BONES OF THE NATION
The Museum of La Plata, Argentina 1884–1888

BY ANA MARÍA LEÓN

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, ships leave Liverpool and Manchester and head west, carrying iron tracks, beams, girders, and other building components across the Atlantic. They dock in the port of Buenos Aires.1 The cargo is unloaded and the tracks are laid out, spreading and growing across the pampas, the vast Argentinian plains, as the spidery extensions of a large railroad network—by 1914, it will be claimed as the tenth longest in the world, the pride of Argentina.2 The conquest of this territory is requisite to its transformation into a site of extraction, cropped for grain and cattle to be processed and shipped back to Europe. But this land is not empty: traces of the Pleistocene remain, from the bones of large mammals to the live descendants of the first human inhabitants of the American continent.3 These traces are to be contained within a new building.

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2 See Raul Scalabrini Ortiz, Historia de las ferrovías argentinas (Buenos Aires: Ed. Fabro, 2014 [1940]).

3 The Pleistocene is the geological epoch comprehending roughly from about 2,580,000 to 11,700 years ago, at the end of the last glacial period and the Paleolithic age used in archaeology.
In the middle of the pampas, a grid is built; within this grid, the Museum of La Plata. The museum can be understood as an apparatus that allows us to trace different networks of exchange operating at vast distances in time and place, from the British Empire to the Argentinean pampas, and from Pleistocene bones to the nineteenth-century wars against the peoples of the Americas. Standing at the crossroads of these networks, the museum was instrumental in dissociating Indigenous populations from their contemporary context and presenting them instead as subjects belonging to a distant past. In doing so, the institution became complicit with processes of genocide and empire expansion, linking these networks of resource extraction and industrialisation to the decimation of one of the oldest populations of the American continent.

The presence of the Tehuelche—a tribe known for its large stature, whose presence in the region extends to about 14,500 BCE—in the museum’s original display, holds the key to this Argentine-British project of territorial expansion. In the halls of the Museum of La Plata, an evolutionary march of specimens culminated with an exhibition of live natives, oozing their forms and discussing their lives. One of these natives was involved with the preparation of exhibition materials: Longo Modesto Inacayal, a Tehuelche chief liberated from a prison camp by Francisco Pascasio Moreno, founder and director of the museum. In 1885, Inacayal and members of his clan were incorporated into the museum:

first, as a living sample, and after their death within the walls of the museum, as anatomical displays. They joined a tradition of exhibition and display of human bodies—primarily people of color—that extended from Europe to the Americas, including the United States, Brazil, and Argentina, and which lasted well until the twentieth century. In Argentina, this live exhibition played a specific role within the discourse of the state.

In recounting his travels through Patagonia, Moreno openly acknowledged raising Tehuelche burial sites to increase his collection of human remains, which joined the collection of the museum. He described his relationship with Tehuelches and their bodies with detachment. Speaking of a Tehuelche he had previously befriended, he would remember:

Near the sheriff's station is the cemetery of the colony, and there was the corpse of my friend Don Slick, good Tehuelche, son of the cacique Casimiro Bigaud. (…) He allowed us to take his photograph, but by no means to measure his body and especially his head. I ignore the curious anxiety which made him act in this way. For later, when I met him once again at Patagones, even though we had remained friends, he would not let me get near him when he was drunk, and a year later, when

A detailed institutional history of the Natural History Museum in Argentina has been written by historian Adolfo Andes; see Adolfo Andes, The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). Gonzalo Stiller has written on the multiple interpretations of the pampas by the Argentinean avant-garde. See Gonzalo Stiller, El paso de unos: una historia de las imágenes del pampa en la Pampa de las Artes (Buenos Aires: Editados, 2013). I wish to complement the research of these historians by offering a reading that links the museum with the essence of the pampas, the expansion of the Argentinean railroad networks, and the long reach of the English industrial revolution.

