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Material habits, identity, semeiotic

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ABSTRACT

Complementing recent archaeological work on identities, in this article I describe the semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce – his general 'theory of signs' – and discuss its uses for interpreting human identity through material culture and the artefactual record. Often classified as 'symbolic anthropology/archaeology', previous researches have presented a more restricted sense of semeiotic, while fewer scholars have been working through Peirce's theories directly. Here, I articulate some aspects of Peirce's semeiotic realism and his pragmatism with his theories regarding semeiosic matter and semeiosic identity. Specifically, Peirce regarded matter as 'mind hidebound with habits', and his semeiotic is particularly well-suited for analyzing the obdurate or habitual character of material culture. Based primarily on my ethnographic and archaeological fieldwork in an Irish-speaking region in western Ireland, I explore and apply some of Peirce's theories to an interpretation of human social identities manifest through such things as prayer beads and field-walls.

KEYWORDS

identity ● Ireland ● material culture ● C.S. Peirce ● semeiotic

INTRODUCTION

How might we know what people are or were like through their material worlds? The *semeiotic*[1] of Charles Sanders Peirce – his 'general theory of signs' – and his descriptions of the categories of phenomena are very relevant for interpreting human identity through the artefactual record. The ongoing interest with Peirce's philosophy within anthropology has proven fruitful for analyses of identity, social organization, linguistic practice and political performance (Daniel, 1987, 1996; Keane, 1997; Munn, 1992; Parmentier, 1994; Silverstein, 1976; Urban, 1989). Scholars have noted that Peirce argued material signs are a form of thought (Bauer, 2002; Gardin, 1992; Herzfeld, 1992; Yentsch and Beaudry, 2001) and, corresponding with these developments, research in archaeological anthropology (Capone and Preucel, 2002; Knappett, 2002; Preucel and Bauer, 2001) suggests the potential for new applications of Peirce's theories for interpreting human identity.

Continuing this previous research, I will attempt to bring together anthropological developments of Peirce's semeiotic for understanding human identity with anthropological developments of Peirce's semeiotic with regard to interpreting material culture. Beginning with an overview of some of the relevant aspects of Peirce's theories, I will describe how his theories can be applied to material culture and matter more generally – matter which Peirce described as 'hidebound habit'. A discussion of recent anthropological research on identity and semeiotic through different forms of data – contemporary cultural practices, linguistic practices, and material/artefactual practices – follows, leading to a discussion through examples from my own research in western Ireland of the semeiosis of material objects and human identity. I conclude with some thoughts on materiality, identity, semeiotic, and suggestions for possibilities for future research.

PEIRCE'S SEMEIOTIC REALISM

Keeping in mind the numerous and excellent treatments of Peirce's philosophy (Colapietro, 1989; Daniel, 1987, 1996; De Waal, 2001; Liszka, 1996; Misak, 2004; Parker, 1998; Parmentier, 1994; Ransdell, 1980, 1986; Shapiro, 1983; Silverstein, 1976; Singer, 1984), I would like to offer here an overview of Peirce's theory of 'semeiotic realism', his analysis of the composition of the sign and description of sign types, and his categories of phenomena, relating them to his thoughts on both matter and identity. The purpose is not simply to confirm the logic of Peirce's theories nor refine our understandings of them, but rather to explore the extent to which they might be useful for understanding human identity through material culture.

Within many disciplines interested in interpretations of material culture the semiology associated with linguist Ferdinand de Saussure has been the regnant theory of sign activity (Gardin, 1992; Preucel and Bauer, 2001). Milton Singer has made clear that Peirce's semeiotic differs significantly from Saussurian or Continental semiology in a number of respects (Singer, 1984: 39–48; see also Preucel and Bauer, 2001; Ransdell, 1980; Shapiro, 1983: 2–3), especially with regard to the composition of the sign relationship and with regard to Peirce's interest in all signs and not only in linguistic signs (Parker, 1998; Peirce, 1931–1958, *Collected Papers*: 2.92 – hereafter *CP*).[2]

Saussure's semiology as described in his *Course in General Linguistics* is concerned principally with linguistic signs and he describes the linguistic sign relationship as being dyadic, or 'dual in nature, comprising two elements . . . a concept and a sound pattern', more commonly understood as a 'signifier' and 'signified' respectively (de Saussure, 1983: 66–7). Saussure described such linguistic signs as 'arbitrary' (p. 67),[3] and argued further that the *synchronic* aspect of such sign activity should be the main interest for linguists (p. 81).

