



Philosophische Fakultät

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## Recollecting Bones

The Remains of German-Australian Colonial  
Entanglements

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## Recollecting Bones

### The Remains of German-Australian Colonial Entanglements

Lars Eckstein (Potsdam)

#### I.

Western memory studies come with a founding legend that is almost compulsively retold. It takes us back to ancient Greece around 500 BC, and goes roughly thus: Simonides of Keos, a choral poet, is called to a banquet given by one of his local patrons in Thessaly, Skopas, head of the Skopadae clan and a famous drunkard and pugilist. Skopas commissions Simonides to compose a festive eulogy, and Simonides readily complies – albeit by embellishing his praise with lavish references to the divine boxing champions Castor and Pollux. Once the song is delivered Skopas wittily refuses the artist half of the arranged payment; since Simonides sang the praise of the two Dioscuri half of the time, it is to them Simonides should turn to collect the other half of the sum. Soon after Simonides is called outdoors where two men asked for him. Outside no one is to be seen, but in that same instant disaster strikes: the roof and walls of Skopas's house collapse, and the entire festive party is mortally crushed. Within the mythical context of the tale, Simonides is thus amply rewarded for his poetic loyalty to the Dioscuri, yet this is not where the dominant mnemonic moral of the tale is at. Legend has it that Simonides's services as sole survivor of the catastrophe are further needed once the dead bodies are unearthed from the ruins. As it turns out, the force of the violent event was such that none of the bodies, mangled and disfigured beyond recognition by the crushing walls and roof, can be properly identified. For the congregating relatives and friends, this situation is intolerable, as recollecting the bodies of their own is paramount not only to allow proper communal mourning, but also to perform the proper burial rites that ensure spiritual passage. And here is the twist: because Simonides had earlier memorised the exact seating arrangement within the banquet hall, he manages to step by step reassign each victim a proper identity by mentally recreating the architecture of the collapsed building.

So much has been written about this legend in some of the towering works of memory studies (cf. Assmann, Lachmann, Yates) that I shall not linger much longer with

the battered bodies of ancient Greece. Still, let me make two related remarks about the Simonides legend which complicate its standard mnemonic morale. This first concerns that the moment of its recording in written form – first by Cicero in *De oratore* (55 BC; II, 352-54), later versioned by Quintilian in *Institutio oratoria* (around 95 AD; XI.2.11 XI.2.20) – marks a significant split in the conception of memory. Throughout the previous centuries of its oral transmission from the Greeks to the Romans, the tale of Simonides travelled as an allegory about the *cultural force* (vis) of memory, a force that is concerned with the “interconnections between memory and identity: i.e. with [...] commemoration, immortalization, projections into the past and future, and not least with the forgetting included in all these acts” (Assmann 1999: 28). Cicero’s written record, however, deliberately displaces all allusions to this force (cf. Goldmann 1989), in order to strategically restage the legend as a key allegory about memory as *technology* (ars). Memory is drained of all its socio-cultural baggage in order to serve as an abstracted method in the art of rhetoric: Cicero and Quintilian advise the orator to memorize long speeches by establishing a mental landscape (represented in the story by Skopas’s house), and to create *imagines*, affectively charged images (the disfigured victims) which represent core elements of the speech. These *imagines* are to be placed at fixed locations in the familiar space as set mnemonic devices, to be retraced and recollected step by step in rhetorical performance (cf. Yates 1966: 1-26).

The epistemic split between memory as *vis* and *ars* (cf. Assmann 1999: 27-32), and the displacement of the first by the latter in the Latin sources of the Simonides myth facilitate a second displacement, namely that of the role of (artistic) representation – Simonides, the historical hero of the tale and, for Cicero and Quintilian, the unwitting founding father of ancient mnemonics, after all, was a poet; and surely there are subtle ties between memory and the economy of representation. I am indebted to Anne Carson’s inspired explorations of the surviving poetry of Simonides in this context, and to her unearthing of his materialist aesthetic in the *Economy of the Unlost*. Carson identifies Simonides as one of the first poets to write for posterity in his ‘lapidary’, in the original sense of the word, epitaphs. In these memory texts, Carson argues, he developed a unique “aesthetic of exactitude or verbal economy” (Carson 1999: 78) conditioned by the material limitations of the surfaces for which he designed his art. Yet she also reads Simonides as more fundamentally caught in the translation between two models of poetic exchange, where a waning model of poetry as “a reciprocal and ritual activity, the exchange of gifts between friends” (Carson 1999: 17) is displaced by a model of commodified transaction.



