be at Christmas, the ultimate ritual of consumption for Christians in the US and, not coincidentally, the ‘pre-eminent family occasion’ for Christian families (Aries, 1962: 359).[4]

Shopping for one’s children is clearly one of the most important acts of parenting in contemporary North American culture (Miller, 1997; Seiter, 1995), and the inability to shop for one’s child/ren is often explicitly mourned in narratives of pregnancy loss. For example, Kristen Ingle writes in a piece called ‘For Elizabeth at Christmas’:

> If you were here I’d buy you a red velvet dress with lace and Mary Janes.[5] If you were here, I’d give you dolls and dishes and all the play-house toys I loved as a little girl . . . If you were here, I’d give you ringlets and ribbons. (Ingle, 1981/82a)

In another piece, addressed to their stillborn son and signed ‘mommy and daddy’, the parents list the things they would have enjoyed buying for him including ‘your first ball, your first bat, or when daddy buys your first Steeler’s hat’ (Martin, 1995: 3).

The pleasures of buying and giving are also denied the larger social network in the event of a pregnancy loss. Kathy Conners wrote a piece on what would otherwise have been her last day at work before beginning maternity leave which tells of how her co-workers had planned on giving ‘a big shower’ – ’Everyone was looking forward to buying little baby girl clothes for you’ (Connors, 1992).

Another woman writes on the occasion of what would have been her son’s second birthday of her fantasy that he could/would come back for just one day for a visit. She imagines tempting him with the promise of toys. If you come back, ‘I will buy you the toys that I’ve dreamed should be yours. Footballs, Legos, and cars with real doors’ (Nucitelli, 1997).

Purchases like these, either made for the baby during pregnancy, or imagined as ones that might have been made for the child had it survived, are the most numerous and elaborated accounts of goods found in narratives of pregnancy loss. Not surprisingly, these goods do not seem to differ from those purchased for newborns.

Clothing is one of the most frequently mentioned items in these accounts and this is understandable given how important clothing is as a marker of humanness, of personhood.[6] 'Clothing is quite literally at the borderline between subject and object' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 97). As Cook notes, 'Clothing, in particular, speaks daily, publicly, and bodily to the presentation of self' (1998: 348).

Clothing, is of course, made of cloth. Schneider and Weiner have observed how common gifts of cloth are cross culturally at life-cycle celebrations and explain this by the way cloth can symbolically be seen to make 'a continuous thread, a binding tie between . . . kinship groups, or . . . generations' (1989: 3).

Studies suggest that clothing is in fact the most popular gift item for Americans. Caplow found that clothing was by far the most common type of gift given in Middletown (35% of all gifts). He suggests that the American 'preference for clothing over all other categories [of gift] is probably accounted for by the automatic individualization of items of clothing. In effect, they describe the receiver by age, sex, appearance, and style' (1982: 385). This has not always been the case. According to Aries (1962), it was not until the 17th century that noble and middle-class European children started being dressed in special 'children's clothing'.

In the US, the children's wear industry experienced exponential growth during the second half of the 20th century (Cook, 1998: 348). An important part of this trend has been the development of gender-specific clothing. Although Willis asserts that 'under capitalism . . . gender like all our attributes and expressions, is bound up with the commodity form' (1991: 33), the capitalist garment industry has only relatively recently produced gender-distinctive clothing for young children. According to Paoletti and Kregloh, 'pink and blue color coding was a novelty at the turn of the century and only became widely practiced after the Second World War' (1989: 22). They attribute this phenomenon to changing understandings of how and when children learn gender, and the increasingly public lives that infants have – color coding helps enable 'strangers to make appropriate social responses to the baby' (Paoletti and Kregloh, 1989: 29).

In narratives of pregnancy loss, clothing is almost always gender-typed, with clothing for girls being described more frequently and fully than for boys. This is to be expected. As Schneider and Weiner (1989: 4) have observed, 'in the fashion system of contemporary western capitalism, women's dress is elaborated to a uniquely high degree' (see also Buck-Morss, 1989: 99). Female gender is expressed via the now conventional color of pink, e.g. 'pink rosebuds', and by gendered patterns, fabrics, and trims, e.g. 'a red velvet dress with lace and Mary Janes'.

