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Indigenous History in *Gould's Book of Fish*

Fiction 'in memoriam'

Introduction

The debate about Aboriginal history in Tasmania has become emblematic of the treatment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and how their history is evaluated. The essay "From Terror to Genocide: Britain's Tasmanian Penal Colony and Australia's History Wars" by Madley (2008) bears witness to this unresolved issue:

Despite over 170 years of debate who or what was responsible for this near-extinction [in Tasmania], no consensus exists on its origins, process, or whether or not it was genocide. (Madley: 78)

Other publications – such as Theodore Dalrymple's "Why Intellectuals Like Genocide" from 2007 or the now infamous work by Keith Windschuttle from 2002 *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Van Diemen's Land, 1803–1847* – highlight the vehemence and emotion involved in the argument (cf. Madley: 77). More so for Aboriginal people; Brewster (3) quotes various voices on the subject of a living memory who say that as long as the conditions of the past are the conditions of the present, the past is not past; that victors can afford to forget while the 'losers' cannot; and that Aboriginal remembrance is a living experience of the past. Stephens (n.p.) states that the urge to rewrite Australia's history appears to be driven by politics rather than a desire for truth and refers to *The History Wars*:

Whether it involves the Stolen Generations or the head of state, native forests or the family, immigration or diplomacy, arguments over public policy keep returning to the legacy of the past. Australian history is now part of the political vocabulary. (Macintyre: 219–220)

For this reason, every public contribution to this heated debate bears taking note of. *Gould's Book of Fish – A Novel in Twelve Fish* [hereafter: *GBF*] by Richard Flanagan entered this discourse with its publication in 2001 and went on to win several prizes. Using general historical facts¹ as a backdrop and the sublime watercolour sketches of fish by the historical William Buelow Gould (c.1801–1853) for his "demented Tasmanian fable"² Flanagan makes "a consummate use of fiction to carry [...] some of the darkest truths or corruptions of our history".³

By rewriting history in the novel *Gould's Book of Fish* the author reframes the narrative of powerless victimisation of the Aboriginal peoples in Tasmania and

1 For example, the penal settlement in Macquarie Harbour, and Sarah Island as its headquarters, existed from 1822 to 1833 (cf. Wiese: 101–103). This is where *GBF* is set, however, with marked differences to the historical reports. Incidentally, the story takes place within the time-frame covered by Windschuttle's publication.

2 From *The Age* (Melbourne), quoted on the cover of *GBF*.

3 From *Australian Book Review* (Melbourne), quoted on the cover of *GBF*.

restores agency to them. Entering the ongoing debate about Aboriginal peoples, he thus transgresses the stereotypical deadlock which history has put contemporary Aboriginal people [and 'Whites'] in.

Truth Created – Fiction and Historiography

How could Indigenous history as portrayed in *GBF* contribute something of worth beyond mere poetic imagination and entertainment? This question is important considering that *GBF* opens by setting historiography and story-telling at arms: The “story discredited itself so completely that [...] the museum’s experts congratulated me on the quality of my forgery” (17), recounts Sid Hammet, the protagonist persona of the first chapter. The story is “not at all the [...] thing a good book should be” (14) according to the accepted conventions of writing, e.g., “a book that never really started and never quite finished” (*GBF*: 14). It tells of “mundane” events and at other times “stories [...] of matters so cracked that at first I thought it must be a chronicle of dreams or nightmares” (14), as the narrator further reveals. So why engage with pure phantasmagoria looking for Indigenous history?

The novel itself while seeming “to concur with the known facts” does so “only long enough to enter with [historians] into an argument” (16). Professor da Silva, consulted as an expert, sees the argument as won by history when he says, “[h]istory, Mr Hammet, is what you cannot see. History has power. But a fake has none” (*GBF*: 18). The novel contests that, deploring that the professor “looked for truth in facts not in stories” (20). For, on the one hand, it turns out later in *GBF* that the facts are meticulously forged (cf. 282–286), hence, also fictional: “a necessary clerical invention” that “accord[s] with expectation” (284).

The concept by Giambattista Vico summarised in the phrase *verum factum* supports the idea that history, or ‘truth’, is something created, and then is taken as fact to substantiate the main-stream historical narrative:

Vico [...] observes that, “for the Latin, *verum* (the true) and *factum* (what is made) are interchangeable” [...], that “the true is precisely what is made” [...]. In other words, human beings make their own truths. (Price: 35)

This also means “that the men who are the agents in history are *in some sense* identical with the men who later write that history” (Pompa qtd. in Price: 35).⁴ Flanagan avails himself of this idea; what is fake and what is true cannot necessarily be distinguished, or are one and the same. Hegemonial historiography is seen as real; in that sense it does have more power than a marginalised ‘fake’ story.

On the other hand, the criticism of looking “for truth in facts not in stories” (*GBF*: 20) implies that there is a different kind of truth to be found in stories that cannot be found in facts. Some reasons for this are excluded: The book as a fraud makes no sense, as the narrator says, because it does not confirm preconceptions (cf. 21); in other words, it is not sellable, contrary to the fake history Sid Hammet imbues the forged antique furniture with, namely, with the “type [of stories] that pay” to deliver a “sense of security – national, individual, spiritual” (*GBF*: 9). In doing so, the

4 Perhaps this explains the finale that Sid Hammet, the twentieth century narrator ends up being revealed as a persona of Gould in the Afterword (404). He is as much an agent in the history of Gould as Gould himself.

author is clearly taking a stab at hegemonic historiography that writes to clear away “a bad conscience about [those in] power and their wealth and everybody else’s lack of it” (ibid.).