Simonides is commonly held to be the first poet in Western history to charge for his art, and he was widely infamous for his stinginess. What surely carried the founding myth of memory studies in the dialogic gift economy of oral history until the moment it was set down in writing, therefore, was its rather drastic critique of the commodification of poetic practice. In an ironic twist, the greed and miserliness of which Aristotle, among others, accused the poet, is here allocated to his boisterous host, whose penurious rejection of a poetic exchange of grace (*charis*) is followed suit by the extinction of his clan; Simonides, instead, is rewarded by the Gods for his unconditional gift.

There is more in the Simonides legend than just the famed founding myth of ancient mnemonics, then. It is also a tale that harbours conflicting conceptions of what memory actually is and which ethical obligations to the world it entails; it is a tale whose moral shifts with its entanglement in different media regimes and epistemic orders; it is a tale about plural economies of representation; and it might be a tale, even, that negotiates the biopolitics of capitalism against what Dipesh Chakrabarty in his dissident critique of Marx refers to as “other formations of self and belonging” (Chakrabarty 2000: 63).

## II.

In July 2014 I, too, found myself at a banquet, in a ruin, now reconstructed as a representative function centre within the Museum of Medical History on the Charité Campus in Berlin. The postmodern *Hörsaalruine* spectacularly preserves the architectural remains of a former lecture hall, the ‘Rudolf Virchow Hörsaal’, named after the arguably most famous medical professor in the clinic’s history, founding father of modern pathology, and founder of the Berlin Anthropological Society who personally commissioned one of the largest colonial collections of human remains in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The historical palimpsest of the ruin is highlighted by a single cinematic photo of the original lecture theatre, showing Virchow himself at the lectern at a festive event in honour of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1901. The roof and walls of this modern hall, of course, were not crushed by ancient Gods or divine accident, but by areal bombs in the final months of the Second World War. In the 1990s, the building was redesigned to serve as a mnemonic site for the destruction brought to the world – not by scientific colonialism which is in many ways prominently exhibited on its wall – but by the racist hubris and genocidal imperialism of Nazi Germany. The testimonial logic of the palimpsestic architecture suggests that there is little connection between the two; rather, it

seems to defiantly state a proud continuity of the scientific Enlightenment wantonly interrupted by the irrational terror of the Third Reich.



Figs 1 and 2: *Hörsaalruine*, Charité

The banquet I attended in this architecture was a festive reception following the handover ceremony of 14 ancestral remains to their Australian traditional owners from the vast anthropological and anatomical collections in the care of the Charité.<sup>1</sup> The number

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<sup>1</sup> The ceremony was the second of its kind, after in April 2013, the Charité was the first German scientific institution to return the remains of 33 individuals to Australian Indigenous communities.

falls into place considering that an estimated 10.000 ‘specimen’ from the colonised spaces of the world found their way to Berlin during the “collecting frenzy” of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Scientific agencies like the Berlin Anthropological Society and individuals like Virchow commissioned private collectors, merchants, seamen and entire trading companies to deliver as much anthropological ‘material’ as possible, and widely traded human skulls and skeletons across Europe themselves. Their aim was invariably to measure such ‘material’ to test various hypotheses of race, basically ranging between Gobienau’s theory of natural racial inequality (postulating political and cultural decline when ‘superior’ races mix with ‘inferior’ ones) and Darwin’s conflicting theory of natural selection. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theories of race increasingly sublated this difference in sycretistic conceptions, as in Galton’s notions of eugenics and racial hygiene (cf. Laukötter 2013: 37).

Whereas some institutions in Berlin emphatically hold on to their collections in the name of Science (and Sciences to come) – such as the successor of the Anthropological Society, the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (BGAEU) which still actively proffers its Rudolf-Virchow-Collection holding more than 4.000 ‘specimen’ amassed in the colonial era to researchers for a fee of 40 Euros a day – the Charité more recently adopted a policy of returning the remains in its care, first and foremost as a consequence of increasing restitution claims especially from Southern Africa and Australia which began to tinge its reputation as a medical research clinic of world renown.<sup>2</sup> However, returning the remains of German-Australian colonial entanglements is a convoluted affair: It is a complex and costly diplomatic endeavour that involves governments and agencies at both ends, that requires the collaboration of scientific institutions, and Indigenous Australian communities who claim their own, predicated on the fact that such communities have survived the onslaught of settler colonialism in the first place, and that a system of Indigenous entitlement is still in place that ensures that the handover and burial ceremonies are conducted in accordance with the Law. But in the first place, as in the Simonides legend, it requires an intense amount of mnemonic work to identify the displaced victims.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2008, the Charité signed a corresponding agreement with the Australian government. The change of policy also owes to the fact that the Charité takes no interest in anthropological research.



