

In the footsteps of Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-48?): a psychogeographical walk along Berlin's *Leichhardtstraße* and Sydney's *Leichhardt Street*

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Both Germans and Australians claim the legacy of Prussian-born Ludwig Leichhardt who, after having completed already two highly successful expeditions in Australia, vanished in the Australian outback in 1848, which has sparked a huge interest in his person and disappearance. This transnational cult is also mirrored in many different ways Leichhardt has been commemorated, despite – or due to – the speculation surrounding his character and death. In *Beyond Leichhardt* (2000), Glen McLaren stresses that the various accounts written of the explorer are so diverging that they could almost portray different men while research on Leichhardt is frequently inadequate and highly subjective.¹ In order to approach the historical character from a contemporary point of view, I take advantage of this *subjective* stance by employing a psychogeographical perspective – a method that allows for an emotional engagement with the city by walking it, or, more precisely, that investigates the impact of urban place on people's behaviour.² The idea that he is missing but found in so many places acts as a springboard from which I set out in search of Leichhardt in contemporary Berlin and Sydney – cities in which he had lived, studied or researched two centuries ago. As I embark on my psychogeographical deambulation in quest of Leichhardt by visiting two roads named in honour of him, Leichhardtstraße in the leafy suburb of Berlin-Dahlem and Leichhardt Street in Sydney's inner-city suburb of Glebe, I try to *imagine* a connection these two streets might have with Leichhardt, while ignoring but simultaneously being fully aware of the time gap.

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21st November 2012. I turn into Leichhardtstraße on a pale autumn day in Berlin, the pavement is covered in bright yellow leaves. The street is lined with typical Dahlem detached houses, not the giant villas also to be found in this area, but the more modest one family houses. I keep walking and on the right hand side I pass a modern office building. At the first intersection is a tiny plaque attached to the road sign, which simply says:

LUDWIG LEICHHARDT
AUSTRALIENFORSCHER
*1813 1848 VERSCHOLLEN

Australia is very far away from Leichhardtstraße. It is hard to imagine the young German in the Australian inland in the nineteenth century, struggling against the heat and other impossibilities unknown to an affluent and tidy suburb in Berlin. Apart from the name and the plaque there is not much else to commemorate him, so I keep walking, slightly disappointed. But what had I expected? A statue? A big plaque telling the story of Leichhardt? The street is unremarkable, quiet, children ride their bikes, an elderly lady walks her dog. A normal street scene. Further down the road I pass a meadow where little boys play football, attended by their mothers and younger siblings. On the right hand side is a lake, *Dreipfuhl*, as I learn later when I check the map again. I pass a basketball court and a playground. More houses, though smaller towards the end of the road; a modern block of flats at the corner of Clayallee. That's it. No further signs of Leichhardt. Nothing to add. I turn around and walk back.

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23rd May 2013. It is autumn again, the air is still cool though it is a sunny morning. I try to remember how I walked Leichhardtstraße in Berlin, almost exactly half a year ago, on a cold autumn afternoon with the light fading, and now Germany seems incredibly far away as I turn into Leichhardt Street in Glebe. Atmosphere and setting certainly are worlds apart.

I walk along the narrow street past some beautiful old houses that are embellished by little towers. In-between them some fairly average brick buildings. The street meanders and turns left until water becomes visible through some trees that surround a playground. It is quiet here, except for some leaves rattling on the pavement, whirled up by the strong wind gusts that sweep through the street. There are hardly any other people around. I follow the road and finally reach the water at Blackwattle Bay. I stand on the pontoon in the sun and try to imagine Leichhardt in this Australian setting, but all I can do is wonder why they named exactly this street after him. Maybe there is no logic behind it, but even that might be a revelation: someone just randomly picks the name of a famous person and allocates it to a certain street. It is striking that Leichhardt has become much more popular and well-known in Australia than in his home country.

His endeavour to cross Australia in order to map the country and his subsequent sudden disappearance have turned him into a transnational hero and an omnipresent name giver. Myth and speculation are always quick to set in when gaps are available.

Leichhardt set out to find a *route* across the continent, yet there is no evidence about how and where his expedition ended. Today we are left with two *roads*, a German and an Australian act of remembrance, simple but lasting. Leichhardt disappeared and never reached the end, and my two walks resonate with this absence as well as I cannot reach a conclusion – *the end of the road* – either. Echoing Ross Gibson, I wonder, “[...] what of the absences – when are they meaningful, when are they nothing?”.³ Leichhardt is still absent, *missing*, hardly graspable as an historical character and in terms of his whereabouts, but he can be *found* in streets, suburbs, even a motorway, as well as other more conventional forms of remembrance.⁴ Yet the alienation rather than connection to him in places like Dahlem or Glebe in the twenty-first century makes the gaps and open questions appear even more important. There are signs – street signs and traces in the outback allegedly proving his passage – but no evidence. Maybe that is the reason for his posthumous success: the lack of facts and a road/search that never ends.

Notes

¹ cf. McLaren, Glen. *Beyond Leichhardt: Bushcraft and the Exploration of Australia*. 1996. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000, 179, 185.

² cf. Debord, Guy. “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography”. 1955. In: Knabb, Ken (ed. and trans.). *Situationist International Anthology*. Rev. and exp. ed. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006 [1981], 8-12, 8.

³ Gibson, Ross. “Places – Past – Disappearance.” *Transformations* 13.1 (2006): n.pag. <http://www.transformationsjournal.org/issue_13_01.shtml>.

⁴ There is a Ludwig-Leichhardt-Museum in his birthplace Trebatsch, for instance.

Biographical Note

Hannah Lili Boettcher recently completed a Joint PhD at the University of Western Australia and the Freie Universität Berlin on the topic of psychogeography with a focus on London, Sydney and Berlin.