Peirce, in contrast, was interested in *all* signs, and in the temporal growth and *continuity* of semeiosis, or sign-activity. Peirce's sign relationship was fundamentally triadic, composed of a *representamen* (also called a 'sign'),[4] an *object*, and an *interpretant*, itself another, more fully developed sign: all three correlates are part of any complete sign. And referring to the *analytic* relationship between the representamen and the object, Peirce detailed three general kinds of signs: *iconic* signs, *indexical* signs, and *symbolic* signs, or icons, indexes and symbols, respectively (*CP* 2.233–53; Daniel, 1987: 30–1, 36).[5] From the various combinations of these correlates Peirce described ten possible classes of signs (*CP* 2.254; Daniel, 1987: 36–8) but, following Peirce (*CP* 2.275), Singer (1984: 60) and Daniel (1987: 38) and for the sake of clarity and (though I hope not reductive) simplicity, I will restrict the present discussion to the more general set of icon, index, and symbol for an understanding of how material culture can represent aspects of human identity.[6]

Peirce recognized that sign activity includes many orders and instances of sign relations that are neither linguistic nor completely arbitrary, that is, that the aspect of the representamen's relation with an object represented for and *through* an interpretant is not necessarily arbitrary. Peirce's famous example of the weathervane is instructive: The weathervane, blowing in the direction of the wind, is an iconic index. It both points (as an index) to the direction of the wind indicating the presence and movement of the wind and it shares (as an icon) in wind itself, in a non-arbitrary way. It is 'tied to', continuous, or contiguous with the wind, and *it is on the ground of this indexical aspect* that the weathervane is a meaningful representation of wind. It is also significant to note that signs can be mixed – iconic indexical signs, for example – and are never 'purely' one mode or another. Rather, one aspect might predominate in a given situation.

Peirce's semeiotic is not a 'psychologistic' argument (*CP* 8.144). He thought of it as a system of inferential logic: 'Logic, in its general sense, is, as I believe I have shown, only another name for semiotic (*sémeiötiké*), the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs' (*CP* 2.227) and this triadic composition of the sign corresponds to the argument of semeiotic as logic, concordant with his thoughts on logical inference (Preucel and Bauer, 2001: 92). Peirce wrote of the triadic structure:

> Indeed, representation necessarily involves a genuine triad. For it involves a sign, or representamen, of some kind, outward or inward, mediating between an object and an interpreting thought. (*CP* 1.480)

Peirce stated that the central characteristic of reality and of meaning is mediation. In semeiotic, the

> *sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity* [my emphasis]. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (*CP* 2.228)[7]

In this irreducibly triadic relationship, signs 'reveal' or represent an aspect of the object to another sign/mind/interpretant, and that interpretant itself may be a representamen for something else: 'Anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum' (*CP* 2.303).

Let us say representamen *R* stands for object *O* in some quality or aspect. *R* seeks to 'generate' an interpretant (an idea, thought, meaning) called *I*, which stands in relation to *R*. In doing so it creates a relationship between *I* and *O*. Generating an interpretant 'completes' the sign – that is, it makes meaning. *R* seeks to draw *I* into a relationship with *O* and generate an *I* such that *I* will stand in relation to *O* in a way equivalent to how *R* presents *O* (in a particular quality or aspect). *I* is not immediate with *O*, rather *R* mediates and represents an aspect of *O* to and for *I*. As Peirce states succinctly:

> A Sign, or Representamen, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object. (*CP* 2.274)

As the representamen presents in the sign relation only certain aspects or qualities of the object (the '*aspectival*' ground established between the representamen and its object), Peirce offered descriptions of three different sign types representing the differing natures this aspectival ground can take: iconic sign, indexical sign, and symbolic sign, or *icon*, *index*, and

symbol, respectively (*CP* 4.447). An *iconic sign* presents some formal shared similarity between the representamen and the object to be represented for the interpretant. For example, a carving of a hand on a rock in western Sweden, or a footprint in the mud-flats of Laetoli, Tanzania, would be iconic signs: they represent a hand and a foot, respectively. It should be explained that the carving and the footprint are iconic signs when they are understood to be representative as such – that is, if the carving is meaningful as representative of a human hand, it is the iconic *aspect* the carving shares with a human hand (an aspect shared independent of interpretation) that is represented in and for the interpretant (Deacon, 1997: 70–2). The carving (or the footprint) is meaningful *on this iconic basis*.

Similarly, the shadow my hand casts is a sign iconic of my hand (it has a formal resemblance to my hand), but is also an indexical sign as my hand obscuring light produces – in a causal relation – shadow. That is, the shadow is 'tied to' my hand *and* to the sun (or other light source) by necessity, and as such interprets a relationship between hand and sun, further representing the sun indexically and my hand iconically and indexically (Knappett, 2002: 109).[8]

Indexical signs are such signs: They represent continuity, contiguity, metonymy, relation, cause-effect, interruption and contact. In short, they represent an aspect of 'connection'. As Peirce describes it:

> An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object. (*CP* 2.248)

> A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focuses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience. (*CP* 2.285)

An index – like an index finger – becomes *meaningful* precisely at the moment one turns away from it and towards something else, specifically the 'object' with which a ground has been established. As noted above, Peirce argued that signs are always potentially polysemic. The carving of the hand is also indexical of the hand that carved it as noted before. And the footprint is an index that a hominid foot had been there at some time. As mercury dilates in a glass tube when heat is applied it indexes ('points to') heat; and as it 'shares' in heat it has an iconic aspect as well. The temperature gradient we use has as its starting point an arbitrarily chosen 'zero', so that the mercury non-arbitrarily rising in the glass may rise to 98.6ºF, which is an arbitrated symbol of convention.

