

Filling Gaps in Provenance Research: Between Plausibility and Experimentality

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The emergence and the flourishing of a discourse on provenance (research) in scholarship, museum work, and cultural politics have had a tremendous effect on how, in recent years, cultural institutions in Germany have begun to question the history of their collections and exhibitions. It has kicked off a new discourse on how to decolonize spaces, structures, and narratives in museums. However, the tenacious pursuit and the ubiquitous talk of provenance have also had side effects. One of these epistemic side effects is the reinforcement of a notion of the ultimate knowability of an object's history.

Provenance as Knowledge

Provenance research is often understood as the reconstruction of a complete, uninterrupted 'chain of owners and possessors' of an object – from the creator of the object, to its sometimes-numerous subsequent users and holders, to the institution where it is kept.¹ Particularly in art historical provenance research, ideally every change of hands during an object's itinerary is listed and documented – not least because a complete chain of ownership underlines the authenticity and thus the value of an artwork by drawing a direct line from the institution back to the artist who created it.

[1] Jonathan Fine and Hilke Thode-Arora, 'Provenance Research Sources, Methods, Possibilities', in *Guidelines: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts*, ed. German Museums Association (Berlin: Deutscher Museumsbund, 2021), 147–52; available at <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/care-of-human-remains-in-museums-and-collections>

Provenance research on artworks or cultural heritage expropriated under National Socialist and colonial rule has added another dimension: it has put emphasis on the circumstances under which an object changed hands and on an ethical assessment of these circumstances from today's point of view.² The latter, too, requires detailed evidence, in part because decisions need to be taken in favour of or against further changes of ownership or possession – that is, for or against restitution or repatriation. Producing reliable knowledge is, therefore, key in the forensic work of provenance research. The latter's systematization and institutionalization have further contributed to the standards of detectability and made 'provenance knowledge' almost a field of its own.

Provenance as Ignorance

There are, however, only very few object histories that can be traced seamlessly, end to end – in particular, in ethnographic museums where objects were collected in large numbers. As a consequence, provenance researchers are often left with fragments of an object's history – and thus with a great number of question marks. Quite frequently, the producer of an artefact cannot be detected, nor can the site of its crafting; the same goes for the original user(s). Moreover, museums have difficulties in providing information on the exact date and/or site of appropriation by a non-local or European-descended actor. Usually, it is only the last holder of an artefact who has been registered in the museum's database; therefore, only accompanying information – if it is indeed still extant after two world wars – can reveal whether this previous holder (unless they removed the object themselves) was aware of the circumstances under which the object was taken from the social context for which it was produced and in which it circulated.

In the case of human remains, there are particularly painful lacunae. In most cases, the name and identity of the person behind the mortal remains cannot be retrieved or reconstructed. This is less a result of the destruction of sources or of institutional obliviousness than of a scientific practice in which individuals were only seen as examples of *types* of human beings and, therefore, remained anonymous – a prerequisite for their objectivization and dehumanization through musealization.

[2] German Lost Art Foundation, ed., *Provenance Research Manual to Identify Cultural Property Seized Due to Persecution During the National-Socialist Era* (Magdeburg: German Lost Art Foundation, 2020); available for download at <https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Web/EN/Research/Manual/Index.html>.

As a consequence, provenance researchers oftentimes cannot but simply wait until further pieces of evidence surface in order to complete the mosaic of hints and indicia they have begun. In a paradoxical way, provenance depends on serendipity, on the coincidental or accidental reappearance of evidence – at times of miniscule, parenthetical, or hidden hints, at times of major, spectacular finds. Therefore, it can be difficult to calculate the time that needs to be invested in provenance research. To give but one example: (oral) historians Dag Henrichsen, Holger Stoecker, Hans Axasi #Eichab, and I teamed up to research the provenance of the mortal remains of two individuals from what is nowadays Namibia, after Werner Hillebrecht, then head of the National Archives of Namibia, brought a historical publication in the German journal *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* to our attention. It took us seven years to collect and stitch together pieces of information from many different sources and come up with at least a preliminary version of who the individuals behind the remains were and how the remains had ended up in the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory – a version that may be revised whenever new sources and clues turn up. We have come to call this kind of research ‘slow science’: a science that cannot be expedited by the systematization of research or by the augmentation of the quality or the quantity of research, but rather a science that proceeds, often frustratingly, only with the lapse of time and the happening upon further evidence.