But the Professor da Silva accords it potential among the “inglorious [...] history of Australian literary frauds. “That one area [...] in which Australia can rightly lay some claim to a global eminence” (GBF: 21); referring to fakes that became national literature and so influenced the collective memory, or identity, of Australians.⁵ It follows that fakes do have a certain power as Price substantiates in *History Made, History Imagined*:

In other words, historical discourse creates a sense of communal identity, of shared experience, of a collective past. [...] Fictional discourse does not vitiate the veracity of the historical truth depicted; rather, fiction helps history realize the possibility of bringing into being a “standing-for” operation that broadens the horizons of the reader’s understanding of the past. (Price: 29)

Price’s position is endorsed when Sid Hammet accuses the Professor of taking history as “a pretext for a rueful fatalism about the present” (GBF: 20). This is where fiction steps in:

Humankind must be able to “feel *unhistorically*”, [Nietzsche] argues, if it is to be creative and forge new, life-giving values. But, he is careful to add, “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture”. (Price: 32)

The creation of a fictitious counter-narrative questions the established version and opens up new ways of debating history and, thus, enters the very current discussion about Indigenous history in Australia. In addition, the non-linear concept of time reflected in the novel,⁶ the “book that never really started and never quite finished” (14), helps situate it in a kind of *continuous present* that is informed by a past still active in everyday perceptions and discussions of the issue.⁷ It doesn’t relegate it to a finished end and mirrors the on-going debate. As such GBF enters an arena in which history is still in the making.

Grounded in History – Truganini and Sal

British policy and local Whites’ actions almost annihilated Tasmania’s Aborigines. From 1803 to 1847, settlement policies, murders, abductions, massacres, and incarceration reduced them from thousands to less than 100 “full-descent” Aborigines. (Madley: 104)

The legalised extermination of Aboriginal people, called the Black War, meant that after 1876 only ‘mixed-race’ survivors remained in Tasmania (cf. Madley: 78). This date became famous for the death of Truganini (c.1812–1876) who is seen as the last

5 I.e. *Durer: Innsbruck, 1495* by the invented poet Ern Malley.

6 Time itself is under discussion in *The Colonisation of Time* where Nanni speaks about colonial constructions of ‘Aboriginal time’ (59–84) according to which the lack of time-keeping according to European standards was also a marker of primitivity.

7 Holgate (4) arrives at the same conclusion: “In *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the consistent overlapping between the novel’s framing story involving Sid Hammet and Gould’s narrative creates what Weir aptly describes as ‘the postcolonial present,’ given that there is no distinct separation between the fictional present and the historical past. By fusing time in a circular movement, the text serves to remind the reader that the postcolonial present is defined by its colonial past, that the human actions in Gould’s time created consequences that are still being felt in the reader’s time”.

living 'full-descent' Aborigine in Tasmania.⁸ Truganini was born in Van Diemen's Land as daughter to the chief Mangana and consequently is described as a 'queen in her own right' (cf. Cronin). By the age of 17 she had lost many of her relatives to European colonisation; her mother had been killed by sailors, her sister abducted by sealers, her uncle shot by a soldier, and her 'fiancé' murdered by wood-cutters. She acted as a guide for the Whites and as a spokesperson for her people (cf. Ryan and Smith). From the mid-1820s on, the beginning of the Black War, she remained under governmental supervision through Robinson (who also appears in *GBF*); and was forcibly relocated in 'settlements' where she watched many of her people die. Her skeleton was on display in museums for about half a century – against her express wish (cf. Shaw). The Tasmanian Government states on its website that knowledge about her is common: "Truganini is arguably the most well known name in Tasmanian women's history. Her life epitomises the story of European invasion and the clash of two disparate cultures" – as does the fictional life of Twopenny Sal.

In the foreground of numerous references to the Black War in *GBF*,⁹ Twopenny Sal [Sal] becomes the contrasting figure which is read against Truganini: They share the same life-time;¹⁰ Sal also is "obviously a Van Diemonian native" (*GBF*: 145), a 'full-descent' Aboriginal woman who grew up as daughter of Towtereh, the chief of the Port Davey people (cf. 219).¹¹ Her life also is marred by destructive encounters with Europeans. She is abducted by sealers while her child is killed, and watches her tribes-people and other Aborigines die (cf. 218). She falls prey to the civilising mission of a religious group, bartered away to a Quaker family by a sealer for "some axes & sugar" (145), then left "in the care" of the Commandant of the penal station "in exchange for a solemn promise of moral & spiritual enlightenment" (147). This civilising mission included being made to wear European clothes (cf. 323) and working as a "domestick" (147) in squalid living conditions (cf. 241) – very typical of the treatment of many generations of Aboriginal women. Just like Truganini's, Twopenny Sal's identity is changed, the Europeans rename her, among them Robinson. Just as some sources claim that Truganini had sexual relations with Robinson (cf. Brantlinger: 214), Sal is also depicted as an object of sexual desire or use (cf. *GBF*: 145).

Comparing the historical Truganini with Twopenny Sal shows that the fictional character represents typical elements of Aboriginal history as explained below. Beyond that, Sal also stands for the survival and activities of Aboriginal peoples in modern times:

Aboriginal women's autobiographical histories are corporeal histories of the gendered and racialised body that has been placed under surveillance, disciplined, silenced and condemned to poverty. Their histories are of rape and abuse, childbearing and motherhood, extended family networks, the absence of male partners, arduous physical labour and political activism. *As such they embody the history of the making of modern Australia, and the survival of Aboriginal culture into the twenty-first century.* (Brewster: 5, emphasis added)

8 Cronin sets the record straight in a newspaper article from 1937: "Trucanine is usually credited as having been the last full blooded Tasmanian aborigine. [...] The melancholy distinction of being the last full-blooded Tasmanian aborigine belongs to 'Little Sal,' who died at American River some years after Trucanine".