For other Brazilian and Argentinean case studies see Andes, The Optic of the State. Perhaps one of the best known cases of human display is that of Socrates “Sauco” Beatriz, one of several Aymara women exhibited in early nineteenth-century Europe under the name of the Hottentot Venus. She died in 1810. In Europe, such displays lasted well into the twentieth century, for instance at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931. In the United States, a raid from the Taos people was found at Bette, California, in 1911 and inaugurated into the exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. As part of her performance piece with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “The Couple in the Cage” (1982), the artist, writer, and curator Coco Fusco has compiled a critical history of these live exhibits—she gives up to the exhibitions of a black woman midget in Minnesota in 1932. See Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Interrevecual Performance,” TDR, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), 143–167.

I returned to that spot to undertake my journey to Nahuel Huapi, he declined my offer to come with me, claiming that I had lost his head. That turned out to be his destiny. Days after my departure he went to Chuquit and was viciously killed there by two other Indians during a night of fear. On my arrival I learned of his mischief, found out the spot where he had been buried, and on a moonlit night exhume his corpse, the skeleton of which remains today in the Anthropological Museum of Buenos Aires; a sacrifice committed for the sake of osteological research on the Tehuelches.

The same I did with the bodies of the chief Sapo and his wife, who had died in previous years at the same spot during one of the tribe’s visits. Both were buried on the Christian cemetery, albeit maintaining the indigenous practice of the sitting position of the corpse.

4 Adolfo Andes, The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). Gonzalo Stiller has written on the multiple interpretations of the pampas by the Argentinean avant-garde. See Gonzalo Stiller, El paso de unos: una historia de las imágenes del pampa en la Pampa de las Artes (Buenos Aires: Editados, 2013). I wish to complement the research of these historians by offering a reading that links the museum with the essence of the pampas, the expansion of the Argentinean railroad networks, and the long reach of the English industrial revolution.

5 Francisco Pascasio Moreno, Visite a la Patagonia extrait, 1877 (Buenos Aires: Sociedad de Bibliógrafos, 1978), 39.
British historian Jens Andermann has read Moreno’s detachment as ironic contempt mobilized to erase the violence exerted by the museum.9 But there is a more insidious problem in Moreno as collector of human remains and agent of the museum, and it has to do with the transformation of the Argentinian territory into a space that harkened back to the Pleistocene past at the same time as it was projected into the future conjured by the Industrial Revolution. The word genocide, which I have used to describe the eradication of the Tehuelche, did not exist until 1944, when Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin created it to describe the Nazi policies of systematic destruction of European Jews. It is with this admittedly anachronic term that I want to open up the story of the museum’s practices—a crime committed for which there was yet no name.10 As Tehuelche bodies and bones were incorporated into the Pleistocene display, the savage nature of the pampas was ready to be retrieved and reconstructed.

We can see the logic of this exhibitionary complex in the organization of the exhibition itself, arranged as a loop to suggest an infinite march through time. Upon entering the building, a double-height rotunda welcomed visitors with paintings of the “prehistoric pampas” in the ground floor. The balcony surrounding this space in the upper floor displayed paintings of paradigmatic Argentinian landscapes from different points of its territory, including the Andes mountains, the rainforest, and the rivers. Andermann has noted how this arrangement situated the pampas as the literal and metaphorical central axis of the Argentinian territory. From this point, the visitor was directed into a circular procession through a series of rooms. Caught within this loop, two double-height rooms catalogued different types of bones and fragments, human and animal. The side hallways were laid out as half circles, their turning rotation accentuating the movement through the hallways and the evolutionary narrative propelling the visitors through the museum. While the first curve displayed the skeletons of ancient specimens, the second one exhibited contemporary animals, stuffed and reconstructed to highlight their present existence. The fabrication of these creatures was done in the forty deposits, workshops, laboratories and other rooms located in the basement, beyond public access. The large space and ample infrastructure dedicated to these activities points to the extraneous labor required to fabricate these histories.

