

Leichhardt

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Traumatic events literally burn themselves onto your psyche. The stronger the emotional response to a particular event, then the greater the bundle of images left in the chemistry of memory.

In 1989 I lived in the inner-Sydney suburb of Leichhardt, in a renovated late-nineteenth century semi-detached house that I was renting very cheaply from a socialist who didn't believe in property speculation. One afternoon I arrived home to find the back verandah doors swinging open in the breeze: the house had been broken into and it had been robbed. And yet it was a neat enough burglary: there had been no trashing of the place, no rifling of drawers, there was no mess really, the thief had simply walked in, picked up my electric guitar and amplifier, my 35mm camera and lenses, my electric typewriter, and then walked out again. I looked at the cat as it sat on the lounge eyeing me skeptically: what use are you, I thought, you watched it all happen and now you can't even tell me who did it.

I was utterly distraught: for me these were the three most important material objects in the world, and now they were gone. And I had no insurance, no job, I was completely broke, and so I had absolutely no way of replacing them. But, what the thief had also done was rob me of much more than just a few possessions: far more importantly, he (I assumed he was a man, a man with a heroin habit) had also robbed me of my ability to leave traces in the world. I would no longer be able to make a noise with a small group of other people and call it music; I would no longer be able to record images of the world and print them and show them to people, and worst of all, I would no longer be able to write things and get other people to read them.

Leichhardt: I will never be able to pronounce it the way a German does, with the glutinous, elongated 'ch' in the middle. I know how to, but it just doesn't feel right, not after a few years of living in Leichhardt, and a lifetime spent in Sydney. It makes me feel like a traitor whenever I attempt it. Leichhardt: spoken in Australian east coast dialect it's abrupt, definitive, matter-of-fact: the second 'h' is always missing. Leichhardt: concrete, asphalt, carbon monoxide, airliners squealing overhead, the accumulations of technological modernity which Leichhardt, with his science and his geography, was in the very forefront of delivering to the Australian continent. To live in Leichhardt, to stop by Leichhardt for a coffee, is to always have Leichhardt in the back of your mind. He's shuffling around – coming, seeing and trying to conquer – deep in your unconscious. Leichhardt: he's still out there, somewhere, as the parked cars bake in the suburban streets under the midday summer sun.

Like most of Sydney, Leichhardt sits on an undulating sandstone landscape. Before the European invasion, the eastern part of what is now Leichhardt was the home of the Cadigal clan, while the parts further west were the home of the Wangal clan, with both clans part of the larger Eora group. Most of these people were killed by a smallpox epidemic that the British invaders brought with them, thereby emptying this part of the Sydney region of its owners and so facilitating what is now euphemistically known as ‘settlement’. Subsequently, two English brothers, Hugh and John Piper, were granted much of the area’s land by the government, and they named it Piperston, after themselves. In 1846 however, the entrepreneur Walter Beames, who, amongst other activities, was instrumental in providing provisions to Ludwig Leichhardt for his three expeditions, bought Piperston from the Pipers. After Leichhardt’s disappearance, Beames re-named his estate after the famous German, with whom he’d become friends. The local council district of Leichhardt was officially proclaimed in 1871.

In this brief history of Leichhardt I have followed the standard format for making sense of the world according to the European-derived system: a progression in orders of hierarchies of knowledge from landscape to native peoples to European peoples to economics to government, and I’ve included the proper names of a couple of white men to add historical validity. It’s a method of making sense of the world that was drummed into me a long time ago, when I was a schoolboy. And in this sense the gap between myself and Ludwig Leichhardt is not nearly so wide as I might have imagined, both of us ultimately being products of the European Enlightenment Project: him born into its first full flowering and me into what might prove to be its twilight.

Leichhardt came to Australia, the periphery of the world for Europeans, in the 1840s, driven by modernity’s urge to measure and to know. But a century and a half later, born into European Australia, a society that had known no organizational forms other than those of modernity, I was still being driven by these same urges. That was why I was so devastated when my property was stolen from my house in Leichhardt, because I’d lost my own devices for recording and observing and making traces. No more would I be able to visit new cities and landscapes and head immediately for the nearest monumental tower or mountain peak and ascend it and observe and record what I saw around me, for no other reason than that it was there. No more would I be able to make any traces.

Or so it seemed. I never did get another electric guitar, but by this point I’d lost much of my enthusiasm for playing anyway. As for photography, well eventually I bought another old 35mm camera, but it’s really only an historical curiosity, all my photography has been

digital for a long time now. And as for my electric typewriter, well, no doubt it's resting somewhere in the rubbish bin of technological history.

At present Lindsay Barrett is a research fellow in the School of International Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney. He also spends a lot of time in Berlin. He has written widely on a range of aspects of Australia cultural history, primarily on the intersections of art, literature, media, technology and politics.