To some degree, the latter is the case for any historical research. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that it is particularly constitutive for provenance research because of the forensic purpose behind this kind of research – that is, the pressure to come up with some history in a timely manner, not least in order for others to be able to reach decisions on the basis of these findings – for example, to restitute or repatriate objects or human remains. Is it maybe this very goal-directedness of provenance research that not only throws gaps into relief but actually co-produces them?

So, when faced with a plethora of lacunae, is there any point in trying to write an object biography, as is generally pleaded for? Or could gaps – be they temporary or permanent – also be made productive epistemologically? Can the many failed attempts of provenance research to create links between people and things, places and times, and to detect causalities and reconstruct chronologies be transformed into something else?

Provenance Research in Jena

In order to answer these questions, I turn to a research project that historian Holger Stoecker and I conducted for our book *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in den naturkundlichen Sammlungen der*



Part of the teaching collection of the Phyletisches Museum Jena.
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Universität Jena (Skin, hair and bones: Colonial traces in natural history collections at the University of Jena). It was the result of one and a half years of research in and around the teaching collection of the Institute of Zoology and Evolutionary Research at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. The collection is held in the Phyletisches Museum (Phyletic Museum), Jena, a museum founded by evolutionary anatomist Ernst Haeckel, who popularized Charles Darwin's theories in Germany and developed them further. Founded in 1907, the museum opened in 1912.

Our research began when, through an unforeseeable chain of events, the mortal remains – or, more precisely, a piece of the scalp – of an African individual, part of the teaching collection of the Institute of Zoology since the 1950s, but long forgotten, resurfaced.³ The desire to understand how and why the mortal remains of this human being ended up in the Jena zoological collection set off a range of activities on our side as well as on the side of the institution. However, as no detailed documentation existed on the teaching collection, we at first had to rely on what a label and a faded inscription on the scalp suggested: that it had been taken from the corpse of an Otjiherero-speaking individual from Namibia, Germany's former colony (1884–1915), and had, at some point, been associated with a certain L. Schulze, most likely the Jena zoologist Leonhard Schultze, later Schultze-Jena (1872–1955).

The name Schultze immediately made sense to us: Schultze, a zoologist by training, travelled in what was then German South West Africa (today's Namibia), between 1903 and 1905, with the aim of assessing the potential of the colony's fishery industry.⁴ He also set out to explore and

[3] We would like to thank Gerta Puchert, at the time museum educator of Phyletisches Museum, for bringing the scalp to our and her colleagues' attention. She has inspired and supported our research by sharing not only her vast knowledge on the museum's and the discipline's history but also her empathic personal reflections on the subject(s) and objects treated here.

[4] Leonhard Schultze, *Die Fischerei an der Westküste Süd-Afrika's. Bericht über Untersuchungen an der Deutsch-Südwest-Afrikanischen Küste und am Kap der Guten Hoffnung der Kolonialabteilung des Auswärtigen Amts*, vol. 9, *Abhandlungen des deutschen Seefischerei-Vereins* (Berlin: O. Salle, 1907a).

document meticulously the landscapes of southwestern Africa as well as the economic, social, and religious practices of the cultural groups inhabiting these landscapes – work that resulted in numerous publications either by Schultze himself or by colleagues whom he provided with geological, botanical, or zoological specimens.⁵