9 The reader is confronted with the Black War directly in the opening chapter of Gould's narrative, the second chapter "The Kelpy".

10 While Twopenny Sal's age is never mentioned, the fact that *GBF* takes place at Sarah Island, the headquarters of Macquarie Harbour's penal settlement places them as adults in the same time-period.

11 Because Sal is depicted as his daughter, she also would be a queen by the same logic applied to Truganini. Incidentally, Towtereh also is a historical figure.

Regaining Control over Fertility, Motherhood, and Her Natural Heritage

Moving towards a more detailed analysis, the developments of Sal's character will be traced as they cover themes at the heart of a people's survival, such as regaining control over fertility, motherhood, and the cultural heritage.

In *GBF*, Robinson, historically the Protector of the Aborigines, names Twopenny Sal "Cleopatra" (323). "Robinson insisted on giving his charges European names [...]. Many of the new names express a patronizing racism – Neptune, Romeo, Queen Cleopatra, and so forth" (Brantlinger: 214). Cleopatra was the head of a subject nation. She is defined in common perception by using her alluring sexuality to manipulate those in power. However, more balanced historical accounts describe her as a politician under duress.¹² Beyond the sexual subjugation implied here, it is of importance to note that it was common to change the names of slaves (cf. Handler and Jacoby: 692–693), in essence, an action of depersonalising domination.

Robinson claims Sal danced obscenely and had sex with the devil (*GBF*: 218), a common idea of the time (cf. Liewald: 56). Robinson represents the dominant European rulers' view of the Aborigines as hellish, almost subhuman creatures.¹³ The historical and the fictional narratives, however, both recount murder, rape, and slavery. Sal's story reflects this; her child is killed by having its brains bashed out by the sealers even though she offers herself in exchange for the baby. The sealers enslave her nonetheless (cf. *GBF*: 218). She acts as a protector of her family, but is powerless.

To add to her horrors, Sal reportedly killed the offspring between the sealers and herself (cf. 218), but the novel indicates that it is likely that she has kept what Gould thinks of as his baby (cf. 260, 323).¹⁴ Historically, cases of infanticide were reported (cf. Gray et al.: 83–85). But this must be seen in the framework of a tribe caring for a child – probably such infants together with their mothers would not have had a chance of survival without tribal support. On an allegorical level, it shows the refusal to breed the white, to let foreignness invade Sal's family. The tribe or family are a thing apart and kept apart.¹⁵ The novel presents the question of infanticide through Sal ambiguously (cf. 323).

Sal's past, so typical of European domination, takes a different turn in the novel. In her sexual encounters domination is undercut to a certain extent and dependencies (i.e. those of Aborigines on Europeans) questioned. Sal is shown to act for herself within the imposed frame of male domination by Europeans, for example, when she decides to change sexual partners for better provisions (*GBF*: 193, 273) or when she steers the regular sexual encounters:

The Mulatto would bend over & throw her skirt onto her back [...] & merely ask that [the Commandant] be quick, as she had matters to attend to. The Commandant would [...] feign a triumph they both knew to be illusory. (*GBF*: 245)

12 Note the parallel: "Robinson [...] called Truganini 'Lalla Rookh'" (Brantlinger: 214). "Lalla Rookh" is the title of an Oriental Romance with a princess of the same name as the heroine, published in 1817 by Moore.

13 For in-depth discussions, see Brantlinger who names various racial theories and publications in *Dark Vanishings*, and van Toorn who discusses "The Terrors of Terra Nullius: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality".

14 Miscegenation, an obsession of the nineteenth century, is a subject Young looks at in detail in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*.

15 But see chapter V. for inclusive actions of Sal.

Part of regaining control over her (sexual) life includes fertility,¹⁶ and even beyond that motherhood. Twopenny Sal gives birth to at least one more child (cf. *GBF*: 260, 323) and adopts orphaned black children; they become “hers” even while she still lives in the settlement (cf. 193, 328). Her care extends beyond her biological offspring to tribal networks.¹⁷ Instead of losing children, she gains children. Sal takes action in increments, first within a subjugating system, then outside of the system. In the end, Sal rejects the life the Europeans devised for her as a domestic servant and sexual worker. She leaves the settlement for the bush. There she reclaims her natural heritage by first going shoeless and then getting into almost “naked”/native garb together with her children, “three small girls & a young boy” (cf. *GBF*: 328).¹⁸ She passes on her heritage to her offspring, including the ‘mixed-race’ baby. Gould calls them “[b]eautiful beyond compare” (328), thus attributing the height of perfection to them.

Brewster (42) describes that in recent generations women have started to occupy a more prominent role in communal as well as in family life and quotes Sally Morgan:

In a lot of Aboriginal families, actually, the women are very strong. In many families I know they carry the weight of the family [...] In most Aboriginal families there is always at least one strong female character [...] who holds everything together.

The character developments of Sal mirror developments of Aboriginal people who are increasingly active in the public arena, moving out from under European domination and trying to regain their cultural heritage in the last decades. Sal is the representative, the mother or queen of the nation. She stands for these queen-like matriarchs (synecdoche) that work to sustain the community despite all the influences of colonialism.

