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## When Flesh is Remembered: A History of Trophies

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### **Abstract**

Today when we think of trophies, we either think of the golden ones on shelves or the animal ones that hunters collect. This research began with the question of how ethical is it for a farmer to kill an endangered animal to protect their livelihood, and from there, the question became how ethical is it for a hunter to collect animal trophies. Why would a hunter be allowed to take trophies and how is a golden trophy similar to an animal one? Looking at the definition according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and how it is defined now, led to the examples of lynching trophies, relics, heirlooms, and serial killer mementos, and how the word changed overtime. Different examples are used to show how the definition and examples have changed and how a power complex was created. The power complex is shown through the person having the trophy and the story they tell with it, whether it be an animal, a golden award, or something else. This is a problem as whole lives, and history itself, can be changed through one story; a story that changed the truth of who held the power.

*Keywords:* History, Flesh, Remembrance, Fetishization, Memorial, Trophy

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When I began my research, I wanted to look into the ethics of animal poaching. Working within animal studies I found that the bigger issue I had was with the collection of animal trophies. This led me to question how some animal products become purely utilitarian, like a

steak, while others become fetishized. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a major shift from animal to human trophies. This then prompted me to study the history of multiple instances where flesh became memorialized and traded to find an answer to the question. I will talk about the increase and shift in trophy collection during the colonization for Africa, lynchings, relics, heirlooms, and serial killer mementos, to show the variety and history of trophies. Each example I present has a connection with each other by the possessor wanting the memory of the object. With this in mind, I argue that flesh becomes trophy through the desire to possess the memory of the life once lived.

The profusion of keeping trophies took off during the colonization of Africa. Originally the Oxford English Dictionary tells us that a trophy was “a structure erected (originally on the field of battle or the nearest land to a sea battle, and later in any public place) as a memorial of a victory in war” (“trophy, n.”). Among the tribesmen in Africa, headhunting and the collection of skulls was an early version of a trophy that captivated Africa’s colonizers. For example, some tribes would take enemy heads and hang them from trees. Colonizers had to establish power and control and therefore, killing the enemy and taking something that belonged to them established their power. Many British soldiers of the time would equate fighting the Xhosa people, which is a tribe in Africa, with hunting wildlife, according to social anthropologist, Simon Harrison (287). These colonizers focused primarily on the collection of heads and parts of Africa’s wildlife, while also mimicking the tribesmen by, for example, taking ivory amulets worn by some chiefs after some of the Frontier battles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Harrison, the social acceptance for this comes from Victorian era customs (289). At that time, Britain had a ritual to hunt indigenous game and then display it, and many soldiers were huntsmen for sport themselves. Harrison says, “these demonstrations of violent

power and mastery over wildlife...symbolized mastery over land” (287). This became a very successful way to show how much had been colonized because they had something physical of the land to demonstrate what they had conquered. The power of the objects though was often the remembrance of the greatness of the beast or the difficulty of the hunt. Here, the object’s life is subject to the owner because memory has the power to change emotions and perceptions.

Wanting the memory turns flesh into trophy, but having the trophy gives the possessor dominance. Therefore, to gain dominance, one has to set themselves apart, and having the trophy gives the status booster needed to do so, because of the spectacle that the trophy belongs to.

Reflecting on trophy hunting, lynchings reflect the same, as they were both socially acceptable. To be considered higher in status, someone would have to do what only a few would or even could do. The few who would commit the lynchings, were regarded as legendary. They would be seen as a hero, an idol. Pictured are two young men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith



E.g. Fig. 1. Source: *Diaries, Radio*. “*Strange Fruit: Anniversary of A Lynching*.” NPR, NPR, 6 Aug. 2010 [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516).

(see fig. 1). Analyzing the photo, there are two young men hanging, a couple holding hands, a pregnant woman, and other average town citizens. Not pictured is James Cameron, who survived the lynching. The next morning, the photographer, who worked for the local press, copied the photograph and sold

it as a postcard for fifty cents. Anthropologist Amy Louise Wood says, “To take a picture of the