Figs 3 and 4: Rudolf-Virchow-Collection in the BGAEU archives

More often than not, there is little or no reliable documentation to establish the provenance of ancestral remains in scientific collections. Their identities are typically crushed by histories of often dubious acquisition (from sacred burial sites, from prisons or camps, via inconclusive trading routes, cf. Lange, P. Turnbull 2002), at best loose archival documentation and corresponding storage practices, and the displacement or loss of accompanying material such as handling papers, letters, or registers. Attempting to assign if not identities, then at least the provenance of at least some of the defaced bones piled up in thousands of cardboard boxes in the limbo of Berlin archives is to face a heap of at best ruinous traces leading into a labyrinth full of dead ends. It takes more than one Simonides to perform the task. In the concrete case, the mnemonic work was performed by the Human Remains Project, a collaborative endeavour between anatomists, historians, and cultural as well as biological anthropologists at the Charité,<sup>3</sup> who managed to attribute the

<sup>3</sup> The Human Remains Project was funded by the German Research Foundation for a period of three years between 2010 and 2012, but has since been discontinued, quite in line with the official policy of the German government which in August 2011 publicly denied any responsibility for the proactive provenance research of colonial collections: “Even if there is still space for further research, the German government sees no need for a respective state-sponsored research programme” (qtd. in Kössler and Wegmann 2011).

skulls of 13 individuals to the Goemulgal and Lag Mabuyag peoples of the Torres Straits, and a single skull to the Wajarri Yamatji people of Western Australia.<sup>4</sup>

The actual handover ceremony of the 14 individuals to their respective communities took place in yet another historically charged space, the main theatre of the Charité's Institute of Anatomy. This one, too, was bombed to ruins in March 1945, yet completely rebuilt in the 50s as "the GDR's prettiest auditorium" (Charité, *Geschichte*). The ceremonial site at the centre of the steep anatomical theatre where the boxes containing the remains were positioned under Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait flags, on a table otherwise used to display bodies for anatomical instruction, has its own disrupted history: it would have been the same site where in the years before the bomb many of the 2.891 human beings executed by the Nazis in Berlin Plötzensee were displayed as medical teaching 'material' (Charité, *Geschichte*). My own experience of the handover ceremony in 2014 was as yet uninformed by these legacies; rather, it was discomforted by memories of my first exposure to that space some two years earlier.



Fig 5: Anatomical Theatre, Charité

<sup>4</sup> The 13 remains of Torres Straits islanders were 'collected' by the German scientist traveler Otto Finsch in 1881 and posted to Rudolf Virchow's address in Berlin. The Western Australian remains of a Wajarri Yamatji man were in all likelihood excavated by an engineer of German descent on a 1891-92 expedition, delivered to Melbourne, and acquired by the Berlin anatomist Wilhelm Krause in 1897 (cf. Charité, *Restitution of Australian Remains 2014*)

## III.

In October 2012, I attended the central workshop conference organized by the Charité's Human Remains Project held in the same anatomical theatre.<sup>5</sup> The event was designed to coordinate practices and policies of conservation and restitution across the German-speaking world, yet also to critically work through various institutional histories and their entanglement in the colonial collecting frenzy. It brought together academics, curators and museum practitioners not only from the Charité, the BGAEU and the Berlin Ethnographical Museum, but also from other centres where major anthropological collections are held (among them Freiburg, Vienna, Göttingen and Leipzig). All debates were conducted in German, and in the conspicuous absence of any representatives of the communities across the globe whose ancestors were at stake.

