

Haunting Simulacra

Paul Turnbull

Universities of Tasmania and Queensland

paul.turnbull@utas.edu.au

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Within scientific and cultural institutions in Australia and other post-settler societies former metropolitan colonial powers there are many artefacts created using the bodily remains of Australian and other Indigenous peoples in various parts of the world. They include plaster casts heads, skulls and other bone and soft tissue structures. There are also busts, half body-casts and death masks. Until recent times, many of these items were on public display. In some museums and art galleries they still are. Most, however, are now securely stored away.

Often these items are kept in the same space as skulls and other bodily remains of Indigenous peoples, most of which were acquired between 1860 and the early 1930s within a scientific paradigm in which it was thought that comparative anthropometric investigation of these bodily structures would yield important clues about the nature of human variation and our evolutionary history.¹

Speaking of the Australian context, it is likely that within another decade most of the bodily remains of the ancestors of Aboriginal Australian peoples and Torres Strait Islanders will have been returned to their community of origin for burial in ancestral country, or placed in secure resting places under Indigenous care and control.²

But what of the casts of bodily structures, the facial casts and busts often stored with ancestral bodily remains which will be returned for burial or rest in Indigenous care?

I must confess to never having asked this question during many years now of provenance re-

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1. There is now a substantial literature on the collecting and scientific uses of the bodily remains of Indigenous peoples. See in particular Fforde 2004; Fabian 2010; Roque 2010; Turnbull 2017
 2. An overview of the work to date of the Australian Government's overseas repatriation program can be found at <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/cultural-heritage/indigenous-repatriation/international-repatriation> (accessed 15 January 2021).

search on behalf of Indigenous communities, their representative organisations and the Australian federal government. The trigger for doing so was undertaking research in 2020 in collaboration with Australian and German colleagues on plaster heads of a man from the Kimberley region for the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC), which since its foundation in 1985 has played a key role in the repatriation of ancestral remains and objects of profound spiritual importance to people of the thirty language groups across the Kimberley Region of northwest West Australia.³ But another influential factor was ongoing debate and agitation within former metropolitan colonial powers and post-settler societies to remove monuments to individuals active in the pursuit of colonial ambitions from public spaces, as well as moves by the French and German governments to seriously consider the repatriation of items in state museums should it be proven that they were acquired in colonial contexts of injustice.⁴

The research in question has its origins in the discovery of new information about an unusual plaster head of Indigenous Australian man possessed by Anatomy Institute of the University of Cologne. I had unexpectedly encountered this object in 2015 when visiting the Institute. It was displayed in a case, along with two skulls, and several plaster casts of skulls and lower jaws of Indigenous Australians. What struck me as unusual about the plaster head was that it had sculpted hair and a full beard. There was also something makeshift or unrefined about its appearance, which at the time I attributed to its exposure to damp conditions or impurities in the plaster.

Describing the head to a colleague involved in researching the provenance of the remains of Indigenous people in German collections for many years led to his establishing that the plaster head was in fact a copy of one created in Berlin at some time between late 1906 and 1926 using clay mouldings of a real head, that of Djaru man, whose ancestral country lies in the southern Kimberley Region of northwest West Australia.

This original of the plaster copy in Cologne is held by the Anatomical Institute of Berlin's Charité University Hospital. On the back of the head the words 'Australier B. XXXV S. 47' appear in ink. They are in the handwriting of the anatomist Hans Virchow, who worked at the Berlin Anatomical Institute from 1893 until his death in 1940.⁵ After casting the head, hairs were set into the moist plaster to recreate the man's head of hair and bushy beard. Also, there are hairs attached to the cast that became stuck to the plaster during the casting process. These hairs are undoubtedly those of the man, but whether the hair carefully set into the moist plaster also belonged to this Djaru

3. Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC), <https://kalacc.org/> (accessed 15 January 2021).

4. Sarr and Savoy 2018

5. On Virchow's career, see Muschong

man is unknown. DNA analysis - were it to be undertaken - would likely prove inconclusive because the real head was dissected, not long after the plaster copy was created.