Sometimes the clothes that had been planned as the outfit to bring the baby home from the hospital in are used instead for the burial. These outfits, especially if for a girl, are often described in detail. For example in a poem entitled ‘what will you look like in heaven?’ Susan Ashbaker (1994) wonders ‘Will you still be wearing your long white gown with satin slippers and lace socks and panties?’[7]

Beds and bedding are another frequently described category of baby things. Specialty furniture – cribs and bassinets feature routinely in narratives of loss, the empty crib being one of the most pervasive images of loss. Baby blankets and quilts are also frequently mentioned and bumper pads are sometimes described. Schneider and Weiner report that ‘In many societies, even in large-scale industrial capitalist ones, people . . . acknowledge the birth . . . of children with gifts of . . . bedding’ (1989: 10). Like clothing, these goods possess the physical qualities of cloth, ‘Malleable and soft, cloth can take many shapes . . . [and cloth] lends itself to an extraordinary range of decorative variation. [These properties] give cloth an almost limitless potential for communication’ (Schneider and Weiner, 1989: 1).

Here again one finds gender-typing a common feature. Hannah Campbell tells of how a friend had given her a ‘white baby blanket’ with ‘a pink and a blue ribbon . . . tied at either end’ and her plan to ‘remove one of [the ribbons] once our baby was born’ (Campbell, 1991a). Kristen Ingle (1981/82b) who discovered that her daughter had died at 33 weeks gestation tells in a poem entitled ‘pink blankets’ of how much she cherished seeing her wrapped in these after her birth.

In descriptions that focus on what life would have been like had the baby survived, toys are frequently mentioned. Like children’s clothing, the market in mass produced toys has grown dramatically since the 1950s (Seiter, 1995; Sutton Smith, 1986). Here, as in the case of clothing, gender-typing is important, e.g. ‘dolls and dishes and all the play-house toys’ or ‘footballs, Legos, and cars’.

Special baby food items are also described in these narratives. Special newborn or children’s foods like jars of baby food, bottles, and lollipops highlight the way that the category of ‘baby’ is so thoroughly constituted by special goods. Melanie Sheehan tells of how she wishes she had a child to take to Toys R Us, the largest US toy store chain. She confesses, in the absence of a child who would prompt her to ‘fill her cart high with goods’, to ‘buying . . . one jar of baby food just to see how it feels’ (Sheehan, 1996: 1). Hannah Campbell, the Irish-American woman with whose story I began, tells of a family tradition of presenting each new member of her extended family with a green lollipop at birth. Despite all the ways her son differed from the other babies welcomed into the family with this gesture, one of her siblings gave him the anticipated lollipop and he was buried with it (Campbell, 1990, 1991a). The association of children with lollipops and other candy marks not only children's fondness for such foods but also evokes the culturally-valued 'sweetness' of infants. One does not find in these narratives, the same preoccupation documented by Miller (1997) among a segment of British mothers (and I know from my own experience, many middle-class US mothers as well) about insuring the 'purity' and 'naturalness' of their children through pure and natural foods (e.g. avoidance of sugar), presumably because their purity and naturalness are preserved through death.[8]

'Baby things' share a number of material characteristics with each other as a class of goods and with the babies to whom they belong. For example, many baby things are soft, e.g. bumper pads, stuffed animals, pillows, and this evokes the softness of the baby's body (both the proverbial soft skin of infants, but also the softness of their bodies due to undeveloped musculature). In addition to this tactile quality, softness is expressed through the use of pastel colors.

Small size is also an important shared characteristic of babies and baby things. This quality is often mentioned in descriptions of clothing, e.g. 'precious little summer things', 'little Carter's stretch-suits', 'little diapers', 'little baby girl clothes', 'tiny pink rosebuds' and is sometimes accentuated by a double adjective as in 'tiny little clothes'.

Another feature of 'baby things' is the prominence of certain representations of nature. Animals are one of the most common themes in baby goods (e.g. teddy bears, bunnies, a lamb chop toy, a pussy-cat pillow). These representations of animals are frequently personified and thus explicitly analogize animals and babies.[9] The presumed 'naturalness' or 'animality' of newborns can be understood, depending on one's view, either because they have yet to be civilized, i.e. imparted with culture; or because they have yet to be corrupted by, and tainted with civilization (cf. Miller, 1997; Paoletti and Kregloh, 1989).

Although as noted earlier, many baby goods are gendered, a striking characteristic of teddy bears and other toy animals is that they are asexual. According to Willis (1991: 26) this complements children's understanding of multiple sexualities. But an alternative interpretation is that infants are considered to be gendered but asexual (or at least pre-sexual) and these toy surrogates represent this characteristic.

Another important decorative theme are those aspects of nature which change, particularly those that do so in a linear direction from negatively to positively valenced, such as rainbows and butterflies. Cyclical natural changes like the seasons and the related growth and decay of flowers and trees are used in narratives of pregnancy loss to symbolize the transformation of the child in death (from this world to the next) as a beautiful, natural occurrence (Layne, 1996), but these motifs are not commonly found on infant consumer goods. Rainbows and butterflies, in contrast, are found frequently on memorial goods and are also very common motifs on toys, books and clothing of young children and are considered appropriate decorative items for nurseries.

