Foetal personhood and representations of the absent child in pregnancy loss memorialization

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Abstract Because mourning and memorializing a miscarriage seems to imply acceptance of foetal personhood, feminists have been reluctant to address the often traumatic but common experience of pregnancy loss. Feminist anthropologists of reproduction have argued that adopting a view of personhood as constructed and negotiated, rather than inherent, solves this dilemma and enables the development of a feminist discourse of pregnancy loss. This article aims to make a critical contribution to such a discourse by analysing representations of lost babies and children in online pregnancy loss memorials. It focuses on two genres of representation, idealized angels and medical ultrasound images. It argues that the dominance of a biological model of personhood limits the ability of both forms of representation to secure the status of memorialized children as real. However, pregnancy loss memorials do communicate the anguish of grieving parents, in part through the very unrepresentability of their loss. They also provoke a questioning of the taken for granted subject of 'the child', whether imagined or real, absent or present.

keywords *child, foetal personhood, memorialization, pregnancy loss, representation*

Introduction: pregnancy loss and foetal personhood

Pregnancy loss is a common experience, but its significance and the suffering and grief it causes have until recently been largely ignored by medical discourse and public culture. Representing a unique juxtaposition of death, childhood, sexuality, female embodiment and reproductive failure, miscarriages and stillbirths are still often experienced as shameful and isolating events. While feminism has been a vocal critic of medicine in relation to reproductive health, and has devoted much energy to making women's hidden experiences visible, it has not had much to say about miscarriage and stillbirth.[1] In her book *Motherhood Lost*, an ethnographic study of pregnancy loss and its meanings, feminist anthropologist Linda Layne states that feminists have 'abandoned their sisters in hours of need' and contributed to their pain by 'retaining a studied silence' on pregnancy loss (2003: 239).

In fact, the rhetoric of the women's health movement with its emphasis on the naturalness of pregnancy and positive birth outcomes has inadvertently contributed to the shame surrounding pregnancy loss (2003: 30).

Layne argues convincingly that one of the main reasons for the feminist silence on pregnancy loss is reproductive politics, specifically the relationship between abortion debates and foetal personhood. While women who memorialize their miscarriages with poems with titles such as 'I'm a Mother Too' insist that they have lost a 'real baby', feminist scholars have been reluctant to concede that embryos and foetuses are equivalent to babies and children. As Layne puts it 'the fear . . . is that if one were to acknowledge that there was something of value lost, something worth grieving in a miscarriage, one would automatically accede the inherent personhood of embryos and fetuses' (2003: 240). Thus feminist scholars are faced with a tension between the need to support women's reproductive rights and the desire to acknowledge women's suffering. Layne urges feminists to overcome their fear of foetal personhood in order to create a woman-centred discourse of pregnancy loss, to develop new ways of acknowledging these events and to advocate new forms of medical management.

Layne's challenge to feminism is located in a chapter of *Motherhood Lost* called 'Breaking the Silence', but her book investigates US pregnancy loss support groups who have already done much to replace silence and absence with words and images. As well as poems, stories and personal accounts from support group newsletters, Layne's book includes photographs of memorial quilts, memorial services, and events organized as part of Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Week which occurs annually in October in the United States.[2] Layne's groundbreaking research on the material culture and lived experiences of pregnancy loss is marked by her deep respect for her subjects' beliefs. An active participant in the pregnancy loss movement who has her own long history of recurrent miscarriage, Layne expresses a special affinity for those suffering from this form of bereavement (2003: 22). At times her empathetic identification acts as a limit to critical analysis. For example, she discusses the preservation of 'baby things' as a form of fetishization, but ultimately rejects this analysis because of the negative connotations of the concept and its denigration of women's memory work (2003: 139).

In contrast, this article contributes to feminist discourse on pregnancy loss through a more critical and less explicitly personal engagement with pregnancy loss memorialization and its production of foetal personhood. I take my lead from another anthropologist of reproduction, Lynn Morgan, who has also criticized feminism for refusing to acknowledge the lived experience of women 'who cherish fetal life' (1996: 48). Morgan argues for a pragmatic and self-reflexive ethics of foetal identity which acknowledges the social reality of foetal personhood while remaining critically attuned to the social and political contexts that produce certain forms of personhood and deny others. This suggests that a feminist ethics of pregnancy loss does not necessarily demand an uncritical response to the versions of foetal personhood constructed by grieving mothers. Indeed it is inevitable

that discourses of pregnancy loss, including those produced by affected women, will constrain what is able to be spoken and represented at the same time as they 'break the silence'. While it is crucial to remain sensitive to suffering, it is consistent with a self-reflexive feminist ethics to examine what kinds of foetal personhood are possible and intelligible in the contemporary Western culture of pregnancy loss.