In 1926 the head was dissected in the course of research for a doctoral thesis by a student of Virchow investigating the facial muscles of this man and those another Aboriginal man whose head that Klaatsch acquired through Archibald Watson, professor of anatomy at the University of Adelaide in South Australia.⁶ Around the turn of the twentieth century Watson harvested the heads of a number of Aboriginal men and women, sending several to colleagues at the University of Cambridge.⁷ At some point before 1926 the head of this man from the Kimberley region was cut in half and photographed. It also appears that tissue from the left corner of the eye was removed at some point in time by Virchow's colleague, Paul Bartels (1874-1914), in the course of studying racial peculiarities of the plica semilunaris, a fold at the inner corner of the eye. At least hair sample also appears to have been taken.

The skulls and the brains of the two men whose heads were dissected in Berlin were almost certainly kept, but no records have yet been found confirming this was so, or which provide any clues as to whether they still exist. Many items in the collection of the Berlin Anatomical Institute were destroyed in February 1945.

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6. Matthiae 1926

7. The extent of Watson and fellow Adelaide scientists sending of the heads of Indigenous Australians to European colleagues has yet to be determined. His donation of several heads to Cambridge University in the late 1890s is recorded in the *Cambridge University Gazette*. The Donations Register of the South Australian Museum (held within their archives) records that at some point in 1893, or soon after, a head was taken to England by Edward Charles Stirling with another one procured later on both in spirit. Records of the Anatomy department of Edinburgh University suggest that a head may have been sent from Adelaide in late 1907. 'I hope the heads in the last lot arrived in good order. Watson was sorry the teeth of the skinned specimen were so bad; but he says cooked food gives the nigger no chance to keep his teeth. A few months of civilised victual makes havoc with the best teeth a going.' William Ramsay Smith to D.J. Cunningham, 18 December 1907, Correspondence of Dr Ramsay Smith, 1907–1915. EUA IN1/ACU/A2/7/2, Special Collections, University of Edinburgh Library, Edinburgh.

Who was this Djaru man? By what means did his head come to be in Berlin in the 1920s. Drawing on research by ethnologist Corinna Erckenbrecht, it was possible to establish that this Djaru man's head was acquired by Hermann Klaatsch (the Heidelberg anatomist and anthropologist (1863-1916), when he visited the Kimberley Region in the course of three years of field work in Australia from 1904 to 1907.⁸

Hermann Klaatsch came to Australia in 1904 hoping to secure evidence to test the hypothesis of his Heidelberg colleague, Otto Schoetensack (1850–1912), that the first peoples of the Australian continent were not the descendants of prehistoric migrants, but living examples of a very early human type descended from a pithecoïd ancestral form that had evolved within Australia when, in the deep past, the continent was part of a great Antarctic landmass that may have extended extended into the Indian Ocean so as to connect southern Asia and Africa. If so, Schoetensack and Klaatsch reasoned, this would explain why more darkly pigmented peoples with similar bodily traits were to be found in an arc extending from Australia to Southern Africa.⁹ It was imperative, Klaatsch told journalists on his arrival in Australia, to act quickly to test this hypothesis, for as he and Schoetensack saw it, a unique window onto the 'evolution of the genus homo ... in relation to the original type from which he sprang' provided by studying the morphology of Australia's first peoples was rapidly closing due to drastic population decline in the wake of their dispossession by settler colonialism, and the dissolution of racial typicalities through those surviving on the margins of settler society as the children who were born now had European and Asian ancestry.¹⁰

Central to Schoetensack and Klaatsch's testing of their evolutionary hypothesis was securing empirical data by close examination of the skulls, post cranial bones and, if possible, soft tissue structures from the bodies of Indigenous Australians. During his time in Australia, Klaatsch carefully examined skulls and post-cranial remains acquired by the principal museums of the Australian colonies, as well as bones and soft tissue structures within the anatomy departments of the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. Klaatsch was also eager to acquire what remains he could to take back to Heidelberg for comparison with those of fossil hominins discovered in various parts of Europe and Asia. And he went to disturbingly extraordinary and dangerous lengths to do so when visiting Indigenous communities in northwest and coastal northern Queensland, and the northwest of West Australia. When visiting the town of Normanton in northwest Queensland's Gulf Country,

8. See Erckenbrecht 2010; Erckenbrecht and Wergin 2018a

9. Klaatsch 1908

10. 'Expedition to Queensland. Inquiries into the Origin of Man.' Rockhampton Morning Bulletin, 25 March: 5.

he plundered burial places with the help of a local resident, only to be discovered. As he recalled in a later unpublished account of his travels,