The Science of Bones

Bones present a very current concern of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. To this day, they are still fighting for the sacred remains of their ancestors to be returned from collections in Australia and overseas.¹⁹ *Entfremdete Körper: Rassismus als Leichenschändung* is an anthology by Wulf D. Hund that expounds on the racism inherent in the travesty of dominating even in death. “Underlying the Enlightenment’s epistemology was natural history’s taxonomic system of classification” (Holgate: 8). This drive for classification led to the wide-spread collection of bones and skulls, also in Australia. The interpretation of measurements between skulls from different continents often served to justify claims of European superiority, which anchors Flanagan’s critique in reality as will be shown.

16 This is also significant in the colonial context, venereal diseases transmitted to Aborigines initially through contact with the Europeans had the potential to impact fertility (one allusion to sexually transmitted diseases can be found in *GBF*: 245, remarkably, Sal is spared), this and other colonial influences also contributed to the fact that in the second half of the nineteenth century too few children were born to sustain the Aboriginal population numbers (cf. Gray et al.: 88–91).

17 Cf. Gray et al. (85–86) who relate that a wider sense of family is pervasive in Aboriginal societies, often with whole classes of people being called “mother”, “father”, etc.

18 The statistical quota of 3 males to 1 female in 1836 is reversed here (cf. Malley: 89).

19 Cf. <http://arts.gov.au/indigenous/repatriation> includes a list of the most current successes of the government programme to repatriate Indigenous sacred remains and objects.

In *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*, John Gascoigne lays out how blatantly unsuccessful British attempts at ‘improving’ the Aboriginal people had basically been given up by the 1840s (cf. 163). This occurred together with a shift towards a biological basis to explain racial differences, seeing them as “innate and, consequently, unlikely to be amenable to change – thus undercutting the whole project of ‘improvement’” (164).²⁰ He mentions how, in 1822, Barron Field used Blumenbach’s work in physical anthropology to argue that “all the Aborigines of Australia (including Van Diemen’s Land) belonged to ‘the degenerate Ethiopian character’” (165).²¹ Gascoigne remarks that the racial overtones evident even then are apparent in Field’s conclusion “that the Australians will never be civilized [...]” (ibid.). Gascoigne explains further that Samuel G. Morton, an American medical professor, gave physical anthropology an overtly racist dimension when he argued that the human races could be arranged in a hierarchical order according to the capacity of their skulls; in turn, John D. Lang, a Presbyterian minister and politician in Australia, referred favourably to Morton’s opinion that some races were the outcome of “a process of decline” – hence, suggested Lang, “the extreme degeneracy and degradation of the Aborigines of Australia” (cf. Gascoigne 165). It is against the “historical context [...] of the violent movement of the frontier across nineteenth century Australia converging with the intellectual frontier of contemporary science” (Turnbull: 2) that these issues in *GBF* can be understood.

In *GBF*, this racist disdain through so-called enlightened and rationalist science is modelled by Lempriere, the doctor of the penal settlement. “The Surgeon [...] embraces the ‘up-and-coming’ field of phrenology in the belief that this will ensure his acceptance into the Royal Society” (Holgate: 8).²² Turnbull describes the historical value of Aboriginal bodies in terms of their potential to enhance an individual scientific reputation. Besides detailing the precise monetary values of Aborigines’ ‘qualities’ as ‘specimens’ (cf. 10), he also shows how these served as “a unique and persuasive currency, to obtain rare specimens of fauna [including body parts] from other parts of the globe”, and even more so as Aboriginal bodies became a desirable commodity in dwindling supply (cf. 10). The close connection with the question of genocide is hard to overlook:

There was also anxiety as to whether science could be provided with sufficient Aboriginal bodies of high racial purity to meet its needs. Since at least the 1830s it had been argued in scientific circles that the Aborigines were ‘dying out’ before the advance of European ‘civilisation’; by the late 1860s it was seriously questioned whether, in a generation or so, the Aboriginal race might not be extinct.²³ (Turnbull: 3)

In the novel (cf. 215–221) and in historiography (cf. Gascoigne: 159), Robinson’s civilising attempts coincide with the death of most of the Aborigines under his care.

20 In *GBF*, the sign on a grog shop summarises everything about the civilising scheme: “an exasperated white woman [...] scrubbing as hard as she could a black baby in a wooden tub who smiles back at her”, the name of the shop is the *Labour in Vain* (cf. 76). This catches “the spirit of the island precisely” (77).

21 This nomination is based on Blumenbach’s classification of the peoples of the world into five groups (without implying a racial hierarchy) drawing on comparative anatomical studies (cf. Gascoigne: 165). “Blumenbach’s skull from the Caucasus region” (301) is referred to in *GBF*.

22 A historical parallel can be found, for instance, in Edward Ramsay, curator of the Australian Museum: He used Aboriginal bodies to receive recognition from European scientists, and was promised a nomination as a member of the Anthropological Society in 1883 (cf. Turnbull: 9).

23 For these connections, see the essay by Antje Kühnast: “In the Interest of Science and of the Colony’: Truganini und die Legende von den aussterbenden Rassen”.

The tragedy gains momentum through the realisation that only then enough bodies are provided for Lempriere's scientific endeavours in phrenology (cf. 228).

The pseudoscience of phrenology – the measuring of human skulls to determine people's character and mental capacity – is arguably the most grotesque facet of the novel.²⁴ [...] The Surgeon enthusiastically tells Gould of phrenology's capacity to help science 'MAKE GREAT ADVANCES IN ITS UNDERSTANDING OF HUMANITY IN ITS SUPERIOR & INFERIOR FORMS,' and 'PARTICULARLY IN REGARD TO VANQUISHED & INFERIOR RACES' (227).

