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From 'Plant Hunter' to 'Tomb Raider'

The Changing Image of Amalie Dietrich

Abstract: In the context of her bicentenary in 2021, Amalie Dietrich will again be celebrated as a feminist paragon or condemned as a racist culprit. Her stay in Australia will be central to these contrasting approaches to her biography. There, she gathered a remarkable amount of native plants, animals, ethnological everyday objects – and human remains. In this context, she was subjected to suspicions of incitement in murder early on and to allegedly critical investigations concerning her role in the anthropological desecration of corpses in recent times. In this paper, we contribute some arguments to the clarification of this controversial subject. It focuses on the treatment of image of Amalie Dietrich in the German discourse from the Kaiserreich via the Weimar Republic, the fascist 'Reich', the Federal Republic as well as the Democratic Republic to reunited Germany. As a result, we argue that a critical biography of Amalie Dietrich must integrate the appreciation of her contribution to botany and zoology with a critique of her role in the racist history of anthropological grave robbery and desecration of human remains.

If it were up to her first critical biographer, Amalie Dietrich had suffered serious injustice. While her recognition as a successful plant hunter and collector was reflected in the biological nomenclature, her public appreciation is said to have been accompanied by misogynous side blows and overtime had developed into a downright smear campaign in the present. It aimed to transform the image of an emancipated naturalist into the distorted portrait of an unscrupulous grave robber.

The upcoming bicentennial of Amalie Dietrich's birthday is regarded as an occasion to take action against such "demonisation" and "character assassination".¹ For this purpose, Ray Sumner set up a special website. In its header, she asks: "Who speaks for Dietrich"? The page has the Germanophone address 'dietrich-feier', which can be translated as 'celebration of/for Dietrich'. It is dedicated "to clear[ing] Dietrich's name" and protecting it from "an outstanding example of adaptational villainy". The author understands this to be a procedure by which "an insignificant aspect of a character" is used to discredit its significant aspects and "to make that person into a one-dimensional villain".²

Purportedly, the felons in this drama are predominantly men ("unwittingly" attended by two women): "every person" engaged in constructing a 'black legend' in respect of Dietrich "has been a (white) male".³ Indeed, many male authors have contributed to this legend. A book by Philip Clarke on the relationship between botanists and Indigenous Australians mentions mainly male scientists. As an aside, however, it is noted: "In Australia, German collector Amalie Dietrich spent

1 Cf. Ray Sumner, *The Demonisation of Amalie Dietrich*, pp. 1 and 5.

2 A first announcement of the bicentenary celebrations in Siebenlehn, the birthplace of Amalie Dietrich, speaks a different language. There is no mention of the accusations made against her. Instead, a large number of events are to take place, including a musical, a play, concerts, and the planting of an 'Amalie-Dietrich-Linden'. In addition, a case with current contemporary documents is to be deposited in a memorial stone; cf. *Freie Presse/Flöhaer Zeitung*, 14 May 2020, p. 11 (Ein Festjahr für Amalie Dietrich).

3 [Ray Sumner], "But he that filches me my good name ... makes me poor indeed" ('unwittingly'); [Ray Sumner], *Media, Misogyny and Amalie Dietrich ('male')*.

several years in Queensland”, “where she actively sought fresh Aboriginal skeletons for her European clients”.⁴ This is indeed an example of evil ‘adapational villainy’. The source used by the author presents Dietrich as a highly qualified botanist who had been “single-handedly forming a large collection”. She “collected widely and methodically, amassing and accurately describing botanical and zoological specimens over a wide range”.⁵ While this remains unmentioned by Clarke, the story about the skeletons is adopted and the botanist is made a corpse desecrator with “gruesome interests”.

Ray Sumner, too, does not call into question that Amalie Dietrich sent indigenous human remains from Australia to Germany. But she is too busy fending off alleged damage to her reputation to deal with the background of this action in detail. Instead, she chooses a strategy of relational damage control. According to this, Dietrich had collected, measured, and determined so many plant and animal exhibits that the small number of human remains was hardly significant. Conversely, male anthropologists have made a business for money and honour out of their collection and scientific evaluation.⁶

To illuminate this controversial scenario, we will first sketch the legend that presents Amalie Dietrich as the ‘Angel of Black Death’, a designation closely associated with her name until today. We then look at the reconstruction and deconstruction of this legend. Its core content is almost as old as the very reports about Dietrich. However, its evaluation varied at different points in time. To illustrate this, we will then concentrate on the image of Amalie Dietrich in six different Germanys: the Wilhelmine Empire, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship, the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and reunified Germany. In conclusion, we argue for a classification of colonial acquisition practices, which are still called ‘collecting’ in the name of anthropological science, as illegitimate appropriation within the framework of a political economy of human remains.

Scandalizing the ‘Angel of Black Death’:

Amalie Dietrich and Scientific Colonial Violence

Concordia Amalie Nelle was born on 26 May 1821 into the family of a purse maker.⁷ Shortly before her twenty-fifth birthday, she married the pharmacist

4 Philip A. Clarke, *Aboriginal Plant Collectors*, p. 144 (there also the following quote ‘gruesome interests’).

5 Rod Ritchie, *Seeing the Rainforests in 19th Century Australia*, p. 52.

6 See [Ray Sumner], *Media, Misogyny and Amalie Dietrich: Amalie Dietrich “was competent and diligent. Her contributions to Australian science/natural history are therefore unparalleled. In Botany 350(+) species, of 20,000 specimens; in Entomology: 800(+) species; Arachnida: 103(+) species, incl. 400(+) specimens, which served as the source of major reference work on Australian spiders”, etc. “Under orders from her employer, Dietrich obtained eight Queensland Aboriginal skeletons and two skulls”. “In 1881 the Museum Godeffroy’s anthropological collection comprised 53 human skeletons and 375 skulls”. For the later information, see also Johannes D. E. Schmeltz, Rudolf Krause, *Die ethnographisch-anthropologische Abtheilung des Museum Godeffroy in Hamburg*, pp. 546, 581-584.*

7 See Georg Balzer, *Dietrich, Amalie*, p. 695.

Wilhelm August Salomo Dietrich, and two years later her daughter Charitas was born. At that time, the couple had specialized in collecting plants. In the end, it was mainly she who pursued this occupation (while her husband devoted himself to the further processing of her collected material). She had acquired some everyday knowledge about medicinal plants from her mother, learned the Linné system from her husband, and trained herself during years of work.

After the couple separated in the early sixties, Amalie Dietrich continued her occupation.⁸ At that time, she delivered her finds to apothecaries, educational institutions, botanical gardens, and several other honourable customers.⁹ In this way, she came into contact with the Hamburg merchant Johan Cesar Godeffroy. He sent a whole series of 'collectors' to Southeast Asia and Oceania, and offered Dietrich a ten-year contract that, in her view, was well-endowed. She left her daughter with foster parents and on 17 May 1863 took the 'La Rochelle' to Australia.¹⁰ She stayed mainly in north Queensland and collected a large number of plants and animals. Her client was also interested in cultural artefacts of the Indigenous Australians and their bodies (especially bones and skulls), and she agreed to this claim. After her return in 1873, she was employed by Godeffroy in his Hamburg museum. Following the bankruptcy of the Godeffroy company, in 1879, she had to move to a municipal accommodation for elderly women. After an illness, she took up residence with her daughter, who had since married. Here she died on 9 March 1891. Her daughter finally wrote a biographical narrative about her, including several letters by her mother that were enriched with information either invented or copied from other sources. The book – first published in 1909 – was quite successful and has been reprinted many times.¹¹ The image of Amalie Dietrich was decisively shaped by this text.

From Bischoff's compilation of facts and fiction, it not only appears that Dietrich transported skulls and skeletons of Indigenous Australians to Hamburg. It is also clear that she was aware of disturbing the peace of the deceased and violating their memory for their survivors. But there are no reports of direct forms of violence. However, the suspicion that Amalie Dietrich might have pursued her scientific interests through a contract killing was formulated early on by Henry Ling Roth. In 1908, he wrote about "a collector" of the Godeffroy Museum "who made several ineffectual efforts to induce squatters to shoot an aboriginal, so that she could send the skeleton to the Museum".¹² In 1947, Charles Barrett took this up more or less literally.¹³

8 Cf. for this and the following the biographical notes in Mary R. S. Creese, *Ladies in the Laboratory*, pp. 40 ff.

9 See Helen Kranz, *Das Museum Godeffroy*, p. 19.

10 See *Courier* (Brisbane), 18 August 1863, p. 4 (La Rochelle).

11 Cf. Charitas Bischoff, *Amalie Dietrich. Ein Leben, erzählt von Charitas Bischoff*. Berlin: Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1922, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1929, 1931, 1933, 1935, 1937; Hamm: Grote 1940, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1955, 1958; Berlin [DDR]: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 1977, 1979, 1980; Stuttgart: Calwer 1980; reprints: Hamburg: Tredition 2011, 2012; Paderborn: Salzwasser 2013. For the manipulation of the letters, see Ray Sumner, *A Woman in the Wilderness*, p. 8.

12 Henry Ling Roth, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay*, p. 81.

13 Charles Barrett, *The Sunlit Land*, p. 165: "Ling Roth states that she made several ineffectual efforts to persuade squatters to shoot an aborigine so that she might send a human skeleton to the Godeffroy Museum".

These narratives were eventually picked up by Ray Sumner, supplemented by further elements based on an alleged local oral history and imparted to her as “personal communication”.¹⁴ She introduces the corresponding passage of her work with a reference to “Dietrich’s gruesome anthropological work” and then writes: “In making her dreadful request, Dietrich showed an attitude to the Aborigines which was not at all uncommon among Europeans at that time”.

Sumner also thinks it likely that Dietrich was this “lady scientist asking for the pelt of an Aborigine”.

Actually, it was Sumner herself who contributed massively to the recent spread of the ‘black legend’ about Amalie Dietrich. In a review of her book, Linden Gillbank wondered why Sumner “accepts a story that survives as folklore – about Dietrich’s request for an Aborigine to be shot for his skin or skeleton”. She added: “Surely there are many possible reasons for the generation of such an unforgettable tale; it could arise from a genuine misunderstanding [...] or ethnic, gender or class bigotry could be involved”.¹⁵ By this time, the suspicion nurtured by Sumner had already achieved a broad public impact. In 1991, the magazine ‘The Bulletin’ reported on the anthropological desecration of indigenous human remains. Amalie Dietrich served as the

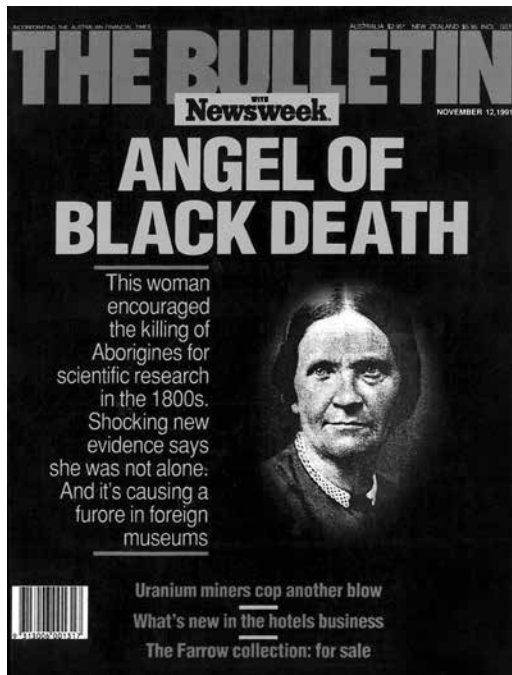


Fig. 1 – Cover story: scandalization as teaser

scandalizing hook in the story. Her portrait was emblazoned on the cover of the issue, and a glaring headline called her the “Angel of Black Death” (see fig. 1). The caption started: “This woman encouraged the killing of Aborigines for scientific research in the 1800s”.