We encountered a number of blacks who seemed not to pay us much attention, but an old ugly woman came up to me, grabbed at the bag of bones and jabbing me with the index finger of her right hand cried: Devil Devil. That sounded like a declaration of war.¹¹

It most certainly was. That evening, back at his hotel, Klaatsch was told by another local resident that he had a group of highly agitated men on a road into town, one menacingly shaking a spear in a woomera. He had asked what the cause of the distress was, and the spear-shaker was said to have shouted, 'we speak of Devil Devil! Devil Devil dug out my brother, me spear him!' .¹² Klaatsch recalled that he chose to spend most of his time in the town's hotel armed with a revolver until he could leave three days later on the next coastal steamer. The following month, returning from visiting Thursday Island off the northern tip of Queensland's Cape York, the steamer he was aboard docked at the mouth of the Norman River, where he was recognised as the 'Devil Devil.' Word of the outrage he had committed had spread among Indigenous communities of the Gulf region.¹³

In aiming to understand the complexities of the entanglement of Western scientific aspirations in settler colonialist ambitions, we would do well to see that Klaatsch, during his three years in Australia, won few friends within the governments of Queensland and West Australia because of his publicly condemning the treatment of Indigenous people by settlers, police and government agents across the remote northern regions of these states. He was also openly critical of the value of the efforts of missionaries to protect, convert and help Indigenous people live on the margins of settler society. Klaatsch believed that Indigenous people still living more or less traditionally should be allowed to continue to do so protected from the intrusion of settler society. Nonetheless, Klaatsch's concern for the welfare of Indigenous peoples in northern Australia did not extend to recognising their obligations to care for the dead. Even though he knew from first-hand experience in Normanston how serious those obligations were taken, not even the threat of spearing deterred him from taking further risks to acquire remains when visiting Indigenous communities in coastal Far North Queensland and the Kimberley Region of Western Australia.

In November and December 1905, Klaatsch visited port township of Broome and the Pallo-

11. Erckenbrecht 2010, 86

12. Erckenbrecht 2010, 89

13. Erckenbrecht 2010, 89

tine Missionary station Beagle Bay in the Kimberley region of West Australia. In Broome, he found that local Indigenous people were generally buried in consecrated ground within the town's cemetery reserve. As such they were protected. However, some among local missionaries appear to have been ready to assist Klaatsch in securing the remains of those who had been buried traditionally beyond the town. When Klaatsch was in Beagle Bay, a girl he was told was aged about fourteen died. He was told that she had died of syphilis. Catholic missionaries of the Pallotine order at Beagle Bay were agreeable - or so Klaatsch claimed - to his taking the girl's head, hands and feet, which he secretly did and sent to Heidelberg via West Australia's main port of Fremantle in a box described for customs officials as containing goanna and frog specimens. As for the girl, she was buried wrapped in sheets of bark from paperbark trees with care taken to ensure that her grieving family and clan people would not notice she was missing her head, hands and feet.¹⁴

Which brings us to what we now know Klaatsch's obtaining the head of the man from the Kimberley region modelled in plaster in Berlin in the early 1920s. Klaatsch again visiting Broome and Beagle Bay in May 1906, where he was able to secretly acquire more skeletal remains and other bodily structures with the aid of local government agents and missionaries. He then travelled from Beagle Bay to the coastal townships of Derby and Wyndham in July 1906.

In Wyndham, Klaatsch found relations between settlers and local Aboriginal clans were tense. Owners of local cattle stations seeking to put an end to the spearing of their stock had convinced local politicians to have the government instruct police stationed at Wyndham to ride out and arrest any Aboriginal men they encountered on station lands who they suspected had been involved in killing cattle. The police were quite willing to perform this work, arresting any men they encountered regardless of whether there was evidence of their killing cattle. For they were paid extra for each day they were out on patrol, as well as gaining a bounty for each man they brought in under arrest. As for the arrested men, they were forced to work in chains on tasks such as making or repairing roads. When Klaatsch arrived in Wyndham, around seventy men were held chained as prisoners in the police compound.