Holgate doesn't mince words when he calls phrenology an attempted rationalisation of racism, and says that it represents the extreme consequences of European imperialism and the attempted genocide of the cultural Other (8).

Lempriere collects Aboriginal skulls and has between forty and seventy black heads "pickling" in barrels (cf. *GBF*: 223). He ends up being annoyed with the heads as they will not sink but keep talking back at him: "But in death as in life, the black heads remained a force with which to be reckoned" (*GBF*: 224, cf. 229, 233). Even in death, the novel suggests, the Aboriginal peoples have a voice that cannot be silenced. Jo Jones (cf. 119) emphasises that by making visible the remnants of traumatised bodies (including tagged and classified Aboriginal bones), there is the recognition by the novel of the incontestable reality of violence against the body, and of the reality of certain events, such as genocide, that occurred on the Tasmanian frontier.

While not condoning the reasoning, Turnbull makes a case that these nineteenth-century scientists understood themselves to be yielding to scientific progress and thus, ultimately, moral necessity by providing knowledge likely to serve the higher good (cf. 11-12). He concedes that a few of them, other benefits notwithstanding, might have acted "in the belief that the scientific knowledge to be gained from procuring and examining Aboriginal bodies would increase the happiness of the descendants of the Aborigines [...]" (13), especially in view of the widespread belief that the Aborigines were fast approaching extinction and could not be saved (cf. 11). Lempriere gives expression to this belief:

'I'LL NOT DON GRIEVING BLACK²⁵ FOR YOU - I AM A PATRIOT NATURALIST, &, LIKE ME, YOU WILL MAKE SACRIFICES FOR SCIENCE - FOR THE NATION.' [...] He yelled, how the past was the past, but his interest was the future & how overjoyed they ought be at the prospect of working together on such a mighty project of Science [...]. (*GBF*: 231)

Lempriere literally tries to beat his humanitarian reasoning into the (barrels with) Aboriginal heads with a stick (cf. 231) in a state of what Holgate calls a "mixture of barbarism and failed idealism" (7): "'I LOVE YOU-DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?' he was now blubbing. 'OUT OF LOVE-ONLY LOVE-DO I DO THIS FOR YOU'" (*GBF*: 232).

An instance of dramatic irony ensues when Gould takes Sal's advice in how to dispose of Lempriere's bones so Gould will not be charged for Lempriere's accidental death; Gould adds Lempriere's skull to the Aboriginal ones in the barrels that are

24 Historical realities taken up in *GBF* often seem unreal and absurd. Holgate (7) remarks, "it often seems as if historical realism has transgressed into the fantastic. [...] However, the actual conditions [...] were so brutal that Gould's fictionalised world plausibly passes as fact, the grotesque becoming an everyday reality".

25 This is an allusion to the so-called Black Armband view of history: "The battle over the Bicentenary [of Australia's first European settlement] was fought between those who wanted to celebrate Australian achievement and those whom they accused of imposing a hairshirt. The Black Armband denoted the excessive gloom that enveloped the national achievement" (Macintyre: 218).

sent to London for examination (*GBF*: 248). The skull is taken for that of a Tasmanian Aborigine and a scientific report claims it to be “an entirely separate species, one possibly [...] approaching the mere animal” (cf. 301304). Only in his death does Lempriere really become of “use to Civilisation” (231) – a future he envisioned for the Aboriginal skulls – by undermining the validity of biased science. Moreover, the “Surgeon is also stripped of his humanity and subsequently trapped forever in text” (Whitmore: 12) – a system of his own devising. In *GBF*, this story-line reverts the historical racist tragedy of Truganini’s bones and all other Aboriginal bones that have been on display.²⁶ Holgate (8) gives the reversal in *GBF* a positive note:

Yet the subtext of *Gould’s Book of Fish* is that, despite the best efforts of European scientists, things that are distinctly Australian defy categorisation, and that they have an intrinsic value irrespective of European definition or assessment.

Meeting the Other

For the remainder of this paper, a closer look will be taken at the relationship between Gould and Sal and how the interactions between an Aboriginal woman and a White man are recast. First in terms of ‘the Other’, then on terms of shared decolonised space, all of which is permeated by a strong symbolism that lets the two people stand for the contact of disparate cultures.

Desire for Enlightenment

“The term of the Other springs from Lacanian psychoanalysis and can be understood as difference that rouses insatiable desire” (Liewald: 37). This is expressed as sexual desire in *GBF*. For example, Gould quotes a poem as written by Goethe in the heat of passion, “The inaccessible/ Here becomes reality / [...] / The Eternal Feminine / Draws us on” (192).²⁷ Before Gould even tries to catch up with Sal in the bush, literally and figuratively, he makes her into an abstract concept because he is not able to cope with the immediate person in front of him.

The Other is not understood, is exotic and erotic (cf. Liewald: 38, Kerr: 126–127). This is expressed through the *focalizer*, Gould; no inside view of Sal is given. Gould is enamoured with Sal, but uncomprehending of what she is: “the more I loved her, the more mysterious she became to me” (*GBF*: 274). The Other arouses passion while the ‘same’ (the white woman) leaves Gould limp (cf. 269).

In the novel, reason, a central tenet of the Enlightenment, is contrasted with love and feeling: “But the truth was that Twopenny Sal had somehow got into my head” (269, see also 192). Gould cannot get the object of his love out of his head, the seat of reason. He feels that something exists between Sal and him that renders him impotent towards the white woman. This makes him “feel all angry because it wasn’t

26 Against her express wish her remains were kept for scientific purposes and on display for half a century, before being buried about 100 years after her death (cf. Ryan and Smith: n.p.).