In this article I explore the forms of unborn personhood found in pregnancy loss memorialization by investigating the visual representations commonly used to depict lost foetuses and babies. I focus on two contrasting genres of representation: idealized angel images and the medical techno-realism of ultrasound images. My main sources are the many Internet websites and virtual support groups set up by grieving parents, but I also draw on newsletters and books written by and for those who have experienced pregnancy loss.[3] In 2005, motivated by my own experiences of miscarriage, I visited more than 50 online memorial sites and read many personal accounts of miscarriage and stillbirth (for example Ash, 2004; Cohen, 2005; Faldet and Fitton, 1997; Freeland, 1990; Hinton, 1997; Kluger-Bell, 2000; Ryan, 2000). The general homogeneity of the miscarriage memorials I read and viewed converted my personal search into a research question about the representational genres of pregnancy loss. I do not claim that the virtual culture of pregnancy loss memorialization found on the Internet is necessarily representative of the private and individual ways women remember and mourn their miscarriages and stillbirths. It does, however, represent a public and accessible discourse which has developed its own conventions and methods of constructing the realness of lost babies.

Most of the material and websites I analyse originate in the United States and the discourse of pregnancy loss memorialization is currently dominated by mainstream North American culture. Although I do cite some examples from Australian pregnancy loss publications, many of the poems and the ideas for memorialization in these publications are taken from US sources. Pregnancy loss memorialization is framed by the ideology of intensive mothering prevalent in contemporary Western contexts, but perhaps most developed in the United States (Hays, 1996). Intensive mothering demands that mothers selflessly dedicate their time, energy and love to 'the sacred child' who is viewed as an essentially innocent, pure and loving being. It valorizes the unique relationship between mother and child as a realm of unconditional love and devotion, outside and beyond the calculating and competitive realm of the capitalist economy (Hays, 1996: 122). In pregnancy loss discourse, maternal love is presented even more powerfully as an unwavering and almost cosmic force which transcends time and space (Layne, 2003: 215; Ryan, 2000). However, as much recent research has demonstrated, contemporary motherhood cannot be separated from consumer culture. A caring mother must be a well-informed and discerning consumer, shopping for the safest pram, the most natural food, the most stimulating toys and the most nurturing day care (Clarke, 2004; Taylor, 2000). As Rothman (2004) has argued, the desire to 'have a child of one's own' itself combines notions of property ownership, the

possessiveness of exclusive love, the desire to nurture another human being and the significance of genetic connection. Pregnancy memorialization both participates in and critiques the consumer culture of motherhood. While it reifies the lost child as a precious gift and relies on commodified objects such as toys and clothing to represent him or her, it also rejects the materialist assumptions which deny the reality of an experience of motherhood which does not produce a living child (Layne, 2004).

Constructing foetal personhood

According to the anthropological perspective of Layne and Morgan, the notion of foetal personhood is only a threat to feminist reproductive politics if one assumes a narrow model of 'inherent' and biologically determined personhood (Layne, 2003; Morgan, 1996). In this model a person is coterminous with a bounded and autonomous body. If on the other hand feminists were to accept an 'anthropologically informed view of personhood' (Layne, 2003: 240), that is, a model of personhood as constructed, then acknowledging foetal personhood would no longer mean acceding to the claims of pro-life campaigners. As Layne argues, a model of personhood as socially constructed allows one to argue that some embryos and foetuses (those that are wanted, mourned and memorialized) are persons or 'real babies', whereas others are not. Personhood is no longer an inherent attribute found in some entities and not others, but a social project carried out over time (Layne, 2003: 240).

Morgan (1996) offers a more developed version of this argument in an article on the limits of philosophical models of relationality. She contrasts the 'Western ethnobiological view of personhood', which underlies the assumption that birth is the morally significant dividing line between persons and non-persons, with 'the relational body-person' model drawn from non-Western, specifically Melanesian, cultures. In the latter model bodies are not simply material entities but are 'the literal instantiation of social relations', formed out of the dense web of social life (1996: 57). And concomitantly, persons are seen as being formed from physiological nurturance, the exchange of food and body substances such as blood, sweat and breast milk. From this perspective, the foetus/infant is figured as 'a motley amalgam' of many social influences and events (such as the failure of contraception or the acquisition of a better job) and substances (such as prenatal vitamins or seven-grain bread) which enable its constitution (1996: 56). Relationships are formative of body substance as well as the social self, and are vital at every stage of potential and emergent personhood, from before conception to the end of the life cycle.

The 'relational body-person' model suggests that social birth cannot be conflated with biological birth and enables both pregnancy termination and pregnancy loss to be reframed. Abortion is not so much 'active killing' as a decision not to complete the social process of producing a body/person (Morgan, 1996: 56–7). But an embryo in a highly desired and long awaited pregnancy may already be constituted as a person by its parents and

extended family. Morgan's analysis moves the discussion beyond arguments about whether or not foetuses are persons in some absolute or universal sense. Instead, as she says, 'personhood should be seen as a negotiated, dynamic concept currently being contested through many overlapping public discourses concerning fetuses' (p. 49). Her 'relational body-person' view of personhood allows us to examine what *kinds* of entities, embodied and disembodied, are being produced as persons in the social and discursive practices of memorializing an unborn child. We can investigate their relationship to the biological existence which is taken to be the basis of personhood in dominant Western discourse and explore the representational conventions employed in their depiction.

