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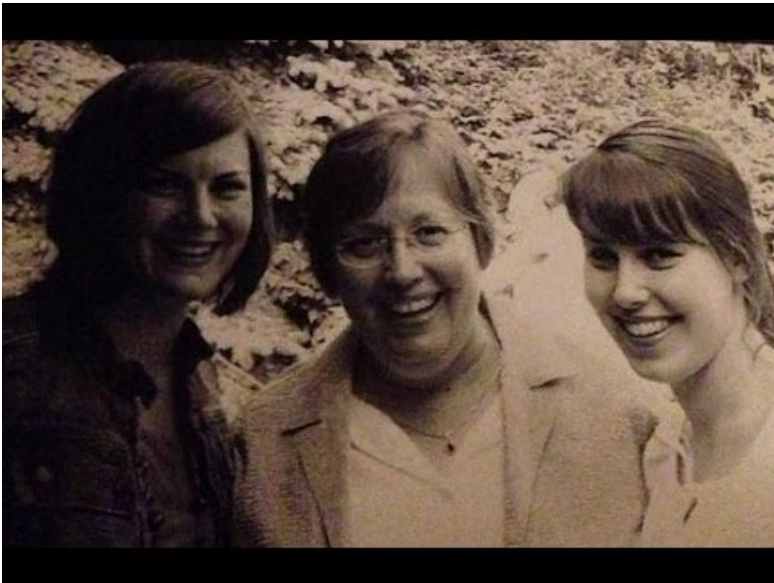
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Craft as a Memorializing Rhetoric

Maria Novotny

I have never really identified as a crafter. I can't knit. I can't crochet. I can't sew. So when I saw this call for proposals around topics of craft, I never really thought I had much to contribute. This changed, however, during November 2014 when my uncle suddenly passed away. Assisting in the preparation of funeral arrangements and engaging in cultural mourning rituals, the presence of craft in my life was made more apparent. As I transitioned back to graduate school after laying my uncle to rest, I began to realize the multiple ways craft functions as an essential memorializing and healing practice in my own life.

In this video essay, I take time narrating how I value craft in my life through three vignettes: (1) the passing away of my Aunt Joanne—who was the first significant person in my life to pass; (2) the passing away of my Uncle Paul—who most recently passed away of a sudden heart attack; (3) and my coming to terms with my own infertility diagnosis—in which I have struggled with conveying and representing my desire for a child that I know will most likely never come into being. As such, this video attempts to push beyond traditional assumptions of craft as a discourse related to home projects or food, and instead suggests that craft is an embodied relational practice which often is central to the memorization of bodies that have passed on or have yet to come to into existence.



Maria Novotny is a PhD student in Rhetoric & Writing at Michigan State University where she studies rhetorics of infertility. She facilitates arts-based infertility workshops with The ART of Infertility—a national arts, oral history and portraiture project. Participation in these workshops has led her to view craft as a essential component to healing and memorialization. In her free time, she travels to Northern Wisconsin where she fishes and hikes with her husband and their three “furbabies.”