Another quality of 'baby things' of particular relevance in the context of pregnancy loss is that of 'preciousness' in both its standard reference to great value and its colloquial sense of 'cuteness' (see also Layne, forthcoming). Since the early part of the 20th century, children in the US were considered 'priceless', valued for their sentimental rather than monetary value (Zelizer, 1985). This expression of sentimental value appertains not only to the children themselves, but also to their things. Consumer goods designed for children, are often described with this adjective, e.g. 'precious little summer things'.

GOODS GIVEN TO OTHERS IN THE NAME OF THE BABY-TO-BE

Sometimes gifts are given to others (usually extended family members) in the name of the baby-to-be. This is sometimes done by way of announcing the pregnancy. For example, Pat MacCauley (1982) tells of how she and her husband planned to announce the news of her pregnancy on Christmas by giving their families 'specially dated tree ornaments shaped as angels, signed from the "baby"'. Thus, the first public act of the baby-to-be may be to enter into the gift giving network of the family. The giving of gifts in the name of a baby-to-be is clearly an extension to fetuses of a class of distinctive North American practices by which we treat infants as agents including treating them 'as an *addressee* in social interaction' (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984: 286), writing thank-you notes or sending greeting cards in their name, or including them on the message of one's answering machine.

I do not have much information on the nature of these goods but they appear to be small, sentimental items. In MacCauley's case, the item given symbolically and materially represents the child (i.e. it is both evocatively and physically homologous). Angels are one of the most frequent symbols of babies – both dead and alive (Layne, 1992). In this case the angel also represents the child through its material qualities – it is small, sentimental, and individualized by the mark of a 'special' date. Thus the child is in effect giving the gift of itself. The notion of the child as gift, either from itself or from God, is well elaborated in narratives of pregnancy loss (Layne, 1997).[10]

GOODS GIVEN TO THE BABY AFTER ITS DEATH

Just as gift-giving to the hoped-for-child often begins before birth, it frequently continues following the death. Many of the goods given to the baby after its death are like those that the child would have received if it were living, e.g. birthday balloons, Easter baskets. But some gifts given on these occasions, like holiday flower arrangements, are clearly gifts to the dead and inventions of the funeral/florist industry (Mitford, 1963; Schmidt, 1995). Balloons and flowers, the two most frequently mentioned items given on such occasions are both highly perishable, and thus mark the short, ephemeral worldly existence of these children via a material homology. The analogy between the beauty and perishability of children and flowers, common since at least the 19th century (Simonds and Rothman, 1992), is also frequently made in support group members' poems. For example, in a poem entitled *A Little Flower*, baby David's great-grandma describes God plucking this bud, 'too beautiful to leave wither on the vine' but who will instead now 'live eternally in His heavenly bouquet' (Taylor, 1993).

Although the gifts left at gravesides are typically purchased, not all of the goods given after the loss are commercial. Several of the gifts mentioned, like a picture drawn by a sibling, or a shell brought home from a trip by the mother (Boyette, 1996), are valued precisely because of their non-commercial nature.

As in the baby things given to or from the baby during the pregnancy, smallness (either in terms of the physical size or the 'tokenness' of the item) seems to be a common characteristic. For example, one mother tells of how her son makes a 'small gift' for his deceased sibling every year and another mother mentions taking her surviving child to the 'dollar store' to buy a gift to place on the grave. Gender is much less frequently mentioned on these occasions, but one mother mentions the 'pink grass' in the Easter basket she put on her daughter's grave.

GOODS GIVEN IN MEMORY OF THE BABY AFTER ITS DEATH

Gifts are frequently given by family members (and occasionally health care providers) to organizations in memory of the child. Memorial gifts are the least personal of all the gifts described in the narratives of loss. It is only in this category of gift that one finds money mentioned as an acceptable gift.

Even though these gifts are typically given on occasions at which the child would have been given presents had s/he survived, e.g. Christmas, Hanukkah, birthdays, and may be the type of gift one might have been giving to one's own child had it lived, the goods commonly given on these occasions are less individual than those purchased for the baby during the pregnancy. Whereas clothing features so prominently in accounts of purchases made for the baby during the pregnancy, clothing is rarely mentioned as an appropriate memorial gift. In contrast, the toys, books, videos that are frequently recommended as memorial gifts are items that could be enjoyed by a group of children. Another difference can be found in comparison with ‘grave-side’ gifts which tend to be perishable; memorial gifts tend to be ‘hard’ goods, perhaps conveying the donor’s wish that the memory of their loved one endure.