Given the situation, Klaatsch was warned by Dr. Patrick Joseph Moloney, at that time Wyndham's government medical officer, mayor and local protector of Aborigines, not to try and secure remains from graves, among which were those of prisoners who had recently died and been buried at the edge of the town's cemetery reserve, which was visible from the compound in which they had been held captive. However, at some point during Klaatsch's stay in Wyndham, the death occurred of a man who was being held in the prison compound after his release from imprisonment in

14. Erckenbrecht and Wergin 2018b

Broome until arrangements could be made to return him to his country at Sturt Creek, some eight hundred kilometres inland. The cause of his death was recorded as beriberi (thiamine/vitamin B1 deficiency), a common illness of Aboriginal men held in white custody in frontier regions as a result of their daily diet largely comprising what Aboriginal people called ‘bubble bubble’ - flour simply mixed with water.¹⁵

It appears that the man had died after being moved to the so-called ‘black ward’ of Wyndham’s hospital, which was actually a canvas covered area outside the hospital building with beds for Aboriginal patients. Klaatsch was given permission by Dr. Moloney to remove the man’s head and other parts in the hospital morgue. The following day the man was buried by inmates of the Wyndham compound under Dr. Moloney’s supervision. Klaatsch did not attend the burial due to his suffering a relapse of malaria he had contracted while visiting Java earlier in the year. Both men had sought to ensure that their removal of the man’s head would not be discovered and possibly cause rioting by the men held in the prison compound by replacing with a pumpkin and tying the body up in blankets.¹⁶

In October 2020, a report detailing the post-mortem mutilation of this Kimberley man’s body, the theft of his head, its fate after its arrival at Berlin’s Anatomy Institute, the creation of a plaster copy and the making of a further copy now in Cologne, was provided to Elders comprising the executive board of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC), based in the Kimberley town of Fitzroy Crossing. Understandably, these senior Aboriginal men and women were distressed and angered. They discussed what action they could take to see the plaster heads given to KALACC with a view to consulting the Kimberley regions guardians of customary law - the Cultural Bosses - as to what should be done with these haunting simulacra. To date, no decision has been reached.

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The history sketched here is by no means unusual. Over the past twenty years, Indigenous Australians have been actively assisted by the nation’s federal government in securing the return of the re-

15. On the shocking treatment of Indigenous men imprisoned in West Australia between 1880 and 1914, see Owen 2016

16. Erckenbrecht and Wergin 2018b

mains of their ancestors from overseas scientific institutions. To date, the remains of over fifteen hundred ancestor have been returned for burial in their ancestral country or put into Indigenous controlled resting places until their fate can be decided. Indigenous Australians have generally regarded an important dimension of the repatriation of these ancestors to be gaining whatever information survives in sources such as museum records and the papers of comparative anatomists and physical anthropologists involved in the collecting and scientific investigation of ancestral remains. And on numerous occasions to date, information about how and why the bodies of Indigenous Australians became the focus of scientific curiosity has uncovered histories as distressing today as that told here, in which scientists knowingly took advantage of settler colonialist violence and subjugation of Australia's first peoples.

What has also come to light, as is the case in history told here, is that while significant progress has been in the repatriation of ancestral remains, there are university anatomy departments and natural history museums throughout Europe, the Americas and countries in other parts of world historically subject to European colonial ambitions which possess objects such as life-like busts, casts of heads and faces, facsimiles of skulls, post-cranial remains and brains. Traditionally, simulacra have been taken to be inferior in terms of lacking the attributes and qualities of the original things they represent. But can this be said of haunting simulacra such as the plaster heads discussed here? Back in the 1980s, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai famously encouraged us to 'follow things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories.'¹⁷ Here, we confronted by things that gave existential concreteness to once received truths about human physical and psychological variation which were implicated, in obvious and also in subtle ways, in the colonial oppression of Australian and other Indigenous peoples. In various cases, the fate of these relics of racial science may be decided with relative ease by the inheritors of these things and representatives of the relevant Indigenous communities. But it may not be so easy to agree on the future of other objects, especially those which reflect the often complex play of contingencies in colonial contexts.

I was reminded of this while researching the history of the busts of the man from the Kimberley region presented here by recalling that in August 2009, protesters chanting 'Sotheby's, Sotheby's, leave them alone, let us take our ancestors home' assailed art collectors arriving at an auction sale in Melbourne of copies of black plaster busts of Woureddy and Truganini, Tasmanian Aboriginal people who lived through the British invasion and dispossession of their ancestral lands during the first third of the nineteenth century. Sotheby's estimated the higher sale price of the two

17. Appadurai 1986, 5

busts would likely be near \$A700,000.¹⁸

The busts were modelled from life in Tasmania by English sculptor Benjamin Law (1807-1882) in the mid-1830s.¹⁹ It is estimated that over time Law made and sold around thirty copies of the busts, of which a number are now in Australian and overseas museum collections. Many of these copies were acquired during the course of the nineteenth by museums because of their perceived anthropological value, which was to increase with the growing credence within nineteenth century scientific circles that Tasmanian Aboriginal people were a distinctive, very primitive human type that was destined to racial extinction.