Symbolic signs are signs that represent the relationship between representamen and object through this sort of arbitrated convention: that is, the conventional or arbitrated aspect of the relationship between the representamen and object is the one that is foregrounded in and for the interpretant. Most words are symbolic signs, and this is the order of signs Saussure described. There is no necessary relationship between the word

'tree' and the object it represents. We know this because the Irish word '*crann'* represents the same object.

There is occasional confusion about the distinctions between the various sign-types. For example, under certain conditions archaeologists might interpret the height of a burial mound to represent the social status of the person who had been interred there. In this case, it might seem that the height of the mound is iconic with social status, but this would be incorrect. There is no ground of similarity nor shared quality of identity between height and social status that could be represented iconically. The height of the barrow might instead be interpreted as a *symbol* of social status. It may very well be that, but for the community of people who interred the deceased the height of the barrow may have been an *index* – that is, the height of the mound is tied, factually, to access to resources and to the ability to organize the labor needed to construct it. As one colleague phrased it, 'the mound of earth invokes the shovel strokes required to put it there'.[9] This is an index in Peirce's sense. It may come to pass that an iconic figural representation of a large mound signifies 'greatness', even in a society that no longer buries but burns its deceased. Through habit of social convention this aspect of the figural mound may become foregrounded in this social system (see Preucel and Bauer, 2001: 91 for a somewhat similar example).

One final example may help summarize: My 4-year-old son drew a small picture book about a car driving on a bumpy road. On one page he drew a picture of a wavy road surface, which indicated 'bumpiness' – this picture was *iconic* of the bumpy road. It is on this iconic ground that we understand the object represented. On another page he drew squiggly lines – he said this is what your hand does when you are drawing while sitting in a bumpy car. This picture was an *index* of 'bumpiness' – it relates bumpiness as it is tied to bumpiness through the *effect* of bumpiness. It is on this indexical ground that we understand the object of the bumpy road. And he had me write on that page that the car was on a 'bumpy road' – the words 'bumpy road' are *symbolic* signs – signs of pure linguistic convention (though one could argue that in English the word 'bumpy' has an onomatopoeic value). It is on this ground of convention that we understand the road as bumpy.

Prior to his description and development of sign classifications, Peirce had developed three general categories of phenomena – Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness – that correspond with iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs, respectively.[10] Peirce described Firstness as 'the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else' (*CP* 1.25, 8.328). Firstness corresponds with undifferentiated possibility, pure quality – for example the quality of 'redness'. Secondness corresponds with the existent or a predominance of a dyadic relationship, of action and reaction, resistance, connection, interruption, contiguity and facticity (the index in its necessary relation) (*CP* 1.326) – for example, a

'red flag'. Here 'redness' as a First is *instantiated* in a flag, as a Second. Thirdness corresponds with habit (*CP* 1.536), law-governed phenomena (*CP* 1.26, 1.536), representation (*CP* 1.328, 1.540), and mediation (*CP* 1.328, 1.537). The 'red flag' as a rule indicating stopping would be an example of Thirdness – the instance of 'redness' is generalized through convention into a rule meaning 'stop'.

MATERIAL HABITS

This brief treatment of Peirce's semeiotic and categories of phenomena allows us to examine further Peirce's theories regarding matter. A comprehensive discussion of Peirce's theories regarding matter is outside the direct scope of this essay. Peirce regarded thought as being manifest within the system of logical relations. In that sense, thoughts are not 'in' us but rather we are 'in' thought – in the flow of semeiosis. Matter is similarly manifest when Peirce says 'This obliges me to say, as I do say, on other grounds, that what we call matter is not completely dead, but is merely mind hidebound with habits' (*CP* 6.158; see also *CP* 7.341). By this he means semeiosis manifests matter as habits. This corresponds well with Peirce's famous *pragmatic maxim*: 'Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object' (*CP* 5.402; Peirce, 1982, v.3: 257–76)[11] – that is, the sum of conceivable effects is 'what' something is. Coupled with Peirce's understanding that symbols are only one of three general kinds of signs, the pragmatic maxim can help us interpret the varying, contextual ways in which matter is meaningful as habit. Knappett discusses an interesting example of this with regard to the 'sleeping policeman' – the speed bumps placed on roads to slow traffic (Knappett, 2002: 99). Here we are reminded that the effect of a speed bump is identical to that of a police officer monitoring speed, and the effect produced (slowing down) might be interpreted as obedience to a 'moral and disciplinary [code]' (2002: 99). It is easy to see a human police agent as both the embodiment and enforcer of a moral rule, but more difficult perhaps to understand a bump in the road as such. Yet that is what it may be – and with respect to producing an effect (which now stands in relation to the rule of slow speed), police and bump are the same, the pragmatic equivalence of human agent and material agent. As Knappett notes, agency is not 'in' the person (or the bump) but is distributed between the correlates.[12]