Smallness remains a theme, for example, one contributor suggests that ‘small gifts . . . can be given to school, church or temple libraries or nurseries’ (Niehoff, 1995; see also Mellon, 1992). A mother tells of how each year she gives ‘small Christmas gifts for needy children’ in memory of her son. Smallness not only indexically matches the physical size of the baby, it also corresponds to the pattern of gift giving to children. Caplow (1982: 386) found that children in the US were typically given many small gifts while adults were given fewer, more ‘substantial’ gifts.

GOODS ACQUIRED BY FAMILY MEMBERS TO MEMORIALIZE THE BABY

Things are also used to memorialize the child within the family. Sometimes these items are put away; other times they are displayed in a public area of the home. For later losses, hospitals are an important source of memorabilia. Many hospitals now have a bereavement team and special protocols for pregnancy losses which include providing parents with mementos. Goods are also often especially purchased for this purpose.

The things that are used to memorialize the child within the family fall into several different categories. Using the semiotic distinction between indices, icons, and symbols, I describe these goods moving from those whose relationship with that which they signify is based on physical connection or contiguity (indices), to those based on a relation of resemblance or similarity (icons), to those based on a more abstract, arbitrary relationship (symbols).

Mementos consisting of parts of the body such as a lock of hair function indexically, that is, they are ‘signs whose relation to their objects [is of] a direct nature . . . by virtue of having been really connected with it’ (Singer, 1978: 216). Of all the readily separable body parts/fluids, hair has a special place in Euro-American symbol systems. Hair has been associated with mourning since antiquity (Ochs, 1993: 54–5) and has been used in the US as a memento of loved ones, either absent or dead, since the 18th century (Aries, 1985; Morley, 1971; Sheumaker, 1997). As Miller notes, ‘it could be “safely” admired, since it was not any part of the embarrassing body’ and it was particularly appropriate for the commemoration of love and death because of its ability to endure, even after death. Sheumaker attributes the popularity of hair as a sentimental object to the fact that because of its durability, ‘it could transcend time, reaching past absence to presence’ and ‘embody the supposed essence of individuals and their relationships’ (Sheumaker, 1997: 422). Like cloth, hair can readily 'evoke ideas of connectedness or tying' (Schneider and Weiner, 1989: 10).

The next stage of remove concerns objects which came into contact with the baby's body, including the measuring tape and paper the baby was laid upon in the hospital, and blankets used to wrap the baby in. An important quality of cloth in this context is that it is permeable with bodily fluids such as tears and body oil. Nanci Hyneman of the Boise, Idaho SHARE group tells of how after learning of a baby girl born with Trisomy 18 she made an 'extra small' afghan for this child who weighed only 4 lbs. When the baby died, the mother told Nanci that she wanted to bury her daughter in the blanket but was having trouble parting with it. Nanci made her another one just like it and the Mom was able to keep the one that was 'filled with her daughter's fragrance' to use 'to sleep with or just hold' when she 'needs comfort' (Hyneman, 1988).[11]

Handprints and footprints are formed by a direct, physical connection with the baby but then represent the baby from a distance. Like hair, hand/footprints have been common mementos of babyhood in Europe and America throughout the 20th century. *Journal de Bebe* by Franc-Nohain published in Paris in 1914, from which The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Baby's Journal* (1978) was adapted, included a page for the 'empriente du pied et de la main de bebe' and a page for 'boucles de cheveaux' (personal communication, Valerie von Volz, Department of Drawing and Prints, Metropolitan Museum of Art). The importance of such prints as symbols of early childhood is also evidenced in the frequency with which they are used as motifs in preschool art projects and consumer goods.

Footprints and handprints are important symbols of humanness; bipedalism and an opposable thumb being distinctive characteristics of the species. Since the Victorian era and the discovery of the uniqueness of fingerprints, these prints have come to represent not only generic humanness but the idea of the unique individuality of each person. Infant footprints were also apparently used in this manner. AC Controls Ltd, a British firm who advertise themselves as 'integrated security specialists' market a 'baby footprinting identicator' kit. According to their promotional material 'obtaining fingerprints and footprints of young children has been undertaken since the early eighties'. Up until recently New York State law required that the footprints of all newborns be recorded. Though no longer required, as they proved to be nearly useless for forensic purposes, many hospitals still do them 'because parents like them' (Dr Pinheiro, Albany Medical Center, personal communication).

Footprints and handprints, if the actual prints of a particular person, function on the basis of contiguity, i.e. they function iconically. If they are used without direct reference to a particular person, as for instance in the discourse of the anti-abortion movement, they function symbolically. In both cases they function as a synecdoche: Part A – fetal feet – equals A – a fetus – which in turn equals B – a human (Condit, 1990). Condit explains how this partiality is key to understanding the importance of fetal footprints in Pro-Life imagery. A 'full picture of a young fetus includes features not associated with adult human beings, the placenta, and the umbilical cord' and if the fetus is young enough, a tail, but fetal feet are 'very close to baby feet in shape. . . . Our visual logic "recognizes" such feet as "small human feet" and we synecdochically expand the unseen picture to see a full "small human"' (1990: 68–9).

