Animal Skull Surrounded by Creosote Flowers

Source: Lauren Kane, Precious Creatures.

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SKIN, MEANING, AND SYMBOLISM IN PET MEMORIALS

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SKIN, MEANING, AND SYMBOLISM IN PET MEMORIALS

Tattoos, Taxidermy, and Trinkets

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First edition 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78756-422-0 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78756-419-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78756-421-3 (Epub)

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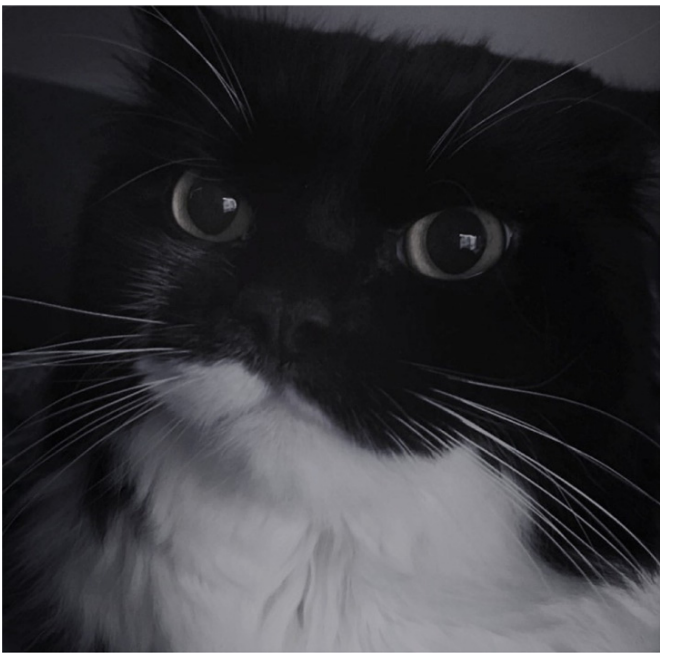
Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Max, my eternal "good boy," mourned, missed, and commemorated in ink.

I carry you with me, always …



And for Elwood, who sits beside me in this moment, always (im)patiently waiting for his dinner …

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research, like writing, can be isolating at times. One is frequently haunted by self-doubt, coupled with the lingering question of whether what seemed like a fabulous idea to begin with will ever come to fruition. Certainly, I jumped into this with little thought as to how I was going to make it work, and with equally little consideration as to the long road that stretched out ahead. I might never have had the courage to endure if not for my ignorance, so perhaps that was for the best. I don't believe that this project would have come together without the intervention and persistent encouragement of the following people. In various forms, they have been my cheer squad since day one and I thank them, humbly, each and every one…

Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce (University of York), Philippa Grand (Emerald Publications), and the Death and Culture Network (DaCNet), thank you for allowing me to be part of this fantastic group of researchers and to contribute to the *Death & Culture* series. Your continued guidance, support, and encouragement have given me the confidence to accept death studies as my true calling. I feel at last, as though I have found my kindred spirits!

Roger Hillman (Australian Catholic University), without your impeccably timed interventions, I might never have come across DaCNet to begin with. Your encouragement has been tireless and your feedback invaluable. No matter how

much doubt I may have expressed in my abilities, you always met me with complete optimism, and I thank you for that.

Anne Cummins, Professor Bridget Aitchison (Australian Catholic University), Rohan Price, and my army of patient proofreaders. Thank you for painstakingly reading and re-reading my manuscript and for offering personal and professional support throughout this process. Even when I felt things weren't looking good, you were able to find something to smile about.

Lauren Kane from *Precious Creatures*, thank you for permission to include images of your various, and always, stunningly beautiful creations and for being so wonderfully open to engaging in this project.

And finally, a heartfelt thank you to Tom Bromwell for reminding me of the importance of setting small goals, so that the larger ones might not seem so insurmountable. Your belief that this would come together in the end helped me to also believe that it would.