The long galleries—illuminated by large skylights—still displayed the largest skeletons, oriented along their main axis. Thus these creatures march with us, their directionalism emphasizing the collective evolutionary journey propelling all creatures into the future. Dry pabilones and claws click against the polished marble bases, extremities are carefully propped up by this rod. Other creatures swoosh over our heads, seeming to fly under the cast iron beams, hanging from delicate threads. We blink as the sun filters through the glass skylight above. Iron beams and Megatherium bones are displayed together, as naked armatures—a small reminder of the iron tracks that brought them together. When Moreno arranged this room, he was intent on increasing the quantity and scale of the display. In a letter to a collaborator, he wrote:

We need at least two hundred more skeletons and some skeletons for the anthropological gallery to give a good impression... I insist on the convenience of having great predators... We need to obtain something to fill these hundreds of meters as soon as possible.11

Indeed, when the museum first opened several galleries remained empty and closed off to the public. But the scientific community did not get a good impression; and many of Moreno’s colleagues protested: surely pedagogical intent here had transcended into vulgar spectacle—the crowded skeletons were arranged in an aesthetic of the gigantic, meant to overwhelm visitors through sheer size rather than instruct them.12

Foreign visitors had different complaints. Visiting the museum in 1893, British naturalist and geologist Richard Lydekker was favorably impressed by the quantity and richness of the collection, yet simultaneously horrified by the classification methods of Argentinean paleontologists;13 instead of revising found bones against Richard Owen’s classifications, in La Plata paleontologists had assumed each bone came from a new species, resulting in an enormous number of new “types” and creating great difficulties.
in the process of exchanging specimens with other institutions. The Argentinian dismissal of British classifications had a nationalistic origin. In contrast to natural history museums in Europe and the United States, which had the resources to collect specimens from around the world, in La Plata the museum was primarily stocked by local findings, a circumstance that was mobilized to serve the narrative of the state.

In 1825, the United Kingdom signed a treaty with Argentina, making it one of the first countries to recognize Argentine independence (1816). At the time, England was turning from an agricultural nation into an importer of grains, meat, and wool. Argentina’s expansive plains and temperate climate provided an ideal territory to cultivate these crops and herd cattle (this was the case also of Australia and the United States). However, the ownership of this potentially lucrative territory was up for dispute. While the Argentinian state had been founded by criollos, that is, Argentines of Spanish descent, the pampas were still populated by Indigenous peoples including the Mapuche, the Ranquel, and most strikingly, the Tehuelche. Starting in 1833, and in several subsequent campaigns throughout the nineteenth century, known as “the Conquest of the Desert”—a deceiving name, as these plains are not a desert—the Argentinian state waged war against its Indigenous populations, with the express objective of exterminating them. Minister of War Julio Argentino Roca was adamant about the urgency of this enterprise:

*Our self-respect as a virile people obliges us to put down as soon as possible, by reason or by force, this handful of savages who destroy our wealth and prevent us from definitely occupying, in the name of law, progress, and our own security, the richest and most fertile lands of the Republic.*

14 Throughout the processes of European colonization in the Americas, and the later created independence wars, many Indigenous groups sought refuge in more distant, less desirable regions of the continent, including the heights of the Andes


17 According to historian Felipe Pigna, between 1776 and 1862 the Argentinean state gave away or undersold 41,707,023 hectares to 1,673 landowners (linked by economic and/or family ties to the different regimes of that period).

18 The discovery of these giant mammals had been contemporaneous with a human presence—that is, the existence of a paleolithic man in the Americas—was initially met with resistance in scientific circles in Europe and the United States, but embraced in South America.

19 See Pedregal, *El sonido del tiempo* de las coas argentinas, 107. Argentinean paleontologists estimate an overlap of 4,000 years between Homo sapiens and these large mammals.

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24 The narrative of the Argentinean nation was thus constructed by the erasure of Indigenous populations and their replacement with displaced Europeans.