The author of the cover story, David Monaghan, had already filmed a documentary called ‘Darwin’s Body-Snatchers’ and was now dealing with the subject of scientific body snatching in Australia. On the story’s first page, it said that “British and Australian scientists ran one of the biggest grave-robbing networks ever organised”. This had become a topical issue because “British and Australian scientists have found that their Aboriginal relics have left them cursed. The bones gathered by their predecessors have tainted scientists with racism, grave-robbing and, according to new evidence, murder”.¹⁶

14 Cf. Ray Sumner, *A Woman in the Wilderness*, pp. 44 ff. For the following quotes, see pp. 44 (‘gruesome’), 45 (‘dreadful request’, ‘pelt’). Sumner’s book published in 1993 was based on her PhD thesis ‘Amalie Dietrich in Australia’ (University of Queensland, 1986) which, according to her, has “served as source of many Dietrich articles” ([Ray Sumner], *Who speaks for Dietrich?*).

15 Linden Gillbank, [Review of] Ray Sumner, *A Woman in the Wilderness* [etc.], p. 192.

16 *The Bulletin*, 12 November 1991, p. 31 (David Monaghan, *The body-snatchers*); for the following, cf. p. 33 (Sumner, ‘unclear’).

The report also mentions Sumner who allegedly stated: "I'm certain Dietrich had Aborigines killed". Subsequently, the author refers to the rumours told by Sumner but then finds: "She got her remains, although exactly how is unclear".¹⁷ Incidentally, the author quite rightly scandalizes contemporary approaches to the question of the return of human remains. The journalistic staging of his article, on the other hand, is undoubtedly lurid, turning the hearsay referenced in the text into fact on the cover and thus exposing the only woman mentioned as the main perpetrator.

As an additional bitter irony, Monaghan chose 'The Bulletin', of all places, for his report. For the longest time, this magazine was published under the racist motto 'Australia for the White Man' and defined Australianness as racist white cosmopolitanism. It decidedly excluded the Indigenous Australians, whose extinction its contributors predicted almost from its first day of publication. Already in 1883, 'The Bulletin' claimed that "[t]he aboriginal question is nearly played out". Subscribing to the notion that "only the master-races of the world are fit material for the ordeal of the civilisation", it saw "only one way to do real good to the aborigines": confining all of them to an "immense reserve in North-Western Australia" and having them "reduce their own numbers [...] by internal quarrels" until the "black race" has "die[d] out easily and naturally".¹⁸

At any rate, film and journal article contributed to the further spreading of the 'black legend' about Amalie Dietrich that was, in fact, widely received. In the process, it also found acceptance in serious literature. Fiona Foley, a Badtjala artist from Fraser island, claimed in 1999, referencing 'The Bulletin' that Dietrich was "known to have offered financial incentives to local settlers in return for the shooting of healthy Aboriginal specimens".¹⁹ Already one year prior, Robert Dingley declared that "Aboriginal bones, throughout the nineteenth century, were a marketable commodity" and added that "there is overwhelming evidence to confirm that living Aborigines were regularly slaughtered in order to provide curators with choice relics of the 'dying race'". In a footnote, he referenced Monaghan's article and Sumner's book.²⁰

In 1997, Paul Turnbull merely referred to Sumner when he said: "It is unlikely that Dietrich asked [...] to kill an Aborigine". The story of the 'skin', however, he reproduced without comment.²¹ Cressida Fforde also referred to Sumner in 2004, reporting that Dietrich "may have believed that obtaining Aboriginal remains justified murder", "did acquire an Aboriginal's dried skin" and sent "Aboriginal

17 The presentation of the article is undoubtedly scandalous and Dietrich's placement on the cover has sexist dimensions. Nevertheless, to say that Monaghan has written "a sensationally inaccurate piece" is overstated, and the imputation that he tried to draw a "crude parallel" between Dietrich and a concentration camp guard who was called the "Blonde Angel of Auschwitz" is incorrect (Paul Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, p. 16). This comparison does not exist, and 'angel of death' is a widespread term in English, which not only occurs in a religious context but is also used figuratively. Coincidentally, the Oxford English Dictionary cites an example from the Australian Gawler Times of 12 July 1872 (see 'angel', phrases: P2. 'angel of death', 2.).

18 The Bulletin, 9 June 1883, p. 6 (Our Black Brothers).

19 Fiona Foley, *A Blast from the Past*, p. 46.

20 Robert Dingley, 'Resurrecting' the Australian Past, pp. 156 f.

21 Paul Turnbull, *Ancestors, not Specimens*.

skeletons taken from funerary sites” to Germany.²² Quoting Sumner, Jürgen Tampke in 2006 wrote that Dietrich had demanded to “shoot an Aborigine for her so that she could have the skin mounted for display in Germany”.²³ Still, in 2011, Regina Ganter declared – referencing Sumner – that “Dietrich suggested to an employee [...] to shoot an Aborigine as a specimen”. She further mentioned Roth and Barrett as early sources of this “anecdote” and added that “this incident”, “in Queensland, particularly among indigenous researchers”, “remains the dominant image of this woman”.²⁴

Collecting ‘Skulls and Skeletons of Extinct Races’: Amalie Dietrich in the Wilhelmine Kaiserreich

When Amalie Dietrich left Germany with destination Australia in 1863, Hamburg was a free Hanseatic city; when she returned in 1873, it belonged to the newly founded German Empire. Even before its colonial claims were officially registered, Hamburg merchants had long since begun to flank their economic ambitions with colonial policy. In this, Dietrich’s employer Godeffroy played a leading role. He demanded state protection for his business in the South Seas, initially represented by a Hamburg consul, Theodor Weber, who then became consul of the North German Confederation and consul of the new German Empire.²⁵

Weber had come to Samoa as an agent of Godeffroy’s trading house and had acquired for the company an enormous estate of plantations for cotton and especially coconut palms, which were cultivated, among others, with forcedly recruited foreign workers.²⁶ Also, Godeffroy capitalized on the additional naturalistic business associated with the brisk colonial trade. Exotica were brought in by seamen not very systematically. This practice was replaced with a targeted procurement policy, regarding plants and animals as well as cultural objects. The latter was a “for-profit ethnography” that pursued a “commercialization of material culture”.²⁷ Because this strategy also had in mind a growing anthropological demand, it additionally became part of the political economy of human remains.

With her employment by Godeffroy, Amalie Dietrich contributed to this business. From the very beginning, it was not only about building a private museum but also about marketing the objects brought in from afar. This was reflected in a whole series of catalogues in which doublets of the collection were offered for sale. The British Museum, for instance, listed 250 species from Brisbane (“collected by A. Dietrich; purchased from the Godeffroy Museum”) as new acquisitions for its herbarium.²⁸

22 Cressida Fforde, *Collecting the Dead*, p. 55.

23 Jürgen Tampke, *The Germans in Australia*, p. 55.

24 Regina Ganter, *Career Moves*, p. 112.

25 Cf. Kees van Dijk, *Pacific Strife*, p. 82.

26 Cf. Doug Munro, *Stewart Firth, Samoan Plantations*, p. 105.

27 Rainer F. Buschmann, *Anthropology’s Global Histories*, pp. 35, 34; see also Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, *Liberal Imperialism in Germany*, pp. 83 ff.

28 House of Commons, *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons*, p. 160 (see section:

Dietrich's contribution to anthropology was appreciated from the start. This not only concerned the esteem of the scientists, the international public was also informed. For instance, a natural science journal reported on the "Museum Godeffroy" in 1877. In the text a "German lady" is mentioned, whose "collections" included "skulls and skeletons of extinct races".²⁹ In 1880, the "Godeffroy Museum of Hamburg" was again praised – with a special emphasis on its "anthropological collection of skulls and skeletons, castings in plaster and photographs of natives" and the "eight skeletons of Australian negroes, of which in the whole of Europe there are only six others to be found".³⁰

This 'rareness' of human remains from Australia was a permanent feature of the anthropological discourse in Germany since the times of Enlightenment. Already Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the 'geometer of race',³¹ was excited about his "very rare skull of a New Hollander from the neighbourhood of Botany Bay".³² He had established an international network of scientific relations with colleagues and admirers. They provided him with bones from all parts of the world, which he piled in his home to such an amount that their storage place was called 'Golgotha' (Calvary) among his family.³³

But the German scientific community was not only from the beginning involved in the international trade of Australian human remains. Together with the enlightened public, it also shared the international discourse on anthropological findings from the new continent.

Hence, in 1810 the geographer and biologist Eberhard August Wilhelm von Zimmermann, in his two volumes on Australia, echoed the narrative of James Grant, Lieutenant in the Royal Navy. The latter reported that "a complete set of bones belonging to a male, and an entire female skeleton"³⁴ were provided by William Balmain, assistant surgeon on the First Fleet and later Principal Surgeon of the antipodean colony in Sydney. Grant then reproduced a letter by Balmain, who had written to him on his anthropological studies of the Indigenous Australians of New South Wales. Zimmermann quoted from this letter and briefed his German readers with the results of the scientific 'mismeasure of man'. They learned what they had already heard before: that so-called primitive people had small craniums and, on the whole, were closer to apes.³⁵

From then on, trading with human remains from Australia was an anthropological business on a market with short supplies. Its commodities were highly valued and priced accordingly. Hence, the skeletons in the Godeffroy selection were a prestigious acquisition. This was not least evident from the fact that Rudolf

Account 'of the Income and Expenditure of the British Museum (Special Trust Funds), for the Financial Year ended the 31st day of March 1875', p. 36).

29 Martin Eiche, *The Museum Godeffroy*, p. 172.

30 'The Museum Godeffroy of Hamburg', pp. 462 f. (the article refers to a contribution in 'Hamburgischer Correspondent', 9 December 1879).

31 Cf. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Geometer of Race*, pp. 65-69.

32 Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, p. 239.

33 Cf. John Gascoigne, *The German Enlightenment and the Pacific*, pp. 166 f.

34 James Grant, *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery [etc.] in the Years 1800, 1801*, p. 115.

35 Cf. Eberhard August Wilhelm von Zimmermann, *Australien in Hinsicht der Erd-, Menschen- und Produktenkunde*, p. 897. The phrasing 'mismeasure etc.' is from Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*.

Virchow, one of the most renowned German anthropologists, secured the right to be the first to examine the bones scientifically.³⁶

Amalie Dietrich’s collection of human remains must be understood against this background. It is then no surprise that this amalgam of contemporary science and gothic tale found its way into the memorial book of her daughter. Here, the bones and skulls taken from Australia were not only mentioned in writing but also graphically depicted.

