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The Utilization of Truganini's Human Remains in Colonial Tasmania¹

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Between 1904 and 1947, visitors to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart who stepped into the Aboriginal exhibition room were instantly confronted with the death of their colony's indigenous population—or so they were led to believe. Their gaze encountered a glass case presenting the skeleton of “Truganini, The Last Tasmanian Aboriginal” (advertisement, June 24, 1905). Also known as “Queen Truganini” at her older age, representations of her reflect the many, often contradictory, interpretations of her life and agency in colonial Tasmania. She has been depicted as selfish collaborator with the colonizer, savvy savior of her race, callous resistance fighter, promiscuous prostitute who preferred whites instead of her “own” men (e.g. Rae-Ellis, 1981), and “symbol for struggle and survival” (Ryan, 1996). Her life and death remain inseparable from the colonial history of Tasmania. I will in this essay explore how Truganini's human remains were utilized as colonial trophies and as physical anthropological specimens in the context of the contemporaneously widely accepted discourse on the allegedly inevitable extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines.

“Don't let them cut me”

When Truganini died in Hobart in 1876, she looked back at a life of struggle against and attempts at conciliation with the invaders of her country (see, e.g., Ryan, 1996; Plomley, 1969 and 1987; Pybus, 1992; Reynolds, 2001, esp. Chapters 4–5; Bonwick, 1870 and 1879). A Nuennone woman from Bruny Island, Truganini was born in 1812, nine years after the establishment of the British convict colony in Van Diemen's Land. Her early experiences with European colonization were violent and the Nuennone community was quickly devastated by murder, rape, dispossession and displacement.

By the 1820s conflict between colonizers and Tasmanians escalated into the Black War, and in 1830 the Black Line moved across the island, aiming at removing its indigenous population to an island reservation. Simultaneous with this forced (and eventually failed) “extrusion from their native land” (Dove, 1842: 247), the Governor of Tasmania, George Arthur, pursued a strategy of “conciliation.” George Augustus Robinson, bricklayer and lay preacher, set out to “collect,” “civilize,” and save from extermination the remaining Tasmanians (Ryan, 124–173; Plomley, 1969; Bonwick, 1870). Accompanied by a group of young Tasmanians, among them Truganini, who helped him to master the unknown terrains of the land and cross-cultural negotiation, the “Friendly Mission” ended with the incarceration of 200 Tasmanians who had agreed to join Robinson. Throughout the following forty years, undergoing a variety of administrative, civilizing, and Christianizing regimes, they died from miserable living conditions, hunger, and sickness (Ryan, 182–221).

In the early 1840s, Truganini took the opportunity to escape these deadly circumstances and accompanied Robinson to his new post as protector of the Victorian Aborigines.

¹ The arguments of this essay derive from my work on the various contexts of bodysnatching of indigenous individuals during the 19th century: Antje Kühnast, “In the interest of science and of the colony’. Truganini und die Legende von den aussterbenden Rassen,” in *Entfremdete Körper. Rassismus als Leichenschändung*, ed. Wulf D. Hund (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), 205–250.

This time, however, she abandoned “the conciliator” in an attempt to return to a free life. After her group had robbed and killed two European whalers, the men were hanged and Truganini returned to the reservation on Flinders Island (Ryan, 218). Back in Tasmania, she became the only survivor of the colonial administration at Oyster Cove and spent her last years in Hobart. At this stage, Truganini had witnessed the beginnings and expansion of the scientifically legitimized plunder of Tasmanian resting places and other acquisitions of their dead. Regarded as the last of her race, Truganini became a living curiosity in the streets of Hobart; when she died her remains became physical anthropological objects of desire. On her deathbed in 1876, knowing that the Royal Society of Tasmania was eager to obtain her dead body, she pleaded, “Don’t let them cut me, but bury me behind one of the mountains” (unsigned news story, 1876).

“The sad trajectory of a race death”

Years before Truganini’s death, Tasmania’s indigenous population had been declared an extinct race. A year before Charles Darwin announced the “short struggle” between victorious “civilized nations” and “barbarians” (Darwin quoted in Brantlinger, 2003, 1). Oscar Peschel, the German publisher of the popular science journal *Das Ausland*, began his “Necrology of the Tasmanians” with the following statement: “Wherever the civilized European encounters peoples of the lower stages, the extinction of the colored people follows in most cases. The story of Tasmania offers the best opportunity for us to follow the sad trajectory of such a race death in all its pathological particulars.” (Peschel, 1870, 145; my translation.) Peschel’s and Darwin’s considerations reflect an internationally debated topic during the 19th and early 20th century—the discourse about the presumed inevitable disappearance of the Tasmanians as one of the “lowest human races.”