Applying the notion of constructed personhood to pregnancy loss memorials reveals that the subjects memorialized in pregnancy loss are not limited to foetuses, if we take foetus to refer to a particular biological entity defined by gestational age. Rather, the death of the embryo or foetus is usually mourned as the loss of the baby and child that the parents imagined would exist in the future. Thus the subject of memorialization is a lost child, and both the idealized and medical genres of representation are responses to the need to represent this loss as 'real'. Ultimately, however, neither form of visualization is able to secure the status of these imagined children as real because of the dominance of the model of inherent biological personhood. This form of personhood has strict requirements for what counts as a real and socially recognized person, one of which is an embodied existence. Thus disembodied social identities such as those of the unborn, the dead and especially the unborn dead remain precarious (Hockey and Draper, 2005).

Memorialization and the constitution of the lost child

The technology of the Internet has clearly been central to the flourishing of pregnancy loss discourse and memorialization. As Ann Anagnost has observed, the Internet is a striking instantiation of what Berlant has called the 'intimate public sphere' (Anagnost, 2004: 147; Berlant, 1997: 5). Cyberspace has become an important space for memorializing the dead, from celebrity tributes to online pet cemeteries. Web memorials allow mourners to express their emotions and their creativity; they are interactive productions which may be permanently 'in progress' (Veale, 2004). Pregnancy loss and other memorial websites enable the translation of a private and familial grief into a public memorial and a base for membership in a virtual community united by similar experiences. Many pregnancy loss websites are members of one or more 'webrings' which take visitors on circular tours of multiple sites dedicated to memorializing miscarriages and stillbirths.[4] The experience of touring these networks is disconcerting as well as moving, as it combines immersion in a world of intimate first person stories and tragic private experiences with the sense of distance and anonymity produced by disembodied and timeless virtual space.

One effect of the Internet on pregnancy loss is that the subject position of grieving mother is connected with, almost defined by, self-disclosure.

The expectation is that she will tell her story in a confessional narrative focused on her maternal love and her pain at losing her child. While the therapeutic value of sharing experiences is recognized in the context of support groups, a narrative produced for an anonymous Internet audience faces different demands of coherence and conventionality (Layne, 2003: 74–5). Guestbooks allow readers to respond to the memorial website and its story, and readers tend to praise heartfelt accounts which evoke strong emotional responses but which are uplifting rather than bitter. The genre of the confessional narrative provides a space for the voices of grieving mothers to be heard but the experiences and emotions that cannot be expressed within its parameters are excluded and rendered not only unsayable but outside proper maternal grief. The ideals of maternal love reproduced in these narratives make ambivalent feelings (such as relief at the death of a foetus) or an absence of feelings (such as experiencing miscarriage as an inconvenience rather than a deep loss) difficult to incorporate into the canon of female experience. Constructions of motherhood as selfless nurturing also place women whose actions or decisions increase the risk of pregnancy loss outside the zone of sympathy (Oaks, 2000). Just as claims to the identity of motherhood are regulated by norms of correct behaviour and attitudes, the status of grieving mother depends on the performance of particular acts and expression of particular maternal values of domesticity and care (Purkiss, 1999).

As well as constructing the subject of the grieving mother, pregnancy loss narratives also construct the subjectivity of the lost baby through an account of his or her prehistory and history. This usually follows a chronological path: the parents' marriage, their desire for a child, their decision to have a child, the discovery of pregnancy, the development of the pregnancy until its untimely end.[5] However, the project of constructing the personhood of the lost child continues beyond the end of the pregnancy, for example, one mother's narrative cited by Layne addresses a lost daughter, 'If you were here I would buy you a red velvet dress with lace and Mary-Janes. If you were here I'd give you dolls and dishes and all the play-house toys I loved as a little girl', while another bereaved mother imagines her son playing on her favourite beach (Ingle cited in Layne, 2003: 110; Ryan, 2000: 172). These kinds of representations, as well as the symbolic use of material objects such as toys and jewellery, are responses to what Layne identifies as 'the realness problem' in pregnancy loss. As Layne argues, medical technologies such as early pregnancy tests and ultrasounds encourage women to think of their wished-for child as a person almost as soon as conception occurs (or even before conception). But if the pregnancy ends with a miscarriage, there is a sudden revocation of this incipient personhood which leaves parents with the question of how to represent the reality of what they have lost in a way that is culturally intelligible (Godel, 2007; Layne, 2003: 17–18).

In a culture which assumes a biological and corporeal substrate to personhood, the 'realness' of a child is difficult to represent in the absence of an independent and embodied existence (Hockey and Draper, 2005). In memorializing their future child, parents respond to this absence by

referring to qualities generally associated with babies and childhood such as specialness, innocence, sweetness and beauty. In terms of the relational body-person model discussed by Morgan this is a personhood constituted largely out of the desires, emotions and imagination of the grieving parents after the unexpected termination of corporeal development. It is foetal in as far as the substantial basis for the social and physiological process of constituting personhood prior to birth is the foetal body. Moreover, knowledge of the existence of the foetal or embryonic body provided the starting point for imagining this child (rather than a generic future child) into being. However, the subject who is memorialized is a baby or child, rather than a foetus.