All the chapters were decorated with vignettes by the painter and graphic artist Hans Kurth. He oriented himself on elements of the respective chapter that seemed to him to be characteristic for its content. These were mainly floral motifs (flowers, leaves, tendrils, berries, thorns); sometimes there were real (lizards, shells, locusts, birds), petrified, or sporadically fictitious animals (dragons), but occasionally also a landscape, a quill, or ships in the harbour. The second part of the book, which supposedly documents letters to and from Australia, begins with a jungle vignette. This is followed again mainly by plants and occasionally by animals but also artefacts of the ‘natives’ (boomerangs, spears) and finally, above a letter addressed to her daughter from Bowen dated 20 September 1869, tools together with a mask and three skulls (see fig. 2).³⁷

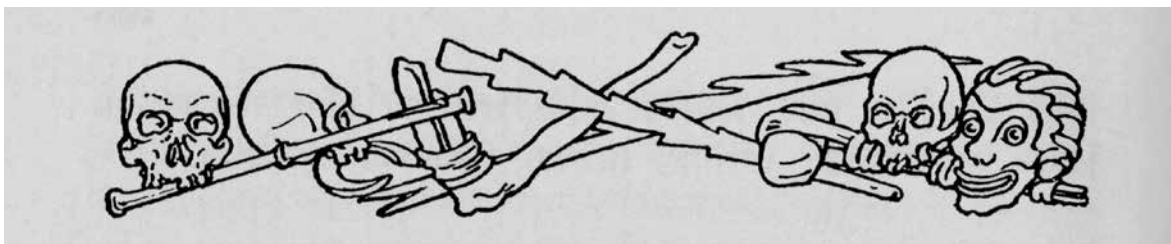


Fig. 2 - Illustrating the defilement of human remains

It seems that the illustrator was particularly impressed by one specific aspect of this chapter. Overall, however, he did not give it much space – exactly one vignette among many others, most of which show plants. The content, on the other hand, is provided by two (also white) women; and it is by no means fictional. Whatever the daughter has faked in the letters of the mother: the narration of the procurement and sending of indigenous skeletons by Amalie Dietrich from Australia correspond to the facts. In this regard, the ‘black legend’ is not a figment of male fantasy; rather, it has its origin in Dietrich’s actions and has existed since the beginning of the construction of stories about her stay in Australia.

In the aforementioned letter, she informs her daughter about her encounters with Indigenous Australians and declares their “culture” to be “at a rather low level”. She then writes about Godeffroy’s long-held request that she procured “skeletons of the natives”, stating it was not unproblematic for her to comply with his demand. Skeletons of children were easily obtainable since commonly they were “just stuck in a hollow tree” – other than “warriors” who were

36 Cf. Paul Turnbull, *The body and soul snatchers*, pp. 35 f. – for details see fig. 4 below and the related information.

37 Charitas Bischoff, *Amalie Dietrich* (1909), p. 386.

“ceremonially buried” in “flat mounds”. Subsequently, Dietrich announces the sending of “thirteen skeletons and several skulls to Hamburg” to “hopefully satisfy the Godeffroys”.³⁸

It is suspected that this text, as well, has been manipulated by Charitas Bischoff.³⁹ Even the number of skeletons and skulls is wrong. According to the Godeffroy inventory, Dietrich sent two skulls and eight skeletons from Australia.⁴⁰ But the basic facts of grave robbing and the desecration of corpses are beyond dispute.

Though the remarkable element of the story was the fact that the collecting of plants, animals, and human remains was accomplished by a woman, it was not perceived as exceptional that human skulls and skeletons were among the collectibles. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Amalie Dietrich’s biography was narrated, the display of human remains was part of German everyday life (but also of that in other countries on the offenders’ side of colonialism and imperialism). It counted among the elements of a racialized political economy of anthropological othering – clamped in a web of public museums, human zoos, colonial advertising, exotic adventure novels, and imperial propaganda.⁴¹

Aside from these mainstream circumstances, the rumour concerning Dietrich’s murderous practice had made its way from Australia to Germany even before her letters were published. It was, however, neither scandalized nor circulated nor integrated into the narration of her antipodean stint. In a book review of one of the main sources of this allegation, the readers of the magazine ‘Globus’ of spring 1908 were informed that “a female collector from the Museum Godeffroy in Hamburg” had sojourned in Queensland, “who constantly requested the settlers to shoot an Aborigine for her, so that she could send the skeleton home”.⁴²

‘Preserved Human Skin’:

Amalie Dietrich in the Weimar Republic

The Weimar Republic saw not only continuous republications of Amalie Dietrich’s biography but furthermore, due to a few anniversaries and the death of Charitas Bischoff, appraisals of the two women’s work. In 1919, a Hamburg newspaper recommended the book to the “ideal female reader of the present” and suggested

38 Charitas Bischoff, *Amalie Dietrich*, pp. 388 (‘low-level’), 389 (‘skeletons’, etc.), 390 (‘thirteen’, ‘satisfy’). All translations from German are done by the authors.

39 Cf. [Ray Sumner], *Combinatorial Creativity and the Australian Letters of Amalie Dietrich* – previously published in the 2016 Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, here pp. 202 ff.

40 Cf. Birgit Scheps, *Die Australien-Sammlung aus dem Museum Godeffroy im Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig*, p. 197. Already in 1881, Johannes D. E. Schmeltz and Rudolf Krause had listed eight skeletons, two skulls, and one lower jaw and noted that “all skulls and skeletons were collected by Frau A. Dietrich” – id., *Die ethnographisch-anthropologische Abtheilung des Museum Godeffroy in Hamburg*, p. 581.

41 Cf. Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*; H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture*; Alexander Honold, Klaus R. Scherpe, eds., *Mit Deutschland um die Welt*; David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire*; Volker M. Langbehn, ed., *German Colonialism, Visual Culture and Modern Memory*; Jürgen Zimmerer, ed., *Kein Platz an der Sonne*.

42 [Review of] H. Ling Roth, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay, Queensland*.

that she should read it as one of the “wonderful examples how women have understood to form and deepen their lives”.⁴³

Almost two years earlier, the chauvinist and völkisch writer Gustav Frenssen,⁴⁴ telling about the many occasions he socialized with Bischoff, recounted how she understood it as her “duty to her mother and the German people” to retell the life of this famous woman. Frenssen valued the book as a “memorial” that “shakes the hearts of the Germans and in particular the hearts of the women”.⁴⁵

The narration of Dietrich’s life was not only deemed an inspirational piece for women and other Germans but also an international success. Dietrich’s centennial was remembered in an article that honoured her biography as “one of the most beloved and read books of the last ten years”; “high and low, young and old, Germans and foreigners admire and love the book” that has “found its way to every part of the world and was translated into several languages”.⁴⁶ One year later, another article informed its readers that a school is using the book as teaching material for the intellectual formation of young girls, giving them a lasting “valuable memory” of the “eventful and strong-willed” life of Amalie Dietrich.⁴⁷ Her daughter’s 75th birthday was taken as another occasion to remind the readership of her book about the “remarkable” woman who was “unique in her mixture of aptitude of sacrifice, urge for knowledge, scientific competence and perseverance” and her achieved “wide-praised name as a natural scientist”.⁴⁸

These newspaper articles did not mention Dietrich’s osseous shipment. This was made up for in an obituary of her daughter Charitas Bischoff in 1925. It gave once again rise to a depiction of Dietrich’s scientific endeavours and praised her work for the Museum Godeffroy, including “the skeletons, skulls, weapons, and tools of the natives” of Australia.⁴⁹ In 1927, a memorial site for Dietrich was established at her place of birth, Siebenlehn.⁵⁰ Two years later, Hamburg named a street after her, the ‘Amalie-Dietrich-Weg’.⁵¹ Given the fact that her contribution to anthropology was universally known at this time, honours like these also included her share in the Western ‘bone trade’.

Only when the eyes of the eulogists roamed from plants, insects and human bones to human skin, the tone became slightly different. In 1932, a detailed and sensationalist newspaper article featured an interview with a contemporary of Dietrich’s, the naturalist Alexander Sokolowsky⁵² (who became an ‘eye-witness’ in the recent ‘Angel of Black Death’ debates). He has “known her well”

43 Neue Hamburger Zeitung, 27 December 1919, p. 9 (Die ideale Leserin der Gegenwart).

44 For Frenssen and his literary milieu, see Kay Dohnke, *Völkische Literatur und Heimatliteratur 1870-1918*; for his popular colonial novel ‘Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest’ (published 1906) see Medardus Brehl, *Vernichtung der Herero*.

45 Neue Hamburger Zeitung, 2 March 1918, p. 13 (Gustav Frenssen, Charitas Bischoff).

46 Hamburger Anzeiger, 28 May 1921, p. 7 (Amalie Dietrich. Zu ihrem hundertsten Geburtstag).

47 Hamburgischer Correspondent und Hamburgische Börsen-Halle, 30 April 1922, p. 13 (Lebensbilder als Unterrichtsmaterial).

48 Hamburger Nachrichten, 7 March 1923, p. 7 (Charitas Bischoff).

49 Hamburger Anzeiger, 27 February 1925, p. 5 (Charitas Bischoff).

50 Hamburger Anzeiger, 10 June 1927, p. 7 (Eine Gedächtnisstätte für Amalie Dietrich).

51 Hamburgischer Correspondent und Hamburgische Börsen-Halle, 21 July 1929, p. 10 (Weitere neue Straßennamen in Hamburg).

52 Hamburger Anzeiger, 12 November 1932, p. 20 (Erinnerungen an Amalie Dietrich), here also the following quotes.

and reminisced how he rambled through the Museum Godeffroy as a secondary school pupil and got into a conversation with Dietrich. "It has not always been easy for her to purchase skeletons and skulls of the natives. The austral negroes still practiced a lively ancestor worship and put the skulls of their ancestors on bamboo stands, from which they had to be literally plucked if one wanted to 'purchase' them".

However, the real sensation of the article was not the collecting of bones but a "negro skin". It was pictured by the newspaper (see fig. 3) – though even the author of the article had its doubts about the veracity of the associated story. "Gracious heavens!", he proclaimed: "Should this woman, whose nerves had been hardened to the point of robustness by the rough life in the Australian bush, have even possessed nature to separate the skin from the body of a dead Papua negro and send it salted to Hamburg?"

This sensationalist story has been transported to the contemporary discourse by Ray Sumner. How she managed this by a collage of hearsay, offstage voices from primary sources, and, deduced from there, unproven assertions, is an argumentative stunt worth to be checked in detail. Contributors to "the local oral history [...]" refer specifically to a lady scientist asking for the pelt of an aborigine. The similarity with the German word *Pelz* (skin or fur) suggests that this was indeed Dietrich's wording". This linguistic argument was followed by an epidermic one: "further proof of this story lies in what must be regarded nowadays as the most bizarre item of her enormous Australian collections. Earlier this century, the Zoological Museum in Hamburg still retained and indeed displayed the tanned skin of an Australian Aborigine, collected by Dietrich".

Hereafter, Sumner referred to the newspaper article comprising the photography and mention of the skin and the interview with Sokolowsky and states: "The story of Dietrich's acquisition of the skin was not recorded in this interview". Finally, she ventilated a further conjecture: "Dietrich may have acquired the skin from a local [...] Aboriginal group, since Finch-Hatton, for example, records skinning as a locale practice".⁵³ Whether an interpretation of this conglomerate of facts and fiction starts with the beginning or with the end amounts to the same



Fig. 3 – 'Menschenhaut': facts and fiction going viral

misery. The word ‘pelt’⁵⁴ was allegedly used by an Australian settler and, hence, may have been just as well part of the dehumanising language of the violent frontier racism – which the allegation by Harold Finch-Hatton, who lived as a settler and gold hunter for some years in Australia, most certainly was. He combined skinning and cannibalism in a lurid tale.⁵⁵

The central section of Sumner’s deliberations is of the same quality. They switch without hesitation from ‘local oral history’ to the presentation of ‘facts’ respectively of a ‘skin collected by Dietrich’. There is, however, every indication that this is an artefact of fiction altogether. Birgit Scheps has reviewed the sources under this aspect.⁵⁶ A human skin is neither listed in the holdings of the Museum Godeffroy nor is it specified in the sales records of the *Australiana* from Hamburg to Leipzig. It is not referred to in publications on anthropological ‘material’ from the museum and goes unmentioned in the studies published in its journal. Its existence is therefore rather improbable – not least because ‘skin trade’ *was* a part of the political economy of human remains. It did not only belong to the scientific sphere of anthropology but also spanned common entertainment.