27 From the last lines of Goethe’s *Faust II* “Das Unzulängliche, / Hier wird’s Ereignis; / [...] Das ewig Weibliche / zieht uns hinan”.

rational & I wanted to please myself [...] & I knew it just wasn't going to happen & none of it stood up to Reason" (270).

The Enlightenment as 'the age of reason' stands for a quest for knowledge and for rational, scientific thought which is supposed to further the progress of humanity. However, "Enlightenment" is a euphemism used by Gould to describe sexual encounters. Gould is revealed as a European with repressed love who cannot name it directly. A further instance occurs when Gould chances across the journal of Matt Brady, a bushranger famed as an anarchist. Gould looks for anything "that might fundamentally threaten the System" of the penal colony and finds "nothing. Only page after page of more pathetick affirmations of love between a white man & a black woman" that leave him feeling "queasy" (*GBF*: 350). He overlooks that this is exactly what threatens "the System", or that he might even be so entrenched in this system that he hates so much. Gould cannot understand the meaning of the sentence: "To love is not safe" (*ibid.*). A conception of a shared life that changes in the process, "the whole something other than either in the merge [...] growing old together" sounds like "nonsense" (*ibid.*) to him. Musings on love is all he finds, when he hoped to find a revolutionary plan. In consequence, his hope for substantial change is "extinguished" (351). But while he falls asleep in the love nest of Matt Brady and his Aboriginal partner, with "Brady's book of indigestible love" at his side, he comes to the point where he prepares himself "to abandon the shell of who & what I was, & metamorphose into something else" (352). The process which began to be set in motion when he sleeps with Sal (*cf.* 275) comes to a critical point here. This progression in *GBF* supports the notion that meaningful interaction with the Other calls one's own identity into question (*cf.* Kerr: 126–127):

That day, the more I loved her [Sal], the more mysterious she became to me. I began with certainty; [...] I ended in doubt, both as to who she was &, even more shockingly, as to who I was. (*GBF*: 275)

However, "dancing the old Enlightenment [...] death & at the same time its transformation into new life" (*GBF*: 275) is pivotal. The orgiastic 'little death' means the loss of identity,²⁸ but by losing his white identity Gould has the chance of gaining a new kind of identity and the knowledge Sal possesses. While sleeping with Sal, Gould sees "in her face an impression of absence; it was perhaps this more than anything else that lent her – at least to me – a certain serene profundity. Her eyes seemed so full of wisdom" (*GBF*: 274) that he is excluded from (*cf.* 327). The novel rejects the Enlightenment concept of reason as a measure of progress by insisting on other forms of knowledge that need to be experienced (*cf.* Jones: 118–119).

The fictional narrative also seems to take up observations made by postcolonial theorists, such as the tension that exists between a sense of natural purity and a corrupted civilisation (Fanon *qtd.* in Liewald: 55): "When the whites feel that they have become mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance".

Robert J. C. Young shows how, according to one concept of the Enlightenment, the qualities of gender were transferred to race (i.e. masculine and feminine races), so that the desire of white males for 'black and yellow' females could be seen as con-

28 *Cf.* "petite mort, n". *OED*. The *OED* gives a quote by A. Koestler: "The corresponding self-transcending component in the sexual relation is [...] the depersonalization (*la petite mort*) of the orgasm".

sistent: “sexual difference has been translated into the sexual division of race, so the white male’s object of desire has been relocated across the racial divide”. In the ‘natural order’ of things, the white male remains at the top regarding gender and racial hierarchies (cf. 111–113).²⁹ But Gould is not on top, he ends up feeling childlike and terribly ashamed of his lack of knowledge (of the Other), not even having bothered to find out Sal’s Aboriginal name – a realisation which is driven home when he is in close proximity to Sal, “nestling his nose into her back” (*GBF*: 327), partaking in the female warmth she provides.

It makes sense that Flanagan picks up Enlightenment ideas repeatedly in *GBF*, as from 1788 to 1850, when European settler Australia was largely formed, the worldview of the Enlightenment was highly influential (cf. Gascoigne: 169), and as similar concepts of progress still influence policy-making (cf. Jones: 115).

It is interesting therefore that *GBF* poses a contrast to the ideals of European Enlightenment of improvement (i.e. moral, civil, agrarian, and legal) and of civilisation that served as the primary justification for establishing dominion in Australia.³⁰ While the subject of European domination pervades *GBF*, the novel still reverses the historical ideals of improvement and civilisation: Enlightenment is not brought to the Aborigines but to the Europeans, and it is only possible through real, physical encounters with the Other. Who influences whom in the end broaches the issue of agency. Sal remains the more independent of the two; it is her actions and decisions that determine the encounters between Gould and herself.

The Enlightenment project, like all creeds, could be used for control as well as liberation (cf. Gascoigne: 14). Flanagan proposes in his novel that it can go both ways. But he also acknowledges the historical tragedy: The reality of loss hits only when the other (culture) is gone and it is too late. The protagonist recognises: “And I who had taken her so for granted, missed her much more than I thought possible” (*GBF*: 160).³¹

The Bonfire as a Site of Decolonisation

In the end, it is necessary to ask what new perspective *GBF*, as literary fiction, provides on historical events, as Doro Wiese does in her essay (cf. 135). She posits that this new perspective may allow readers to imagine and relate to stories that could have been part of Tasmania’s past, as well as allowing for encounters that lead to a shift in power relations (cf. 135–136) towards an “inclusive present and future” (125). Flanagan conceives a storyline in which Aboriginal people allow Europeans into their world – in spite of the havoc the intruders wreak.³²

29 Tacey (cf. 51) talks about the Australian psyche and says that Australian consciousness has constructed itself as masculine in the archetypal sense, but that this masculinity is exaggerated and hollow, and serves merely to mask the sense of inner weakness and vulnerability.