victim in this state of debasement reinforced this process by freezing the moment of representation in time” (76). Not every trophy is a photograph. In most scenes, like the scene depicted in the photograph, many townsfolk will take pieces of the lynched bodies. In some lynchings people will take anything possible, including organs and fences. This allows the possessor of the trophies to have ownership over the memory of the death. Harvey Young, an assistant professor at Northwestern University, then says, “the lynching souvenir is a...remain[der] of a performance spectacle” (641). He furthers this by saying, “the souvenir requires an accompanying narrative furnished by its possessor” (642). Furnishing the narrative allows the possessor to have control over the memory of the moment, to again become one of the dominate spectators of this brutal scene. Having any kind of trophy allows the possessor to relive the moment, giving the owner the ability to brag or boast about that they were there, or simply to prove it happened. If a spectator’s family member wasn’t able to attend, having this proof that the moment happened allows the owner not only to rewrite the life of the object, but also their own life. This is how possessors also exert their power and dominance. This power comes from the uniqueness in each individual moment, and the spectacle of it comes from the oddity that it is. Every lynching, for example, is different. How they lynch the person, who the person is, and what the setting is, all play into the uniqueness of the spectacle making the event that much more of a feat. Attending the lynching, having some sort of proof, allows the possessor to be idolized.

Saints can also be idolized in the same manner. Another instance of a fleshy souvenir with a more positive intention are the relics of saints. Peter Brown says that “the invisible gesture of God’s forgiveness which had made [the relic] available in the first place” is what gives the saint and the object its power and therefore “its power in the community was very much the condensation of the determination of that community to believe that it had been judged by God

to have deserved the [presence] of the saint” (qtd. in “Relics” 79). It could have been any object, but the fact that an object was picked, the decided object would have been proof that the saint was a divine connection to God. If we owned the object, we would then possess its healing potential, its power. The saint becomes sanctified through his martyrdom, which again requires the holder of the relic to remember that saint’s life and death in order to express their veneration. In this example, being healed by the relic would also be the trophy. Being healed would set a person apart from those who were not healed, but also having the relic would set the person apart. Having the relic, would allow the owner to talk about the saint’s life and create a perception of them. If there is no physical object to act as evidence of the saint’s life, then there would be no object to also defend the saint’s life. Again, even a saint’s life would be subject to the owner only by the trophy. The only difference between a relic and any of the trophies previously mentioned and forthcoming is the narrative that accompanies it. The saint’s martyrdom is what gives his trophies the perception of goodness. Obtaining the relic would give the possessor the chance to again express the saint’s veneration, but also their dominance by having the object. Therefore, in the quest for dominance, it doesn’t matter what trophy you have, but that you at least have the accompanying memory to provide the narrative.

Furthermore, some things are purely created based on memory. Victorian mourning jewelry was created to preserve the memory and life of the deceased. Some items were passed down as an heirloom. Of course, they used the memories attached to the object to remember the person who passed, but for those that are still living and subject to memory loss the object is equivalent to a computer backup, as a place to return to or a place to begin again; this can also be seen with photographs, as the visual representation recalls the memory. A simple object can hold history and can catalog a lifetime, or it can authenticate a time and place unknown to the new

owners. For example, the chronometer that was found on the *Bounty* authenticated and detailed the story of the ship, its mutineers, and Pitcairn Island. As the chronometer shifted hands throughout a century it became more of a symbol of friendship and history than a working timekeeping piece (Young 213). As the piece was handed off, so did the stories, creating a sense of community that when held and told of its history, some felt sentimental of a time that no longer existed. There is power in reminiscing, and this power creates the community that influences the next partakers. These influences change as the hands who holds it change. For example, a piece of John Adams's hair was kept in a gold oval frame and as more people visited the island, and the piece shifted ownership, the story told with it shifted from a story of being a mutiny outpost, to one about loyalty and how the island came to be (Young 217). The perception the owner has of the object, changes how the viewer perceives it; this does not allow for the viewer to make their own opinion, and can change how the history of it may be rewritten.