In Germany, this had public appeal particularly in connection with the popular ‘redskin’-novels by Karl May, distributed en masse to the general public.⁵⁷ Completely invented by the author, he nevertheless pretended to deliver first-hand information on the ‘Wild West’ – the ‘native’ custom of scalping included. Scalps were also exhibited in the Karl-May-Museum after they had been given to May’s widow in 1926. The donor also reported about their ‘acquisition’.⁵⁸

A special attraction were the mummified and tattooed Maori heads, so-called *Toi Moko*. They were ‘collected’ and exhibited by numerous western museums. In Germany, there were and still are such heads; in 2011 and 2018, *Toi Moko* were returned by museums from Frankfurt and Cologne,⁵⁹ and the ethnological museum in Hamburg also returned a *Toi Moko*.⁶⁰

Indigenous Australians were also victims of this part of racist desecration of corpses. The interest in their skin was by no means always scientifically motivated. After the London Zoological Society had “appealed for specimens through the colonial press”, they, inter alia, got some “skulls and ‘the bones included in the dried skin of a female Native of Australia’”.⁶¹ After the death of William Lanne, regarded by the white Tasmanians as the last ‘pure-blooded’ man of the

54 Pelt has its place not only in German dictionaries (as ‘Pelz’), the Oxford English dictionary also quotes its use as a designation of the “human skin, esp. when bare” in the English language. Cf. Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. ‘pelt’, no. 1, 6.

55 Cf. Harold Finch-Hatton, *Advance Australia*, p. 128: “When a warrior of celebrity dies, [...] they skin him with the greatest care, and, after eating as much of him as they feel inclined for, they pick his bones beautifully clean and wrap them up in his skin”.

56 Cf. Birgit Scheps, *Skelette aus Queensland*, p. 140.

57 Cf. Dieter Sudhold, Hartmut Vollmer, eds., *Karl Mays ‘Winnetou’*; for the background, see Hartmut Lutz, *German Indianthusiasm*.

58 Cf. Patty Frank (i.e. Ernst Tobis), “Wie ich meinen ersten Skalp erwarb”. Debates surrounding the repatriation of these human remains continue until today – see Robin Leipold, *The ‘Recommendations’ in Practice*.

59 Cf. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 August 2018 (Judith von Sternburg, Eva Raabe); Julia Günther, *Kunst der Kolonialzeit*.

60 *taz*, 18 November 2014 (Petra Schellen, *Exponate aus ehemaligen Kolonien*).

61 Paul Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, p. 206.

indigenous population, there was a dispute between rival doctors over his mortal remains. They desecrated his body several times and cut off his head, hands, and feet to preserve them for research. The scientists also provided themselves with personal trophies. One of them “had a tobacco pouch made out of a portion of the skin”.⁶²

When Tambo, a member of a group of Indigenous Australians from Queensland, marketed as ‘Australian Cannibals’ by a white impresario, died in Cleveland (Ohio), his body was left to the owner of a local dime museum. He announced in the press that he intended “to have the body embalmed” and “planned to exhibit Tambo behind glass”.⁶³

As these examples show, ‘skin’ was not only the subject of anthropological interest. As far as the racial science discourse is concerned, it had become more and more ossified since the beginning of the nineteenth century and concentrated on bones and skulls. However, the popular image of races was still dominated by skin colour. It was much more than the display of a superficial difference. Skin colour was considered an indicator of culture and ultimately of humanity itself.

In this sense, the German naturalist physician Lorenz Oken declared at the beginning of the nineteenth century: “The human being is the white man. His inner self shines through the skin because the skin is transparent, uncoloured. He who can blush is a human being; he who cannot do so is a Moor”. To these, the author counted “also the brown-black Australians”.⁶⁴ The gradations of humanity, which were designed by racial theory, should be readable from the shades of the skin. The different dehumanization strategies of a long European colonial history were reflected in this idea and continued to have an effect. What shaped the way non-white people were treated, applied all the more to their mortal remains.

‘She was a German Woman’:

Amalie Dietrich in the Fascist ‘Reich’

Charitas Bischoff’s book about her mother was published in further editions during the time of German fascism. There were no objections to its distribution. The publishers were on the side of the new rulers anyway. The senior partner wrote already in 1932 to one of its authors: “My fervent wish is that the great movement in politics may lead to recovery and advancement”. His son, who joined the publishing house in 1935, became a member of the SS.⁶⁵

Besides the continuation of the daughter’s legend, there were several other works on Amalie Dietrich. The journalist Gertraud Enderlein published a novel-like story about ‘A Woman from Siebenlehn’. In the same year, she wrote an entry about Dietrich for an association protecting the Saxon ‘Heimat’ without

62 Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p. 217; see Stefan Petrow, *The Last Man*.

63 Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages*, p. 106.

64 Lorenz Oken, *Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie*, p. 355.

65 Volker Griese, *Die drei Leben des Gustav F.*, p. 204 (‘fervent wish’); Benjamin Carter Hett, “This Story Is about Something Fundamental”, p. 211 (‘SS’).

mentioning her anthropological efforts.⁶⁶ The poet and essayist Paul Appel wrote an article about Amalie Dietrich in the 'Kölnische Zeitung' and unsuccessfully negotiated with the publisher Goverts a biography dedicated to her.⁶⁷

One author dealing with Amalie Dietrich was politically right-wing and, at least at the beginning, voting for Hitler, positively evaluated the National Socialists' seizure of power. However, the Nazis' racial laws declared Elisabeth Langgässer to be 'half-Jewish' and imposed a ban on publication in 1936.⁶⁸ Until then, she had still been able to publish. In June 1933, her radio play 'Frauen als Wegbereiter: Amalie Dietrich' ('Women as Trailblazers: Amalie Dietrich') was aired. Intended for young people, its broadcast was repeated in September.⁶⁹

Dietrich's character must have interested Langgässer, if only because she was the mother of an illegitimate daughter and felt disturbed by the child in her work as a writer.⁷⁰ Besides, the girl born out of wedlock had a Jewish father, the Social Democratic constitutional law expert Hermann Heller. Since Langgässer herself had a Jewish father, her daughter was considered a 'three-quarter Jew' under the Nazis' racial laws. While her mother found relative protection through marriage in a so-called 'privileged mixed marriage', the daughter was hit by the full force of the racial laws, had to wear the Star of David, move to a Jewish house, and was eventually deported to Auschwitz.⁷¹

The fascist racial laws were not passed until two years after Langgässer's radio play was written. Contemporary antisemitism and other racisms associated with it, however, were already fully present in 1933. In Langgässer's play, this is reflected in the characterisation of Indigenous Australians as primitive "Papuaner", who 'cackle', 'howl', 'bare their teeth', 'shout wildly', are predominantly busy with drumming, and are classified as "treacherous and malicious".⁷²

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the anthropological body snatching is uncritically included in the description of her activities by the broadcasted Amalie. Her "mission is: Collect plants and animals of all kinds [...], birds and their nests, weapons and skeletons of the natives. Collect, collect! Gather!"

66 Cf. Gertraud Enderlein, *Eine Frau aus Siebenlehn* (1937); id., *Die Naturforscherin Amalie Dietrich (1821-1891)*, pp. 164 ff. Her 1955 recast of the novel goes much further in reporting her grave-robbing endeavours and the subsequent plans for the academic exploitation of the human remains by Virchow.

67 Cf. Anne-M. Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts im Dritten Reich*, p. 421. Also not printed at first was a social history of the 'Bürgertum', the 'respectable German middle class', by Alice Berend, in which there is a chapter on Amalie Dietrich. The Jewish author commenced its creation already during the Weimar Republic and was only able to finish it after her migration into exile enforced by the Nazis. It was finally published in the Federal Republic – cf. Alice Berend, *Die gute alte Zeit. Amalie Dietrich* is portrayed as an emancipated woman and natural scientist. The subject 'bones' is only mentioned in a letter quoted from Bischoff's collection. Human remains are rated like mosses, snails, or spiders. They bring "recognition" through the "scholars" at home. Words of critique are missing.

68 Cf. Mathias Bertram, *Literarische Epochendiagnosen der Nachkriegszeit*, p. 23.

69 Cf. Anthony W. Riley, *Elisabeth Langgässers frühe Hörspiele*, p. 384.

70 Cf. Eva-Maria Gehler, *Weibliche NS-Affinitäten*, p. 261.

71 Langgässer's daughter Cordelia has later processed her youth in literature – see Cordelia Edvardson, *Burned Child Seeks the Fire*; cf. Dagmar C. G. Lorenz, *Keepers of the Motherland*, pp. 160-170.

72 Elisabeth Langgässer, *Frauen als Wegbereiter*, pp. 12 ('Papua-Negroes'), 13 ('gibber' etc.), 17 ('insidious and malicious'); for the following quote, see *ibid.*, p. 7.

The ‘collecting’ adjoined in connection with anthropological ‘objects’ was, in fact, part of a political economy of human remains. By the time Langgässer took up the term, this had long since become manifest in the form of a veritable ‘bone trade’ concerning the holdings of Dietrich’s loot. The trading company Godeffroy declared insolvency in 1879. The museum was continued until it had to make way for the expansion of the Hamburg harbour. In the course of the museum’s dissolution from 1882 to 1885, several parties were interested in its various holdings. The entire anthropological and ethnological collection finally went to the city of Leipzig, which purchased it for its new ethnological museum.⁷³

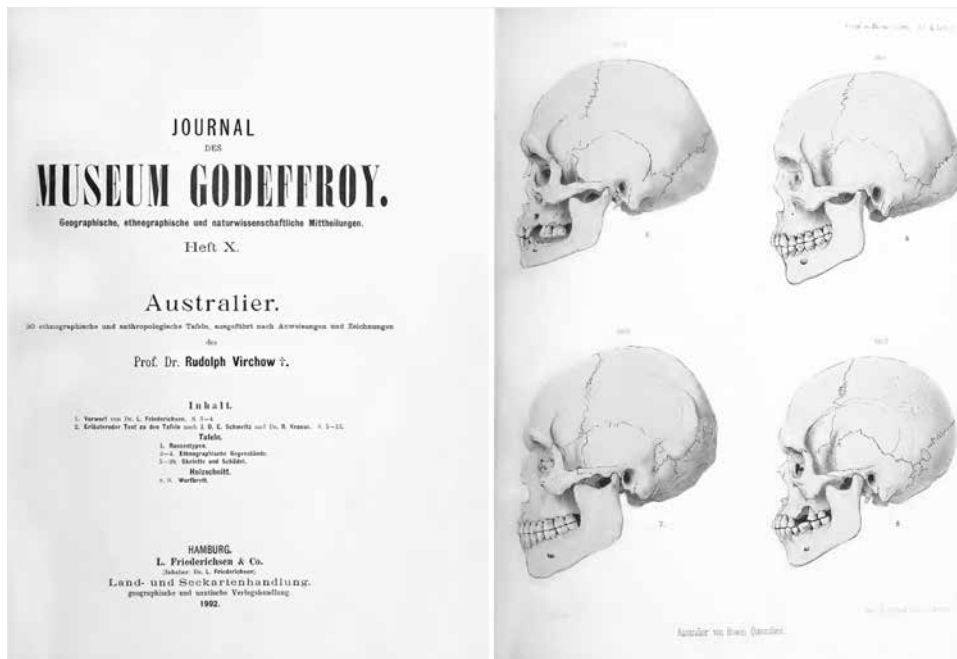


Fig. 4 – Racial profiling

They were rated a considerable acquisition. Not only did they represent rare items, but they had also been made known in the scientific community by the renowned anthropologist Rudolf Virchow. His scientific examination of the skulls and skeletons was published after his death in a special issue of the journal of the Museum Godeffroy in 1902 – together with photographs of three skeletons and several skulls, all of them also graphically represented in profile, front view, top view, and bottom view. Two of them were even called by name, indicating that their mortal remains did not date back to bygone times. They must have lived (and died) in temporal and spatial proximity to Amalie Dietrich’s stay in Queensland (see fig. 4).⁷⁴