30 To not misrepresent Flanagan, it should be mentioned that various authors (e.g., Holgate: 10, Jones: 115, 127) point out correctly that Flanagan critiques the way Enlightenment ideas were misused to dominate and control, but that he still upholds liberal Enlightenment ideas.

31 This is also a dynamic that is active in science, especially anthropology and related fields, the dilemma of destroying what is being explored. This was also the case for Aboriginal skulls and bones, these so-called “desiderata” (from the Latin: objects of desire) gained in value once it had been understood that they would become rarer with the ‘races dying’ out (cf. Turnbull: 7–8).

32 Again, this is contrary to the historical fact of the European invasion of a *Terra Nullius* where Aboriginal people quite literally did not count, and obviously were not taken into consideration (cf. Mohanram: 142–143).

While they are in the bush,³³ Tracker Mark, a male Aborigine who is greatly disfigured by pox and cruelty inflicted by Europeans, reaches out, and touches Gould (cf. *GBF*: 324–325), “something that [Gould] would never have anticipated” (324). Sal inscribes cicatrices on Gould that symbolise “Palawa” (Aboriginals) and “Numminer” (ghosts/white men) (cf. 271), later she paints him with ochre, as if they “shared something that transcended our bodies & our histories” (333). But Gould is mystified by the meanings: “I only sensed that I knew none of it” (ibid.).

The bonfire Sal ignites is the place where she ascribes a possible new identity to Gould, she would allow Gould to change places with Tracker Mark who has died in the meantime. She makes him Palawa, while Tracker Mark is now Numminer: “‘Long time before,’ said she ‘you were us.’ I looked at her & then I couldn’t look at her” (*GBF*: 340). Sal and Tracker Mark take Gould into their world, invite him in, and rename him to be part of it. But Gould is incapable of stepping across the cultural divide, of following the Aboriginal woman he loves “into the future” (340–341). This unhappy outcome evokes a sense of loss in the reader, of something that should have happened but did not. Wiese describes a further possible effect on the readers:

By inventing that which cannot be found in the historical record, the novel *creates a space for the emergence of a collectivity* no longer existing or yet to come. It employs the powers of the false to evoke a “missing people”. This power can convey a sense of what is eternally missing *in the present* [...]. (Wiese: 100, emphasis added)

This space for the emergence of a new collective story is indicated in *GBF* through the empty sheets in Brady’s journal. Where “the clean, empty sheets” start (*GBF*: 353), Gould begins to write a new story (this is after he has given over his own story to the flames):

Orbis tertius, my first words rendering that third circle in Latin. And then, finally, breaking apart the spider web of [...] memory in which I had become enshrouded [...]. (*GBF*: 353)

The memory of two separate and disparate circles, “Black man, full circle; white man, bisected circle” (*GBF*: 352), is not the foundation of the new story. “Life [is] the third circle” (ibid.) which undoes a memory (history) that hinders the view; Gould realises in naming the third circle that “everyone had the capacity to be someone [...] that Numminer were Palawa & Palawa Numminer” (353), this is where there’s life.³⁴

In *GBF*, the bonfire constitutes this shared space where memory is broken up and where both circles come together. In itself the bonfire carries a strong symbolic and emotional value for Tasmanian Aborigines because some researchers thought they were unable to start a fire and concluded that they must be even more primitive than other natives [and treated accordingly] (cf. Robinson’s diary qtd. in Taylor: 2). So it is significant that Sal sets up the funeral pyre for Tracker Mark. She ignites a bonfire fuelled with registers, letter-books, any written documents that contain the official happenings of the penal settlement, and so she lets conceptions of progress

33 It is to be noted that the bush is firmly fixed as a place that formed the Australian identity and in collective memory also denotes the frontier of European progress (cf. Hansen and Griffiths: 31–32, 37).

34 What is proposed here is fairly typical; Tiffin writes about counter-discourses and that “Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectic relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity” (99).

and European civilisation go up in flames.³⁵ Sal's fire becomes so big it cannot be contained anymore (*GBF*: 334–340),³⁶ highlighting the power that is in the hands of an Aborigine. Gould adds his own book – the very book the readers have been immersed in for the last 338 pages – to the fire to be free from his own limited and limiting life story:

Onto that pyre I threw so many, many words – that entire untrue literature of the past which had shackled & subjugated me [...] – that had so long denied me my free voice & the stories I needed to tell. (*GBF*: 339)

The bonfire becomes a meeting-point for the Aboriginal and the White were they deconstruct the dichotomies, individual conceptions of the world, and the official histories that limit them, which frees them to actually interact and to tell other stories. Deconstructing the past is central for imagining a future together that is not dominated by historical power relations:

[R]econfiguring the past as 'shared space' is a vital part of a contemporary decolonising process that involves the contestation of national and cultural space in Australia. (Hall qtd. in Liewald: 138)

Price seems to be explaining the objective of *GBF* perfectly when he explains the role of fiction as making action possible in the future.