As revealed in pregnancy loss memorialization, the subjectivity of a lost future child is necessarily both constrained and indeterminate because the parents do not know much about their child-to-be (at most sex and expected birth date) and what they do know is general rather than individual. In addition, mementoes are few, especially in cases of early miscarriages. While imagination can provide more concrete detail than the existing physical traces and known facts, it undermines the element of realness which is a central issue in pregnancy loss discourse. For instance, the image of girlhood used in the example above to invoke the personhood of a lost daughter is marked by its origins in fantasy. This daughter may not have liked dolls and may have rejected the velvet dress and Mary-Janes. The author wants to represent the loss of a unique and irreplaceable child in a culturally intelligible way, but can only do so through the textual production of an idealized and conventional image of girlhood.

The 'realness problem' is intimately connected with the ethnobiological model of personhood and its location within an ideology of the visual which assumes that what is real is what can be seen (or at least rendered visible in some way). In particular we assume that persons have or have had a tangible and autonomous physical existence and that they are visible, either in their actual embodied presence or via a representation of this embodied presence. As Peggy Phelan has argued, the Western discourses of science, law and autobiography (among others) all employ the visible real as a truth-effect in order to establish their notions of the real, 'the real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real' (1993: 2). It is not surprising therefore that pregnancy loss discourse promotes the entry of lost children into the realm of visible representation as a way of enhancing their realness. As suggested in the above example, this can be done through a wide range of symbolic objects that do not aim to mimetically represent the child itself, such as jewellery, certificates, toys, baby clothes, stuffed animals and memorial plants.[6]

While angelic idealism and medical images poignantly express the reality and enormity of parental loss, their construction of the personhood of the lost child is unable to challenge the powerful cultural equation of personhood with embodiment and presence. This is because memorializers of not-yet children and never-to-be children work within existing cultural discourses and practices and their aim is to have their children included within the category of real children, rather than to disrupt the

ontology underlying the category itself. These limitations do not decrease the value of pregnancy loss websites as consoling and publicly visible memorials. Indeed the anguish of grieving parents is powerfully communicated through the inability of their loss to be fully represented. In addition, as I suggest at the end of the article, these representations of non-existing children can provoke questioning of the taken for granted subject of 'the child' (Castaneda, 2002).

Angelic idealism

It is not foetuses but angels which dominate websites dedicated to the memorialization of pregnancies and neonatal deaths. The iconography of angels is one of the most frequent responses to the realness problem of pregnancy loss and the question of how to visibly represent a lost child (Godel, 2007; Layne, 1992; Lerner, 1997).[7] The names of most websites dedicated to pregnancy loss memorialization include the word 'angel'. Angels enable a positive valuation to be placed on absence as angel babies are described as 'too beautiful for earth' or 'only on loan from God'. Despite their contested ontological status, on pregnancy loss websites angels represent the real, if otherworldly and undeveloped, identity of lost babies. The familiar and, for many, inspiring image of an angel gives the lost wished-for child a visible and enduring public presence in the absence of mementoes such as photographs and possessions. The anthropomorphic figure of an angel suggests an ongoing life which is taking place elsewhere, thus that the child's absence is not the absence of non-existence but the absence of non-presence.

On websites such as *Remember Our Angels* bereaved parents can submit a memorial which names the baby, their gestational age and the date they 'flew to heaven', and the cause of their death if known. Angels, mainly in the form of cherubic blond infants or tiny newborns with wings, are the dominant visual images on pregnancy loss websites, which also feature poems and dedications to angel babies. Some of the graphics are sweet and naive drawings of the kind seen on traditional baby congratulation cards, but most striking are the manipulated photographic images which turn 'real' babies into angels. One dramatic image featured on many sites is of a tiny, naked sleeping newborn with wings, cradled in a pair of large male hands (assumed to be those of Jesus), captioned 'safe in his hands'. The link between angels and pregnancy loss is so well established that websites such as *Angels Forever Loved* offer sets of graphics by category (boy angels, girl angels, newborn), available for anyone designing their own memorial site.[8]

The Christian origins of these images are immediately apparent but it is difficult to assess their exact relationship to religious belief and doctrine. Angels and the angelic are no longer identified exclusively with Christianity, but have become features of New Age and therapeutic spirituality (as well as appearing in popular entertainment) (Flanagan, 2001; Zaidman, 2007). Moreover, turning to the transcendent to make sense of a loss, especially if it is untimely and sudden, is a broadly experienced feature of

grief and mourning (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). However, the prominence of angels in pregnancy loss culture does mark its North American origins. The high levels of religiosity, identification with Christianity and belief in God and the afterlife found in the United States are a contrast to the secularism of other post-industrial Western countries (Froese and Bader, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Rodabough and Cole, 2003). A recent US survey suggests that many Americans continue to live in an enchanted world – it found that more than half of respondents believed that they had been protected by a guardian angel at some point in their lives (Van Biema, 2008).

While many of the angels of pregnancy loss are presented without obvious religious iconography, pictures of angels with Jesus are also common. There is an uncomplicated message of consolation conveyed by nearly all the sites: miscarried foetuses and dead babies have gone to heaven to be with God and parents will be reunited with them in their own afterlife. Some of the images display the caption 'Their tiny feet go before us to teach us the way home'. Expressions of faith in 'God's plans for us' and God's benign agency are also common. The vision of God as a benevolent father and heaven as a safe and peaceful haven filled with flowers, birds, butterflies and happily playing children is reminiscent of Christian literature produced for children. While such images may provide solace for many, grieving parents with a secular or non-Christian world-view or less sentimental understanding of death could well find them infantilizing, banal or alienating.