During his travels, Schultze not only witnessed the uprising of the OvaHerero and Nama against German colonial occupation in 1904 and 1905, but he even joined the German troops in one of their campaigns against the Nama. The colonial war that German troops waged against the local population between 1904 and 1908 escalated into a genocide for two reasons: first, the relentless persecution of fleeing civilians; and second, what historian Jürgen Zimmerer has come to call ‘murder by deliberate neglect’ – that is, the malnutrition of and resulting high mortality rate amongst prisoners of war in the concentration camps.⁶ It was in at least two of these camps, Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht/Shark Island, that German military doctors dissected the bodies of deceased inmates in order to investigate diseases and/or prepare anatomical ‘specimens’ for their colleagues at German universities.⁷ Schultze most probably tapped into these networks and exploited them for his own anatomical-anthropological ambitions when he was in Swakopmund, Lüderitzbucht, or Keetmanshoop, where a military hospital for Africans existed. In the first of a series of edited volumes that resulted from his travels in the colony, he wrote, ‘I could take advantage of the victims of war and extract parts from their fresh corpses that conveniently

[5] See Leonhard Schultze, *Aus Namaland und Kalahari. Bericht an die Kgl. Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin über eine Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika, ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905* (Jena: G. Fischer, 1907b); Leonhard Schultze, ‘Einleitung’, in *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 1 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1908), v–viii; Leonhard Schultze, *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 2 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1909); Leonhard Schultze, *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 3 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1910); Leonhard Schultze, *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 4 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1912); Leonhard Schultze-Jena, ‘Zur Kenntnis des Körpers der Hottentotten und Buschmänner’, in *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 5 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1928), 145–227.

[6] Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘War, Concentration Camps and Genocide in South-West Africa’, in *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and Its Aftermath*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2008), 56.

[7] Casper W. Erichsen, *The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently Among Them: Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904–1908* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2005), 139–145; Holger Stoecker and Andreas Winkelmann, ‘Skulls and Skeletons from Namibia in Berlin: Results of the Charité Human Remains Project’, *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2018): 12.

complemented the study of the living body (imprisoned H***** were often at my disposal)⁸.

Although Schultze earned his PhD at the University of Jena, he has been completely forgotten in the university's historiography. When we started our research, the University of Jena was perceived by nearly all our interlocutors as having no explicit links with either the history of the scientific exploitation of Africa or the broader colonial movement in Germany at the time – although they were indeed aware that Jena had been a centre of National Socialist study on human heredity.⁹ We, therefore, needed to start from scratch, by probing the history of Jena institutions and their collections. We examined the archival record at the Phyletisches Museum, at neighbouring institutions such as the Ernst-Haeckel-Haus (Ernst Haeckel House), and the university archive in search of further hints about when, how, and why this atrocious so-called acquisition could have been made. During those one and a half years, we oftentimes felt we were onto something. And indeed, we did make major discoveries: for example, we managed to unearth at least four inventory books pertinent to the collections in and around the Phyletisches Museum that had gone astray over the decades and seemed completely unknown to our interlocutors at the institution.

However, we did not succeed in retrieving either the identity or the place of abduction, nor could we determine the subsequent trajectories of the piece of a scalp through German colonial science. In fact, the short inventory list of the teaching collection, created in 1988, remained the only source where the skin was mentioned explicitly – including Schultze's own writings.¹⁰ As a result, a series of questions remained concerning not only the identity of the deceased person but also, more generally, the time span between 1904/1905, when the body of this individual must have been desecrated, and the 1950s, when the aforementioned label, typical of the time, must have been created for it.

[8] The term with asterisks in the quotation is a derogatory term for Nama. Schultze, 'Einleitung', viii. My translation from the German original: 'Andererseits konnte ich mir die Opfer des Krieges zunutze machen und frischen Leichen von Eingeborenen Teile entnehmen, die das Studium des lebenden Körpers (gefangene H***** standen mir häufig zu Gebote) willkommen ergänzten'.

[9] See, by way of comparison, Uwe Hoßfeld, *Institute, Geld, Intrigen. Rassenwahn in Thüringen, 1930–1945* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, 2014).