In the case of pregnancy loss, footprints seem to have an additional meaning (one that privileges them over handprints) in that they can evoke the sense that someone was here and now is gone. Like someone walking in the sand, the footprint is a fragile trace that a person passed this way. Unlike footprints in the sand, however, those imprinted on specially treated paper are durable reminders of the baby's physical reality. Another suggested way of preserving this physical trace is through plaster casts. In its section 'ideas for remembrance', SHARE mentions 'a kit for casting baby's hand or foot . . . available from American Baby Products. The copy-tot kit duplicates in lifelike detail' (Smith, 1988).

Sonogram photos function iconically as memorial goods. Oaks (1998) and others have noted how these images play an important role in helping to establish the 'reality' of a 'baby' for many women during the early stages of their pregnancy. If the 'reality' of embryos, especially in the early stages of a pregnancy is problematic for some women because they cannot be seen or felt, the 'reality problem' is greatly heightened for women after a pregnancy loss. Sonogram images may be one of the only things available to testify to the fact that a 'real baby' ever existed. Sonogram images, while requiring more interpretive effort – i.e. not being as 'unproblematically "real"' (Shapiro, 1988: 124) as conventional photographs – carry the imprint of medical authority and thus play an important role in authenticating the existence of a 'real baby' (Layne, 1992).

Women whose losses take place in the later half of their pregnancies are often presented with snapshots by the hospital staff. This practice is a modern variation of a 19th-century Euro-American practice. According to Aries, by the second half of the 19th century, photographs of the dead, especially dead children, had become very popular: 'Few family albums were without their photographs of dead children' (Aries, 1985: 247). Today, photographs of the dead are no longer considered appropriate; it is photographic remembrances of the person in life, not in death, which are valued. But in the case of pregnancy loss, snapshots of the baby after its birth/death may be the only ones possible. Like sonogram images, these photos play a critical role in establishing the reality of the baby. In 1987 SHARE conducted a survey of bereaved parents regarding the importance of photographs after a loss. Of the 438 respondents (reporting losses which occurred between 1966 and 1987), 95 per cent 'felt that it is important to have pictures of the baby', 63 per cent had one or more photograph, 50 per cent were offered pictures by the hospital, 26 per cent had taken pictures themselves (Laux, 1988a). The respondents testify to the 'reality making' function of such photos: 'We need to remember her as a real person we were holding. This is our proof.' 'Although I get no great comfort from her pictures, I do have them put away for when I do feel the need to see she existed.' 'On those days when you feel like it really never happened and people are treating you like you never had a child, you do have a picture to remind yourself you did have a child.' Another describes having a picture of her 20-week gestation baby 'hanging on the wall with the rest of the children . . . It is proof she existed' (quoted in Laux, 1988b). In addition to affirming the reality of a baby, such photographs are used by bereaved parents to stress the uniqueness and individuality of their baby while at the same time to provide important resources for establishing family ties through the rhetoric of inheritance and resemblance.[12]

Artistic renderings – sketches and paintings – are another form of visual representation sometimes used to memorialize dead babies. According to Aries (1962), this practice can be traced to the 16th century, when elite European families began to include their dead children in group portraits on, or at, the family tomb. Not until the beginning of the 17th century were portraits of individual children common. By then 'it had become customary to preserve by means of the painter's art the ephemeral appearance of childhood' (1962: 43). Aries (1962: 43) argues that 'photography took over from painting' in the 19th century, and while there is no denying the importance of photography in contemporary family life, photography has not completely replaced painting. Many middle-class North American families still have portraits done of their children which they hang in public spaces of their homes. The greater cost of such representations and what Bourdieu (1984: 39) has described as the 'legitimacy-imposing effects of paintings' make these prestige items. Portraits are, like children, 'one of a kind' and although painting is thought to be less 'realistic' than photography, good art is thought to capture the essence of its subject.

Artifacts of civil society are another important type of memorial good. This includes birth and death certificates, hospital identification bracelets, crib cards, baptismal certificates. Like visual representations, these items bestow authenticity but they do so via different means. Their authenticating power comes from the civil (or religious) authority which grants them. This in turn rests on the power of positivism which forms the basis of these bureaucratic institutions. Such goods traffic in weights and measures, dates and times, for these are the prerequisites of civil personhood – what it takes to be counted. According to Hacking (1991: 186), by the end of the 19th century, it had become taken 'for granted that positive facts were measured by numbers'.