Several theoretical consequences emerge from this. Peirce was working to overcome the Cartesian division of mind and matter (Singer, 1984: 56–7, 71), and he was equally trying to extend or develop Kant's epistemology by bringing (or obviating) the noumenal 'thing-in-itself' in relation with the

phenomenal world. Peirce's epistemology is fundamentally about signs. Signs do not refer to nor represent 'things'; they represent other signs. This allows us to interpret the material world into a phenomenal world in which matter would have any consequence or effect – i.e. the world of the logic of semeiosis. In his review 'Fraser's *The Works of George Berkeley*' (*CP* 8.7; Peirce, 1982, v.2: 462–87), Peirce attacked what he saw as simplistic materialism that dominated nineteenth century science. Peirce recognized that the obdurate nature of matter made its consequences habitual and law-like, which could regulate subsequent semeiosis (Preucel and Bauer, 2001: 87) under certain conditions. But matter is still, like thought, habitual *within and through* the triadic relations of semeiosis. There are of course numerous theorists in the Western philosophical tradition who have sought to examine (and at times reconcile) thought and matter.[13] Peirce's theories differ in some ways, primarily through his insistence on the logic of semeiosis and thought as triadic, and of matter as a species of this thought.

SEMEIOSIC IDENTITY

Peirce argued that the human self is a sign (Colapietro, 1989: 42; Daniel, 1987: 41, 1996: 121–3; Singer, 1984: 58). 'At any instant then man is a thought, and as thought is a species of symbol, the general answer to the question what is man? is that he is a symbol', Peirce wrote (*CP* 7.583). He argued that our mind is not that of the individual *cogito*, but rather semeiosically formed, maintained and transformed: 'When we think, then, we ourselves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign' (*CP* 5.283). This allows us to begin interpreting human identities within a system of unfolding semeiosis:

> It is hard for man to understand this, because he persists in identifying himself with his will, his power over the animal organism, with brute force. Now the organism is only an instrument of thought. But the identity of a man consists in the consistency of what he does and thinks, and *consistency* is the intellectual character of a thing; that is, is its expressing something. (*CP* 5.315)

It is possible to think of 'consistency' as something that expresses a continuity over time (a sense of an 'extended self'), as an expressive disposition, and with regard to identity, an expressive interpretive disposition present and represented in material habituation (Sebeok, 1989). We are semeiosically manifest, as is matter (Singer, 1984: 71), and one of the ways in which our continuity of self – our identity – extends beyond individual instances (what Peirce critiqued as the nominalist's position) is through regulative habits ('Thirdness'). Matter is one kind of regulative habit. Here Peirce critiques both materialist arguments of humans as mere organisms and

rationalist arguments of humans as Cartesian minds. This is a central contribution of Peirce with regard to understanding identity in relation to material practices. By arguing for the semeiosic composition of people and matter we can develop our understandings of how material objects, past and present, represent socially formed human identities, their social conditions and effects.

Milton Singer, in *Man's Glassy Essence* (1984: 53–73), has persuasively argued that Peirce's theory of human being was one that considered humans not as 'individuated' discrete 'boxe[s]of flesh and blood' (Singer, 1984: 65; and see Brück, 2004) but instead socially, dialogically and semiosically formed. Humans are habitual – 'bundles of habits' (Singer, 1984: 64; Preucel and Bauer, 2001: 93) – but we are semeiosic habits for whom the 'habit of habit-change' (*CP* 5.476–7; *CP* 6.86) is elemental.[14] Singer advances the argument that the idea that humans are dialogically and socially formed is part of Peirce's theory of semeiosis – that is, that human identity is an ongoing social formation resulting in habits of mind. Similar theories of human identity can be found in Hegel's and Bakhtin's works (Singer, 1984: 71), and later theorists such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead developed this further, but Peirce's theories of semeiosis and his phenomenological categories allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how human identities form and transform.

There is a tradition within sociocultural anthropology of exploring the symbolic aspects of the material world (Turner, 1967; Urban, 1991: 7–8) which sociocultural anthropologists have recently moved beyond. Daniel's work (1987, 1996) has been at the forefront of Peircean semeiotic analyses of cultural practices – the sexual, political, violent, material. In *Fluid Signs* Daniel argues for a Peircean semeiotic approach to identity (Daniel, 1987: 14–56). And in *Charred Lullabies*, Daniel's nuanced discussion of different forms of measurement on tea plantations in Sri Lanka reflects differentials of power and hence different kinds of human social agents, but also how this is semeiosically manifest through different material objects. Daniel explains that for one implement of measurement – the liter – the abstract *concept* 'liter' is the object represented by the sign/representamen of a *material* liter container. But with regard to the *cuntu* – an object that could be 'a cigarette tin, condensed milk tin, or the half-shell of a coconut' (Daniel, 1996: 82) – it is this *material* object that is semeiosic object for the representamen concept of *cuntu*. In other words, the two semeiotic relations are reversed: 'An object that determines its representation from within a regularized domain determines regular representations . . . [such as] the liter. An object that determines its representations from within a domain of variables determines variable representations, as in the case of the *cuntu*' (Daniel, 1996: 82–3).