The religious nature of angel imagery is to some extent undermined by the juxtaposition of everyday symbols of childhood with symbols of other-worldliness such as wings or haloes. A frequently used image on these sites is of a black and white photograph of a baby, usually naked or wearing nothing but a nappy, with beautiful white wings attached to his or her back. The angels on memorial sites are also often pictured with playmates or toys, teddy bears, birds (especially bluebirds or doves) and dogs, all of which highlight their identity as infants and children while also represent-ing their existence as characterized by the ordinary happiness we connect with childhood. While many of the angels are of indeterminate gender with blond curls and white robes, representations of girl and boy angels tend to conform to conventional models of gender. The girls are dressed in pink accompanied by butterflies, ribbons, flowers, the boys in blue, pictured with dogs, frogs and buckets and spades. Perhaps because of the less pretty and the therefore less angelic nature of the symbols associated with boyhood, the range of boy angel graphics is much more limited than the range of angel girls (although male foetuses are more likely to miscarry and suffer stillbirth). Most of the angels are white, indeed blond and blue-eyed, although images of African American and Asian angels can also be found.[9]

The marking of gender and ethnic difference does not disturb the overall homogeneity of the angel images. The angels are either smiling or sleeping peacefully, never crying or in distress. Moreover, they inevitably represent what are called 'blue ribbon' babies. They are healthy, blemish-free and perfectly formed. That is, they are idealized images of babyhood and

childhood rather than attempts to mimetically reproduce the particular lost foetus/baby who is being memorialized, who may have died because of chromosomal or other abnormalities. The ages of the angel babies also do not reflect the age of the lost foetus or infant. While some are represented as tiny newborns, most resemble children from toddler to preschool age. Children of this age most closely resemble the popular image of the chubby-cheeked cherub (although of course some children never do). But it is also an age which highlights what may be the most longed for and valued characteristics of a desired child. As babies on the verge of becoming children, these angelic toddlers have the dependency and presumed innocence of babies, but can also be imagined returning parental love, feeling emotions such as happiness and demonstrating virtues of goodness, sweetness and kindness. The belief expressed by parents that they will meet their lost children again in heaven also tends to imagine reunion with a child who is old enough to speak and recognize his or her parents, but who is still able to be cradled and cuddled on a lap.

The generic nature of angel imagery is in tension with the importance that bereaved parents place on the irreplaceability and individuality of their lost child.[10] The same graphics appear on many different memorials, although the naming of the angel with a first and last name connects it with a particular identity. The name carries the burden of identifying the unique individual while the generic image immediately places him or her in a large population of other 'angel babies'. The irony of the proliferation of angels on memorial websites is that the desire to express the realness and uniqueness of the parents' loss is converted into a representational practice based on the repetition of generic images. The angels we see are clearly not real babies or children, they are fantasized images of the qualities dreamt of in an ideal child. As mentioned earlier, some of the images based on photographs conform to the genre of realism but devices such as the juxtaposition of the oversized cradling hand mark the image as surreal rather than real. The newborn baby originally photographed for this image was a real, specific baby but there is no clue to his or her identity; s/he has come to stand for baby-ness, an effect intensified by the use of black and white.

To point out these tensions between realness and fantasy is not to criticize the parents (mostly mothers) who have constructed these heartfelt memorials nor to diminish the reality of their loss or authenticity of their feelings. However, it does suggest that the idea of personhood as 'a literal instantiation of social relations' as described by Morgan does not capture this particular representational practice (1996: 57). The reification of the ideal/desired child that occurs in these memorials reveals that while bereaved parents are aiming to represent their lost child for themselves and for others, they are also representing their longing for a child. Rather than social relations, it is desire that is being instantiated through the figure of the angel. The most powerful effect of many of these sites is the communication of overwhelming and unfulfilled desire, rather than the construction of personhood.

Despite the risk of pathologizing parental grief, the juxtaposition of desire and reified representations of absent bodies suggests that the notion

of the fetish can illuminate some of the tensions found in website memorials. The angel figures are both metaphoric and metonymic substitutes for the flesh and blood bodies which anchor personhood in living children. They therefore enable a disavowal of the child's corporeal non-existence. Donna Haraway has described a fetish as 'an object human beings make only to forget their role in creating it' (1978: 23). The angel images and personas on memorial websites are obviously created; indeed mothers often describe the making of the website as part of their journey of mourning, but the angels are also imbued with an independent existence and agency, a continuation of the process of growth and development that was occurring *in utero* before death. Some angels speak through their websites, expressing gratitude to visitors and asking them to visit other angel baby sites, while others express their feelings in poems addressed to their mothers.[11] At least a partial disavowal of the process of constructing the 'relational body person' is in process here, in favour of a simple model of unmediated individual existence.