The same can be said about heirlooms in the sense that instead of artifacts, such as the chronometer, or relics, such as the bone fragment of Saint Justin, where they present a history of a person intertwined with history itself, or a collection of histories intertwined, heirlooms detail the life of one person or one family, which differs from the moment a lynching souvenir frames. Heirlooms, because of the personal attachment to a particular person and only being passed down through the bloodline, create almost a personality of their own. This individuality connects them to a history of a family, and continually keeps the past, and the original owner's life, alive, but it is up to the new owner's choice whether to pass on the same emotions imbued into the object. "Things—even though they have connections to the past—are in the end most important for the individual emotional growth they stimulate in the present" (Osborne 478). This choice affects the power dynamic and can possibly change it. Again, if the new/current owner holds a

different emotion toward the heirloom, that emotion will be passed down and not the emotions belonging to the ancestors, as that was the original purpose: to pass along what could not. These emotions may change due to changing societal customs and norms, but also by the power-wielding-hierarchy already established, especially if the hierarchy changes. “Not all the living have equal access to that ancestral past, as heirlooms are typically valued objects that are not available or equally accessible to all members of a community, the possession, display, and transmission of heirlooms also differentiate the living and help to reify inherited social differences” (Lillios 236). With the hierarchy, a descendent may choose an object different from the current heirloom(s) known to the family to present a different side of the story, regardless of what their intentions are. This could further create the divide, but this would also give more perspective to the actual events in the family’s history, than the furnished narrative that the already established heirlooms may present. Whether right or wrong, good or bad, more of the history can be told, creating a more unbiased narrative, if the descendent(s) so choose to share.

Heirlooms and mourning jewelry are reminders of something sacred because of the voyeuristic nature of them. Something as simple and small as a bracelet made of hair, that in life meant friendship, now meant a bond that is no longer present. Having a collective grief or reminiscence creates a sense of community, pride, responsibility, or any other emotion that the partaker feels along with the choice of whether they share those feelings to others. There is power in making that choice and choosing what to share with the object. The question becomes more of who decides what object to use, and what power does the object itself provide.

We may be able to see this in serial-killer mementos. Generally, the objects used to keep the past alive are deemed by the present, but serial killers pick certain things to be their trophies so that they can relive the experience, a constant control of power: it’s why they commit the



murder in the first place, a primal act of power. Of course, the difference here is that the killers are not reminiscing, or learning of a past life, instead they are creating the soon-to-be past life, but there is merit in looking at what object they use to reminisce, play into the power dynamic of objectual memory.

Every memento taken by the murderer is specific to them alone. Ted Bundy was known for keeping his victims' heads, while Charles Albright kept his victims' eyes. Some, like Lonnie David Franklin Jr., kept photographs. The act of creating is actually an act of control. When creating, the artist controls every aspect, and the act of killing only gives a short amount of time to control. Therefore, committing the murder and taking photographs, is an act of creating, a display of control and dominance. For a serial killer, committing the murder is like creating a piece of art. Each choice into who, where, what, why, and how, is made with their own sense of reason and is carefully picked. This sense of choosing is their display of control with the more that can be created, the more control there is. This supports the idea that power is controlled dominance.

The same can be said with photographs. Taking a physical piece of the person, like a hand, is simply just cutting it off. There is not control or creation in the moment, but taking a photograph opens the door for more opportunities. We can see the controlled dominance in Franklin's photographs where he made his victims pose, adding to the control he had. It is unknown whether the victims were able to choose whether to pose, but Franklin kept photographs of 160 women ("Are they dead or alive?"). By acting on this need to control, he is creating—giving himself power over the moment. Taking the photograph, he freezes the moment in time, and keeping the photograph allows him to relive every aspect of the crime he created, much more than a physical bodily object would, including the lead up, taking the photograph, the

kill, and placing the photograph in its place. The photograph will not only preserve the emotions during the act but the photograph itself will be preserved longer than any physical human memento would. Every serial killer chooses to kill their victims their own way, and their process for choosing their mementos is the same. The spectacle of it comes from the individuality in the oddities of it. The killer has control over the narrative of the moment with the memento in hand. They continue to tell the story they created the way they intended it to be, until they are caught. Once the mementos are on display to the world, the story is no longer the same story told and told again, even to the killers themselves.

The same can be said about any example I've presented. The more of the original story is shared with others, the more the story changes. The object is just as important to the history of the story, and the story itself, just as much as the memory. Neither would be the same without the other. Having the object is proof that the memory existed, but what the owner speaks of the memory, that act of choosing, is what gives them power; therefore, the object proves their retelling. The object allows them to control, and create if they so choose to, the dominant story told, an act of rewriting history.

In conclusion, the evolution of flesh becomes trophy through the desire to possess the memory of the life once lived, which originates in the desire for dominance. We have seen through the seemingly different topics of trophy hunting, lychings, relics, heirlooms, and serial killer mementos, that taking a trophy is no longer a way of remembering the life once lived, but a way to remember the life that was conquered.

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