Linguistic anthropologists have long engaged with Peirce's ideas, and more recently with regard to how identity is manifest and performed through language practice (see especially Silverstein, 1976). Following this

work, Urban argues that under certain linguistic conditions a theory of a discrete, bounded person (a 'box of flesh and blood') is inadequate for understanding how the referent of the first-person pronoun subject ('I') can be variable, for example when comparing indirect quoted speech ('he said he was going') and direct quoted speech ('he said "I am going"') (Urban, 1989). A semeiotic perspective of different orders of sign-activity, including close attention to the indexical aspects of language (as analytically distinct from the symbolic which had been the interest of Saussure), allows for a more developed understanding of human 'self'.

Having a shared history (Binford, 1962), the relationship between socio-cultural and archaeological anthropology has been energized by groups of anthropologists interested in theory, neither for the sake of itself nor simply subservient to empirical application. Archaeological anthropologists have increasingly argued for and applied to their research on identity useful analytic categories such as gender and class (Conkey and Gero, 1997; Herzfeld, 1992: 66; Meskell, 2001; Tilley, 1999). And while there has been ongoing development in social archaeological theories of interpretation, the presence of semeiotic interpretations has been uneven. Often categorized as 'symbolic archaeology', these works have adhered to somewhat restricted notions of symbolic forms of representation (Conkey, 2001; Cooney, 2000; Gardin, 1992; Holl, 2004; Robb, 1998; Sinclair, 1995; Yentsch and Beaudry, 2001). Gardin notes that both Peirce and Saussure are often invoked, but only through 'ritual allusions' as opposed to application (Gardin, 1992: 91). Similarly Yentsch and Beaudry (2001: 227) mention Gottdiener's work on Peirce but it is difficult to see how Gottdiener's interest in Peirce's semeiotic for interpreting 'postmodern sensibilities' (Gottdiener, 1995: 67) might be extended to our understanding of past identities through the archaeological record.

Knappett has argued for the use of Peirce's trichotomous system for analyzing material culture, noting 'it is apparent from Peircean semiotics that to talk about artefacts being symbolic is inaccurate most of the time' (2002: 103). Herzfeld (1992: 83–4 n.1) employs a specifically Peircean analysis of social relations through material artefacts, as do Preucel and Bauer (2001), Capone and Preucel (2002), and Bauer (2002). Preucel and Bauer (2001: 93) propose a Peircean semeiotic archaeology, one where the pragmatic aspects of Peirce's theories – especially with regard to forms of logical inference, the mediated nature of phenomena, and the habitual character of matter – form the basis for scientific lines of archaeological inquiry and reasoning. They argue clearly that 'unity at the level of logical reasoning (metapragmatic level)' would still allow for 'disunity at the level of interpretative theory', a position that acknowledges both the persistent and variable aspects of material habits.

Tilley describes matter as habit (1999: 264) and argues against interpretations of artefacts as 'dead matter' (p. 103) reflecting a kind of Peircean

sensibility. But his analysis of rock art in western Sweden could be served further by Peirce's semeiotic. In *Metaphor and Material Culture*, Tilley (1999) discusses and interprets a collection of Bronze Age rock carvings in Sweden, many of which are iconic representations of hands, feet, human bodies, boats, shoes. Tilley notes that 'The rock-carving surfaces themselves are, of course, transformed by the hand producing designs' (1999: 144). This is significant in that the carved hand is an icon of a human hand; and *all* the carvings index *the* hand that made them. If the human hand were significant enough to be represented formally – iconically – we might perhaps infer that the indexical aspects of the hand itself – i.e. the fact that the other carvings were made by a human hand – are at least potentially constitutive of the meanings of the other carvings (and see Tilley, 1993: 257 on the iconic aspects of the human body and figural representations of human ribs).

The examples that follow are based upon my research in an Irish (Gaelic)-speaking community (*Gaeltacht*) in western Ireland. Inis Mór (hereafter referred to as 'Aran') is the largest of the three Aran Islands located in Galway Bay. Though primarily ethnographic, my research among the community of contemporary residents in Aran includes questions of how material artefacts contribute to social identities.

■ *AN PHAIDRÍN*, THE ROSARY

In the winter of 1999, while living in Aran, I was invited to a neighbor's house to participate with him in his evening prayers. I was not very familiar with Christian prayer practices, and while previously I had heard the rosary (a Catholic Christian prayer) in English, I had never heard it prayed in Irish. Sitting in his kitchen, my neighbor Tom said he would be happy to show me how he prayed, and he asked Anne, another neighbor who had joined us, to get a set of rosary beads for him. Anne went to a small sideboard in the kitchen and retrieved from there a set of rosary beads, a chain of beads that had belonged to Tom's sister, Nan. The beads were made of stone, perhaps 100 years old, and since the time Nan had died two years earlier, Tom had been praying with this set. He let me take the beads in my hands, and I could feel they were worn smooth with prayer. There was a small silver cross at one point in the strand. Then, with the beads in his hands, Tom began saying the rosary in Irish.