As Patrick Brantlinger has shown, this “extinction discourse” played out across social boundaries and political, religious, and scientific denominations, integrating a variety of arguments about the alleged inevitable demise of indigenous populations following their contact with white civilization. The extinction discourse, however, did not exist as a clearly defined theory or a contemporarily defined argumentative system. It presents a pattern of implicitly and explicitly interwoven ideas about the experienced decline of colonized indigenous populations. Politicians, missionaries, anthropologists, artists, and historians discussed possible causes for the experienced decline of colonized peoples, such as “violence, warfare, genocide,” and disease. The most important arguments in the debate however dealt with the presumed most destructive cause, “self-extinguishing” savagery. Thus the extinction discourse was not beyond intentions but, as Brantlinger states, “helped to rationalize or occlude the genocidal aspects of European conquest or colonization.” Accordingly, it facilitated the interpretation of the expected extinction of Tasmanian Aborigines as the result of their “primitive nature” (Brantlinger, 1, 2, 124).

“An absolutely unique exhibit”

The frequently lamented fate of the Tasmanians—this, too, an element in the extinction discourse—became internationally a prime example for the theory of the dying races. Truganini’s skeleton, proudly advertised by the Tasmanian Museum as “An Absolutely Unique Exhibit,” consistently served as the most graphic piece of evidence not only for the death of an individual but also for the elimination of the “Tasmanian race.” As physical anthropological specimen its height was exactly indicated by a measuring tape, and two other items pointed to the scientific elements of the exhibit: Truganini’s death mask to the left of the skeleton and, above the skull, a set of ethnographic photographs, taken in three perspectives, of the elderly Truganini.

The symbolic potency of the exhibit, however, additionally strongly relied on the extinction narrative projected by the objects surrounding the skeleton. Stone tools at the skeleton’s feet not only visually built the base of the exhibit, but also symbolized one of the foundational arguments for Tasmanian decline. They conveyed to the museum visitor that Tasmanians, in the words of the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, “represented the condition of Palaeolithic Man” (Tylor, 1899, v). Other cultural objects such as shell necklaces, spears, waddies and miniature canoes built a frame around the skeleton, testifying to what Europeans perceived as the Tasmanians’ utterly primitive state of nature. Artistic representations of Truganini and other Tasmanian Aborigines, such as Thomas Bock’s portraits of her and Wourreddy, pointed to the romanticizing perceptions of the inhabitants of Tasmania in the early phases of colonization.

A tribal leader, Wourreddy’s sculpture by Benjamin Law stood to the right of Truganini’s skeleton. The juxtaposition of the male warrior’s bust and the female skeleton (in lieu of Law’s matching bust of Truganini) represented the alleged trajectory from his romanticized state of a natural people to the death of a lower race that had been incapable of reproduction and adaptation to British colonization. To the right, a historical government declaration on equal rights and obligations of white and black inhabitants presented the sole object in the display that openly referred to the colonial context of Truganini’s life times. Through its placement next to the skeleton, it also conveyed the message of the settler society’s fruitless attempts at the civilization and rescue of the Tasmanians from their demise. (For analysis of material display as documentation of the extinction discourse, see Kühnast.)

Thus the arrangement in the glass case was no mere accumulation of anthropological trophies collected by the Royal Society. Conveying the message of a “race death” in the Tasmanian colony, the exhibit was a “monument of both scientific racism and successful colonization,” as Souvendrini Perera aptly terms it (1996, 395).

“In the interest of science and of the colony”

As the pairing of Wourreddy’s bust with Truganini’s skeleton shows, the museum exhibit spoke to its onlookers through its representations as much as through representational absences. Such was the case with an additional piece of information on the skeleton’s label: “William Lannee, the last Male Tasmanian Aboriginal, died 1869” (advertisement, 1905). Missing was information on the scandalous corpse mutilation and grave robbing that occurred only shortly after his death. In the name of science, two competing

medical practitioners tried to secure the body for their respective scientific institutions, the Royal Society of Tasmania and the London College of Surgeons. Lanney's body was beheaded, his hands and feet cut off, his grave plundered (MacDonald, 2005a, esp. Chapters 4-6; MacDonald, 2005b; Petrow, 1997). Horrified by this mutilation, Truganini asked a friend to be buried at the deepest spot in the sea. As the cleric later recalled, she knew "all were dead excepting herself, and the people in Hobart had got all their skulls" (H. D. Atkinson, cited by Fforde, 2004, 97). Truganini eventually wished to not be "cut up" because she had witnessed previous attempts to acquire Aboriginal skulls and bones as anthropological specimens.