Other memorial goods include sentimental knickknacks for the home often purchased specifically for the purpose of memorialization like Christmas ornaments and figurines like the ones Hannah Campbell keeps in her curio cabinet.[13] Angels are one of the most popular decorative motifs for such mementos. Hannah Campbell describes the 'handmade . . . pale blue felt' angel which they place on top of their tree each year as 'Marc's angel'. Although she bought this ornament before his birth/death, the year he died she attached a 'holy card with a prayer on the front and Marc's name and date of birth on the back' to the ornament to 'display Marc's name' (Campbell, 1991b). The analogization of dead babies with angels accomplished both in verse and through memorial goods, attributes to babies the qualities of goodness, innocence, and sacredness (Layne, 1992) as well as a broader Victorian valuation of domestic life (Douglas, 1977).

Smallness is a quality which is frequently highlighted in descriptions of this type of memorial good. Several members report having in addition to their main tree, a separate, 'small Christmas tree' as a memorial each year. Unlike the smallness of baby clothing which fulfills a practical need, there is no such material constraint when it comes to items that represent the child symbolically after its death. In this context the valuation of smallness can be traced to the late 18th and early 19th-century notion developed by natural theologians that the miraculous was present in the ordinary and the infinite in the small (Cooksey, 1992: 7). This view is well expressed in the well-known opening lines of Blake's poem, 'Auguries of Innocence' (1970 [1803–4]):

> To see a world in a grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour.

From this perspective, the smallness of the fetal or newborn body and the shortness of its life do not devalue it, but on the contrary point to special value of this life.[14]

Baby footprints reappear in a more abstract way in this category of memorial good, e.g. not the actual print of a particular baby, but the representation of a generic fetus' or baby's footprint. The SHARE newsletter periodically includes the pattern for making cross-stitched footprints.[15] For example, in 1991 a pattern is presented along with an article on 'keepsakes following a miscarriage'. The author suggests that the footprint 'could include baby's name and date and be framed as a tree ornament'. Replicas of tiny feet also are apparently sometimes purchased as memorial objects. According to a piece in the SHARE newsletter, 'pewter feet the size of a 10 week gestation baby are available from religious stores' (Lewis, 1991).

Another important set of memorial items are objects to be placed in one's yard. Some commonly used items include trees, rose bushes, fountains, benches, bird baths, garden statues of children or angels. These items convey the qualities of goodness, innocence, and sacredness as well as that of a romantically construed naturalness (Layne, 1994).[16]

Whereas most memorial goods are the kinds of mementos that one might have had the child lived (e.g. hospital records, scrapbooks, portraits, toys), and therefore work to normalize the baby's life, garden memorabilia normalizes the child's death. The fact that plants are alive and capable of growth are particularly important in this regard. Cathi Lammert (1992), director of SHARE, tells of 'a very special gift' of 'a little blue spruce' given to them by family members one December, on the first anniversary of their son's birth/death. This 'lovely small bush' becomes a stand-in for a child who is not thought of as dead, but rather as an ongoing, living, miraculous, 'angelic presence' manifested through this object of nature. 'Our little bush . . . immediately named the little 'Christopher' bush . . . nurtured and grew' even after having been transplanted to their new home. Each year they decorate 'our little bush' with 'bright white lights . . . the symbol of brightness and purity'. Cathi remarks upon the lovingness with which her husband arranges the bush/child in 'his radiant white garment of lights' thereby transforming Christopher's bush into Christopher who 'stood glistening alone'. At other times the bush is construed not as the child himself but as a vehicle through which Christopher 'do[es] his miracles' (Lammert, 1992). Here again we see how the qualities of 'specialness', 'loveliness' and especially 'smallness' are stressed; this bush is referred to as 'little' or 'small' 10 times in a one page account.

Similar symbolism is utilized in the common, sometimes collective, support group ritual of planting of a tree as a living memorial. In a handbook on organizing pregnancy loss rituals compiled by the founder of SHARE, Sister Jane Marie Lamb, offers suggested scripts for tree planting ceremonies which make explicit use not only of the broad analogy between trees' seasonal changes and the life/death of the child but specific physical homologies between the qualities of particular trees and these children. For example, she recommends the Bradford Pear tree because it remains small, does not produce fruit, has blossoms which are 'pure and sweet' and remind us of 'innocence' and requires little care just as 'the children who had died cannot receive the care you longed to give them' (Lamb, 1988).[17]

Memorial jewelry is also a popular memorial good. The most frequent type of memorial jewelry mentioned is a 'mother's ring' which has the birth stone of each of the woman's children (whether living and dead).[18] Sometimes jewelry is more representational as for example, 'precious feet pins' and guardian angel pins. Sue Friedeck (1995), a SHARE newsletter editor who had two miscarriages and then had a son who died 13 days after birth, wears two pieces of jewelry representing her son: 'an angel on a chain' and a ring with her son's birthstone which was given to her as a Mother's Day gift. She writes that she would also like to get a butterfly and heart to wear on her necklace so as to represent 'each child lost'. For Sue, the angel, butterfly, and heart 'each represent special qualities of my babies'.