I was haunted, and still am, by the dynamics of this event. This first concerns an absolute hiatus of silence and mistrust between researchers in various fields of the humanities on the one hand, and biological anthropologists in particular on the other. Instead of revisiting the colonial archive surrounding the body in provenance research, biological anthropologists take recourse to the physical 'material' itself, either using invasive methods (such as DNA testing, uncommon in dealings with human remains), or by taking recourse to morphometric measuring systems, in particular of skulls. By matching the results of elaborate 3D measurements against data samples of various 'populations' across the globe, such research professes to more or less reliably attribute remains to specific geographical regions (cf. Wittwer-Backofen and Schlager 2013). Yet across the humanities, the validity of biometrical data in provenance research tends to be "categorically rejected" (Schnalke, Winkelmann and Stöcker: 2013 21): And indeed, none of the (biological) anthropologists at the workshop professed any interest in the cultural *force* of their mnemonic work; instead, they staged it as a purely *technological* engagement with bodies that are unhinged from any political entanglements, in a mnemonic design responsible only to the presumably disinterested parameters of Science. None of the presenters was even prepared to reflect on the discomforting continuities of their research with 19<sup>th</sup>-century raciology; to admit that the data bases against with cranial measurements are matched are themselves a product of 19<sup>th</sup>-century raciological sampling;

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<sup>5</sup> The workshop was titled "Sammeln und Bewahren, Erforschen und Zurückgeben – *Human Remains* aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen" (Collecting and Preserving, Researching and Returning – Human Remains from Colonial Times in Academic and Museum Collections).

that the idea of stable ‘populations’ informing such samples wilfully ignores convoluted histories of migration and cross-cultural exchange; or that ‘populations’ (postulating the convergence of genetic variation) merely reproduce the colonial construction of ‘race’ with a difference.

Even more distressing, however, was the crystallization of a wide consensus among legal scholars, museum practitioners and the curators of scientific collections in particular that colonial regimes were in principle legitimate contexts of imperial acquisition. This mutual agreement, as spelled out in the 2013 *Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections* collectively authored by a range of speakers at the workshop for the German Museums Association, deliberately disentangled the injustices of German fascist imperialism as a *regime* of injustice (*Unrechtsregime*) from the injustices committed by non-fascist colonial regimes with are *ex negativo* treated as ethically and legally just.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, any restitution claims which pre- or postdate the imperial exploits of Nazi Germany by formerly colonized people are only considered legitimate by the *Recommendations* if they are supported by conclusive evidence of very specific “*contexts of injustice*” which override legitimate colonial interests, such as when:

- a) “the person from whom the human remains originate was the victim of an act of violence and/or parts of his body were or are processed and retained against his will”; or
- b) “the human remains were added to a collection against the will of the original owner(s) or person(s) entitled to dispose of them, in particular by means of physical violence, coercion, theft, grave robbery or deception” (Deutscher Museumsbund 2013: 10, 11). Any Indigenous community levelling a restitution claim is thus perversely forced to accept the legitimacy of its own colonisation in principle; consequently, it is also the Indigenous community, rather than the administrative heirs of imperial collectors, who is obliged to unearth case-by-case evidence documenting particular “*contexts of injustice*” (according to European, rather than Indigenous Law) which delegitimise the abduction of their

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<sup>6</sup> The term “context of injustice” was chosen by a working group who collectively devised the 2013 *Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections* on behalf of the *Deutscher Museumsbund* (German Museums Association). The ultimate foil of its conceptual scope are the genocidal crimes of the Nazi *Unrechtsregime* (regime of injustice), as all members of the working group, many of whom spoke at the workshop, agreed that “a human being who was killed in a concentration camp in the ‘Third Reich’ and whose human remains were transported to a collection experienced grave and irreparable injustice” (Ahrndt 2013: 316, my trans.). What followed, though, were a series of question marks: can this at all extend to other genocides? what if Germans were not even in charge? and what of, for instance, colonial transactions in headhunting societies which themselves dealt in human remains? Accordingly, the *Recommendations* explicitly reject the notion of a systemic context of injustice for colonial collections; in effect, the various imperial regimes across the globe which facilitated the acquisition and trafficking of subaltern bodies in the name of racial Science are negatively defined as *a priori* ethical and legitimate.

ancestral dead; and still, it ultimately remains in the powers of the Western institution alone to decide “whether circumstances appear[ed] to be particularly problematic” (2013: 9).<sup>7</sup>