The rosary is a Catholic Christian prayer or set of prayers that, while perhaps not exclusively Catholic, is closely identified with Marian (Virgin Mary) Catholic devotional practices, at least in Aran. The rosary necessarily involves a strand of prayer beads. The beads look like those shown in Figure 1. There are five sets of ten smaller beads; each set of ten is called a 'decade',

Figure 1 A strand of prayer beads

separated by a larger bead. The rosary involves saying specific prayers depending upon the bead and its size and location in the sequence of the chain; often people would say five decades, or one circumlocution of the entire strand. On each of the ten smaller beads in one decade, the person

in prayer would hold the bead between their fingers and recite the *Sé dó Bheatha*, or 'Hail Mary'.[15]

Tom began his prayers, his voice rhythmic and deliberate but barely modulated in volume or pitch. His voice was not strong, and at times I had difficulty hearing him clearly, or rather, I had difficulty hearing the individual words distinctly, and I instead attended to the rhythm and the cadence of the prayer marked by the sequential movement of the beads. His hands held them lightly, and without looking down his fingers worked by walking through the strand, pausing at each small bead to recite the *Sé dó Bheatha*, holding the praying bead with his forefinger and thumb and reciting this same prayer before moving to the next small bead to repeat the prayer. Prayer of this sort involves repetition and sequence, and the beads, in their formal similarity, all round, all the same size, materially repeat their form in a specified sequence. Each iteration of the *Sé dó Bheatha* is identical to the next. The beads then, all and each in their predictable, regular roundness, one after another without variation, are iconic of the repeated prayer. Each of the iterated prayers is discrete – bounded, whole, individual. Similarly, each bead is discrete, bounded, whole, individual, and at the same time tied to the next. The prayer *Sé dó Bheatha* itself is a product of historically specific social conventions reflecting institutional Catholic doctrine. But there is a shared quality (there are many other aspects to both the prayer and the beads) of individual discreteness, and it is this shared formal quality that is foregrounded in both media and subsequently represented in the practice of prayer, and this basis makes this particular social convention of prayer possible.

Furthermore, the iconic shared quality of the prayer and the beads is such that they are also connected. They are related through the temporal practice of repeating the same prayer for each bead, and as such are also indexically connected through this. Both the beads and the verbal prayer segment time together (and they could not do this if their shared formal similarity of discreteness were not manifest temporally in practice), they have the same temporal value, and through this the presence of one signals the necessary presence of the other. That is why I could discern the movement of Tom's prayer though I could not always hear his voice. The beads 'voiced' the prayer for him, temporally and practically. And it is important to note that the word 'bead' from its Old English etymology meant 'prayer', and prayer in its later forms referring especially to the rosary. Eventually the 'meaning' was transferred to the 'small globular bodies' used in prayer (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn).

Because the meaning of the prayer through the material bead is manifest through the sequence of beads in a strand, the beads are connected to one another. Part of their meaning is the indexical capacity they have to anticipate the subsequent bead. That is, each individual bead is in part meaningful because it is 'tied to' (in both the literal and indexical sense) another

adjoining bead. An 'individuated bead' (and some individual beads have been found at various excavated sites in Aran; Ní Ghabhlain, 1997) would not be able to bear or represent this aspect of prayer. A single or individual bead, a small round stone with a hole bored through its center, as a prayer bead would index the presence of other beads, *even in their material extant absence*. The meaning of the bead as prayer is 'contained' in its *contiguity* with other such beads. There is a chain of semeiosis that organizes the beads in relation to prayer, so that already we see both an iconic aspect and an indexical aspect relating bead to prayer.

In the prayer that is the rosary, the absence altogether of the beads would be a significant absence, and it is probable that the prayer would neither continue nor be possible. Though all strands of prayer beads are in theory identical with each other, they are not necessarily so: Nan's beads certainly bore meanings specific to their history and provenance, her practice of prayer materially present in and through the beads themselves. And here is both a logical proposition as well as a metaphysical one. The worn beads are the representational presence (or appearance) of her prayer in their indexical and symbolic forms. The worn quality of the beads 'contain' prayer: inferentially (logically), relationally, triadically. The prayer is not 'inside' the beads, but in the triadic relationship made manifest through the worn rosary beads.

As they were worn with prayer, they physically index Nan's years of prayers and they generate the interpretant of Nan praying with and through them; they draw me into a relationship with Nan's prayer grounded by the indexical worn aspect. As the generated interpretant holding the worn beads with my fingers, *I now stand in relation to the object of Nan having prayed in the same way that the worn prayer beads stand in relation to her having prayed – through the specific aspect of their worn quality*. So if anyone were to have asked if I had experienced Nan's prayers, I could have truthfully responded, 'Yes'.

A part of the meaning of the practice depends on the symbolic regularity of the prayed words and of the material beads. The actual form of the prayers regulates the formal possibilities of the rosary beads themselves, just as the beads materially regulate the practice of prayer. Neither can be made simply any-which-way. In this regard they are certainly signs of convention; they are the products of particular discursive forces – in this respect, the discourse of a historically specific Catholic doctrine. The beads follow the institutional dictates, though in terms of the actual materials out of which beads are made (wood, amber, stone, metal) I believe there is no institutional specificity. The materials chosen could, however, represent many other social forces and conditions. Much more can be said regarding the symbolic aspects of prayer as discursively organized and authorized religious convention (it certainly is that as well) reflecting historically specific doctrine, but that is not my direct concern here. The purpose of this

section is to demonstrate how we might approach the interpretation of material objects as semeiosic habits and bring them into relation with the semeiosic formation of human identities. Let me conclude with a final example, also from Aran, but concerning a different matter.