In Leipzig, the bones Dietrich brought to Germany outlasted the rest of the Empire, the Weimar Republic, and most of the so-called ‘Third Reich’. They were

73 Cf. Birgit Scheps, *Das verkaufte Museum*.

74 Cf. Johannes D. E. Schmeltz, Eduard Krause, *Australier*. Fig. 4 is reprinted from *ibid.*, plate 11. Schmeltz was the former curator of the Museum Godeffroy, Virchow was named as the originator of the measuring data and the plates on page 3. Amalie Dietrich is identified as the ‘collector’ of the human remains on p. 10 of the same issue; the (colonially assigned) names of two of the victims of Dietrich’s grave robbery and Virchow’s scientific desecration of corpses can be found on p. 11.

then destroyed during an allied air raid on the city in 1943. By this time German fascism had long since surpassed all previous forms of scientific desecration of corpses and murderous science. The Nazis' 'racial state'⁷⁵ did not only supply physicians and anthropologists with human material from its murder factories. It also enabled them to take anthropological measurements on living victims, select them according to their 'suitability' as 'racial specimens', then murdered them and exploited their corpses according to the methods of racial science.

This was, for instance, the practice of August Hirt, professor of anatomy at the 'Reich University' of Strasbourg, where he wanted to establish a 'Jewish skeleton collection' and a collection of 'Judeo-Bolshevik skulls'. In doing so, he assumed to continue a tradition of anthropological research; at the University of Strasbourg, there was a repository of skulls whose origins went back to the seventeenth century. He considered his project urgent, not least because the Jews were a 'dying breed'.⁷⁶

The connection between violence and racial science could not be formulated more cynically. It was constitutive for all areas of scientific racism. There never was a non-racist racial science. Even its most liberal representatives took part in the hierarchical order of humanity and researched material from the colonial periphery.⁷⁷ This was done neither without disregard for cultural customs nor without violence and concern. Again and again, it reached as far as armed actions and genocidal massacres. Two years before Amalie Dietrich arrived in Queensland, a commander of the Native Police declared: "blacks [...] only understand brute force".⁷⁸ The victims of such violence became the subject of anthropological interest.⁷⁹ This shows to the extreme that the category of 'collecting' in the context of racial anthropology is euphemistic, disguising, and trivializing.

The same holds also true of Amalie Dietrich's 'collecting' and 'gathering': it was *Leichenschändung* (literally: disgracing, humiliating corpses). In contrast to the English term 'desecration of corpses', which imparts the act a religious aura and understands it as a profanation, the German word refers to a social process and thus points out that even the dead can be dehumanized and posthumously robbed of their dignity.⁸⁰

'A Real Woman':

Amalie Dietrich in the Federal Republic of Germany

Many German racial scientists were able to continue their careers after 1945 without any restrictions. Among them were Egon von Eickstedt and his student Ilse Schwidetzky. Both had also pursued 'applied' research during fascism. It included racial studies that could decide on life and death. This did not prevent

75 Cf. Michael Burleigh, Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State*.

76 Cf. Hans-Joachim Lang, *Die Namen der Nummern*, pp. 120 ff. and 210 ff.

77 Cf. Wulf D. Hund, *Negative Vergesellschaftung*.

78 Quoted from Noel Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, p. 27.

79 Cf. Peter McAllister, Shawn C. Rowlands, Michael C. Westaway, *The Blood and the Bone*; Paul Turnbull, *Anthropological Collecting and Colonial Violence in Colonial Queensland*.

80 Cf. Wulf D. Hund, *Die Körper der Bilder der Rassen*.

the scientific community of the early Federal Republic of Germany from continuing to employ them prominently. Schwidetzky passed such knowledge to a circle of students. Among them was Rainer Knußmann, who became professor of human biology and director of the Anthropological Institute of the University of Hamburg.⁸¹

In his textbook, widely distributed by a renowned scientific publishing house, he wrote about the "Australids" that they were "the most theriomorphic recent group of people", meaning "closer to the animal primates". This dehumanization was further specified by the description of physical characteristics. It also included the attribution of a "relatively frequent splayed big toe" – which actually is considered a characteristic of ape primates. In humans it would only appear as "atavism": "especially in Australids" the splayed big toe "would make the foot almost a 'grabber foot'".⁸²

Under such conditions, it was impossible to critically analyse Amalie Dietrich's contribution to anthropology. The memoirs of her daughter were published without any change. She, herself, also received public recognition. In the 1960s, a hall of residence for female students in Hamburg, sponsored by the Deutscher Akademikerinnen-Bund (German Association of Women Academics), was called 'Amalie-Dietrich-Haus' and a street, the 'Amalie-Dietrich-Stieg', was named after her.⁸³

The honours expressed the implementation of a positive image of the researcher Dietrich, who could also serve as a female model. This included ambivalent elements associated with it. The role of women embodied by her was still characterized, as a book for young people stated in 1951, by the "outrageous step" of "sacrificing her domesticity to research". Her stay in Australia was seen as an indication of a "decidedly masculine and adventurous life". This was immediately smoothed out by the author, who assured that she would have remained "a simple, quiet and modest, a real woman" until the end of her life.⁸⁴

Her 'collecting' was mainly focussed on plants. Concerning living creatures, the author let her explain: "I [...] often have a heavy heart when I have to go after the lives of harmless animals. But it fulfils scientific purposes and is now part of my task". Whereas the 'collecting' here does not extend to human remains, this connection was explicitly emphasized by Gertrud Enderlein. Her fictitious treatment of Dietrich's research presented her in the already well-established tradition as a collector. Amalie Dietrich's portrayal was punctuated by the cover illustration of the book (see fig. 5), showing her with her handcart.

The text connects the 'collection' of plants, animals, and human remains because Dietrich would have been convinced that the spectator at home could only get "a proper perspective of the unknown part of the earth" if its flowers and animals are provided with their "ethnographically important surroundings".

81 Cf. Andreas Lüddecke, *Rassen, Schädel und Gelehrte; AG gegen Rassenkunde*, ed., *Deine Knochen – Deine Wirklichkeit*.

82 Rainer Knußmann, *Lehrbuch der Anthropologie und Humangenetik*, pp. 354, 326 ('theriomorph'), 355 ('big toe'); 245 ('grabber foot').

83 Cf. Bärbel Maul, *Akademikerinnen in der Nachkriegszeit*, p. 114; Brita Reimers, *Amalie-Dietrich-Stieg*, pp. 14-17. For Dietrich in the context of colonial places of memory, see Stefanie Affeldt, "Kein Mensch setzt meinem Sammeleifer Schranken".

84 Renate Goedecke, *Als Forscherin nach Australien*, p. 125.

The “piece of the life of the inhabitants” was thus made a real necessity of her gathering activities. Almost inevitably, she “had finally even returned to the light twelve Papua skeletons which had long been entrusted to the earth” – “with a soft shiver of reverence”, contemplating whether she would “intervene in a sacred order”, just as “during the killing of the first beautiful butterfly”.⁸⁵

More than ten years later, at the end of the 1960s, things had not changed. A compilation of biographies on ‘Germans among other peoples’ comprised a volume on ‘Servants of an Idea’. Among the seventeen biographies collected there, Amalie Dietrich is the only woman – because, as the editor assures, she “remained so faithful to her idea that her idealism achieved what men’s courage did not dare to do”, namely “to master the dangers of the desert continent” with an energy to which “even the cannibals capitulated”. Nevertheless, the chapter on Dietrich is the only one that does not have its own author but is a compilation of extracts from the book of her daughter. Here then, her letter reporting the procurement of “skeletons of the natives” is reproduced.⁸⁶

Even in the context of the new women’s movement, the appreciation of Dietrich’s life did not find unclouded expression. This was also true when it originated from socialist Germany and was reflected in a publication that appeared in both East and West Germany at short intervals, such as Renate Feyl’s literary and biographical vignettes on ‘Women in Science’. Among them is a contribution on Amalie Dietrich. She “gladly accepts poverty”, it says there, “provided that she does not have to give up her botanical interest”. In its pursuit, she finds “fulfilment and meaning of life”. This goes hand in hand with “obsession”, which lets her fearlessly make long journeys in search of plants. She becomes a “plant collecting egocentric”, a “science fanatic” setting off for Australia as an esteemed botanist. There, “her attention” is not only directed to plants but also “to anthropological and ethnographic objects” – and here, too, what should apply is what distinguishes her as a whole: “She collects, collects and collects”.⁸⁷

This biographical narrative has indeed overcome the chauvinistic tone with which, long before Amalie Dietrich set off for Australia, Thomas Carlyle had assured that “[t]he History of the world is but the Biography of great men” and with which, after her return, Heinrich von Treitschke was still certain that “men



Fig. 5 – ‘Collecting with a soft shiver of reverence’

85 Gertrud Enderlein, *Die Frau aus Siebenlehn* (1955), p. 124.

86 Kurt Schleucher, *Deutsche unter anderen Völkern*; the editor’s introduction is on pp. 7-13 with the characterization of Dietrich on p. 12; the chapter on Dietrich is titled ‘Die Eine-Frau-Expedition. Amalie Dietrich’ (closely following Charitas Bischoff’s book), *ibid*, pp. 172-214, the quote concerning the skeletons can be found on p. 203.

87 Renate Feyl, *Der lautlose Aufbruch. Frauen in der Wissenschaft*. Frankfurt: Luchterhand Literaturverlag 1989 (3rd ed.; 1st ed. Berlin (DDR): Verlag Neues Leben 1981; licensed ed. for Western Germany Neuwied [et al.]: Luchterhand 1983), pp. 103 (‘interest’, ‘fulfilment’), 104 (‘obsession’), 107 (‘egocentric’, ‘science fanatic’), 114 (‘objects’, ‘collects’).

make history".⁸⁸ But the development of social and cultural historiography is ignored, and Dietrich's life is made into a puzzle of traditional biography. Like the 'great men' in the past, a woman now moves along a path determined by her character, follows her immanent 'collecting zeal' into the most distant regions of the world, and eventually extends it to human remains.

Although their unethical acquisition is well known, they are reified into 'anthropological objects'. Thus, access to critical reflection on Dietrich's activities is obstructed, and these become a legitimate part of scientific curiosity. Moreover, the basic rules of biographical historiography are disregarded. In this case, this simply concerns "the rule of entirety: Heidegger did join the Nazi party, Heisenberg did work on the German bomb, Wittgenstein did beat and slap his mathematics pupils in his brief stint as a school teacher"⁸⁹ – and Dietrich did defile human remains.