The novel, as I conceive of it here, engages in *acts of annihilation* in that it actively destroys the object (in this case, history) as part of a larger project of action. Put differently, the acts of contemplation and perception required of the reader of such novels will bring about the rejection of history – both as actions in the past and as a narrative of the past – and will replace it with notions of a "project-in-course", a continuing unfolding of *narrative alternatives that make action for the future possible* [...]. (Price: 300, emphasis added)

Conclusion

"A novel like *Gould's Book of Fish* intervenes in its own way in the debate" over Aboriginal history (Wiese: 99). In constructing its poetic history Flanagan presents a counternarrative that challenges, debunks, or modifies the accepted narratives of history that are used today to justify political practices in Australia (cf. Price: 303). As shown in chapter two, Flanagan casts doubt upon the whole process of historiography, he "encourages his readers to think of the construction of history" and "whom specific histories benefit" (Whitmore: 14). Reading his work is not meant merely as an intellectual exercise; the individual stories of Sal, and with her of Gould, are in no way a truthful narration, in the sense of closely following all the historical facts, but they establish "the truth of narration that offers a different point of connection to the reader" (Wiese: 105). *GBF* is written 'in memoriam', to give a face to "all those faceless people who have no portraits, who only exist" as a "record, a list" (384). Literature provides a different mode of engagement than non-fiction, namely, a story to which

35 In *Living with Fire*, Hansen and Griffiths describe [bush]fire as the greatest elemental force shaping Australian settlement (v), a key force that has shaped the bush, and Australia itself as a continent of fire (29).

36 This is also an interesting reversal of history regarding the question of who ends who's world (cf. Liewald: 130). The Europeans are described in many history books as bringing the end for the Aborigines' world. But in *GBF* the apocalyptic "inferno" (*GBF*: 340) destroys the European's conception and the civilisation at hand, the penal settlement.

readers “might be able to relate because it makes an affective layer of experiences accessible, because it affects them and is affected by their reading” (Wiese: 106).

The ‘faceless of history’ are fleshed out in *GBF*; how the ‘alternate histories’ of an Aboriginal woman and of vociferous human remains are composed is examined in chapters three and four respectively. Chapter three looks at the progressive emancipation of Sal. She begins with more timid forms of protest and then completely throws off European control and regains an independent life. Sal stands for Aboriginal history, but she also has individual agency which does not allow glossing over her actions. She also represents contemporary Aboriginal communities that often have a strong maternal figure at the centre.

Chapter four showcases the implication of Aboriginal bodies under imperialist domination contrary to which the novel stages the collective protests of an Aboriginal headcount which leave a racist science of classification effectively “defeated” (*GBF*: 232). With repercussions on the acknowledgement of Aboriginal rights lasting into present times, undeniably, there is “symmetry & beauty” (*GBF*: 248) in the way ‘science’ backfires completely in the novel.

GBF does not confine itself to recounting historical events and giving them a liberated twist. Considering that “the novel cannot pass itself off as anything close to historiography” (Wiese: 104), *GBF* cannot “rewrite history”, as was attributed to it in the thesis, but its role can be used to add marginalised perspectives and to rethink possible outcomes:

[N]ovelists can give eyes and voice to the victims of history. They can open a second-order referential realm that examines and considers outcomes that were not realized. (Price: 29)

This twofold function is echoed in the novel:

It sometimes seemed as if the author of the *Book of Fish*, the storyteller William Buelow Gould, had been born with a memory but neither experience nor history to account for it, and had spent forever after seeking to invent what didn't exist in the curious belief that his imagination might become his experience, and thereby both explain and cure the problem of an inconsolable memory. (*GBF*: 22–23, emphasis added)

At the heart of memory work there lies a belief in the relationship between remembering and transformation (cf. Kneebone: 76). In chapter five both of these aspects are inquired into: In the first section, the synecdochal [non-]relationship between Sal and Gould under the shadow of ‘Enlightenment’ is investigated. What Flanagan portrays, deliberately, is how Gould is caught in the impossibility of imagining a shared life between Aboriginal people and Whites, and the feeling of loss that follows. On the other hand, the novel still opens up the idea of change through real, physical encounters with the Other. In fact, the second section deals with the way *GBF* conceives of an alternate future – in a shared space, provided preconceived ideas are let go of.

GBF is a many-faceted novel whose careful references reveal Aboriginal history as a key subject. The fictional reversals of history re-establish Indigenous Australian people as agents in history, and not as passive victims caught in time, but as able to move beyond history and still existing hurt. However, the novel imagines Aboriginal people inviting the White man into their world, even if he runs up against

cultural barriers. This seems to be a naïve, simplistic idea of a shared, decolonised space. How much sharing really would be possible considering that many Aboriginal societies protect certain kinds of knowledge, knowledge they are not allowed to give to an outsider? Another limitation is evident in the dichotomy perpetuated by *GBF* by portraying Sal as independent and perfect only when she returns to a life unsullied by European influence.³⁷ This is uncomfortably close to images of the 'noble savage' in an 'original', unchanging state versus brutalised civilisation, a simplistic Enlightenment idea. No middle-ground and no perspective on what it means to be an Aboriginal person in modern times is given.

Still, *GBF* rightfully takes its place among the postcolonial literature that "can be seen as a movement against the ideology, eurocentrism, imperialism and stereotypical construction of the colonial Other" (Liewald: 33). Flanagan is writing, but not raging against the machine – in the hope that it opens up new avenues to any reader who admits along with Gould (*GBF*: 401): "For I am not reconciled to this world".

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37 Tiffin (99) notes that post-colonial literature has frequently been accompanied by the demand for a new or wholly recovered 'reality', free of all colonial taint, and says that such a demand is desirable and inevitable, but also alludes to the contradictions inherent in such a project.

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