The skeletal exhibit clearly demonstrates that her fears were more than justified. When she died in 1876, the Royal Society immediately announced: "In the eyes of all the civilized and scientific world it would indeed be accounted disgraceful and discreditable to Tasmania were such type of a now extinct race allowed to be cast away."² Although it thereby legitimized its right to the remains "for the purpose of preserving them in such a manner as may seem best in the interest of science and of the colony"³ (thus not the British metropole), the Colonial Secretary, inclined by "the unseemly proceedings" following Lanney's death, ordered the secret interment of Truganini's body "where such scenes cannot again occur."⁴ Upon the Royal Society's insistence on its "first and highest claim"⁵ to the "truly genuine,... unique," and "typical specimen of an extinct race,"⁶ her remains were excavated two years later.⁷ Its utilization in the museum's anthropological collection however remained explicitly restricted: It was "not to be exposed to public view, but... decently deposited in a secure resting place where it may be accessible by special permission to scientific men for scientific purposes"⁸ only.

"A savage and sinister expression?"

Scientific men showed little interest in the typical specimen until the 20th century. In 1920 "the complete skeleton of Trucanini (the last of the race) remain[ed] to be measured and the indices to be tabulated," complained Crowther's grandson (Crowther and Lord, 1920, 37). It took another fifty years before, in 1971, a student at the Tasmanian University undertook the first and sole investigation of Truganini's skeleton—obviously instigated by the rising pressure of Tasmanian Aboriginal activists

² Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—James Agnew to Colonial Secretary's Office, May 9, 1876. Copies of the correspondence are held in the library of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Canberra), File No. pMS 1774. For analyses of the correspondence see also Fforde, 98 and Cove, 1995), 50-52.

³ Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—James Agnew to Colonial Secretary's Office, May 9, 1876.

⁴ Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—George Gilmore to Royal Society, May 10, 1876. See also "Summary for Europe," *The Mercury*, May 13, 1876.

⁵ Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—James Agnew to Colonial Office, May 9, 1876.

⁶ Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—James Agnew to Colonial Secretary, July 12, 1876.

⁷ Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—James Agnew to Colonial Secretary, December 4, 1878.

⁸ Tasmanian Colonial Secretary's Office: Correspondence—Moore to James Agnew, December 6, 1876.

to have her remains returned and decently laid to rest (Meumann, 1971; see also Ryan, 264-266, Fforde, 98-100, and Turnbull, 1997).

Truganini's bones were, however, presented at the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1888. In 1904, again on the occasion of a Colonial Exhibition in Melbourne, renowned anthropologist Baldwin Spencer assembled the skeletal exhibit henceforth shown in the Tasmanian Museum (Fforde, 98). Its presentations at the exhibitions and eventual exposition to the public gaze suggest that the skeleton served primarily as a trophy of Tasmanian colonial pride and a curious, scientifically adorned symbol for racial extinction rather than as scientific object.

Truganini's skull, however, was included in several craniological investigations, mainly during the early 20th century. The prime significance of skulls emerged throughout the 19th century when outer appearances such as skin coloration or hair structure were increasingly deemed insufficient markers for racial identification. By the late 19th century, the heyday of craniology, skulls presented meaningful and practical pieces of evidence. Containing the brain, they presented the exclusively human capability for intellectual and cultural development. Easily handleable, they were shipped to anthropological collections on international routes of human remains trafficking (see, e.g., Turnbull, 2008, 213). Crowther's desperate appropriation of Lanney's skull and its subsequent shipment to the University of Edinburgh is but one example for the significance bestowed on human skulls (Fforde, 123-126).

Because their bearers were deemed to be (soon) extinct, skulls labeled "Tasmanian" were "rare objects" (Davis, 1874, 3-5; Turnbull, 2008, 213-215.) They were valuable, sought after trophies in anthropologists' collections and objects for study on an international scale (Fforde, 74-75; Anderson, 2008, 239). In 1869 the French craniologist, Paul Topinard, claimed to be able to instantly differentiate typically Tasmanian characteristics, defining them as having "a wild and sinister appearance, not less striking than its disposition to a keel shaped skullcap" (Topinard, 1869, 645, 647; my translation). He thereby set the internationally accepted standard in the definition of Tasmanian cranial features, instigating physical anthropologists in the ensuing decades to look for Topinardian signs of sinister savageness and the keel-shaped skullcap (Plomley, 1966, 1-2).

The search for these signs however proved a precarious enterprise. In 1874 "the most successful collector of indigenous Australian skeletal material of the Victorian era," Joseph Barnard Davis, aimed like Topinard at defining the Tasmanians as a race distinct from Australian Aborigines (Turnbull, 2008, 206; MacDonald, 2005a, Chapter 4). While he approved of many of the Frenchman's findings, Davis disagreed with his verdict on their appearance. Observing a "peculiarity in the physiognomy... which is also expressed in their crania," Davis conceded, "I do not know, whether I shall be able to describe it in words so as to make it understood by others." Not only had he difficulties describing their "particular roundness," but also discovering the essential "savage and sinister expression" (Davis, 10). In possession of a Tasmanian man's face mask, Davis "ha[d] reason to think that the expression of the countenance of a Tasmanian, especially of the mouth was generally mild, if not benevolent... and the roundness... is opposed to a savage expression" (ibid., 11).