'Valuable Skeletons in Danger':

Amalie Dietrich in the German Democratic Republic

It should not surprise that Amalie Dietrich was also honoured in the German Democratic Republic. Firstly, she came from Saxony; secondly, she originated from a simple background; and thirdly, she was a role model for energetic women. All this had found its expression in a poem of the famous writer Wulf Kirsten. He celebrated Dietrich as the "Beutlermädchen" (literally: purse maker girl) and praised the never-ending energy in her enthusiasm for plant collecting. Being of a lower social descent, for him, she was "gesegnet mit dem Privileg der Armut" (blessed with the privilege of poverty). She did not resign in her discriminated social position but followed her passion and developed her skills and knowledge. By doing so, eventually, she even acquired "Ruhm" (fame), as the poem was captioned.⁹⁰

In this case, her celebrity status resulted solely from her plant gathering. The poet kept secret her desecration of corpses. This was not feasible, however, when a 'socialist' edition of her biography was published. Here, the author of the epilogue had to respond to Dietrich's contribution to scientific racism and solved this problem in a highly adventurous way.

First, he characterized his protagonist as the daughter of the "peasant family Dietrich" and her story as "lesson of the struggle for real humanity" and the "liberation of women under the conditions of the bourgeois society". Then, he made her an early precursor of anti-colonial attitudes. She had felt "sympathy" for the "natives" and thus defied the zeitgeist of "colonialism". But then, in an ideological faux pas, he referred to a publication of the Nazi era in which the persistence, thoroughness, and sense of order of the 'collector' Dietrich were explained simply by the sentence: "She was a German".

88 Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, p. 47; Heinrich von Treitschke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, p. 28.

89 Mott T. Greene, *Writing Scientific Biography*, pp. 730 f.

90 Wulf Kirsten, *ruhm*, pp. 85 f.

This praise of being German held also true for the handling of human bones. Among other things, Dietrich was said to aim for the “complete skeleton of a native”. This she also “achieves” with her ‘orderly’ attitude.⁹¹ Günther Wirth, graduate philosopher, party functionary of the bloc party ‘Christian Democratic Union of Germany’, editor and publisher of several Christian-oriented magazines in the German Democratic Republic, saw no problem in adopting this depiction without comment. Benevolence and desecration of corpses were not mutually exclusive when it came to ‘natives’.

The corresponding background is an unreflective and uncritical approach to the ideological consequences of racial thinking. It developed in several variants. Among them were naturalistic concepts which denied all so-called ‘coloured’ races the possibility of ever reaching the level of the ‘white’ Europeans. But there were also historicising concepts, according to which the ‘non-white’ races (for various reasons) would have lagged behind the Europeans in their development. The basis of this variety of modern racism was the theory of progress established by the Enlightenment, according to which humankind would work its way up to true humanity by its own efforts in certain stages. It was in this way that the ‘white race’ made the greatest progress.

The ‘coloured’ races, by contrast, were compared to children. With Hegel and Schiller, this took on philosophical and literary form. The one did not consider ‘Africa’ to be a “historical part of the world” and its inhabitants a “children’s nation”, the other saw non-European peoples “camped around us [...] like children”.⁹² This view was to prevail and further define the benevolent side of European racism, which did not aim at complete dehumanisation.

Amalie Dietrich, a few decades later, simply described the indigenous people of Australia as “uneducated children”.⁹³ This remark is found in the same section of the very letter in which her biography documented that she had disregarded the remembrance of the dead, disturbed their rest, and desecrated their corpses.

However, the vignette with the skulls is missing from the edition published in the German Democratic Republic. This does not mean that in socialist Germany no image of this part of Dietrich’s ‘research’ was created. Quite to the contrary: The narration was dramatically illustrated and published for young readers as a picture story in the ‘Trommel’ (drum), the weekly magazine for the ‘Thälmann pioneers’ published by the central council of the ‘Freie Deutsche Jugend’ (Free German Youth).

In reading it, the pioneers learned that natural research cannot be done alone. In this case two young ‘natives’ act as assistants, who are assigned to Dietrich by a ‘chief’, but in the end, only she receives the awards for her ‘collections’, here two gold medals from the ‘Deutscher Naturforscherverband’. A part of her ‘collecting

91 Günther Wirth’s epilogue in the 1980 copy of Charitas Bischoff, *Amalie Dietrich*, pp. 312 (‘peasant family’), 307 (‘humanity’, ‘liberation’), 322 (‘sympathy’, ‘skeleton’); Wirth took the last information from an article on Dietrich by Enderlein in the *Dresdener Neuesten Nachrichten* in 1935 – moreover, it is her 1937 biographical sketch ‘Die Naturforscherin Amalie Dietrich’ (p. 166), where the praise of Germanness can be found. For Wirth, see Helmut Müller-Enbergs, et al., eds., *Wer war wer in der DDR*, s. v. ‘Wirth, Günther’.

92 For the historical and ideological background as well as for the quotes, see Wulf D. Hund, *Wie die Deutschen weiß wurden*, pp. 79-96, 87 (‘Hegel’), 89 (‘Schiller’).

93 Charitas Bischoff, *Amalie Dietrich*, p. 389

work', she prefers to do alone and secretly anyway. It is connected with desecration of corpses and not free of risk because human remains are subject to the remembrance of the 'natives' and rest in "shrines" in which the deceased were buried. Obviously, "skulls and skeletons" may be secretly stolen when a "famous doctor and physiologist" "needs" them to take "skull measurements" (see fig. 6).⁹⁴

This version of the 'black legend' was probably the most widely circulated – because the 'Trommel' as the journalistic organ of a mass organisation was used



Hier ist die Stelle, die sie sucht: Gespenstisch huscht der Lichtstrahl ihrer Laterne über Totenköpfe und Skelette. In sargähnlichen Schreinen ruhen sie im Geäst.

Das sind wunderbare Funde: Der berühmte Arzt und Physiologe Virchow braucht sie für Schädelmessungen. Plötzlich schrickt Amalie zusammen: Stimmen nähern sich!

„Die Eingeborenen tanzen im Wald! Sie dürfen mich nicht finden!“ Amalie stürzt ins Dickicht, kommt vom Wege ab. Die wertvollen Skelette sind in Gefahr.

Fig. 6 – 'The valuable skeletons are in danger'

in some places as teaching material and reached a circulation of up to one million copies.⁹⁵ It conveyed the positive image of a heroine who came to the honoured rank of a researcher from humble circumstances. The fact that the secret theft and removal of human remains was declared to be one of the venerated achievements did not detract from her positive image. The caption left no doubt about this. The "natives" were not allowed to see anything of the action, because then the "valuable skeletons" would be in "danger" – "valuable" for researchers in Germany, in "danger" because the "natives" would never have given them away voluntarily.

Still, in the mid-1960s, and in an ideological environment that continued to be in line with socialist principles, Amalie Dietrich was seen as the emancipated 'plant hunter' who had made it by her own efforts to scientific recognition. Here, too, the awareness of the extension of her activities to the procurement of human remains lay within the knowledge horizon of those who shaped and disseminated Dietrich's image. This did not shake the portrayal of her as an integer

94 The cartoon 'Amalie Dietrich, eine Frau in Australien' by Christa Altenburger and Bernhard Kluge was published in four instalments in the 'Trommel', 1965, 42-46; this is an extract from the second instalment. The texts underneath the images read (from left to right): "Here is the spot she is looking for: spookily, the beam of her lantern flits over skulls and skeletons. In coffin-like shrines, they rest in the branches"; "These are wonderful finds: the famous doctor and physiologist Virchow needs them for skull measurements. Suddenly Amalie winces: Voices are approaching!"; "The natives are dancing in the forest! They must not find me!" Amalie plunges into the thicket, strays from the path. The valuable skeletons are in danger".

95 Cf. the contributions by Klaus Pecher and Susanne Lost in Christoph Lüth, Klaus Pecher, eds., *Kinderzeitschriften in der DDR*, pp. 12 ff., and 152 ff.

natural scientist. Seemingly, the acquisition of the bones of deceased ‘natives’ was still considered a legitimate part of her engagement.

The failure of critical thinking in this context may come as a surprise. Already the Third International had taken up the fight against colonialism – and included it in their programme, in which the old parole from the ‘Communist Manifesto’ was expanded to the slogan: “Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!”⁹⁶ After the defeat of fascism, this political perspective also became effective in the German Democratic Republic. In the second half of the 1970s, when the book about Dietrich was published, this had intensified in the context of systemic competition. Like other socialist states, the German Democratic Republic pursued an offensive policy of ‘socialist economic aid’.⁹⁷

Additionally, historical scholarship in socialist Germany commenced to critically investigate the colonial policy of imperialist Germany much earlier than the colleagues in the West. In this context, a study on colonial policy in Namibia was published in the mid-1960s and received international recognition. It assessed the persecution of the Nama to be a crime and characterized it as a genocide.⁹⁸ The colonialism discussed here was analysed (quite rightly) as the politics of capitalist monopolies and an imperialist state.⁹⁹

From this perspective, the racists were (only) the others. In their own country, the “fascist racial barbarism” had been overcome, and they were on the right side in the struggle “against apartheid, racism and colonialism”.¹⁰⁰ Such statements were not put into a broader context of racism analysis. In fact, no theory of racism at all developed in the German Democratic Republic. Though, admittedly, there were some initial approaches to this,¹⁰¹ they were not enhanced and neither historically nor sociologically processed.

This also applied to the science of anthropology. Its representatives did not attempt to trace the recent racist past back to its origins and subject it to general criticism. Rather, race theory was continued in a widespread textbook, while the subject of racism remained untreated. Given the author, this was not surprising. He had learned his scientific tools from Nazi racial researchers during fascism.¹⁰²

96 Cf. John Riddell, *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!*.

97 Cf. Ulrich van der Heyden, *GDR Development Policy in Africa*.

98 Cf. Horst Drechsler, *Südafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*. Eventually, the study was translated into English – see Horst Drechsler, *Let Us Die Fighting*; one of the chapters has the heading ‘The Battle in the Waterberg: The Genocide of the Herero’ (pp. 154 ff.).

99 Cf. Manfred Nussbaum, *Vom “Kolonialenthusiasmus” zur Kolonialpolitik der Monopole*.

100 *Gegen Rassismus, Apartheid und Kolonialismus*, p. 702.

101 Cf. Stefan Heymann, *Marxismus und Rassenfrage*; Siegbert Kahn, *Antisemitismus und Rassenhetze*.

102 Cf. Hans Grimm, *Einführung in die Anthropologie*, pp. 64 f.; for the author, see *Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung*, Grimm, Johannes (Hans), and Holle Greil, Ingrid Wustmann, *In memoriam Hans Grimm* – this obituary does not contain a single critical word about Grimm’s education during the Nazi period; quite the contrary, it praises the deceased for his adherence to the esteem of his superior: “After completing his doctorate [...] Hans Grimm took up his first assistant position at the Anthropological Institute, which was headed by E. v. Eickstedt. It is characteristic for him that, contrary to the later spirit of the age, he never denied his respect for v. Eickstedt’s scientific work” (p. 164); Eickstedt was one of the leading racial scientists of the Nazi period (and his disciples and grant-disciples, like Schwidetzky and Knußmann also made careers in West Germany – see above, f.n. 81), the ‘later spirit of the age’ was the criticism of his research (cf. Andreas Lüddecke, *Rassen, Schädel und Gelehrte*).

**'White Grandmother' and 'Angel of Black Death':
Amalie Dietrich in Unified Germany**

In addition to her biography, there were other 'all-German' texts on Amalie Dietrich before 1989. Of them, Renate Feyl's 'Women in Science' outright omits the problem of scientific desecration of corpses. It appears only indirectly in one sentence: "Rudolf Virchow wants to evaluate the anthropological material she has collected".¹⁰³ Such handling of the topic of scientific body theft is no less problematic than its journalistic scandalization. The violent colonial background of Dietrich's contribution to scientific racism escapes the attention directed towards the emancipatory dimension of the life of an extraordinary woman. The human remains stolen by her are transformed into mere 'anthropological material'.