Sometimes more than one of the categories of memorial goods are combined in memorial jewelry. For example, the 'keepsake pendant' advertised in an issue of SHARE as 'a small decorative vessel that holds a portion of a cremated baby's remains or a lock of hair.' The pendant can be worn as a necklace or displayed under a blown glass dome (Madelyn, 1996).[19]

Like clothing, jewelry mediates between the body and others and as such is both public and private. Simmel (1950: 341) has described the way 'adornment,' particularly jewelry, supplies 'the personality with . . . an enlargement or intensification of its sphere: The personality . . . is more when it is adorned.' Simmel attributes this capacity, in part, to the 'shining metals and precious stones' which give jewelry its brilliance. The light 'radiates out, thus the wearer appears as the center of a circle', the 'sensuously observable' qualities act as a 'vehicle of a spiritual fulguration' (1950: 340). Memorial jewelry serves not only to constitute that which was lost as 'a child', but just as importantly, the woman as 'a mother', i.e. at the center of a circle with relations radiating out.

Whereas balloons, and grave flowers stress the fragility of life and the inevitability of change as time passes, jewelry is a 'hard good' which emphasizes a lasting quality. Memorial jewelry also makes tacit claims about the 'preciousness' of these babies, a cultural notion which appears to have a particular prominence in narratives of loss. A final relevant characteristic is that memorial jewelry may be seen by others but not necessarily recognized as a symbol of a pregnancy loss.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this essay I have focused on the instrumental role material artifacts play in the construction of fetal and neonatal personhood and consequentially of motherhood. Scholars of material culture recognize that as a medium of discourse, objects differ from language or behavior (Gorenstein, 1996: 3). The meanings that objects convey may reinforce or challenge meanings expressed through language and behavior. Baby things are used by members of pregnancy loss support groups to do both.

On the one hand, they reinforce the dominant cultural constructions of babies as precious, i.e. sentimental objects of affection; on the other hand, they challenge existing definitions as to whether being alive is a prerequisite of this condition. Similarly, they reaffirm the rightness and powerful desirability of proper life trajectories but challenge prevailing notions as to what qualifies for inclusion in this narrative structure.

In a society so thoroughly imbued with the ideology of 'possessive individualism' (i.e. we are largely defined by what we possess, cf. Handler, 1988; Macpherson, 1962), to possess baby things is powerful proof that 'a baby' existed. But not any 'baby' will do. The insistence of bereaved parents on the notion of 'real babies' points to the frightening alternative of 'the unreal', that is, the liminal dangers of death and deformity. Through the use of both physical and evocative homologies bereaved parents use objects to construct the 'real babyhood' of their embryos/fetuses/neonates. They use the culturally-prescribed, appealing qualities of baby things (smallness, softness, naturalness, sweetness, cuteness, preciousness) to normalize their child. These things assert not only that a baby existed but that this baby (even if born dead and/or malformed) possessed many of the shared qualities of babyhood which are so culturally valued.

Baby things also help parents normalize and 'make real' their experience as parents. Although for some bereaved parents, the child continues to have an important spiritual presence in their lives, the physical, sensual aspects of mothering are sorely missed. Because of the sensual qualities of things, they play a critical role in helping bereaved parents articulate and mourn this lack. As the advertisement for the keepsake pendants suggests 'holding a source of comfort in their hands' helps bereaved families 'find peace in their hearts' (Madelyn, 1996). In addition, in buying, caring for, and preserving baby things women are able to engage in some of the prescribed roles of motherhood. Many bereaved mothers describe feelings of frustration and helplessness. For example, Sue Friedeck (1995) writes, 'I felt so helpless, I could not protect my babies and it seemed that nothing I did could save them.' Although unable to preserve their children, bereaved mothers, are like other mothers, able to use things to preserve their memory.

Scholars of material culture often remark on the subversive capacities of things and on their ability to proselytize (McCracken, 1988: 25). We have seen how members of pregnancy loss support groups take the 'cultural themes' inscribed in things (Gorenstein, 1996), whether traces of a body or mass-produced consumer items, and use them to make their babies and their parenthood 'real'. In so doing they challenge the dominant cultural assessment of pregnancy loss, and illuminate the hidden 'poiesis' of consumption and the art of 'making do' (de Certeau, 1984) with the power of things.

Notes

I owe special thanks to Shirley Gorenstein who was instrumental in focusing my attention on the material culture dimensions of the gifts and provided invaluable comments on earlier drafts, and to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute for a sabbatical leave which enabled me to work on this project.