25 As the plains were transformed into a cattle-production machine, discussions over customs duties in the port led to a failed insurrection in the province of Buenos Aires. To solve these separatist tendencies, the state gave the city of Buenos Aires federal status, and officially established it as the capital of Argentina. At the same time, it decreed the creation of La Plata, a new city to become capital of the province. Located about 30 miles southeast of Buenos Aires, La Plata was designed and built by topographer Pedro Benoit, and officially founded in 1882. The city was laid out as a perfect square crossed by two forty-five-degree-angle diagonals, almost perfectly aligned along the north-south and east-west axis. Benoit's French roots and Freemason affiliation point to some of the possible formal origins of the scheme, while recent research by historian Fabiola López-Durán suggests additional motivations related to eugenics discourses also transplanted from France. Rounded corners limited the confines of the original square, which was itself subdivided into a grid of six by six squares, punctuated by a park on each corner. Each of these squares was in turn subdivided into a grid of six by six blocks. On the northeast side of the city, one of the squares was assigned to house a large park, designed by French landscape architect Charles Thays, who had trained in Paris and later relocated to Argentina. Within this French landscape, German engineer Carl Ludwig Wilhelm Heynemann (known in Argentina as Carlos Heynemann) and Swedish architect Henrich Aberg (known as Enrique Aberg) designed the Museum of La Plata.

26 Early drawings suggest that they initially envisioned a landscape populated by representatives of its Paleolithic fauna. Heynemann and Aberg wrapped a Neoclassical façade around a symmetrical Beaux-Arts plan, but left parts of the iron structure exposed on the inside and, similar to some of the train stations spreading across the country.

27 The British used similar strategies in areas controlled by the East India Company and later by the Raj in the Indian subcontinent.


29 For an analysis of the eugenic undertones of this project and its architecture see Fabiola López-Durán, "Architects for Modern Life," in Eugenics to the Garden: Architectural Heritage and the Crafting of Modernity (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). For nuanced, recent research into the racial politics of Argentina see Paulina L. Alberts and Eduard Elena, Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina: The Shaping of a Modern Subject, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

20 The United Kingdom was the first to make widespread use of refrigeration technologies to freeze meat and transport it by ship from its colonies to the British Isles. The first ship outfitted with a refrigeration unit was commissioned in New Zealand in 1813. See Colin Willmsworth, A Lasting Legacy: A 150-year History of New Zealand's Rivercruising since the First Frozen Meat Shipment (New Zealand: Rural Press Limited, 2001).

21 The railroads were initially started with Argentinean capital in 1885, but by 1892, there was a large amount of British companies. The most important instance here is the Western Buenos Aires Railroad which was sold in 1895. These transactions were criticized for underpricing the companies. See, for instance, Schubert, El mercado argentino de los ferrocarriles argentinos.

Darwin's findings confirmed the pampas as the territory of the remote past, where the bones of fantastic creatures might be unearthed, like a latter-day Laocoon, to confirm Argentina's greatness via the presence of the remains of these gigantic mammals. These bones and fossils populated the collections of National History Museums in Europe, up until 1884, when the provincial government banned these remains from leaving the country.

Other remains soon confirmed that these large mammals had not been the only population of the Argentinian pampas during the Paleolithic era. Starting in the late 1850s, Argentinians includingito-Argentinian paleontologist Florentino Ameghino, Eustaquio Zeballos, and aforementioned Moreno excavated the remains of Paleolithic humans, establishing the presence of these groups as one of the first human presences in the Americas. Such a discovery gave the young nation the arguments to claim itself as a possible "cradle of humankind"—a site of origin, rather than a peripheral locality. It is in this light that we must understand Moreno's narrative of friendship and tomb raiding: caught between the state-sanctioned genocide of the Tehuelche, and their conflation with Paleolithic humans remains as markers of the nation's sublime past. The narrative of bigfoot was extended here to cover not only the bones of large mammals, but also those of the legendary tall Tehuelche.