Video Transcript

0:10

when I hear the word craft I immediately

0:14

think of my aunts all of them are avid

0:17

crafters who for years would attend our

0:19

annual family vacation unloading bins

0:22

upon bins of crafting materials from

0:24

their minivans

0:25

into our tiny family cabin during this

0:29

week in hot and humid July they gathered

0:31

around card tables stitching painting

0:34

and hot glue gunning various Halloween

0:37

Thanksgiving and Christmas decor

0:40

thinking about these memories I

0:42

frequently am reminded of the laughter

0:44

that would fill the room as they sat

0:46

crafted and shared stories this is how I

0:50

came to know craft by watching my aunt's

0:53

make talk and be amongst each other

0:57

I understand craft then as a relational

1:00

practice working with one's body while

1:03

in conversation companionship and

1:06

camaraderie with other bodies in the

1:08

making of things

1:10

my definition of craft then is informed

1:14

from such memories of my aunt's where I

1:16

witness craft as a practice facilitating

1:18

relationality and so I find craft as an

1:22

embodied practice operating as prints

1:25

suggests quote as a particular set of

1:28

actions and relationships between people

1:31

and between people and things the notion

1:35

of craft is relational as linking

1:38

between bodies and things was something

1:40

I grew up watching on these family

1:42

vacations yet I myself never identified

1:45

as a crafter this changed however as I

1:48

encountered a series of personal losses

1:50

and found myself engaging in various

1:53

types of craft as a way to make sense of

1:55

such loss my first connection to craft

1:59

developed one to my aunts passed away my

2:02

aunt Joanne was the first of all the

2:04

aunts to die and her death especially as

2:07

it was my first experience with a loved

2:09

one dying was particularly hard to cope

2:11

with

2:12

but in grieving her loss I came to

2:15

understand crafts relationality the

2:17

crafts materiality that is if craft is

2:21

relational its relationality is not

2:24

limited to that which is physically

2:25

visible its relationality extends beyond

2:29

that which is living and present amongst

2:31

us craft that can function as an

2:34

embodiment and reminding us of all those

2:38

relations that have passed on before us

2:40

let me share how this is my aunt when

2:45

she died in 2007 of breast cancer a few

2:49

acceptors she turned 50 years old up

2:52

until the final days of her death she

2:54

remained her spirited feisty self when

2:57

she died though a void was immediately

2:59

felt in our family her quick-witted

3:02

humor her chuckling laugh the numerous

3:05

phone calls she made to us during the

3:06

day all suddenly vanished

3:08

there was also an eerie sense of

3:11

finality toward death because she had

3:13

always lived by herself she never

3:15

married never had a partner and so in

3:18

many ways when she died so died the life

3:21

that she quite literally crafted to keep

3:24

memories of her Elijah those who knew

3:26

her best

3:27

my grandparents painstakingly we

3:29

distributed nearly all of her

3:30

possessions this process of gifting an

3:33

object to one of my aunt's close friends

3:35

or family members serve not only

3:37

practical purposes but memorializing

3:40

purposes the things my aunt once

3:42

collected and housed were now passed

3:45

along to others as a way to remember my

3:46

aunt for every object my grandmother

3:49

gave away a story was shared about why

3:51

that individual should have said object

3:54

the practice of assigning stories and

3:56

memories to particular objects in many

3:59

ways transform the object into a craft

4:01

no longer were these objects just things

4:04

in my aunt's house but things that now

4:06

served as memories connecting us to my

4:09

aunt

4:11

take this serving tree decoupage letters

4:14

and cards sent from my aunt Joanne cover

4:16

the tray which was given to my

4:18

grandparents from a relative to remember

4:20

and celebrate my aunt's life craft

4:23

appears in this piece both as it

4:25

memorializes my

4:26

Ann's handwriting and the story shared

4:28

in the cards and it also transforms the

4:31

cards and letters into a new object this

4:35

decision to place the cards and letters

4:36

onto a serving tray was intentional

4:39

instead of simply giving the cards and

4:41

letters to my grandparents the serving

4:43

tray functions as a celebratory object

4:46

the tray is often used at family

4:48

celebratory gatherings and a reminder

4:50

that my aunt Joanne is always with us

4:53

my aunt Ellen's death taught me to

4:57

understand the ways in which her

4:58

memories continue to live on with us

5:00

often through the crafting and

5:02

repurposing of her life in my own life I

5:05

found much comfort and having pieces

5:07