This policy is further aggravated by a pervasive dismissal of Indigenous knowledge. At no point during the conversions at the Charité workshop did anyone ever assume that there are epistemic traditions among the communities whose ancestors rest in the limbo of European archives which might substantially contribute to our knowledge of the dead. Any claim to ancestral remains must exclusively engage with the scientific cultures of the West which alone produce knowledge that is credited as such in restitution debates. The ironies are profound, as the progressive differentiation of Western sciences is inextricably entwined with the very imperial capitalism whose necropolitical legacies they now administer. That they do so with various degrees of reflexivity and awareness is evident in the dramatic discrepancy between the mnemonic performances of biological and historical anthropologists. Yet the pluralised scientific cultures of the West close ranks again in the systematic disavowal of any knowledge system outside of their academy, and especially where such knowledge is not grounded, as the Simonides myth before Cicero, in writing or similarly solid medial formats of representation. The consequences of this disavowal are as dramatic as they are calculating.

A particularly insidious example is the installation of a specific notion of ‘generational memory’ in the *Recommendations* of the German Museums Association. Thus, the author collective was careful enough to delineate “exceptions” which delegitimise potential restitution claims against German institutions *even if* there is evidence that ancestral remains were collected in “contexts of injustice”. The second of two caveats specifies this:<sup>8</sup>

From an ethnological perspective, memories of a deceased person fade after approximately four to five generations. This equates to approx. 125 years, thus providing a period of time which can also serve as a guide from a physical-

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<sup>7</sup> The refusal to accept that colonial collections were amassed in generic contexts of injustice dramatically entails that the onus of proof is relegated from the holding institutions to the colonized Other. It is of little consequence, in other words, that scholars like Paul Turnbull have documented that for Indigenous Australian remains the definitions of injustice under a) and b) effectively hold for any case, given that there is a “wealth of historical evidence documenting the determination of indigenous Australian communities to protect the dead, and imperial recognition of their right to do so” (P. Turnbull 2002: 83), just as there is no doubt that “concern for the ancestral dead has been a continuing and profoundly influential determinant of indigenous identity, politics and memory” (ibid, 66).

<sup>8</sup> The other “exception” holds for ancestral remains collected in cultures where “killing an enemy and making use of his physical remains were socially accepted” (Deutscher Museumsbund 2013: 10).



anthropological perspective. In the case of people who were killed or whose body was handled in an unlawful manner more than 125 years ago, genealogical mapping to people alive today is usually no longer possible. Consequently, it is no longer possible to identify direct descendants in whose eyes the injustice which occurred could continue to have an effect. (2013: 11)<sup>9</sup>

The author collective fails to annotate where exactly the notion of a generational memory of “approx. 125 years” comes from; yet I strongly suggest that their “ethnological perspective” really draws on dominant theories of *social memory* developed in the West alone and in Germany in particular. A major point of reference would have been Aleida Assmann’s widely popularised proposition that “[t]he temporal horizon of social memory cannot be extended across the time span of lived interaction and communication, this is beyond three or four generations at most”.<sup>10</sup>

To project this interpretation of social memory as an anthropological universal across what Walter Mignolo calls “the colonial difference”, however, is a dramatic act of epistemic violence. Let me call on the work of Stephen Muecke, here, to help me more safely cross that difference myself, who in *Ancient and Modern* highlights the foundational philosophical difference between dualistic philosophies of the West primarily organized around time, and Indigenous Australian philosophies of being and belonging that are rather organized in a specific relation to place. Referring to Nancy Munn’s account of the Warlpiri people of the Tanami Desert, he notes:

Children are born from the ancestor’s spirit emerging from the ground, relating a person with their place of birth (and incurring the responsibilities of care for that country) and [...] upon their physical, corporeal death, their spirit returns to that place. [...] The safe return of their spirit is imperative to the wellbeing of the place so that it may continue as an enduring life source and again be the site where life will continue to emerge. (Muecke 2004: 16)

It is important not to essentialise or simplify much more complex and highly diverse Indigenous cosmogonies of knowledge here; as Muecke stresses, place is a highly dynamic category in Indigenous ontologies, and with the arrival of European philosophies

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<sup>9</sup> The authors admittedly do qualify that “in the case of the persecution of certain groups and genocides within a people or State of origin” (ibid.) memory may exceed the margin that both biological and cultural anthropologist seem to converge upon (a gesture, I feel, less directed to the victims of colonialism than to European victims of genocidal violence).