With the native population out of the way, the Argentinian pampas were ready for large-scale cultivation. British investment and Argentinian landowners combined to engineer this territory, transforming it into a transnational network involving ports, ships, granaries, refrigeration facilities, and other components linking both sides of the Atlantic. Additional infrastructure had to be built to connect these facilities to the pampas. The Argentinian railroad network was started in 1855 but its different systems were sold to mostly British companies by 1880. By then, it extended across almost 18,000 kilometers. Private investment meant private tracks, laid out to transport these goods: from their origin in the pampas to the port of Buenos Aires, and from there across the Atlantic. The railroad tracks, sheds, depots, signaling booths, and other built components of this system were built following British guidelines, and its iron structures were manufactured in England and shipped to Argentina, to be assembled there. A network of meat-preserving and refrigeration facilities were organized from the Argentinean side. A large workforce was needed to replace the original population: this new population was also shipped from Europe, mostly from Italy and Spain, heeding the call of Argentinian advertising and incentives and giving this country one of the largest percentages in foreign-born population at the time. The narrative of the Argentinean nation was thus constructed by the erasure of Indigenous populations and their replacement with displaced Europeans.

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For a brief summary of this history in English see Shulman, Thomas E. Peter H. Smith and James N. Green, "Argentina: Progreso, Salud, Arte; Diseño," in Modern Latin America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
The museum building went through a few renovations throughout the twentieth century until it was designated a National Historic Monument in 1997. The exhibition display was substantially redesigned in the 2010s. One of the galleries has been preserved with the original nineteenth-century display of the evolutionary march. In one of the upper galleries, a recent renovation lays out the history of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Here, visitors are greeted by a video monitor in which an Argentinian, non-Indigenous man gives the following instructions on the living presence of Indigenous groups in the country, currently known in Argentina as “original peoples”:

“It is important that we think of the original peoples and it is important to respect them and integrate them.”

Indeed, Tehuelche people still live in Argentina, but as the man in the video suggests with his demeanor and phrasing, they are still obscured. Little is said here, or in the museum at large, about the painful processes that sought to eradicate them, and prompted them to retreat and isolate themselves. On the other side of this room Moreno’s studio has been conserved as a relic—visitors can peek into it through a pane of glass. A sign in front of the studio informs us of the last restitution made by the museum: Inacayal’s porcio, delivered to representatives of the Council of Mapuche-Tehuelche Communities and the Nahuelpan Community from the province of Chubut. The introductory video and punctilious mention of the return of a garment creates the impression of an institution that has thoughtfully reconsidered its past. The display informs us that

The restitution of this valuable object, that symbolized a relationship of respect between Inacayal and F. Moreno today represents a new stage of fraternal dialogue between the Museum and the original communities.”

However, the restitution process was more complicated. Argentinian laws sanctioned in 1991 and 2001 established that remains should be made available to the communities that requested them. Inacayal’s remains were partially returned in 1994. In 2006, the group Colectivo Guiza, a self-convened organization at the School of Natural Sciences and Museum of the National University of La Plata, verified that the restitution had been incomplete and parts of Inacayal’s body had been held back by the museum, as well as the remains of his companions. A second

restitution was secured in 2014, comprising not only the porcio, but also remains of Inacayal, his partner (no name on record), and his niece Margarita Foyel. Currently, the museum still holds human remains in its collection. For the request and continued activism of Indigenous groups in Argentina, human remains have been taken out of exhibition, but the restitution process has been delayed because of the challenges of identifying individual remains—per its own website, the museum accepts requests for the “restoration of claimed individuals.” In the nineteenth century these groups were decimated, their tombs raided, and their bodies and bones catalogued, archived, and displayed. In the current display, the genocide of Indigenous people is elided, their presence presented as a chapter within the longer histories of the continent, and the history of Inacayal and other Indigenous captives is incomplete. By choosing to omit its many complications against these populations, the museum repeats the gesture of eradication.