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Image 1. Woman and Dog on Sofa

Source: Shutterstock

INTRODUCTION

Humans give meaning to life through the creation of narrative. This narrative, which begins with the self-realization that we are each an individual entity, is the conduit through which we experience the world, and all the other living beings within it. This idea has been brought to life in the work of Walter Benjamin, specifically in the way in which he details the importance of narrative specific to the death experience (*Selected Writings Volume 3*, 2009, p. 151). Similar themes are present in the creation mythologies discussed by Joseph Campbell (*The Power of Myth*, 1988), whose extensive investigation of the human journey links the core of identity creation and life purpose back to the creation of the narrative. So too, the psychological concepts of Sigmund Freud (*Mourning and Melancholia*, 1962) and Carl Jung (*Man and His Symbols*, 1964), whose beliefs about the construction of the self are the cornerstone on which an entire section of contemporary scholarship rests, are preoccupied with the narrative stories we tell ourselves. The contribution which this volume makes to an already rich field of scholarship lies in its assessment of how narrative manifests in the guise of the five senses. Of these senses (sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch), it is concerned with the last, specifically it's conduit: skin. It is touch and skin, how we use and understand skin in the action of touching and being touched, and how we mark the human skin in response to self-narrative, which is intrinsic to the primal experience of human life and the rituals of death. Throughout the course of living, everything, from the

construction of who we are to the people we love and how we celebrate, mourn, and memorialize, is anchored to the touch experience (Griffin & Evans, 2008, p. 9). The visual representation of this self-narrative then is the body. A tangible canvas for the story of who we are, it also holds the memory of what has been. In the case of mourning specifically, adornment of the skin with ink can reflect our grief. Through the absorption of the image, word, or pattern, we echo what we have surpassed by our own mortality.

Historically, and in the contemporary world, the fabric of self has often been interwoven with a larger social or communal experience. In many cultures, the modification of skin represents a visual symbol of membership to a group or tribe (Ellis, 2008, p. 133). More widely, rites of passage are still communicated through marking the body with paint (Turner, 2012, pp. 492–93) or in the act of scarification (Eggertsson, 2018, pp. 7–8), and so too, community status and gender (Barron, 2017, pp. 86–91.). For men, this may include circumcision, while for women the internal process of gestation and birth can be read on the external canvas of their skin (Thompson, 2015, p. 21). In the case of both genders, adornment of skin with body paint, piercings, scars, and inks provides further proof of knowledge, social status, and sexual maturity. The skin was and is the most personal site of celebration. Throughout a life, as it experiences the passing of time, as it encounters the skin of others, it presents a living memory, a map of how a life has been lived (Patterson & Schroder, 2010, p. 259).

It is not only our own self-narrative that we read in the skin but also the narrative of those we live alongside – both human and animal. In the human and animal relationship, touch and skin-to-skin contact are of increased significance to how understanding is formed between species and how relationships are negotiated. Owing to a lack of common verbal

language, the touch relationship is the primary communicative tool for interspecies dialog, mimicking that of the primate and mammalian creatures with which humans share so much DNA (Jablonski, 2013, p. 164). In human societies, like those in the animal kingdom, skin becomes the central component to how we experience the world and establish individuality within cultural and community hierarchies. Despite the profound role which animals, particularly domestic companion species, play in daily life, relatively few studies have taken the touch relationship as their focal point. As a result, the significance of this unique and crucial bond remains largely unconsidered in academic discussions on human and animal dynamics. This is particularly true of how we mourn animals and the death rituals we enact in response to their passing. What I will explore within this study is how the skin of humans and animals is used specifically as a site of memorialization, and how we communicate our fascination, infatuation, and grief over the animal death through the use of skin – both theirs and our own.

When I set out researching this project, my initial intent had been to link the Victorian Era practice of and fascination with taxidermy (specifically the anthropocentric works of Walter Potter) with the modern practice of memorial tattooing. As a tattoo enthusiast, what struck me was the similarities between the anthropomorphic elements in Potter's taxidermy creations and the esthetics of memorial tattoos that feature companion animals. In so many tattooed representations, we see animals preserved in human form. It is their image, as their human keeper has interpreted it, which becomes the memorial narrative. This interpretation is defined through anthropomorphic traits which have been bestowed upon animals to fulfill human yearnings. When we look upon taxidermy as well, we are confronted with the same principle of narrative formation. It is a human longing,

an urge to remain close to an animal, that drives the decision to preserve it after death.