<sup>10</sup> Assmann concludes that “the material support of this lived memory such as photographs or letters then turn into fossils, into traces of a lost [...] past” (Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* 28, my trans.)

of being, notions of place have become increasingly syncretised with teleological time. Still, if we cross the epistemic difference and conceive of memory as primarily a function of *place* rather than *time*, 125 years are, of course, nothing: there is no difference in this mnemonic tradition and its claims to the care of ancestral dead whether remains are 60, or in fact 60.000 years old. But surely, 125 years are everything to those curators and anthropologists who wish to hold on to their collections in the name of Science: Following the *Recommendations*, most ‘specimen’ collected before 1890 are already quite ‘safe’, and the window of opportunity for further restitutions conveniently closes within roughly the next 25 years. 125 years are hardly an anthropological universal, but a function of epistemic power that is installed as an imperial *technology* of mnemonic disavowal.

#### IV.

Around 2.500 years after Simonides, another man of letters found himself in Greece, surrounded by a word collapsing to rubble under the onslaught of the Second World War. In its final year, he was stationed in Athens to help train the Hellenic Air Force, after serving on RAF intelligence missions in Northern Africa and the near East. It was in those years, in his own account, that Patrick White came up with the idea of his fifth novel *Voss*, published in 1957 to mark his belated breakthrough in Australia, and to establish his monolithic position in Australian literary history ever since.<sup>11</sup> An excursion into the canonical heart of White Australian fiction may serve to bring out some of the cruel ironies of the continuing disavowal of Indigenous epistemologies and the quest for their ancestral dead in the limbo of German institutions, for it is the imaginary quest for German bones lost in the Australian interior that is at the heart of *Voss*.

At the centre of Patrick White’s metaphysically loaded novel is what Darrell Lewis in a recent publication termed “the greatest myth of Australian history” (Lewis 2013), namely the disappearance of Prussian explorer Ludwig Leichhardt and his entire expedition party in the heart of the continent. Leichhardt made his name as ‘Prince of Explorers’ when triumphantly leading an overland expedition from Moreton Bay to Port

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<sup>11</sup> *Voss*, White notes, while “possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when [...] reading Eyre’s *Journal* in a London bed-sitting room”, was “[n]ourished by months spent traipsing backwards and forwards across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of the day”. After his sojourn in Greece in the final months of the war, then, the idea for the novel matured “after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt’s expeditions and A.H. Chisholm’s *Strange New World*” (White, “The Prodigal Son” 270).

Essington in 1844 and 1845. Yet he never returned from his second attempt to cross the continent from Moreton Bay on the East coast to the Swan River colony in the West three years later, merely leaving a range of inconclusive material traces behind, among them a range of trees marked with his initials, and a gun plate with his name found around 1900 by a stockman in a bottle tree, probably in the northern ranges of the Great Sandy Desert.

Quite obviously, the social memory of Ludwig Leichhardt hardly faded four or five years after his disappearance, against the odds of anthropological prediction: more than 14 expeditions have been mounted across the past century-and-a-half to recover his remains, and new searches are under way (Lewis 2013). None of the searches has been even nearly successful in locating Leichhardt, who prophesied in a letter to his friend Durando in Paris in July 1844: “It is well possible that I shall rest forever in this colony – it is possible that my bones will bleach on the plains of the interior”.<sup>12</sup> It is this mythical quality of Leichhardt’s disappearance, in conjunction with the lack fed by the persisting failure of all scientific expeditions to find him, which has called upon poet after poet to figuratively recollect his remains. Patrick White’s Johann Ulrich Voss is only one version of Ludwig Leichhardt in a long line of fictional quests (cf. Martin 2013); yet it has doubtlessly been the by far most influential for the Australian cultural imaginary.

White powerfully twists Leichhardt into a tormented romantic hero of Nietzschean proportions.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the historical Leichhardt, who pledged his loyalty to the Sciences alone (yet had to answer, constantly, to imperial capitalism and the settler gentry who funded his expeditions), his fictional *doppelgänger* Voss is above all on a deep Romantic quest for humility in an unmoored world, whose superhuman arrogations are finally redeemed in death in the heart of the Australian interior. Whoever the modernist Gods who finally crush Voss’s hubris – critics either like to highlight the novel’s wealth of Christian iconography, or the waste lands of the Australian interior as mirror of the psyche – their ultimate agents are very human. White chooses to have his already humbled and dying Voss properly executed in the received fashion of the imperial gothic. As Voss’s executioner, he decrees one of his two Indigenous guides, young Jackie, and as the audience, an unnamed Indigenous clan of the interior deserts:

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<sup>12</sup> The French original reads: “Il est bien possible que je resterais dans cette colonie pour toujours – il est possible que mes os blanchiront sur les plaines de l’intérieur”.

