

## Book Review

**Lynn M. Morgan, *Icons of Life: a Cultural History of Human Embryos*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009. Pp. ix + 310. \$21.95, £14.95. ISBN 978 0 52 026044 3.**

This spellbinding volume combines anthropological, feminist and historical perspectives both to unravel the origins of a rediscovered collection of human foetal remains at Mt Holyoke College, where the author is Professor of Social Anthropology, and to provide a wider cultural analysis of how the dead embryo becomes an icon of life. Finding herself in a poorly lit basement crowded with neglected jars of foetal specimens at the outset of her journey, Morgan travels back in time to reconstruct the many cultural practices necessary to their emergence in this particular form and in this particular place. It is a complex path they have taken—scientifically, morally and epistemologically. As one would expect from an anthropologist specialising in reproduction, this book is as much a cultural history of conception stories as it is an historical account of foetal specimen collection.

The story of the practices involved in foetal (or embryo) specimen collection from the eighteenth century onward has become more familiar to readers from the influential work of scholars such as Nick Hopwood and Barbara Duden. Like them, Morgan emphasises the importance of what might be described as the consolidation of a biologised ontology from the nineteenth century onwards, particularly through the organisation of the foetal or embryonic form along an axis of development. Bringing this history up to the present, especially in the United States, requires that we also understand the twentieth-century transformation of foetal imagery not only from a scientific representation into a political one, in the context of the Right to Life movement, but also the conversion of biological life into an iconic signifier of moral truth, personal identity and universal humanness more generally. Morgan's work makes an unprecedented contribution to the understanding of this multilayered biopolitical present through her erudite, insightful, informative and often disturbing, account of her own journey as an accidental expert enjoined to serve as local custodian of a rediscovered collection of human remains.

She takes us, for example, back in time to the heyday of the Carnegie Human Embryo Collection in Washington, DC, comprising 10,000 specimens that are still in existence. At a practical level, she explains 'the cultural logic and social practices that made embryo collecting seem both normal and reasonable' (p. 33), while always reminding her readers that such matters are never entirely practical, but instead, even for science, matters of faith: 'Embryos mean only as much as the faith that is placed on embryological evidence' (p. 33).

The great strength of this book is in illuminating what a broad church these faiths belong to—including science itself. The mid-century story of embryo collection related by Morgan emphasises the use of embryological evidence to piece together various biological problems—from conception and development to theories of race and recapitulation. Taking us inside the laboratory of Franklin Mall, Morgan reveals the elaborate networks of scientific knowledge production that relied on a vast system of embryo and foetal specimen exchange. Built up through this reciprocal system of material transfer

were not only a new corpus of scientific 'facts of life', and an expansion of the embryological view of development, but an affirmation of the value of scientific knowledge as a privileged form of social truth.

Paradoxically, argues Morgan, it was precisely the success of the growing scientific faith in 'the embryological view' (based on the production of more and more viewable specimens) which enabled the naturalisation of the dead embryo as an icon of life to begin to thrive outside the lab, in popular and political cultures based on this powerful imagery. As the famous mid-century images of Lennart Nilsson still attest, the dead embryo has ironically become a signifier of the universal value of human life. Hence, as foetal imagery produced in the lab begins to acquire a life of its own outside it, it is annexed to other faiths—including those of both fundamentalist Christianity and the market. The new 'embryos are us' view of human life, familiar from Hollywood films such as '2001', car advertisements, greeting cards and music videos, is the direct descendant, Morgan argues, of scientific faith in the truth of the embryonic form as a template of 'life itself'.

In painstaking, but highly readable, analyses of the life of particular specimens, Morgan reinforces her point that there is nothing inherently meaningful in these jarred objects, which ultimately not only belong to specific contexts of production and use in order to be 'made to speak' to their audiences, but also code-switch as readily as well-trained anthropologists when they are transferred into new and unfamiliar settings. Thus another irony—that the deeply evocative foetal form, so readily assumed to carry almost inherent symbolic power—is as arbitrary in its signifying capacity as any other sign.

The most important gap in this signifying chain identified by Morgan, however, places this book firmly in the tradition of feminist studies which have identified the emergence of the foetal subject as an independent entity not only with the rise of anti-abortion rhetoric, but with the occlusion of women and reproduction more broadly. If the meaning of the foetal or embryonic form is revealing because they can mean so much, so too is the absence structuring their presence—of the women in whose bodies they originated. The eclipse of these origins, Morgan suggests, reveals as much as the images that displace them.

doi:10.1093/shm/hkr067

Sarah Franklin  
*London School of Economics*  
[s.franklin@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.franklin@lse.ac.uk)