crafted by my aunt during the process of

5:10

redistributing her possessions I

5:12

expressed interest in having a craft

5:14

that she created this desire wasn't out

5:17

of wanting a specific item but of

5:19

wanting an object that she created an

5:21

object made through her own body for

5:24

example I like having this bowl that she

5:27

made in high school I like observing the

5:30

design and the shape of the bowl I like

5:32

running my hands over the bowl knowing

5:34

that her own hands had once crafted and

5:37

shaped this chunk of clay into an object

5:40

I liked hurting the bowl over and seeing

5:43

her initials scraped into the bottom her

5:46

crafting of this piece serves as a

5:48

physical link to an object her body made

5:52

the bowl to me remains an object

5:55

representing the embodiment of my aunt a

5:57

piece of her that remains present

6:00

despite her physical passing crafts can

6:03

emerge then in the objects we

6:05

memorialize connecting to and

6:08

facilitating a spirit of relationality

6:10

amongst ourselves and those who passed

6:13

away craft as a memorializing practice

6:17

can also emerge through cultural

6:18

mourning rituals cutting the ways in

6:20

which we mourn and say goodbye to

6:22

deceased loved ones this understanding

6:24

of craft emerged more fully as I dealt

6:26

with the death of my uncle Paul who

6:28

passed away suddenly of a heart attack

6:30

this past November unprepared for his

6:33

death

6:33

my sisters and I gathered around to

6:35

support my grandparents who had now lost

6:37

two out of their three children

6:40

the week before Thanksgiving then

6:41

consisted of assisting in numerous

6:44

funeral arrangements to particular tasks

6:47

involved very much the practice of

6:48

crafting picture boards and slideshows

6:51

of my uncle with his family were

6:52

requested by the funeral director for

6:55

two days my sisters and I shoveled

6:57

through old photographs albums and boxes

7:00

to craft memories of my uncle for

7:02

friends and family to remember him by as

7:05

I returned home for my week-long stay I

7:08

recounted the events of my uncle's

7:10

passing and we started health threads of

7:12

crafting weed themselves throughout my

7:14

experience during my stay I was

7:16

continually reminded of how my uncle

7:18

would craft music as a composer and

7:20

craft spectacular gin martinis while we

7:24

hustled about making funeral

7:26

arrangements friends and family crafted

7:29

delicious pies breads and traditional

7:31

Czech kolaches to nurture or grieve in

7:33

pain we were always either talking of

7:36

crafting recipients of crafting or

7:38

crafting our goodbyes to my uncle that

7:40

week during the preparations for my

7:44

uncle's funeral it became very apparent

7:46

to me the craft is also very much a part

7:48

of the memorializing of those who have

7:50

passed before us CREB provides material

7:53

into the physical body that is no longer

7:55

with us

7:55

instead through the crafting of serving

7:58

trays bowls or even the crafting of

8:00

picture boards and slideshows craft

8:02

culture remembers and embodies those who

8:05

have passed away my story about my uncle

8:07

Paul and even my aunt Joanne is rooted

8:10

very much in Western Christian cultural

8:12

traditions yet many other cultures share

8:16

similar rituals and involved crafts to

8:18

connect us and help us mourn those who

8:20

have died take the practice of making

8:22

nachos often display to no friendos as a

8:25

way to memorialize those who have passed

8:27

away or take even the Jewish practice of

8:30

sitting Shiva in which family members

8:32

take one week to honor and mourn the

8:34

passing away of a relative and host

8:37

visitors at the home through prayer and

8:39

food these rituals all center around

8:42

craft. Craft offers a physical

8:45

materiality then to the physical void of

8:48

a body no longer with us and facilitates

8:51

a continued sense

8:53

relationality but kraft also works to

8:56

memorialize that which may never come

8:57

into being I've got a lot about this

9:00

especially in relation to infertility

9:02

which is typically a silent physical

9:04

void hardly known or visible to the

9:07

general public but for many individuals

9:09

who encounter infertility there's a deep

9:13

feeling of physical loss and a desire to

9:16

express and honor that which was never

9:18

meant to be I speak to this from

9:23

personal experience and my diagnosis

9:25

with infertility coming to understand my

9:27

female body as an infertile body was

9:30

extremely disorienting and isolating

9:33

some of this is because of cultural

9:35

silence that surrounds infertility and

9:38

this silence often leads to a stigma

9:40

about the disease because as Alison

9:43

finds silence quote sustains the myth of

9:47

fertility as a universal experience

9:49