<sup>13</sup> White extensively draws on his reading of Chisholm’s popular 1941 *Strange New World* which systematically discredits Leichhardt’s character and bushskills, and deliberately imbues him with a tinge of Hitleresque megalomania.

Jackie went in, crowded upon by several members of his adoptive tribe still doubtful of his honesty. But the spirits of the place were kind to Jackie: they held him up by the armpits as he knelt at the side of Mr Voss.

He could just see that the pale eyes of the white man were looking, whether at him or through him, he did not attempt to discover, but quickly stabbed with his knife and his breath between the windpipe and the muscular part of the throat.

His audience was hissing.

The boy was stabbing, and sawing, and cutting, and breaking, with all of his increasing, but confused manhood, above all, breaking. He must break the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly, to the white men.

When Jackie had got the head off, he ran outside followed by the witnesses, and flung the thing at the feet of the elders, who had been clever enough to see to it that they should not do the deed themselves. (White 1994 *Voss*: 394)

I have always been irritated by the bland racism of White's *Voss*; for all I know, Chinua Achebe's core allegations against Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – that it denies Africans a voice beyond incoherent stammer, and that it essentially reduces Africa to a “metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, [...] to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind” (Achebe 2013: 117) – are pretty much where it is at in *Voss*, too, just replace Africa with Indigenous Australia. But I am especially fascinated with some of the more specific historical ironies of White's fictional recollection of Leichhardt's bones.

White's archival inspiration for the particulars of Voss's death would have been the death of John Baxter which forms the core narrative hinge of Edward John Eyre's *Journal*, and the death of John Gilbert, an ornithologist collecting for John Gould on Leichhardt's first expedition to Port Essington. Neither Baxter nor Gilbert were savagely decapitated, though: in Eyre's account, Baxter is shot in his sleep by two Indigenous trackers who desert the exploration party (Eyre 1845: vol. I ch. 18 and vol. II ch. 1), while Gilbert was speared in the heart during an Indigenous attack on Leichhardt's camp, presumably following the abuse of women by expedition members and the desecration of a ritual site (cf. Sprod 2006: 95-102). The penchant for decapitation, well, was a rather European one. The heads of Indigenous Australians were a highly sought-after commodity in a market fuelled by the insatiable demand created by collectors like Virchow and his peers. There is no indication in the archival records that Leichhardt himself, whose anthropological observations of the Indigenous communities he encountered and botanised with in the Moreton Bay region in particular are among the most reflexive and empathetic of their day (cf. Darragh and Fensham 2013: e.g. 388-99), was actively involved in the

collection of bones himself. Yet there is no indication either that he objected to it. About half a year after his arrival in Australia, he inspects with Enlightened (dis)interest and phrenological expertise a collection of Indigenous skulls shown to him by a customs official in Newcastle (Darragh and Fensham 2013: 43). And Leichhardt took no offence, apparently, against some of the more disturbing practices of some of his expedition members, among them Henry Turnbull, who was part of Leichhardt's second expedition to the Peak Ranges. In an 1857 lecture, Turnbull remarks in passing about his explorations with Leichhardt:

I picked up the skull of a blackfellow – probably that of one killed in a fight. I was very anxious to take this to Sydney with me but after carrying it for about three weeks slung under my arms I found it so very inconvenient that I was compelled to throw it away. I extracted a dozen fine teeth, however, which I have still in my possession. (H. Turnbull 1983 32)

Voss's death in Patrick White's imagination is nothing less than an abysmal inversion, then, of the tales of countless imperial subalterns severing the heads of Australia's Indigenous dead and dying and tossing them at the feet of their Scientific elders in the Enlightened centres of learning in London, Paris or Berlin.