Imagining and wanting a child (and wanting an imagined child) is of course not restricted to those who experience pregnancy loss. In fact contemporary norms of responsible parenthood require that a child be wanted before it is conceived. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein argues that the naturalized discourse of 'wanting a child' in fact masks the fetishized production of the child as 'a self-evidently knowable, recognisable and separate object/body' (2003: 24). Her point is that a child that does not yet exist cannot be wanted unless it is first constructed, and it is this disavowed process of construction that constitutes the ostensibly natural and self-generating desire for a child. Her description of the not-yet child can also be applied to the never-to-be children of pregnancy loss:

> . . . the not-yet 'child' can never be a self-constituted subject, but is an indeterminate space or potentiality, which has definitions mapped onto (or: into) it; definitions moreover which are the result, or compositions, of projections, mappings, appropriations, and (re-)creations. The 'child' as fetish is meant to hide that the 'child' can never be a self-generating presence, but instead is what we might call an assemblage or a production. (2003: 26)

But the idealized lost child found on memorial websites and memorial writings cannot be contrasted simply with real and seemingly self-constituted children. Lesnik-Oberstein is talking about the particular construction of the wanted child by parents undergoing IVF (*in vitro* fertilization) treatment but her statement can be applied to representations of children and 'the child' in general. Jacqueline Rose and other critics have argued that the construction of 'the child' is a process of mystification which 'secures, places and frames' the child as predictable and knowable according to adult demands and investments (Rose, 1984: 2; Castaneda, 2001). This process of disavowed construction may be most easily diagnosed in cases of pregnancy loss where there is no living child or referent. However, it is also found in many ordinary and taken for granted practices of parenthood, not to mention the circulation of images of children in popular culture. For example, establishing and maintaining an archive of

fetishized and sentimentalized objects and images to represent a child as s/he moves through stages of growth and development is one of the cultur- ally endorsed tasks of motherhood. As Ann Anagnost has observed, this process is about representing a child who is already 'lost and gone' as each stage is left behind, even though the individual is still living (2004: 157).

Technomedical images

More elaborate memorial sites combine idealized angel images with other much more personal, indexical signs of 'realness' which contain the material traces of embodiment.[12] For example one website which tells a heartbreaking story of three miscarriages includes ultrasound images from early in the pregnancies, photographs of the mother pregnant with her 'last angel', a girl who was born at 19 weeks' gestation, her foot and hand prints and a photo of her tiny body next to her mother's hand after her birth and death.[13] It is now common for hospitals to offer parents photographs of a baby who has died before or during birth, or for parents to take their own photos, and many memorial sites for later term miscarriages and stillbirths include these portrait-style images (Godel, 2007). While the dead babies are often dressed in baby clothes (frequently pink or blue) and sometimes pictured with flowers and toys, these images are still confronting because Anglo-American culture has become largely unused to intimate photo- graphic portraits of the dead, especially dead infants (Nygard and Reilly, 2003). The contrast between the sentimental and cosy angel imagery and the corporeal reality of lifeless babies who are not chubby, rosy-cheeked or smiling is a jolting reminder of the finality and physicality of death.

The medical genre of foetal representation is made up of the images and texts produced by different technologies during the pregnancy and the miscarriage or stillbirth. The most common images in this genre are obstetrical ultrasounds as sonography has become a routine part of most pregnancies, as well as being a crucial tool in diagnosing foetal abnormality, foetal death and miscarriage. The availability of ultrasound technology has had a major role in the emergence of the foetus as a social being, member of the human community and proto-citizen (Berlant, 1997; Condit, 1995; Morgan, 1996; Taylor, 1992). As Condit has argued, the relatively recent phenomenon of widespread visual exposure to the foetal body has the effect of making the foetus seem 'more "human", more like a "baby", and more of a "person" than ever before' (1995: 25). While foetal imagery appears in a wide range of locations including popular culture, advertising and the front line of anti-abortion politics, a key site for the personification of the foetus is the clinical ultrasound.

Mitchell and Georges have called the now standard 20 week obstetric ultrasound the ritual of 'Baby's First Picture' (1998). Here medical technol- ogy enables parents to 'see' their 'baby' and attribute it with qualities such as shyness or athleticism, in collaboration with the technician who inter- prets the grainy shapes and often comments on the baby's behaviour, movement and appearance.[14] At the same time, the technoscientifc author- ity and objectivity of this particular 'baby photo' provides incontrovertible

evidence of the reality of foetal existence. The construction of foetal existence into personhood is continued outside the clinic as a copy of the ultrasound image is shown to family and friends (who as Mitchell and Georges say are expected to smile at it), displayed on fridge doors and even turned into greeting cards (1998: 105). Thus, ultrasound technology enables parents to enlist others into the social construction of their baby and give it the public and social identity required for the attainment of personhood.

Sonography is a complex process of converting sound waves into electric signals which are then visually displayed, but the phenomenon produced when the ultrasound transducer interacts with the pregnant woman's body is taken to be the material reality of the foetus (Barad, 1998). This kind of techno-realism, where a highly specific technological representation is read as the material truth of the human body and its condition, is typical of contemporary biomedicine. As Sharon Lehner has remarked (drawing on Phelan), the tautological logic of technoscience is revealed in its confusion of representation and the real: 'the "truth" is presented by a technology, and yet it is invisible without that exact technology' (2003: 547).