suppressing contrary experiences and an

9:52

ideology of motherhood and symbolic

9:55

ideal of family understanding the

9:58

isolation the silence the confusion of

10:02

experiencing infertility of experiencing

10:05

this physical void present in such a

10:07

body is important to understanding the

10:10

ways in which craft can both memorialize

10:11

that child that may never come into

10:13

being as well as translate and shares

10:16

such experience to others who may have

10:18

never experienced infertility taking

10:23

time to craft about my experience with

10:24

infertility has encouraged a practice of

10:27

mindfulness by mindfulness I mean that

10:30

craft allows for a retrospective or a

10:32

reconnection amongst my body and my mind

10:35

crafting images representing my

10:37

infertility engages my body in a process

10:40

that allows me to take a break from the

10:42

constant questions that surround myself

10:44

like why is it my body working and

10:48

instead as an embodied practice craft

10:51

reminds me of the ways in which my body

10:53

is already strong already making already

10:56

creating and

11:00

crack connects meets my own body it also

11:02

connects them into the little body I

11:04

might never get to know my crafting

11:06

around infertility then is not only a

11:08

crafting to understand my body but a

11:11

crafting to memorialize this desire hope

11:14

and wanting to carry my own child

11:16

and so my crafts like the ones shown our

11:20

little offerings little tokens of what I

11:22

may never physically experience but

11:25

emotionally experience on a day to day

11:27

bubble the sharing of these memorialized

11:31

crafts to others functions as a practice

11:33

of translation as well craft translates

11:36

beyond that of traditional discourse as

11:39

it is a form of multi modality in this

11:42

way crutches an accessible medium in

11:45

which individuals can represent uncommon

11:47

or marginalized experiences to the

11:50

greater public yet unlike traditional

11:52

discourse which can also express

11:54

marginalized experiences craft engages

11:57

embodied complexity craft facilitates

12:01

mindfulness within the realm of the

12:03

craft and in this way craft also

12:06

communicates not only the discursive

12:08

realities of an experience but the

12:10

embodied and affective realities Crafton

12:14

is a powerful medium in which

12:16

individuals can intervene within

12:17

dominant discourses of the body in

12:20

federal activists and art education

12:22

scholar Melissa McClure in her piece

12:25

smothering has advocated for the ways in

12:28

which crafting experiences of

12:30

infertility can intervene in the

12:32

dominant discourses that perpetuate the

12:35

culture privilege notions of ableism

12:37

Parenthood and traditional motherhood

12:40

critically engaging in feminist art and

12:43

scholarship can begin to translate new

12:45

realities of experiences of motherhood

12:47

and infertility because of the potential

12:50

craft holds as an accessible public

12:53

pedagogy so crack memorializes

12:57

relationships and translates experiences

12:59

beyond discourse how is crash rhetorical

13:03

to address this question I draw on

13:05

Dickinson Blair and not the definition

13:07

of rhetoric which claims quote we do not

13:10

see rhetoric as a genre of discourse or

13:12

even necessarily

13:14

discursive at all rather we take

13:16

rhetoric to be a set of theoretical

13:18

stances and critical tactics that offer

13:20

ways of understanding evaluating an

13:23

inter meaning in a broad range of human

13:25

activities their definition understands

13:29

rhetoric as a sort of process of a doing

13:31

of a meaning making and this is very

13:34

much what craft is a process of doing a

13:37

meaning making amongst bodies and people

13:40

and people and things through cultural

13:44

mourning practices craft allows us to

13:46

remember and continue to connect with

13:48

those who have passed away craft also

13:50

allows us to represent those individuals

13:52

who may never enter into being and Crush

13:56

can also translate these experiences

13:58

through its embodied and affective

14:00

multi-modality to those who may not have

14:02

shared such experience in this way craft

14:06

is a rhetorical act as a memorializing

14:09

and relational interaction is a form of

14:12

public pedagogy it facilitates

14:14

relationality amongst ourselves

14:16

amongst those who have passed away

14:18

amongst those who have never been and

14:20

amongst those who may not understand or

14:22

relate and so craft is really never just

14:26

about what has been crafted but about

14:28

the stories those crafted objects

14:31

communicate just like the stories my

14:34

aunts shared and told as they crafted on

14:36

hot summer afternoons

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