Aran contains a depth of archaeological sites from large Iron Age stone forts (including the famous Dún Aengus) to early Christian monastic sites to eighteenth and nineteenth century manufactories. In the next section, I apply the concept of 'material metaphor' to an analysis of historical and contemporary identities in Aran, and I examine how material objects correspond and help produce a discourse of modern identity in relation to the social domain of languages.

CLAÍOCHA: METAPHORS FOR MODERNITY

Perhaps the most obvious and certainly the most ubiquitous of cultural monuments in Aran are the mortarless stone walls – the *claíocha* – that carve and lace the entire island (Figure 2). I should explain that in Aran the Irish word *claí* (pl. *claíocha*) refers only to the out-of-doors field-walls, and usually signifies only those walls that are single-stone in thickness, the most common type used as field boundaries. The field-walls (which according to some could total hundreds of miles in linear measurement; Robinson, 1990) are cultural monuments and they are historical monuments as well: A number of residents told me that they could tell older-built walls from the more recently built. Most said that the older walls would be found 'back west' (Figure 3) (a phrase that has a number of connotations including 'back beyond'), the newer walls nearer the main village of Cill Rónáin in the eastern half of the island (Figure 4). The Irish word for 'west' is *thiar*; this word can also mean 'back' (Coleman, 1999). The word indicating movement from the west is *aniar*, movement toward the west is *siar*. Were someone in Aran to say *tá mé ag dhul siar* ('I am going westward') they could be referring to going back toward Bun Gabhla, the westernmost village in Aran and the furthest away from Cill Rónáin in terms of spatial distance and therefore under certain conditions the furthest away in terms of temporal distance – both 'west' and 'back beyond'.

The social chronology of wall-building in Aran follows another related to the Irish language. At least since the time of J.M. Synge's visits to Aran at the turn of the twentieth century there has been a general discourse of English language having 'taken over' Cill Rónáin village – the main ('metropolitan') commercial village by the time of Synge's visit – while Irish remained the sole or primary language of the other villages. Aran diagrammed and still diagrams all of Ireland in this regard, the language question having been raised by Irish nationalists trying to prevent Irish from being eclipsed throughout Ireland during and after the period of

Figure 2 Mortarless stone walls that carve and lace the entire island

Figure 3 Older-built walls found 'back west'

Figure 4 The newer walls found nearer the main village

English colonial dominion. In Synge's book *The Aran Islands*, English is nearly equivalent with modernity, Irish with Gaelic tradition. Language communities in this instance are metaphors for one's position relative to a generalized modernity (Fabian, 1983; Kiberd, 1979). In a sense this dialectical distinction – of *Gaeilge* (Irish) being pre-modern and authentically Irish Gaelic and *Bearla* (English) being modern and foreign – is presented as a transhistorical distinction especially in recent Aran history. The convention in Synge's day was that going 'west' meant going back in time to the pre-modern Gaelic homeland (Kiberd, 1979: 36–7), and in Aran the social place as played out in the physical space is similarly organized and organizing: going west is going back in ethnohistoric time. This is manifest in the ways in which field-walls in Aran are understood.

Residents would also note that they could often tell who or which people from which family or village built which walls. Certain persons, both currently living and recently deceased, were known to be skilled wall-builders, and some had distinctive styles (Figure 5). One respondent said that a person's identity in Aran 'is wrapped around their ability to make a stone wall and a rabbit-proof stone wall at that'. Certain patterns might be more prevalent in higher frequency in some villages than in others, and specific families would be associated with these respective 'styles'. In this way, the walls represent (potentially) village and kinship identity, and they

Figure 5 Some stone-wall builders had distinctive styles

represent aspects of Aran identity more generally. An archaeologist familiar with Aran with whom I spoke considered the wall system – including the whole notion of the walls themselves – as a collective system and collective monument. The walls are often iconically represented on T-shirts, posters and postcards for tourist consumption and they are among the most ubiquitous and emblematic symbols of Aran. And for Tim Robinson (1990, 1997) the field-walls are 'of all the islands' monuments the most moving, an image, in their wearisome repetitiousness and tireless spontaneity, of the labour of those disregarded generations' (1990: 6). The walls, of course, are continually rebuilt and that is a part of their contemporary meaning – that is, the persistence of a material habit representing a social habit: respondents in Aran noted often to me that they knew gravity, goats, cattle, and tourists knocked down walls – so that a *standing* wall *means repair* to many residents, and indexes for them ongoing attention and care of fields. The older walls back west are older in part because they have a longer history of being maintained, just like the Irish spoken there.

Tilley has argued (1999) for attention to the metaphoric aspects of material culture: that is, that different domains of symbolic production – for example tombs and household structure – might be analogs for each other. I would extend this and argue that in Aran language and field-walls are metaphors for one another, what Daniel has called 'iconic Thirds in that the

convention of symbolic function inherent in the metaphor is quite evident' (Daniel, 1987: 51). In this situation, the origin and age of the walls are in a metaphoric relation with the state of the languages, Irish and English, in Aran.