Given the critical role sonogram images and photographs play in establishing the reality of the baby, and his or her individuality and uniqueness, it is not surprising that they also influence the meaning of pregnancy loss. Layne describes the devastating experience of seeing a foetal heartbeat in one prenatal visit, then 'At the next visit, where there had been a magical tiny flicker of life on the screen, the screen is deadly still . . .' (2003: 83). Thus the technology makes both the pregnancy and the loss more real. Ultrasound images become powerful and incontrovertible evidence of the existence of the lost baby, evidence that can be reproduced and shared through other technologies such as the Internet.

In the context of pregnancy loss websites, ultrasound images function like photographs of a loved one. In her analysis of foetal images found in anti-abortion material, Janelle Taylor points out that Walter Benjamin identified portrait photography as the last refuge of the 'cult value' of art (Taylor, 1992: 71). Cult value refers back to the artwork's unique presence in time and space and is responsible for its aura of authenticity and authority. Benjamin's argument about the loss of cult value and disappearance of the aura when art becomes mechanically reproducible (through photography) is well-known. But he noted that because the person depicted in a photograph of a loved one has had a unique presence in the life of the viewer, an aura continues to emanate from portrait photographs: 'the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture' (Benjamin, 1969: 228).

While Benjamin highlights the significance of the familiar human face in producing the aura of portrait photography, foetal ultrasounds are able to produce the auratic effect of authenticity and uniqueness in spite of the lack of a recognizable face and absence of resemblance to a particular individual. While they cannot be identified as a specific individual they testify to the existence of a unique, specific and physically bounded body, a body that is given the appearance of autonomy and independence through the

absence of the mother's body in the image. In contrast to Benjamin, Roland Barthes argues that a photograph always carries its referent with itself and is not easily distinguished from its referent (1984: 5–6). This intimate relationship between the image and the referent acquires great significance when the referent or thing itself is otherwise invisible as in the case of foetal ultrasound. The ultrasound not only proves that a baby exists, it *is* the baby. Thus in the context of pregnancy loss when the realness of the baby is at once contested and deeply invested in, ultrasound images are a key designation of reality as well as what Barthes calls 'the absolute Particular' (1984: 4). The information recorded at the time of the ultrasound which frequently appears on the edge of the image (date, time, name and number of weeks gestation) further enhances the authority of the image as a guarantor of the real.

In pregnancy loss memorialization the aura of specificity and truth conveyed by ultrasound images provides a powerful supplement to generic and fantasized angel images. But their ability to guarantee the unique existence of 'my child' comes at a price, a price related to their location within the Western ethnobiological discourse of personhood. If the presence of the foetus as captured on ultrasound guarantees the reality of my baby, then the death or absence of the foetus as confirmed by a later ultrasound means my baby no longer exists or never existed. If the ultrasound images document personhood, then the post-miscarriage ultrasound of the empty uterus is evidence of the end of personhood. Through its representation of the pure blackness of the amniotic space where the shape of a foetus would normally be seen, ultrasound constructs the aftermath of miscarriage as absence and nothingness.[15]

The realness problem of pregnancy loss is not produced solely by a cultural inability to acknowledge what has been lost, but also by a complex relationship between biological events, the representation of those events and the desire for a child. In the context of Western medicalized culture, some form of biological existence is taken to be the necessary condition for the commencement and continuation of the social project of personhood. While a child may be fervently desired and vividly imagined prior to the confirmation of a pregnancy, the knowledge that the embodied process of gestation has commenced enables a shift from an open-ended imagining to the biological and social production of a specific child. Within the particular biosocial context of medicalized pregnancy, the death of the foetus signals the discontinuation of this production process, irrespective of the parents' imagining and desire.

Conclusion

Feminist anthropologists have argued that understanding personhood as an ongoing social process can provide the basis for a feminist ethics of pregnancy loss (Layne, 2003; Morgan, 1996). Rather than identifying foetuses categorically as either persons or non-persons, this approach suggests that the status of a foetus depends on the social relations that surround it and either bring it into being as a person or not.

This article has utilized this perspective on personhood to investigate pregnancy loss memorialization and its construction of lost babies and children. It examined two genres of imagery used in pregnancy loss websites to visually represent the realness of the lost child: angelic idealism and technomedical representation. Neither genre can fully overcome 'the realness problem' of pregnancy loss. Angel imagery conveys the sense of a child who continues to exist in another unearthly form, but its generic and fantasized nature is inconsistent with the individual specificity which characterizes personhood. The scientific truth value of ultrasound images provides indexical specificity and proof of the existence of the foetus as an observable biological and material entity. However, because the medical discourse represented by the ultrasound is wedded to a biological rather than social/relational model of personhood, it classifies the lost child as non-existent after the death of the foetus. Grieving parents who memorialize their losses are thus constrained by the demands of intelligibility within a culture that understands 'real' personhood as ethnobiological rather than relational. But while they may be unable to construct and communicate the realness of the lost child, pregnancy loss memorials do communicate the intensity of maternal grief, and the intensity of desire for a child. Moreover, by drawing attention to the fantasized and fetishized nature of figurations of 'the child', pregnancy loss memorials destabilize the distinction between real and imagined children. However, the effect of the destabilization is to undermine the realness of the real child rather than to promote the realness of the imagined and desired child.

