

5 Of Storying and Storing: 'Reading' Lichtenecker's Voice Recordings

Anette Hoffmann

*No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better
than you can speak about yourself.*

(bell hooks, 1990, p. 241)

Introduction

With the invention of the phonograph – or sound/voice writer – by Thomas Alva Edison in 1877, the human voice could become an object. What so far had been the elusive, ephemeral effect of sound waves could be captured and stored on Edison wax cylinders. As an object the voice could at once be separated from its source and social setting, become transportable, but also indexical to its absent referent. The phonograph, writes Erika Brady, 'was distinctively the product of 19th century scientific and social preoccupations' (1999, p. 11) of which the collecting of (exotic) objects was certainly one. The voice, conserved on wax cylinders, could become part of 'accumulative, item-centered, indexic' collections that were treasured by museums, academic institutions, as well as medical collections (1999, p. 14).

The new technology of voice-recording was almost immediately introduced to the study of folklore and to anthropology. Shortly after the recording of voice had become possible, its storage was institutionalised. In Berlin the Phonogramm-Archiv was founded in 1900. Erich von Hornbostel, the Director of the Archive between 1905 and 1933, saw the aim of the archive as creating a collection of musical phonograms of all peoples of the world. The recordings were thought to provide comparative material of modes of expression – both in language and in music – that were deemed key to the cultural character of peoples.¹ Today the Phonogramm-Archiv in Berlin is one of several archives in Europe that host immense historical sound and voice collections from many formerly colonised countries.² To ensure the accumulation of such a comprehensive collection, it was the strategy of the archive to equip German researchers and travellers with a phonograph and wax cylinders. The German artist Hans Lichtenecker was one of them.

Hans Lichtenecker (1891-1988) went to Namibia (then South West Africa) in 1931 with the explicit aim of creating an 'archive of vanishing races'.³ The target group for this archive were people Lichtenecker called '*Buschmänner und Hottentotten*'.

1 Until 1923 the Phonogramm-Archiv was associated to the Institute of Psychology.

2 See Ziegler (2006) and the portal *dismarc*, in which one can search for sound recordings in European archives <<http://www.dismarc.org/>> {Accessed on 15 March, 2011}.

3 Namibia Scientific Society. Hans Lichtenecker's Diary, (unpublished), page 1.

During his expedition he produced life-casts, photographs, registers of skin and hair colours, hair samples, a travelogue, and voice recordings on 57 wax cylinders.⁴ Lichtenecker's recordings of voices in Namibia did not follow the preoccupations of linguistics or musicology; instead, he had the idea to *collect* the voices of 'natives' (*Eingeborenenstimmen*) as a supplement to their alleged 'racial features'. Lichtenecker regarded himself as an artist. Although he was commissioned by the German raciologist Eugen Fischer to take photographs in Rehoboth⁵ and had learned to make casts from Theodor Mollison at the University of Munich, he did not have the direct support of an academic institution in Germany. His idea was to reproduce the 'Face of Southwest' (*Das Gesicht von Südwest*, which is also the title of his photo album).

4 Not all of what the voices had to say can be retrieved. Some of the cylinders did not survive their journey to Leningrad – where they were taken as spoils of war by Russian soldiers during the last days of World War II – and only returned to the archive in 1990. Some of the cylinders became mouldy and the delicate wax relief that carries the voices has been destroyed. Of the 57 recorded cylinders that Lichtenecker brought back from Namibia, 41 are still intact. Transcribing and translating the recordings in Namibia was hard work for Memory Biwa, Levi Namaseb, Renathe Tjikundi and Rhyn Tjituka, who did the translations from Khoekhoegowab and Otjiherero in 2007-8. This was not only due to the background noise, the sometimes old-fashioned way of speaking, and the often obscure situation of the recordings, but also because of the 'pain in the voice' of some speakers, as Memory Biwa described it to me. I am deeply grateful for the dedicated work of translating and transcribing Memory, Rhyn, Levi and Renathe invested in the project. The digitising was funded by the Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle (AACRLS) project in Windhoek and the Mopane Foundation in Windhoek. I am very grateful for their generous support, without which the digitalisation, reworking of the sound quality, and the translation and transcription of the recordings would not have been possible. Most of the translations and transcriptions can be found in Anette Hoffmann (2009) (ed.). *What We See. Reconsidering an Anthropometrical Collection from Southern Africa: Images, Voices and Versioning*. My own research was made possible by a postdoctoral fellowship at the Programme on the Study of Humanities in Africa, at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. I am deeply grateful for having been granted this fellowship and excellent research and learning experience at UWC in 2007-8, and for being able to produce the exhibition 'What We See' from there. I also thank the Namibian Scientific Society for allowing me to use the photographs and diary of Hans Lichtenecker.