If language is generally understood as a social practice, it must also in this case be understood as monumental. In Aran and in the *Gaeltacht* more generally language is among the most important organizing symbols. If language and field-walls can be metaphoric substitutes for one another, then field-walls – representing certain conventions about modernity – would also be practices, and in their continual maintenance they are certainly that. These walls index the person who built them; they pen cattle, sheep, goats, horses; they demarcate land-ownership boundaries among family members and between families; they help retain soil built up by hand over decades and centuries (the soil itself is artefactual in Aran); they represent an aspect of life in Aran that has become emblematic of Gaelic tradition and Irish modernity; and they represent an aspect of the ongoing tension between the two main languages in Aran. As such these walls are polysemic practices in the ways that they represent social identities, past and present.

CONCLUSIONS

How might we know what people are or were like through their material worlds? At first glance, the question might have seemed a problematic recapitulation of the Cartesian division between mind (or 'self') and matter. But one of Peirce's consuming interests was overcoming this division for simple pragmatic (in both the marked and unmarked senses) reasons: the Cartesian division and nominalist/materialist positions (and we can now say this of the Saussurian/Leví-Straussian structuralist/symbolic position; Parmentier, 1994: 101) are not up to the analytic task of understanding how meaning works. Archaeology is centrally situated to contribute to this overcoming of Cartesian, structuralist, and nominalist thought regarding matter and regarding identity. The material world has persistent habitual effects, not unlike social practices such as prayer. And in the religious ritual I observed the two were bound together. Matter is a particular species of obdurate habit (Preucel and Bauer, 2001) – but obdurate does not mean static. Rather it suggests resistance and effort. Matter is habitual within and through semeiosis, and Peirce argued that signs grow and thought is continuous. Signs grow *from*, but the (problematic?) telic component of Peirce's theory states that signs also grow *toward*, at the very least through regulative practices. One can imagine some of the ways in which issues of materiality and identity – understood through a semeiotic framework – might be productively engaged within archaeology. In particular, Peirce's interest in continuity of thought

and of semeiosis might help us in understanding how social identities manifest through artefacts such as stone walls relate the past to the present. Among many other things, our human identities (our 'glassy essence' in Peirce's reckoning)[16] persist through our material habits.

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Notes

1. The spelling and orthography of '*semeiotic*' is not an idiosyncratic conceit but, following Peirce, preserves its etymology and distinguishes it from *semiotic* or *semiology* (see Daniel, 1996: 213 n.3).
2. I use the *Collected Papers* of Peirce (noted in text as CP with volume and paragraph number) and where possible cite the volume and pages from the chronological *Writings of C.S. Peirce*.
3. See de Saussure (1983: 81) and Shapiro (1983: 2–3) on 'relative arbitrariness' of linguistic signs.
4. For a clarification of Peirce's usage of the term 'sign' (in its marked and unmarked senses), see Parmentier (1994: 194 n.8).
5. See *CP* 2.233–53 for the three trichotomies of signs.
6. See Peirce (CP 2.275) for 'Icons, Indices, and Symbols' as 'The most fundamental [division of signs]'. For productive uses of Peirce's ten sign classification (in *CP* 2.254–64) see Daniel (1987, 1996), Munn (1992) and Parmentier (1994).
7. See *CP* 1.540 for the distinction Peirce makes between 'sign' and 'representamen'.
8. Triadically as far as the shadow is concerned, the hand is the representamen of the sun – that is, the hand mediates/relates the sun (or a particular aspect of the sun) to the interpretant-shadow (shadow 'completes' the hand-sun relation). The shadow in turn can subsequently serve as representamen of the sun to a further interpretant.
9. Email correspondence with J. Dickinson, 15 March 2005.
10. Initially described as 'Quality' (Firstness), 'Relation' (Secondness), 'Representation' (Thirdness) in his essay 'On a New List of Categories' from 1867 (*CP* 1.545; Peirce, 1982, v.2: 49–59).

11 From Peirce 'How to Make our Ideas Clear' (in Hoopes, 1991: 160–79; Peirce, 1982, v.3: 257–76).

12 Peirce's pragmatism is not a simple 'instrumentalism' (but see Menand, 2001: 360–1 on Dewey's interpretation).

13 A partial list would perhaps include the Mediaeval Scholastics, Bishop Berkeley, René Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and more recently Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler.

14 Thanks to Val Daniel for this insight; see Peirce's essay 'The Fixation of Belief' (*CP* 5.358; Peirce, 1982, v.3: 242–57) and his manuscript 'A Guess at the Riddle' (*CP* 1.354).

15 *Sé do bheatha, a Mhuire*
atá lán de ghrásta
tá an tiarna leat
is beannaithe thú idir mná
Agus is beannaithe toradh do bhroinnne
Íosa.
A Naomh-Mhuire, a Mháthair Dé
guigh orainn na peacaigh anois
agus ar uair ár mbáis
Amen.

16 See Peirce, 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities' (*CP* 5.264–5.317; 1982, v.2: 211–42), for his citing of Shakespeare's phrase.

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