What also soon became evident in my research was that it is not only *how* the animal is displayed in either taxidermy or tattooing that is of importance to the narrative of death and grief as the human experiences it, but also the role of skin and touch within these processes. In the absence of a shared verbal language, everything between the human and the companion animal is built on a narrative that exists around touch. Voice and intonation, while also essential elements in establishing these close bonds, lack the clarity and intimacy that comes from touching the fur of the animal (Beck & Katcher, 1996, p. 84). While the return touch of the animal might not always be so enjoyable (as any cat owner would attest), it is equally as important to how animals communicate their feelings with us.

The issue of how companion animals feel about their humans, specifically the question of how they love, if they love at all, is one that remains contested among scholars. While there are those who would believe that our animals fail to understand or conceptualize love as we would know it (Hoffman, 2014, pp. 194–197),[1] there are others who are convinced of the fact that our animals do, on some emotional level, understand us (Cudworth, 2011, pp. 146–147). This debate around animal emotions and the idea of active animal participation in human experience is but one element of the complex nature of human and animal relationships.

[1]Hoffman outlines four aspects which denote loving partnership; but of these, voluntariness and equality are problematic when we consider the reciprocal love relationship between human and animal. As a domestic pet has no agency in its adoption into the home, nor is it afforded the equality of a human family member, it fails to meet the prerequisites for a loving relationship structure.

Throughout history, though particularly in the colonial period, we see in the collection of animal and bird specimens the desire of the human mind to understand the animal body. In examples such as the Wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities, animal skin, hair, and bones abound. They are the antecedent parts which would, with the invention of taxidermy, become realized as part of the whole animal. In relation to death and mourning, what these examples highlight is the human yearning to express the void which an animal leaves upon its departure from our lives, something particularly true of relationships in which the animal is loved as an individual. On a deeper level, our preoccupation with the preservation of the animal form also speaks of our need to feel as though we are valued as much by our companion animals as they are by us. In relation to skin, this desire is demonstrated again in the recent prevalence of memorial tattooing that takes the pet as its focus.

Recent publications such as *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (Poliquin, 2012) and *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life* (Desmond, 2016), along with edited collections *Mourning Animals: Rituals and Practices of Mourning* (DeMello, 2016) and *Animal Death* (Johnstone & Probyn-Rapsey, 2013), remind readers of the ongoing friction between wanting to know the animal world and the human need to dominate it, while the scholarship of Erica Fudge (*Perceiving Animals*, 2000) and Margo DeMello (*Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*, 2012) highlight the important role which animals play in shaping human interaction in day-to-day life. While Fudge looks specifically at the conflict between humans and animals in historical settings and how these might influence interspecies relationships today, the breadth of DeMello's work encompasses not only the development of

Animal and Human Studies (HAS) as an academic discipline but also examines how animals have been mourned in a variety of contexts. DeMello's focused consideration of animal and human dynamics have informed much of my approach to this work, specifically her collection *Mourning Animals* and her volume *Humans and Animals*. While the latter of DeMello's two works does discuss mourning in detail, this study differs in its focus on the use of skin (human and animal) in this mourning experience. Elements of DeMello's work on death along with Margo Mifflin's study of tattooing (*Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, 2013) play a primary role in my focus on how skin is used within the rituals of mourning, as opposed to the historic relationship it has shared with tattoos in the tribal or pop-culture setting. The literature on taxidermy has been drawn from a variety of sources. While Poliquin has been central to the concept of taxidermy as a site of longing, discussion on taxidermy as an artistic form (Aloi, 2018; Milgrom, 2010; Lemaitre, 2016), along with its value in the natural history setting, has also been drawn upon. My aim herein has been to look at how we, as an audience, interact with animal skins in a variety of settings, and more prominently when we are mourning for domestic pets. This encounter not only plays out in how we interact with the taxidermy mount of an animal, be it a museum specimen or a beloved family member, but also how we employ our own skin as a memorial site for deceased domestic pets.

For the purpose of this study, I define taxidermy as any professionally preserved part of a companion animal. While traditionally the term may have been limited to full mounts or, in the case of game, head mounts, it is important to consider some of the newer forms of preservation and how the shifting trend of taxidermy as an art form shares space with modern grieving processes. As such, it is essential to consider