At the beginning of the 1990s, at a time when issues of repatriation and restitution of indigenous human remains are already problematized, and to some extent successfully negotiated, in Northern America and Australia, the German discourse on Dietrich's treatment of human remains was divided. On the one hand, it was explicitly addressed and even reached the German-speaking readership in Australia.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, the anthropological dimension of Dietrich's 'collecting' was concealed.

Ilse Jahn (from the former German Democratic Republic) refrained from discussing the topic altogether. She quoted one of Dietrich's alleged letters to her daughter, telling her about all the "natural wonders". However, Jahn very clumsily chose to erase from the records six words important in this context: "whether it is inconspicuous mosses, slugs, spiders and millipedes or tools ... all, all serve to connect me with my old home". But whose 'tools'? The very telling ellipsis held the truth – the Rockhampton letter from April 1864 stated that, besides the floral and faunal specimen, "tools, skulls and skeletons of the natives, all, all serve to connect me with my old home".¹⁰⁵ While Jahn lauded Dietrich's curiosity that caused her to "expand her areas of interest to anthropology and ethnology", her problematic contribution to these fields were obliterated.¹⁰⁶

Not any better was an audio collage dealing with the problem of anthropological body snatching. In the radio play 'The Collector', Amalie Dietrich, framed by a 'Song of the Earth', is seen by the 'natives' as a 'white grandmother from the Dreamtime'. Her journey takes her "into the nurseries of humanity", where she also pursues her anthropological activities. This part of the audio collage is contested by various voices. They mention "freshly cut heads" and "cut off hands or feet"; an old man tells of "Pemulwuy's head" and Dietrich of "13 skeletons" which she intends to send to Hamburg. The broadcasting station profanely announced: "She will pack skeletons and skulls of aboriginal people in boxes, preserve them in barrels and jars and send them across the sea from Australia to Germany".¹⁰⁷

103 Renate Feyl, *Der lautlose Aufbruch*, p. 116.

104 Cf. Henriette Treplin, "...schicken nun dreizehn Skelette und mehrere Schädel nach Hamburg".

105 Charitas Bischoff, *Amalie Dietrich*, p. 281.

106 Ilse Jahn, *Amalie Dietrich*, pp. 121 ('natural wonders' etc.), 122 ('anthropology').

107 Cf. Ursula Weck, *Die Sammlerin*.

In a novel by Annette Dutton, a German-born, Australia-based journalist, reference is made to the narrative of the “Angel of Black Death” as “lacking any foundation”.¹⁰⁸ It is explained that this is a rumour that has never been attributed to a man. In the fictitious narration of the novel, an Indigenous Australian absolves Dietrich from these allegations by stating: “She didn’t do it. It was the man who worked for her”. This is part of the novel’s lengthy and tangled historical fabrication of the procurement of human remains. “[F]rom time to time, Amalie found single human bones or skulls in abandoned settlements of the blacks” – but this is not sufficient for Godeffroy’s anthropological desires. He asks her to send “complete skeletons”, “the more the better, but as soon as possible at least eight, also those of children”. In a dedicated chapter, Dutton describes how Dietrich is unwilling or incapable of accomplishing such a “dark task”. It is a completely invented (rather misogynist) employee of Virchow who sets out to acquire the skeleton of a child with the help of a cooperative indigenous farm servant.

Obviously, Amalie Dietrich was meant to be kept out of the controversy about human remains. But the debates surrounding their repatriation reached even ordinary German households, when, in March 2011, a documentary film took up the question of German involvement in the European ‘bone trade’.¹⁰⁹ Its scientific advisor simultaneously published an article in the magazine ‘Geo’.¹¹⁰ Both publications dealt with the question of origins, colonial context, and future of human remains in German museums and institutions; both have in common that Amalie Dietrich, and in particular her acquisition of the skeletons, is the scandalizing hook of this topic.

Just as the Geo’s version was richly illustrated with sensationalist imagery (amongst other things, the ominous skin and the skeletons), the expert interviews of the film were intercut with historical materials and re-enacted sequences. The heart of the documentary is the dealing with ‘murder in the name of science’ and the violent relations between Indigenous Australians and Europeans. It is a real textbook example of the *mise-en-scène* of a suspicion.

The initial setting is solely populated by men – known scientists in Germany and Australia and anonymous “strange men living on death” providing them with human remains from Australia. The dramaturgy is geared to this scandal and promises to present “evidence which calls the culprits by name”. For this purpose, it sends an actress to the Queensland outback and refers to her as Amalie Dietrich. At first, she is shown dragging her hand cart through the bush, fiddling around in her cabin, looking through the microscope, feeding caged animals, and preparing plants. Then comes the watershed moment: a faded-in letter by Godeffroy asks her to collect skeletons and skulls.

Despite the admission that no reconstruction of the actual events was possible, the documentary then showcases an inculpatory chain of evidence. A descendant of the station owner who originally had accused Dietrich of asking him “to

108 For the following quotes, see Annette Dutton, *Das Geheimnis jenes Tages*, pp. 377 (‘Angel’, ‘foundation’), 38 (rumour), 361 (‘man’), 302 (‘eight’), 311 (‘dark task’), 310.

109 See Jens Monath, Heike Schmidt, *Terra X: Mordakte Museum*. In its online media library, the ZDF since added the subtitle ‘Leichen im Museumskeller’ (corpses in the museum cellar).

110 See Matthias Glaubrecht, *Der Beutezug*.

kill an Aborigine for her” is interviewed surrounded by family documents in his home. His allegation is “recorded” and, hence, certified. Afterwards, the Dietrich actress is depicted lurking in the shade of trees, spying on Indigenous Australians, and stealing their bones in the twilight of the Australian bush. This is referred to as “ruthless” and taken as evidence that she, because of that, could also have asked for or even commissioned murder. Employing a mixture of facts, fiction, and insinuation, the documentary has solved its self-imposed task, i.e. to name the offenders at the anthropological frontier. Their name is ‘Amalie Dietrich’.

The television documentary and its printed complement not only caused a scandal but also had practical consequences. One of them was a street denunciation. Alarmed by the film, a city council found itself confronted with a street named after Dietrich. It was clear that the murder accusations were a rumour. However, the press posing the question “Street named after ‘Angel of Death’?” was reason enough for a decision. A city councilwoman from the Green Party declared: “It’s enough that now there’s a bruit to it. We do not need that.” The street was renamed.¹¹¹

Since then, the rumour turned possible truth and was inexorably propagated. “Was Amalie Dietrich really ‘just’ a tomb raider”, asked a tabloid under the headline “The Angel of Death of the Aborigines” (see fig. 7).¹¹² Its double-page layout with a stamp-sized Amalie Dietrich and a page-sized representative of those negatively affected by her ‘collecting’ activities seems like an identity parade.¹¹³ She is depicted as an explorer who “advanced to areas that before hardly a white had seen” and diligently fulfilled her employer’s



Fig. 7 - ‘The Angel of Death of the Aborigines’

111 Cf. Süddeutsche Zeitung, 14 March 2011 (Fragwürdige Namenspatronin); Münchner Merkur, 23 February 2011 (Straße nach “Todesengel” benannt?); Münchner Merkur, 30 March 2011 (Aus der Amalie-Dietrich- wird die Linden-Straße). That the former ‘Amalie-Dietrich-Straße’ was renamed after the linden – a tree that was not only the centre of German village fairs and the location of romances but also oftentimes shaded the graves of beloved deceased – seems only appropriate; for the role of the linden in German literature, see Uwe Hentschel, *Der Lindenbaum in der deutschen Literatur des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*.

112 *Hamburger Morgenpost*, 29 September 2018, p. 15 (Der Todesengel der Aborigines).

113 As colonialism and its symbolic violence goes, this very photo that serves as a ‘generic’ Indigenous Australian depicts Jungun, a Western Australian man from Broome who was taken from his land in 1890 to be exhibited to the public in Melbourne. Neither the date nor the location is connected to Amalie Dietrich. However, the photo comes from the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum that also held photos taken by Dietrich. More importantly, this museum joined the ‘Returning Photos Project’ and restituted numerous photographs of Indigenous Australians from European collections to their cultural groups. This is one of them. See University of Western Australia, *Returning Photos*.

requirements – skeletons and skulls of the local inhabitants included. The article culminates in the historical accusation of murder and notes: “It will not be possible to clarify whether this is the truth or merely a legend”. But in its caption, the article judges: when in doubt, against the accused.

***A Political Economy of Human Remains:
Discursive Polyphony or Critical Analysis of Anthropologic Grave Robbery?***

Sumner ends her book with the sentence: “for Amalie Dietrich, nothing exists outside the representation”.¹¹⁴ For her activity as a ‘collector’ of bones and skulls, this is only partly true. ‘Acquired’ in the context of the colonial policy of the empire, they were destroyed in the wake of the fascist policy of aggression. Nevertheless, the evidence of their actuality proves beyond doubt that they did exist. The history of their evaluation in the various stages of German history alone shows that for the longest time they were considered exhibits of a legitimate scientific interest whose inhumane context of acquisition was justified by its noble aims.

At no time did the participants assume that their actions were without flaw. While they desecrated the corpses, they knew that the relatives and descendants of the deceased had ceremonially buried the dead and ritually remembered them. They deliberately violated moral rules that were well known to them and called their actions “sacrilege”.¹¹⁵ It was embedded in colonial violent relationships. This was clear to both the responsible people in power and the scientific consumers of human remains in the metropolis.

A decade after Amalie Dietrich returned from Australia, the British High Commissioner reported to the Prime Minister: “The habit of regarding natives as vermin, to be cleared off the face of the earth, has given to the average Queenslanders a tone of brutality and cruelty”. Even “men of culture and refinement”, he added, talk “of the individual murder of natives, exactly as if they would talk of a day’s sport, or of having to kill some troublesome animal”.¹¹⁶

Rudolf Virchow showed a keen interest in the skeletons Dietrich sent. Only two years after her return to Hamburg, Virchow put the connection between colonial violence and anthropological research on paper in no uncertain terms. He formulated a detailed programme for “collecting” and “observing”. The latter was to refer “best” to the “naked body” in terms of physical features, taking into account “the purity of race” and the “dark tribes” that could “lay claim to Aboriginality”. The former should primarily consider “bones, hair, and skin”, paying particular attention to “skulls” and increasing the “number of good skeletons”. It was suggested that “in European colonies and ordered states” hospitals and prisons as well as in other areas “safe burial grounds” should be sought out and “severed hands or feet” or even “skin” should be collected on battlefields, at public executions, or in hospitals and prisons, which would be of “great interest

114 Ray Sumner, *A Woman in the Wilderness*, p. 97.

115 Helen MacDonald, *Possessing the Dead*, pp. 214 f.

116 Quoted from Raymond Evans, *Fighting Words*, p. 38 (in the quote, ‘INDIVIDUAL’ is written in capitals).

especially in the case of coloured races".¹¹⁷ As a photograph shows (fig. 8) these instructions were markedly successful. Virchow is positioned in his cabinet of bones (like Blumenbach must already have figured on his 'Calvary').¹¹⁸