5 Mollison and Fischer were raciologists. Fischer advised the National Socialists in questions of race and was one of the architects of the Nuremberg Laws (he was also actively involved in the sterilisation of the so-called '*Rheinlandbastarde*' – children whose parents were German women and African soldiers of the French Army). Lichtenecker saw Fischer as his mentor; he took photographs in Rehoboth for Fischer, who had conducted anthropometric research in the POW camps in Namibia and in Rehoboth in 1908. The photographs were used for Fischer's article 'Neue Rehobother Basterstudien. 1. Antlitzveränderung verschiedener Altersstufen bei Bastarden' (1938, see also Lichtenecker 1964). Lichtenecker travelled at his own expense, the casts he took were, to my knowledge, not delivered to Mollison, but were shown at the 'Koloniausstellung' of the National Socialists in 1934 in Köln. Lichtenecker tried later to sell the casts, and the 'heads' he had produced from the casts. One of the 'heads' is held by the Naturkundemuseum in Vienna. Most of the casts were sold to the National Museum in Windhoek in the 1980s.

The collection produced by Hans Lichtenecker in Namibia in 1931 includes the recorded voices of people who were photographed, measured, and cast.⁶ The life-casts he produced in Namibia, imprints of faces, heads, hands and feet, consisting of a wax-like substance,⁷ were thought to realistically represent the features of 'racial types' (*Rassentypen*). In many cases people spoke into the phonograph immediately after they had gone through the suffocating and often terrifying procedure of cast-making. Especially in the recordings that were produced in the police station in Keetmanshoop, where most of the casts were made, the process of the cast-making resonates.⁸ Lichtenecker did not understand these recordings as cultural expressions in terms of music or language,⁹ and much less as part of a conversation. Knowing that he did not understand what they were saying, the people who were recorded at times spoke more freely than, no doubt, he realised.

6 The photo-album Hans Lichtenecker produced of his expedition also has a photograph showing the 'digging up' of 'supposedly a Bushman grave' in the Namib, ('*ein vermeintliches Buschmangrab*' in the original caption), and a photograph of a skull. The original caption identifies it as the photograph of a '*Buschmannschädel aus der Namib*' (a bushman skull from the Namib). The skull does not appear in any of the parts of the Lichtenecker collection in Windhoek or in Berlin. It is not clear to me what happened to it. (All photographs and the diary are kept by the Namibian Scientific Society in Windhoek.) It was, however, not Lichtenecker's aim to collect human remains. The researchers from the German-speaking countries who 'collected' (in many cases this meant digging up graves, taking human remains from prisons, camps, etc.) skulls, heads, and other human remains in South Africa and Namibia, were mainly Eugen Fischer, Felix von Luschan, Gustav Fritsch, and Rudolph Pöch (Rudolph Virchow also conducted research on human remains he had ordered from South Africa). Most of the skulls seem to be held today at the Charité in Berlin. Complete human heads from Namibia were 'discovered' in the cellars of the University of Freiburg in 2009, and had probably been sent there for Fischer's research. However, if one considers the extent of the activity of 'collecting' and the institutions involved, one might still find more collections of human remains in museums in Germany. For an overview on the discussion on the collections, and questions of their return see: <<http://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/anthropologische-schaedelsammlungen.htm>>. {Accessed 8 April, 2011}.

7 The material Lichtenecker used for the life-casts is called Negocoll.

8 I have argued that the cast-making in the police station in Keetmanshoop worked with a 'performance of terror' that forced people to submit to the anthropometrical praxis. Interestingly, apart from 'working with' prisoners (which was also the strategy of Wilhelm Bleek for his research on 'Bushman' languages), Felix von Luschan had taken casts and produced recordings in the pass offices in Kimberley and Johannesburg in 1906. One might, therefore, link the racist practices of research in the twentieth century not merely to military subjugation (see Rassool and Legassick, 2009, p. 185; Hoffmann, 2011) but also to the systematic control of mobility and an ever-perfected system of surveillance.

9 The Phonogramm-Archiv aimed at vocal or musical recordings as a representation of culture (see also Britta Lange, 2007, p. 318).