[10] Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in den naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Universität Jena*, vol. 9, *Laborberichte* (Ilmtal-Weinstraße: VDG Weimar, 2016), 29–31.

Provenance Research as Speculation:

Tentative Object Biographies

In the course of our investigation, we amassed a wealth of contextual information; traced human remains with similar histories and provenances in the collections of neighbouring disciplines and institutions in Jena; happened upon personal and place names well known for their links with practices of body-snatching, dissection, and translocation of African corpses; uncovered entirely forgotten aspects of Schultze's work and career; disproved the assumption that the University of Jena had no connection with the broader colonial movement in Germany; and eventually rediscovered that the University of Jena had had an ethnographic collection, which included yet more mortal remains of individuals from southwestern Africa. In our view, these were significant findings that needed to be told to a broader public in Jena, even though we still lacked the evidence that would enable us to reconstruct the one and only 'factual' object biography of the human remains that we had originally sought.

As a consequence, we came up with three different, speculative, but highly plausible object biographies. In these, we synthesized findings, expanded on hints and traces with the help of patterns that we knew from other case studies, and drew on parallels and similarities with other collection and institution histories. We called the trajectories we charted *tentative object biographies*. They offered a method for narrating the findings of our research, for making assumptions on the basis of typical actor constellations, motivations, and developments, with the help of the example of the piece of a scalp. Even though we crafted the tentative object biographies as separate trajectories, we made clear that points of connection between them existed – places where the skin could have 'changed track'. For on the one hand, the contexts we elaborated on seemed more or less equally convincing; on the other hand, coincidence, accidents, and idiosyncrasies that run counter to the obvious or the usual are known to play a surprisingly great role in the constitution of collections, as the historiography of museum collections has shown.

In the following, I briefly summarize the speculative plot of each of the three tentative biographies and the main arguments for it. Everything that is described is based on evidence – except for explicit references to the skin.¹¹

[11] I will point to key sources, but more detailed references are available in Förster and Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen*.

*The Theatre of War as Anatomical Theatre:
Berlin-Jena Networks in Anatomy*

Schultze's travels were financed by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Berlin, whose board of trustees was headed by Wilhelm Waldeyer, professor at the Institute of Anatomy at Berlin University. Funding was granted on the condition that Schultze hand over material he collected in the colony to relevant scientific institutions in Berlin. The young Schultze was eager to impress Waldeyer, who had already published on the cerebral anatomy of some individuals from eastern Africa.¹² When the opportunity arose to gain access to mortal remains of the 'enemy' in the concentration camp in Swakopmund, Schultze had them sent to Waldeyer, as is known from the two skulls that have been found in the Charité in Berlin and repatriated to Namibia in 2018.¹³ Among the body parts was a piece of a scalp.

The theatre of war in the colony turned into an anatomical theatre for the colonial metropole: Waldeyer and his colleagues started to ask the colonial administration for more deliveries. A number of articles in the journal *Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie* testify to this.¹⁴ Waldeyer passed human remains to his colleagues at the Institute of Anatomy in Jena, where dissector Hermann von Eggeling started working on them in order to contribute to an edited volume planned by Schultze.¹⁵ None of these remains are traceable today – as is also the case for three skeletons, or parts thereof, that Schultze provided to the anatomical collection between 1912 and 1928. Only the piece of a scalp is locatable. When the Institute of Anatomy cleared out its collection of specimens that did not complement its curriculum in the 1930s, the piece was transferred to the Institute of Zoology, which was known for its interest in human evolution. Owing to the lack of documentation, the piece of scalp is not included in the exhibition, but only in the teaching collection.

[12] Wilhelm Waldeyer, 'Über einige Gehirne von Ostafrikanern', in *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* (Horn: F. Berger & Söhne, 1894), 24 : 141–44. Indeed, Waldeyer later also investigates the cerebral anatomy of individuals from southwestern Africa: Wilhelm Waldeyer, 'Gehirne südwestafrikanischer Völker', in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Verlag der Königlich Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1906), 3–8.