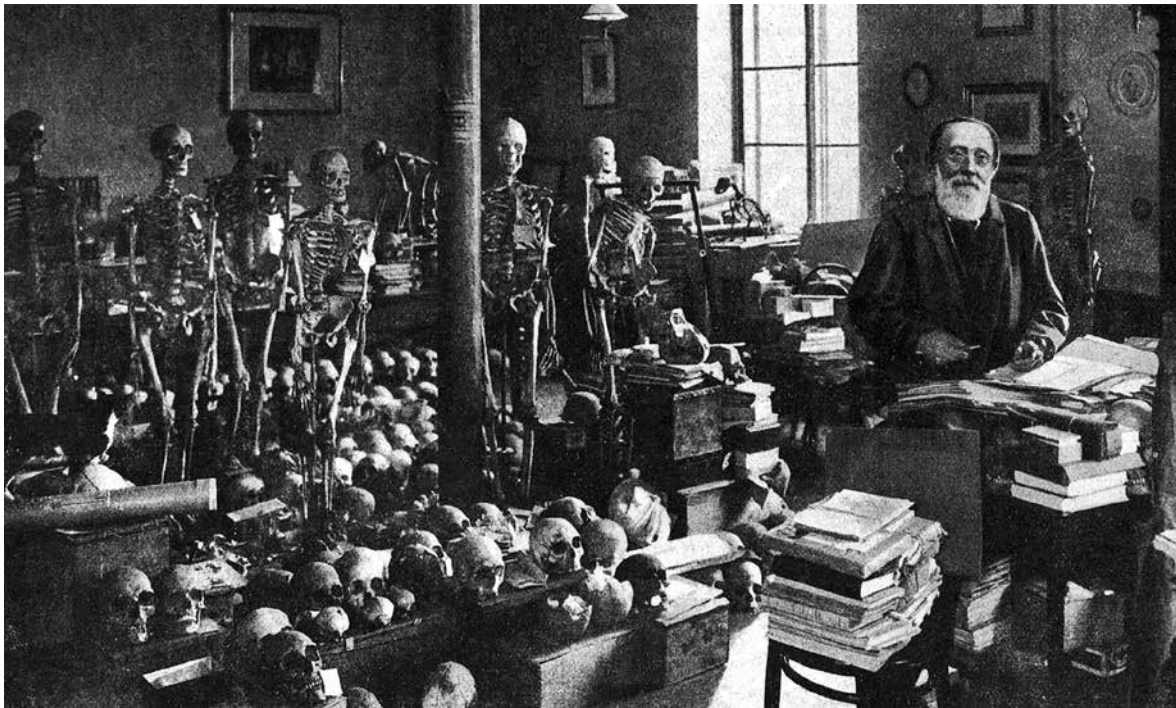


Fig. 8 - Anthropological racism: Rudolf Virchow and his 'bone collection'

Violence is inscribed in these references several times. In the case of 'safe gravesites', it is not a question of undisturbed rest for the dead but concerns the safety of the grave robbers. Occasionally, they did indeed come into danger, as the report of a Swiss botanist on a body theft in former German southwest Africa shows. He had to flee, leaving behind parts of his prey. At home, he was celebrated nevertheless. In May 1887, the 'Neue Zürcher Zeitung' characterized him as a "martyr of science, [...] who in the interest of his skeleton collection even guilted himself of desecration of graves".¹¹⁹ The adventurous semantics made it clear that his contemporaries were aware of the 'guilt' associated with such actions. Those who had accepted responsibility for it were nevertheless declared 'martyrs' who were prepared to disregard moral commandments because they believed in science.

Whether this also included disregarding the Fifth Commandment is disputed. But there is at least evidence that the scientists involved were unsure whether their excessive demand for human body parts was not satisfied in a murderous way. In 1905, Felix von Luschan, at that time professor of physical anthropology and head of the Africa-Oceania department at the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin, during a trip to South Africa, urgently requested skeletons of 'bushmen'.

117 Rudolf Virchow, *Anthropologie und prähistorische Forschungen*, pp. 571-590, pp. 581 ('collecting', 'observing'), 584 ('naked body', 'purity of race', 'dark tribes'), 581 ff. ('bones, hair, skin' etc.).

118 Rudolf Virchow in his laboratory at the Pathological Institute, 1890.

119 Quoted in Dag Henrichsen, *Die 'Skelettaffäre' und andere 'Geheimnisse'*, p. 126.

He then wrote in a letter that he would not be surprised if some of them died soon without having been ill.¹²⁰

There exist reports from Australia that are even more drastic. Whether or not they are true in individual cases is not, however, the decisive question for the important connection between colonialism, anthropology, and violence. This complex cannot be resolved by individual scandalization. Paul Turnbull, therefore, rightly places the scientific desecration of corpses in the fundamental context of ‘museum collecting and frontier violence’.¹²¹

In nineteenth-century Australia, violence against the indigenous population was part of everyday life.¹²² The political economy of the settler society included expropriation, expulsion, resettlement, forced labour, deculturation, and desocialization. All these elements were associated with coercion and physical violence, which also repeatedly led to massacres.

The “political economy of bone collecting”¹²³ was embedded in these conditions and shaped by them. This becomes emphatically clear in the example of Charles de Vis, who had come to Queensland at the time when Amalie Dietrich was also staying there. In England, he had been deacon, rector of the Anglican Church, and museum curator and had become a member of the ‘Anthropological Society’. In Australia, he soon served as curator (and later director) of the Queensland Museum.¹²⁴ There, he heard from a local physician, “that he could supply ‘any amount of skulls & bones from the place where a massacre took place’” and immediately asked that as many human remains as possible be sent to him.¹²⁵

Last but not least, the brutal actions of the ‘Native Police’ contributed to the fact that science was provided with the coveted human remains. Their commanding officers of European descent frequently combined their often deadly missions with a side-line as bone gatherers. Both occupations were de facto entwined but strictly separated morally and, above all, legally. The collected bones of Indigenous Australians were thought to come from dead people who had not been murdered for anthropological exploitation but had been killed in punitive and retaliatory actions. Their killing was covered by the cloak of justice, and the subsequent desecration of their corpses was passed off as a service to science.

Amalie Dietrich did her ‘collecting’ in this climate of open violence and racist disregard. Only two years before her arrival in Queensland, the ‘Brisbane Courier’ had printed a letter from a squatter who called for “the duty of government [...] to abolish the absurd and false law which makes it murder to kill a wild beast” and added that “we are at war with the blacks, and all means of killing them are lawful”. The writer was convinced that “[t]he very lives” of Indigenous

120 Cf. Andrew Zimmerman, *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, pp. 170 f.

121 Cf. Paul Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, pp. 285 ff.; regarding the sources on targeted killings and their assessment, see *ibid.*, pp. 279 ff.

122 Cf. the chapters on Australia in Lynette Russell, *Colonial Frontiers and Patrick Wolfe, Traces of History*.

123 Helen MacDonald, *Human Remains*, p. 108.

124 Cf. Lionel A. Gilbert, *de Vis, Charles Walter (1829-1915)*.

125 Quoted from Paul Turnbull, *Science, Museums and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*, p. 287; for the following, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 288 ff. Concerning the ‘Native Police’ see chapter 3 of Raymond Evans, “The Nigger Shall Disappear...”, pp. 55-66.

Australians “are unlawful” and that “all traces of an hostile, barbarous, and useless set of beings must be swept away by the torrent of Christian civilisation”.¹²⁶

Dietrich stayed exactly in this border zone that was marked by the violence of the white frontier society and in which even moral rules of humanity were doubted. She also defied these rules when she took possession of the mortal remains of Indigenous Australians. This was done consciously, and it was clear to her that there was both scientific and economic demand for it. She was part of a political economy of body-snatching, in which human remains were exchanged for money and reputation, and the resting place of those affected played just as little a role as the remembrance of their death by those surviving. The centre of this economy was accumulation; its results were no mere ‘collections’ but veritable banks of bones, skulls, skins, hairs, tissue, and other human components. They were not ‘collected’ but appropriated. The violent nature of this connection was unmistakable and marked all its components. A differentiation between crimes committed by individuals and the mere scientific ambitions of anthropologists would, therefore, be apologetic. The ‘murder story’ connected to Amalie Dietrich’s stay in Australia urgently needs critical reappraisal and classification. But this cannot consist in taking justified doubts about directly murderous acts as a reason to separate her activities from the injustice of frontier violence. It is certainly not acceptable to set off the small number of human remains against the enormous quantity of plants and animals that she sent to Hamburg.

This is also a topic that needs to be critically analysed. Sumner writes about the natural scientist Dietrich that her collection “represents an enormous contribution to the knowledge of Australian plants, reptiles, birds, bryophytes (mosses and related plants), spiders, and insects”.¹²⁷ Given the discussion about “‘linguistic imperialism’, a politics of naming that accompanied and promoted European global expansion and colonization”, this is a one-dimensional characterization.¹²⁸ Even as a plant collector, Amalie Dietrich did not pursue an innocent profession in Australia. This circumstance has occasionally been intoned. In an opera that melodizes the ‘Letters of Amalie Dietrich’, she is not only interested in nature but also in her personal fame and sings: “With every shipment my reputation grows – | they have named two new species after me!”¹²⁹

What remains to be done, then? Amalie Dietrich was ‘blessed with the privilege of poverty’, as the poet praises her social background and modest life. Her “independent stand reflects a radical feminism of its own”, as the predominant part of the scientific discourse assures.¹³⁰ But in the interplay of the ‘big three’ of social discrimination – class, gender, and race¹³¹ – Dietrich was situated on different sides: degraded by classism and sexism but upgraded by racism.

This, by the way, is the ‘normal condition’ of racist societalization. It allows a sense of social affiliation and even admits access to a feeling of superiority for

126 The Courier (Brisbane), 19 November 1861, pp. 2 f. (Killing no murder); cf. Raymond Evans, *Genocide in Northern Australia, 1824-1928*.

127 Ray Sumner, *The Demonisation of Amalie Dietrich*, p. 2.

128 Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, p. 195.

129 Ralph Middenway (music), Andrew Taylor (libretto), *The Letters of Amalie Dietrich*.

130 Marilyn Bailey Ogilvie, *Marital Collaboration*, p. 108.

131 Cf. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Other*.

all those whose social position is marked by inequality, disadvantage, and exclusion.¹³² In the same year, when her daughter published Dietrich’s biography and letters, this was phrased by the black American scholar W. E. Burghardt Du Bois (who, some years before, had stayed and studied in the German ‘Kaiserreich’).¹³³ He addressed the “hegemony of the white races” that made even “the slums of white society in all cases and under all circumstances the superior of any colored group” and legitimated “the right of white men of any kind to club blacks into submission”.¹³⁴

While Dietrich fought her way through the barriers of social relations, at least she had the advantage of being white in the wilderness of Queensland, and she did not reject the expectations attached to this status. Just as she disregarded the established boundaries of womanhood, she participated in white supremacy by dealing with the human remains of Indigenous Australians – which, in the final account of her journey to Australia, represented a part of her fame.

Her image has many facets. Among them is her contribution to anthropological racism by violating the culture and rites of Indigenous Australians. This does not obliterate her achievements as a plant collector. But a critical analysis of her activities has to deal with the fact, that and how she could integrate dehumanizing practices in an endeavour viewed by her and her contemporaries as ‘collecting’. An investigation into the connection between scientific scrupulousity and racist unscrupulousness in the activities of Amalie Dietrich is clearly a desideratum.

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132 Cf. Wulf D. Hund, *Negative Societalisation*.

133 Cf. Kenneth Barkin, *W. E. B. Du Bois’ Love Affair with Imperial Germany*.

134 W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Evolution of the Race Problem*, pp. 153 f.

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