The zealously acquired skulls in the Tasmanian Museum were as much ignored by men of science as Truganini's skeleton until in 1897 Walter Harper and Arthur Clarke examined the collection in 1897. Devoutly limiting their investigation to the recording of measurements, they "hope[d] that our masters, the savants of the Old World, will find in their researches some use for these records for an extinct race" (Harper and Clarke, 1897, 97). Harper and Clarke, like Topinard, felt they could spot Tasmanian skull features at first sight and immediately excluded three as not Tasmanian. Three additional skulls were put aside after they decided their brain volume was too big for Tasmanians, declaring them as "the skulls of half-castes," whose higher brain volume, logically, must then be a result from European blood admixture (*ibid.*, 99; see also Berry and Robertson, 1909, 50). A decade later, all six skulls were reincorporated into the pool of Tasmanian crania by a new team of investigators. Richard J. A. Berry and A. W. D. Robertson allowed for a larger brain volume, which was, as they pointed out, "although unusual" but "not unknown among Tasmanian Aborigines." More important, they regarded them as "genuine Tasmanian pure bloods" because they considered "90 per cent of the features so characteristically found in the skull of the Tasmanian aboriginal" as proof for their racial "authenticity" (Berry and Robertson, 50).

There was never any question about Truganini's authenticity. Accordingly, Harper and Clarke observed one of Topinard's typical features: The "keel-shaped vault... in Truganini's skull [was] particularly noticeable" (Harper and Clarke, 100). Some irritation however arose when Harper and Clarke discovered that Topinard's prime racial marker was absent. Experiencing difficulties to notice the sinisterness in Truganini's skull, they resolved their problem by a change of method and resorted to the photographs, which seven years later would be put on display above the skeletal exhibit.

On the occasion of the International Exhibition in Melbourne in 1866, Charles Woolley took group and portrait photographs of the surviving residents of Oyster Cove, among them William Lanney and Truganini (Rae-Ellis, 1992, 230). While Truganini's European dress and traditional Tasmanian shell necklace represented her as an individual, the photographic perspectives (front, three-quarters and the side) clearly applied the rules of anthropometric photographing desired by physical anthropologists. Copies of these photographs were distributed and published internationally in anthropological works, illustrating the Tasmanian prime example of racial extinction. Harper and Clarke used the photographs to construct and reassert Truganini's skull's proper Tasmanian features: "Truganini, in her photographs taken during life, appears to have this [sinister] appearance strongly marked, but it is hardly noticeable in the skull; however in a photograph of the cranium the peculiarity is more apparent" (Harper and Clarke, 101). Like Davis they referred to discrepancies between their cranial evidence and representations of living Tasmanians. However, while Davis softened Topinard's judgment by pointing to a benevolent appearance, Harper and Clarke sought to confirm it by construing a series of evidence from her skull to a photograph of her face to a photograph of the skull.

Conclusion

The multi-faceted colonial and international discourse on the extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines led to the scientifically legitimized appropriation and utilization of Truganini's human remains. I have pointed to two elements of this discourse. Firstly, its ensuing practice of unearthing and exhibiting, and secondly, the scientific investigation and interpretation of Truganini's human remains.

The museum exhibit of Truganini's skeleton in its literal ethnographic, artistic, photographic, political and scientific framework materialized as a transparent mausoleum not only for the "Last Tasmanian Aboriginal," but more so for the entire "Tasmanian race." Providing a narrative of natural extinction that occurred beyond the control of a prospering settler society, it conveyed a message of futile attempts at civilization and salvation. Truganini, despite her diverse historical roles in colonial Tasmania, existed in the exhibit mainly as a symbol of "race death."

To the Royal Society of Tasmania, she had for many years been a (still) walking physical anthropological object, but after she died, its leading members openly rendered her into a "typical specimen." Considering the lack of scientific investigation and the predominant utilization of her bones as colonial trophies, they became demonstrations of colonial pride and self-assurance.

Harper and Clarke's desperate construction of a "sinister expression" in Truganini's skull presents but one example for the maneuvers late 19th century physical anthropologists undertook to define, search, and reiterate characteristics deemed typical Tasmanian. It reveals the rationale driving the quest for racial markers. When faced with the stubbornness of human individuality and variance in their skeletal material these race scientists, rather than questioning their premises, continued to construe a reality of biological race signs.

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