[13] Stoecker and Winkelmann, 'Skulls and Skeletons', 20.

[14] Stoecker and Winkelmann, 'Skulls and Skeletons', 23–24.

[15] Heinrich von Eggeling, 'Anatomische Untersuchungen an den Köpfen von vier Hereros, einem Herero- und einem Hottentottenkind', in *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, ed. Leonard Schultze, vol. 3, *Anatomische Untersuchungen an Menschen und höheren Tieren* (Jena: G. Fischer, 1909), 323–48.

*The Obsession of Race Theory with Hair:
Jena Zoology under Haeckel*

When Schultze left for what was then German South West Africa, he felt indebted to his teacher Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), who had granted him a sabbatical for his travels. Haeckel, inspired by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, was interested in how one can recognize different 'human races' by the characteristics of their hair.¹⁶ Schultze seemed to have the ambition to deliver empirical evidence for Haeckel's theories, and thus included the analysis of hair into his anthropological investigations.¹⁷ Schultze lumped together two of the cultural groups amongst which he worked because of the seeming similarity of their hair; this is how the term *Khoisan* (a combination of *Khoe* and *San*) was created – a term used in linguistics and genetics as well as in political discourses on indigeneity in southern Africa to this day.¹⁸

When Schultze got access to dead bodies, he secured at least one hair and skin sample for his teacher. Haeckel incorporated the latter into the zoological collection he had built over the previous forty years – that is, since he became a professor in Jena. Back in Jena, Schultze was designated director of the Phyletisches Museum – a project that Haeckel had been working towards for many years. When the museum eventually opened, in 1912 – Schultze had left the Institute of Zoology in the meantime – a great part of the collection of the institute went on display, including hair samples. They became part of a display in which men of different 'races' and primates were compared in terms of their anatomy. Over the subsequent decades, the collection of the museum grew bigger, and its displays became overstuffed; the vitrines were finally reorganized and culled in the 1950s. The piece of a scalp of an individual born in south-western Africa was relegated to the teaching collection; it is, therefore, not present in a photograph of the display taken in the 1950s.

*Producing Knowledge for Colonial Expansion:
Jena Geography*

Schultze's well-received publication on German South West Africa earned him a professorship in geography – which is why he left the Institute of Zoology, including the Phyletisches Museum, and became head of the Institute of Geography in Jena and its ethnographic collection, in 1908.¹⁹

[16] Ernst Haeckel, *Systematische Phylogenie der Wirbelthiere (Vertebrata)* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1895), 636.

[17] Leonhard Schultze-Jena, 'Zur Kenntnis des Körpers der Hottentotten und Buschmänner', 166.

[18] Susanne Berzborn, *Ziegen und Diamanten. Sicherung des Lebensunterhalts im ländlichen Südafrika* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006), 232–33.

[19] This publication is Leonhard Schultze, *Die Fischerei an der Westküste Süd-Afrikas*.

The ethnographic collection had a strong focus on German South West Africa, thanks to Schultze's predecessors, Eduard Pechuel-Lösche and Karl Dove, two proponents of the geography of German South West Africa who both donated their private collections to the institute. Dove also co-organized Jena's colonial exhibition of 1900; moreover, he used his networks to acquire objects and even human remains from a number of colleagues.

Thus, Schultze may have had good reason to follow suit and add the piece of a scalp (and maybe more objects) he had originally held back for himself. In the 1920s, when geography and ethnography became separate disciplines, the ethnographic collection held by the Institute of Geography fell out of use and was dispersed across public institutions in Jena. Interestingly, more than a decade later, another discipline took an interest in the collection: the anthropologist Bernhard Struck, head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Jena, tried to reassemble it. Struck also started building an anthropological collection, which included '49 hair samples, taken from Bushmen, H***** and Hereros', to which the piece of the scalp from the reconstructed ethnographic collection was added.²⁰ Because the disciplines of ethnology or African studies did not get institutionalized at the University of Jena, the ethnographic collection faded into oblivion and was eventually dispersed for good. Only the skin was saved by zoologists for their teaching collection.