The sombre ironies of this inversion are compounded by yet another inversion which concerns the ways in which White imaginatively lays Leichhardt's remains at rest. The above passage from *Voss* continues:

The boy [Jackie] stood for a moment beneath the morning star. The whole air was trembling on his skin. As for the head-thing, it knocked against a few stones, and lay like any melon. How much was left of the man it no longer represented? His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately. Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell. (White 1994 *Voss*: 394)

Voss's decapitation culminates in the redemptive union of his body and spirit with the *place* of his Australian destiny: the air of the desert interior absorbs his dreams; the earth takes in his blood, his skull organically merges with the land. My reading of this passage is indebted to Sue Martin, who puts it in the context of a series of earlier fictionalisations of Leichhardt's remains from the first eulogies to Lemurian novels such as Earnest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1896). Martin argues that what most

fictionalisations of Leichhardt's death have in common is that they disembody him, make him ultimately untraceable, and indelibly merge him with the land (Martin 2013: 126). Leichhardt is thus turned into a timeless, mythical sign of White presence, a presence that may serve to legitimate European occupation of the land against the competing claims of Indigenous Australians whose humanity can be cast aside like the human head that Turnbull no longer feels inclined to carry around. The final abysmal inversion, here, is of course that White's fictional recollection of Leichhardt's bones, unwittingly or not, cannibalizes non-dualistic Indigenous philosophies of memory and being in the land, such as those of the Warlpiri people of the Tanami Desert I have called up via Nancy Munn and Stephen Muecke.<sup>14</sup> The same philosophies which Western Science denounces facing Indigenous claims for their ancestral dead are twisted into White mythologies of imperial belonging in the songs of their own disappeared.

V.

Lindsay Barrett concludes his profound exploration of the entangled histories of Leichhardt and *Voss* in German and Australian memories by proposing: "Ultimately, what *Voss* and the lesser versions of the Leichhardt myth do in Australia is that they allow us, albeit in a guarded, roundabout and reticent way, to speak about this enormous trauma at the heart of our nation" that is "the invasion of the entire continent by the British imperial machine, the theft of the land in order to found a new European society, and the killing or displacement of however many Indigenous people it actually took to achieve this goal" (Barrett 2013: 37). I agree in principle, yet would like to insist that such conversations need to tackle the White mythologies around Leichhardt and their abysmal ironies head on, lest they engrain that trauma even further and perpetuate the epistemic violence against Indigenous Australians. But I also want to insist that the traumatic injustice at the heart of the Australian "nation" exceeds Australian responsibilities, just as the "British imperial machine" of which Leichhardt was and was not part has always been entangled in a larger, European colonial project.

The thousands of colonial human remains from all parts of the world in Berlin alone are a powerful testimony to the fact that the Australian trauma is also a German one, just like that of any other nation whose ancestral remains were abducted in the name of the

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<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, it is between the Tanami and the Great Sandy Desert that Leichhardt probably perished.

scientific Enlightenment by force of the various entangled machines of European imperialism. The political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany in which I grew up has been and still is overwhelmingly bent on the memory of German Fascism and the Holocaust, and surely, the continuation of this mnemonic work is absolutely vital, as not least the 2014 NSU (National Socialist Underground) hearings have shown which unearthed a deeply disturbing pervasiveness of racism and antisemitism in all sectors of Germany's legislative and executive machines without, as far as I can see, stirring a substantial public debate, let alone triggering decisive political action. Yet the postulate of the singularity of the Holocaust, and the framing of National Socialism as an 'aberration' of modernity which can only be overcome by an unconditional commitment to the European Enlightenment (as most famously argued by Jürgen Habermas among many others, and as exhibited by the Charité's *Hörsaalruine*) have been severely limiting, precisely because they forestall a critique of the entanglements of the Enlightenment and Empire. "[S]o long as the options are postulated as Europe or Auschwitz", Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox and Susanne Zantop argue, "that critique of the European legacy remains difficult for Germans to advance" (Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox and Zantop 1998: 5). In the same "guarded, roundabout and reticent way" which Lindsay Barrett invokes for Australian conversations about imperial injustice, Germans, too, must begin to more systematically explore, in Paul Gilroy's words, "the connections and the differences between anti-semitism and anti-black and other racisms and asses[s] the issues that arise when it can no longer be denied that they interacted over a long time in what might be seen as Fascism's intellectual, ethical and scientific pre-history" (Gilroy 1996: 26). In the meantime, we need to care for the dead. We need to return them, first, from the status of scientific objects to the status of ancestral human beings, and then progressively, and proactively, as close as possible to the care of those communities from whom they were stolen.

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