The broader issue that this article has addressed is the parameters of a feminist response to miscarriage and pregnancy loss. At the end of *Motherhood Lost* Layne describes the possibilities of a woman-centred discourse and practice of pregnancy loss. These include the inclusion of pregnancy loss as a normal part of prenatal classes and pregnancy manuals, the development of feminist rituals to mark pregnancy loss, the promotion of more supportive medical protocols, the alteration of work structures so that women are able to have children during the 'biologically optimum' period and the facilitation of alternative methods of forming families (Layne, 2003: 246–9). These are important and worthwhile aims, although the endorsement of earlier childbearing would need to be carefully handled with adequate recognition of the many social and personal factors which may make the 'biologically optimum' time not the preferred time to embark on the project of making a person. But as well as these practical measures, critical and theoretical engagement with the discourses and practices of pregnancy loss is also a legitimate part of a feminist response.

In some ways representations of pregnancy loss offer a critique of consumer-oriented models of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. They mark the lasting emotional and social significance of experiences that fail to produce a 'blue ribbon baby' and they reveal aspects of reproduction hidden by discourses of progress, control and choice (Davis-Floyd, 1994). However, they also exist within a feminized culture of commodified private life and feeling (Berlant, 1997; Layne, 2004). Pregnancy loss memorialization is indebted to biomedical models of life and death, at the same

time as it challenges them through images of angels and the continued existence of loved ones after death. Representations of pregnancy loss, whether produced by medical experts, health activists, scholars or mourning mothers, will reflect and reproduce particular culturally intelligible norms of motherhood, womanhood, childhood and personhood. Their effects are likely to be marginalizing and excluding as well as consoling and empowering. These complexities deserve sensitive but rigorous exploration.

Notes

1. There are exceptions, such as *Hidden Loss: Miscarriage and Ectopic Pregnancy* (Hey et al., 1996), first published by The Women's Press in 1989. See also Lehner (2003).
2. October 15 was designated International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day in 1988.
3. Examples of pregnancy loss memorial sites are: *Remember Our Angels* [http://www.geocities.com/RememberOurAngels2002/index.html]; *Empty Cradles* [www.empty-cradles.com/]; *A Place to Remember* [http://www.aplacetoremember.com/]; *BabySteps* [http://www.babysteps.com/]. All accessed 16 February 2008.
4. Examples of such webrings are: *Angels Forever Loved* [http://www.ringsurf.com/ring/dawnuk57/]; *Born Angels* [http://l.webring.com/t/Born-Angels-Pregnancy-Loss-Support]; *Cherished Angels* [http://www.ringsurf.com/ring/dawnuk00/]. All accessed 16 February 2008.
5. These narratives seem almost inevitably heterosexual. I have not found a non-heterosexual account of pregnancy loss on any of the websites I have visited, or in any collections of personal accounts such as Ryan (2000) and Faldet and Fitton (1997).
6. See Layne (2000) for a discussion of the 'material culture' of pregnancy loss.
7. The angel images and graphics discussed in this section of the article can be found at the following sites: *Remember Our Angels* website [http://www.geocities.com/RememberOurAngels2002/index.html]; *Angels Forever Loved* webring [http://www.ringsurf.com/ring/dawnuk57/]; *Miscarriages of Love* website [http://geocities.com/mylittlestangels/].
8. See also *Dawn's Graphics* [http://www.geocities.com/dawnsgraphics2001/index.html]. Accessed 16 February 2008.
9. The book *Mommy, Please Don't Cry: There Are No Tears in Heaven* (Deymaz, 2003), which combines illustrations of children in heaven with messages written in the voice of the child to the grieving mother, is notable for its depiction of multi-racial children. The children in this book have no wings, but they are represented within the angelic genre, in white robes and bare feet.
10. The notion of irreplaceability is often mentioned in response to misguided attempts to comfort parents by telling them that they will be able to 'try again' or to have another child (Kohn and Moffitt, 2000: 157).
11. See *Letters from Angels* [http://www.ringsurf.com/ring_browser.php?id=464750]. Accessed 10 February 2008.
12. Examples of memorials which include ultrasound images can be found on the angel memorials page of the *Teddy Love Club* website [http://www.

teddyloveclub.org.au/index.php?id=1] and the *Cherished Angels* webring.

13. Contact the author for information about this website.

14. As ultrasound technology develops the images produced are less blurry and more 'realistic', especially those produced by three-dimensional sonography.

15. The apparent obviousness of the equation between foetus and baby is disrupted not only by the ongoing processes of personhood practised by bereaved parents, but also by obstetric conditions such as blighted ovum and molar pregnancy. In these (not uncommon) forms of miscarriage, a pregnancy (including a placenta and an amniotic sac) exists without a foetus (Kohn and Moffitt, 2000: 56–60). Women who have experienced a blighted ovum express the strangeness of finding out after several months of being pregnant that there was 'nothing there'. The idea of personhood as social construction suggests that these pregnancies are just as constitutive of a real baby as other losses, and indeed babies lost due to blighted ova are memorialized on pregnancy loss sites in the same way as other early miscarriages. However, the discourse of biological personhood makes it difficult to mourn the loss of a foetus that never existed.

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