1. The term, ‘pregnancy loss’, itself most probably emerged simultaneously with the groups. ‘Spontaneous abortion’, the medical term for what in lay terms is a ‘miscarriage’, is defined as the involuntary expulsion of the fetus before the date that it could be viable outside the womb; ‘stillbirth’ is used to designate any fetal demise after that point. As advances in neonatal medicine push back the date at which a fetus has any possibility of surviving, the boundary separating miscarriage from stillbirth is changing and varies from state to state but in the US where patients have access to neonatal intensive care units the minimum age is somewhere between 20 and 24 weeks. Only about 3 per cent of all intrauterine deaths take place after 16 weeks gestation (Bongaarts and Potter, 1983: 39).
2. In Layne (2000) I describe a whole series of substitute baby things described in the newsletters for bereaved parents who, for one reason or another, do not have the ‘real thing’, like do-it-yourself baptismal certificates, or birth/death certificates and argue that even in these cases, the materiality of these simulacra functions in the same reality-making fashion.
3. Miller (1997: 71, 75) describes how members of Britain’s National Childbirth Trust transfer, ‘almost instantly’ after the birth, ‘the sense of pleasure [and prowess at ‘self-construction’] they had developed in buying clothes and items for themselves . . . to the infant’. In the US, at least, this transfer often begins during the pregnancy.
4. Caplow (1982: 387) argues that Christmas gifts ‘repair and reinforce the kinship ties weakened by distance and by the lack of opportunity for contact’. Perhaps this has now also become true, with the advent of fetal personhood, for these present, yet absent, family members-in-the-making during pregnancy.
5. Mary Janes are black, usually patent leather, round-toed girls’ shoes with a single strap around the ankle. They were named after a character in the Buster Brown comic strip of the early 1900s and were one of the first trademarked/charactered pieces of clothing for children (personal communication, Dan Cook, 2000).
6. See Guillemin and Holmstrom (1986: 135–7) on similar uses of clothes by parents and nurses to ‘personify’ critically ill newborns in Neonatal Intensive Care Units, some of whom in the past would have been classified as miscarriages or stillbirths.
7. See Morley (1971) on the similarities between Victorian burial gowns and those for infants.
8. Similarly, where these British women resist the gendering of their infants (Miller, 1997), bereaved mothers welcome and seek out this reassuring evidence of identity. Brand names are rarely mentioned in these textual descriptions but one may assume that actual purchases are made according to the style, taste, and class aspirations of the parents and their social network (Bourdieu, 1984; Fussell, 1983).
9. See McVeigh (1996) on the attribution of shared characteristics to animals, infants, and women in Japanese culture and Thorsen (1996) on the similarities between the attributes of infants and dogs in 19th and 20th-century Euro-America.

10. The rhetoric of the gift permeates narratives of pregnancy loss. Elsewhere (Layne, 1999b), I examine the spiritual gifts that are often felt to flow between God, the ‘baby’ and bereaved parents as the result of a pregnancy loss.

11. Unlike hair, which endures, ‘the softness and ultimate fragility’ of cloth, is thought to ‘capture the vulnerability of humans, whose every relationship is transient, subject to the degenerative process of illness, death, and decay’ (Schneider and Weiner, 1989: 2).

12. See Sherman and Newman (1977: 186) on the importance of photographs, particularly of women’s children, as a ‘cherished possession’ among the elderly.

13. Wozniak (in press) describes strikingly similar practices among foster mothers in the US as they tend the memory of foster children they ‘lost’ through death, their departure to an adoptive family, or return to their biological families.

14. This sacralization of smallness is one of the places the ideology and rhetoric of the anti-abortion movement and the pregnancy loss support movement overlap and reinforce one another.

15. See Aries (1985), Morley (1971) and Schorsch (1976) on embroidered mourning goods like memorial pictures, samplers, and mourning handkerchiefs popular during both the Federal and the Victorian eras. As I describe in Layne (forthcoming), handmade things continue to be an important category of goods prepared for an anticipated baby.

16. See Schorsch (1976) on the importance of garden iconography in American Federal mourning art.

17. In addition to the analogies drawn between child and tree, the ceremony also points to an analogy between the survivor’s journey and evolving understanding of her/his loss, and the living memory of the child.

18. Other examples include the ‘beaded bracelet keepsake with your baby’s name’ advertised in the ‘resources’ section of a SHARE newsletter (Herda, 1989), and ‘baby’s breath lapel pin and pendants’ offered by a SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) group in Canada (Mills, 1988) as ‘meaningful symbols to help preserve the memory of a loved child’.

19. See Aries (1985) on the changing meaning of mourning lockets.

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