Potential and Limitations of Tentative Object Biographies

Without additional evidence, it is not possible to determine which of the three ways, sketched above, the skin might have reached the zoological teaching collection by the 1950s. Each of the three tentative object biographies appears plausible in its own way: the first, because of the well-documented and notorious networks along which human remains were traded by anatomists in colonial Germany; the second, because of its particular focus on the specific interest that Jena's scientific circles could have taken in it; the third, because of the prominent role that the territory of German South West Africa played in the discipline of geography already before the abduction of the piece of the scalp. It is possible that in some months, years, or decades, a piece of writing will turn up that validates or invalidates our tentative object biographies – or at least gives them a different twist and turn.

[20] The word with asterisks in the quotation is a derogatory term for Nama. Johannes Bescherer, 'Zur Geschichte des Instituts für Anthropologie und Völkerkunde der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena in den Jahren 1936–1953', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. Mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Reihe* 3 (1954): 3–12.

Nevertheless, we argue, the tentative object biographies will remain heuristically valuable, because they are carefully constructed from a wealth of contextual knowledge and an abundance of related and similar cases that we have come across in our work. They condense circumstantial evidence into compelling examples. Taken together, they detail many of the motivations, mechanisms, and ramifications of what sociologist Wulf D. Hund has called the ‘political economy of desecration of dead bodies’ of African subjects under colonial rule, and they provide evidence for the inextricable complicity of (Jena) science with colonialism around 1900.²¹ They also point to the lack of institutional self-reflection at the time of our research and plead for a critical, postcolonial institutional memory that fundamentally builds on such findings.

What all three biographies cannot achieve, unfortunately, is a reconstruction of the identity of the individual whose mortal remains were abducted, meaning that a dignified return to their family of origin is not yet possible. Had we better and more detailed sources, however, our assumptions and speculations could perhaps have also allowed us to begin to address the identity of the deceased person.

On Speculating and Writing Experimental Histories

Our notion of tentative object biographies was inspired by a number of discussions that we felt were related to our problem of the absence of conclusive evidence. In the humanities, historian Carlo Ginzburg’s essay on “clues” has been influential.²² Ginzburg reflects on drawing conclusions from marginal observations and from reading and interpreting the (material) traces of individual actions in forensic contexts. Often characterized as the ‘circumstantial paradigm’, this method informed our approach. Philosopher Sybille Krämer, considering the epistemic role of traces and citing psychologist Albert Spitznagel, speaks of the ‘art of intelligent conjecture’ based on experience as well as creativity, a ‘knowing-how [. . .], a capability, that, under certain circumstances, leads to new knowledge, even though, at the same time, it makes us perceive the limitations of that knowledge’.²³ Taken together, the three narratives also re-enact our ‘scrutinising movement’ (*Suchbewegung*)

[21] Wulf D. Hund, ed., *Entfremdete Körper. Rassismus als Leichenschändung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009).

[22] Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method’, introduction and trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 9 (1980): 5–34.

[23] Sybille Krämer, ‘Was also ist eine Spur? Und worin besteht ihre epistemologische Rolle? Eine Bestandsaufnahme’, in *Spur. Spurenlesen als Orientierungstechnik und Wissenskunst*, ed. Sybille Krämer, Werner Kogge, and Gernot Grube (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 21. My translation from the German original: ‘Spurenlesen ist ein knowing-how, [. . .] ein Können also, das unter bestimmten Umständen zu neuem Wissen führt – uns aber auch dessen Grenzen spuren lässt’.

between traces, our constant weighing of plausibilities against one another without making a final judgement. The approach teases out the question: How much can or must we know in the first place to tell the story of colonial desecration of dead bodies of African individuals and to be able to repatriate their human remains?