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, which since the late 1970s has been the main representative organisation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community recognised by Australia's federal and state governments, likened the sale of the two busts to profiting from selling images of the Holocaust. They demanded the busts be removed from museum collections and given to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. One Centre spokesperson refused to rule out destruction of the busts should they be returned to Tasmania.

Representatives of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community have insisted that the busts of Woureddy and Truganini are artefacts that are symbolic of what they see as colonial genocide, and should be removed from public display and surrendered to the community to determine what should be done with them; and in the present climate of debate and agitation within former metropolitan colonial powers and post-settler societies to remove monuments to individuals active in the pursuit of colonial ambitions from public spaces - there will probably many who would agree. But as in the case of reconstructing how it came to be that plaster heads of a man from the Kimberley region, which have lain ignored for near a century in European anatomical collections, there is much to be said for deciding how we should regard copies of the busts of Woureddy and Truganini now in Australian and overseas museums on the basis of research on the history of their creation, the meanings they acquired and the uses to which they were put. And here one is struck by an important qualita-

18. See 'Sotheby's cans sale of Aboriginal busts labelled as racist', <https://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2665408.htm> (accessed 20 January 2021); 'Protesters halt Sotheby's auction of "racist" art', <https://www.smh.com.au/national/protesters-halt-sothebys-auction-of-racist-art-20090825-ewwk.html> (accessed 20 January 2021); also 'Withdraw the Benjamin Law Busts? A Contrary View', <https://www.aasd.com.au/index.cfm/news/25-withdraw-the-benjamin-law-busts-a-contrary-view/>

19. On Benjamin Law's busts of Woureddy and Truganini, see <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=32420> (accessed 20 January 2021)

tive difference between the plaster heads of the unknown man from the Kimberley region, and the busts of Woureddy and Truganini. Historical sources disclose that Woureddy happily sat for Law through the lengthy process involved in sculpting his head, and was said to have been delighted with the finished work. Certainly, while Woureddy sat for Law in everyday European dress of the time, the sculptor portrayed him as he would have dressed traditionally and styled his hair, and the attraction of the bust was by the 1860s its supposedly anthropologically documenting a distinctive, primitive human type destined to racial extinction. Hence one can largely agree with curator and art historian David Hansen that

It is not right that this handsome work of art should be held to stand either as some kind of symbol of the Tasmanian ethnocide or, contrariwise, as an emblem of discredited Social Darwinism. It is not the sculpture that conveys the extinction myth, but the way the image is and has been used in another past, a later past.²⁰

Even so, the fact remains that the historical trajectory of the busts of Woureddy and Truganini - for all their artistry - include their being widely perceived as melancholy memorials to a dying race. And as historian Greg Lehman has observed, it is impossible not to see that for Tasmanian Aboriginal people today, the busts are seen as commemorating a woman and man who resisted 'the force of will that Aborigines in Australia continue to be subject to - a will that perpetuates the disadvantage, discrimination and systemic racism.'²¹ Hence there are persuasive grounds for their display now - ideally in collaboration with Tasmanian Aboriginal people - in ways that creatively convey and respond both to their place in colonialist imaginings and their representing today the aspirations of Indigenous Australians for recognition of their never ceding sovereignty of their ancestral lands and efforts to regain those lands along with recognition of their long struggle to preserve their culture and heritage.

Similarly, while the fate of objects, such as the busts of the man from the Kimberley region, are obviously best left to the Elders of relevant communities to decide, there are other objects now in the collections of scientific and cultural institutions with histories comparable in various respects to the busts of Woureddy and Truganini, in that Indigenous people were actively involved of their own volition in their creation. And by exploring the range of meanings that were inscribed in their

20. Hansen 2020, 50

21. Lehman 2011, 53

forms and with which they subsequently came to be imbued through their uses over time - ideally in partnership by those most affected by the knowledge making they enabled - we may well make important progress in decolonisation.

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