

The Refrigerator and American Ideas of "Home"

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The particular refrigerator I recall literally was plastered over with pictures of children and certificates and citations that marked their athletic and educational accomplishments. There were photos of family gatherings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandmother and grandfather. One could see that pictures considered most emotionally important to parents—the youngest son being hugged by a grandparent, a daughter riding the family dog—were placed at eye level, on the front of the fridge. Photos of distant relatives and business cards of the family insurance agent, plumber, painter and house remodeler were placed either below eye level on the front of the fridge, or on its side in a more peripheral space. Also, as the mom of the household explained to me, pictures sometimes were replaced as new and important family gatherings took place, or if children did something that merited that special "Kodak moment." Thus a process of creating or recycling family history, of outlining degrees of familial affection, of intimacy or of distance was spatially diagrammed on the refrigerator.

Having sharpened my analytical eye observing the rituals and mores of a remote Papua New Guinean tribal group, I began to see the refrigerator as an object ritually marked by this middle-class, Midwestern family. Ritual space, like that in which an initiation or a mortuary ritual is performed, usually is marked off from the surrounding area by objects that have a special "alerting" quality. The object can be something ordinary, even mundane, but some modification is done to it so that its nature is altered in a symbolic sense and it comes to convey a host of special meanings.

Creating Domesticity

This refrigerator, and millions like it that are put to similar symbolic uses, occupied central stage in a ritual performance that had as its aim the creation of domesticity, and a feeling of home. The refrigerator increasingly has become a sort of billboard advertisement for many strongly held values about what a home should be, what sort of emo-



Anthropologist learning about American domestic life.

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tional and moral tone should distinguish it, and how it should run.

What is the American culture of domesticity? What values go in to making it up, and how can we see these values pictured on our refrigerators? Well, to begin let's consider the issue of American mothers being responsible for the flow of household tasks. That is, one of the ways that the middle-class mom judges her success as a mom and housewife is by successfully coordinating or balancing a host of household activities. Running kids to soccer practice or little league, shopping for and preparing family meals, picking up kids from band practice . . . all these activities must be balanced and organized if the household is to function smoothly; indeed, if it is to function at all. Keeping the family activities running smoothly is not only a mother's key responsibility, but often a significant source of feelings of satisfaction, competence and pride. The family master schedule enshrines the values of balance and organization—helping to put order into a potentially chaotic environment,

and provide the home with its particular rhythm and tone; placed on the fridge, it revealed the kitchen and the refrigerator surface to be family command and control centers, on which certain notions of how a home should run were displayed.

"Warming-Up of the Home"

The ritual of continually creating a domestic world also involves the evocation of sentiment. Many domestic acts and routines are specifically understood to be acts of emotional nurturing and caring. These accomplish what can be called an emotional "warming-up of the home." By placing photos of the household's children on the front of the fridge, the mom of the household was performing one of these acts of housewarming. The photos were evidence of parental care, concern and affection. Other photos that I saw on the fridge, such as those of distant relatives, also had a certain teaching function. The mom told me that she would often point out pictures of these kin to her young children as she told them who they were and

how they were related to the children. Bits of family history were woven into these descriptions. The refrigerator had become a sort of memory board that functioned to evoke a feeling of family.

The children's art taped at odd angles of the fridge, the certificates of their educational and athletic accomplishments—an A received on a spelling test, a certificate awarded for good sportsmanship on a little league team—were testament to the fact that domestic life for this family also was about the emotional nurturance and praise of children. Keeping up the flow of emotional nurturance, as well as domestic routine, is an emotionally trying endeavor for many mothers. And so the proliferation of homilies—pithy and uplifting sayings that express sympathy for the mother and homemaker's lot, or that have a straightforward religious message—all usually plastered on the fridge so that the household's mom can take a dose of daily comfort and counsel.

Upscale Refrigerators

This is not of course the whole of the story. Other American refrigerators I have seen in the course of my work reflect another definition of domesticity. In a number of more upscale homes, the kitchen is not so much a place for celebrating family values and children's achievements as a stage where one displays a sense of mastery of domestic arts—such as cooking—and where one can exhibit an overall social ease. Here refrigerators most often have a clean surface. In this sort of household, the refrigerator also serves as a ritual marker. What it marks, above all else, is its owner's taste and aesthetic judgment. The gleaming stainless steel surface and sharpness and boldness of line of the Sub Zero, for instance, connote a kind of mastery of a developed aesthetic vocabulary, as well as a real assertion of self. Here sharp lines and gleaming surfaces are associated with the suppression of domesticity and sentiment. □

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