Expounding the potential trajectories of the skin also elicited another aspect – that of fiction as an element in historians' writings. Referring to the historiography of Australian settler-Indigenous relations, historian Klaus Neumann has spoken of 'experimental histories'.²⁴ Experimental histories often address unequal relations, which is why they programmatically go beyond the scope of the colonial archive, with its lack of the voices of the oppressed and marginalized and its inherent bias. They bring in ethical, emotive, and subjective layers motivated by a critique of the colonial archive and a plea for alternative ways of knowing the past. Neumann goes as far as to also reference genres and media such as novels, theatre plays, and films when he writes, 'Experimental histories are departures from conventional academic histories in that they do not privilege a single perspective on the past, are not couched within the realist paradigm, do not have a linear narrative structure whose logic is determined by chronology and a series of cause and effect relationships, are not written in the third person, and are not unambiguously non-fiction'.²⁵

In contrast to some of the writings Neumann refers to, our tentative object biographies do not abandon chronology or causality – quite the opposite. Nevertheless, opening up towards and making assumptions about the hitherto unknown in critical-creative ways may be what provenance research can learn from *Spurenlesen* – the reading of tracks – as well as from experimental history: it may prevent provenance research from getting bogged down in an endless search for conclusive evidence.

Conclusion

Even though the final proof remained lacking, in our book (and in the accompanying case report) Holger Stoecker and I argued for a strong likelihood that the piece of a scalp had been appropriated in one of the prisoner-of-war camps in Shark Island/Lüderitzbucht, or Keetmanshoop during the genocidal war. This meant it had been abducted in a 'context of injustice', to borrow the terminology used by the German Museums Association's guidelines on the 'Care of Human Remains in Museums and

[24] Klaus Neumann, 'But Is It History?', *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 1 (2008): 19–32.

[25] Neumann, 'But Is It History?', 21–22.



Handover ceremony during the repatriation of ancestral remains from German institutions to Namibia, Berlin, 2018. © Joachim Zeller

Collections'.²⁶ As a consequence, the Phyletisches Museum eventually decided to repatriate the object. The case was reported to the Namibian Embassy in Berlin, and in 2018 a joint return of ancestral remains from several institutions across Germany (Berlin, Greifswald, Hamburg, Hannover, Jena, Witzzenhausen), as well as from one private household, was organized. All ancestral remains returned in the years of 2011, 2014, and 2018 are now kept in a storage space at the National Museum of Namibia that is dedi-

cated specifically to repatriated human remains.

The previous illegitimate transfer of these body parts to Germany – that is, their object biographies – were in most cases better documented than in Jena. Nevertheless, for not more than two of them did names resurface.²⁷ For none of them could a subject biography of family of origin be established. This remains the most scandalous obliteration we are confronted with in the field of provenance research on human remains abducted in colonial contexts.

[26] German Museums Association, *Guidelines: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts* (Berlin: Deutscher Museumsbund, 2021), 17–19; available at <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/care-of-human-remains-in-museums-and-collections>.

[27] Quite frequently, chains of custody can be reconstructed only fragmentarily. The concept of 'tentative object biographies' has been employed in some other cases in order to productively address the lack of evidence. See Bettina Brockmeyer, Frank Edward, and Holger Stoecker, 'The Mkwawa Complex: A Tanzanian-European History about Provenance, Restitution, and Politics', *Journal of Modern European History* 18, no. 2 (2020): 117–39; Martin Nadarzinski, 'Namibia in Witzzenhausen. Die ethnographische Sammlung des Deutschen Instituts für Tropische und Sub-tropische Landwirtschaft' (master's thesis, Goethe-Universität zu Frankfurt, 2020); see also the following report, produced in the context of the exhibition 'Nach der Natur' at the Humboldt Forum, Holger Stoecker, *Provenienzbericht über zwei menschliche Kehlkopfpräparate im Lautarchiv der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, 2021), https://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de/media/medialibrary/2022/10/Provenienzbericht_Kehlkoepfe_Lautarchiv.pdf.



The hanging tree in Old Moshi with an advertisement for the *Marejesho* exhibition, 2022. © Konradin Kunze