In 1845, writer, journalist, and later president Domingo Sarmiento wrote the historical novel Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism. This reflection on the early political struggles between the Argentinean cities and countryside became a key model of Argentine nationalism. The novel sketched out Argentina as a clash between the cultured, European-like metropolis against the savage, barbaric pampas. To Sarmiento, the desolate pampas

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32 For more on Colectivo Guiza, see Colectivo Guiza: Grupo Universitario de Investigación en Antropología Social, http://colectivoguiza.blogspot.com. The group works with Indigenous groups in Argentina in order to identify human remains in museum collections, in particular those of the Museo de La Plata, and proceed with restitutions. For an interview with the group, see Ana Gutiérrez, “Primera en la ciencia—Entrevista al Colectivo GUIZA,” in Asociación del Sur: Perspectivas y Críticas 1 (July 2016), http://sdetoledo.unam.mx/acsprimeraenlacien.


34 For the museum’s position, see http://www.museo.femys. unlp.edu.ar/criptologia, investigar.com, accessed 20 July 2020.
discouraged any type of society, yet at the same time this landscape gave the Argentinian people a uniquely poetic nature that was key to the nation’s identity:

What impressions does it leave in the inhabitant of the Republic of Argentina to gaze into the horizon and see... not to see anything; because the more he sinks his eyes in that uncertain horizon, appar- aently indefinite, the more it retreats from him, the more it fascinates him, confuses him, and sinks him in contemplation and doubt? Where does that world end that he wishes in vain to penetrate? He doesn’t know! What is beyond what he can see? Loneliness, danger, the savage, death!!!

Picking up on various discourses on the sublime, Sarmiento transformed the pampas into the menacing, awe-inspiring presence of the infinite, invading and infecting the whole country with a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the unknown. To this irresistible force, he juxtaposed the metropoli, proposing that through the civilizing agency of the city, analogous to Europe, the nation might resist the barbaric impulse of the American plains. Sarmiento’s dichotomy between civilization and barbarism stands at the crux of the Museum’s paradoxical logic: elevating the archaic past—the supposedly barbaric inhabitants of the pampas—can only happen through its destruction, brought about by the civilizing enterprise that allows for the understanding of their scientific value. The museum was the agent that produced the transubstantiation of the Tehuelche: from inconvenient presence in the pampas into scientific specimens; both confirming the narrative put forward by the Argentinian state and collaborating with the transformation of its plains into commodified territory. The violent eradication of the native population by the Argentinian state, and the transformation of this territory into a systematic extraction economy by the British Empire were in this way silenced under the guise of science, whose authority sanctioned the national mythology that allowed the state to lay claim to the pampa. At the end of the nineteenth century, the dialectic of the enlightenment was on display at the Museum of La Plata—but there was no one there to see it.

Postscript

In 1985, the first professional war crimes exhumations group, the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF, Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team), was assembled in Argentina, in collaboration with United States forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow. The team conducted the first systematic exhumations and produced important evidence to identify the desaparecidos, people disappeared by the Argentine Military Government during the Dirty War (1974–1983). In 2016, on the fortieth anniversary of the 1976 military coup, a series of exhibitions related to the memory of the desaparecidos were held at the ESMA, a former detention space now turned into a space of memory. Here, the work of the EAAF on human rights violations was shown together with an exhibition by Colectivo Guías documenting their work on the identification and restitution of human remains from indigenous groups exhibited in museums in La Plata and around the world, titled “Prisoners of Science.” Brought together by the identification of human remains, the legacies of the Dirty War joined the ongoing processes of settler colonialism to illustrate these long histories of necropolitics.

35 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Fernando de Heine Acevedo: Liberación La Facultad, 1851 (1853): 76
37 The term “Dirty War” is used to include the short presidency of Isabel Perón (1974–76), which was followed by the 1976 military coup that led to the self-declared National Reorganization Process.