

Essay One: Declaration

How to Write About Leichhardt?

– Towards a Ficto/critical Manifesto –

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How to write? About Leichhardt, who abstracted himself and died of his exposure to the desert? About a scientist of colonial ambition who composed his private letters for a public literary market, and whose legacy has been mediated by colonial, fictional, and academic texts? How to write about a mythical figure whose – real world referential – scientific writing is not entirely innocent, and whose function today is endowed with (trans- or plain) national significance by – fictional world constituting – literary writing and political rhetoric? About a deserter of national ranks, too, who wrote in the desert? Indeed, if Leichhardt is but a text-discursive complex, then how to write critically about it *without* perpetuating its current form/ation¹ and *against* its wider effects? How to avoid exercising in writing about Leichhardt what one sets out to critique in writing about Leichhardt? How to *critically* write on a myth without effectively writing its *fiction* on?

My ficto/critical proposition is to write like ... hard! Albeit, not as in uncompromising, morally unforgiving, or entirely incomprehensible. Only to harden the texture of the scripture in a way that *frictions* the smooth flow of y/our textual practices.² To make perceptible (*aisthesis*), in writing, via peculiar textual conduct (aesthetics & poetics), what we constitutively abstract from in reading: the manifest bases of transcendence – these material, immaterial things – that are the im/mediacy of mediation and y/our active role in the textual work (*poiesis*). Paradoxically, the ficto/critical is concrete *friction writing* that turns its otherwise crystal structure half-opaque to nevertheless clarify y/our role in the processes of textual abstraction *and* their wider discursive effects.

The *performative* aim is writing that is not only self-reflexively aware of its medial basis, textual exercise, and discursive pre/scription but also makes these aspects im/mediately perceptible for its recipient. The *crucial* aim is writing that bridges the gap between y/our textual conduct always presently under way and the text-discursive form/ations under critique short-circuitously. Ficto/critical writing is both *traitorous* towards the generic fields and practices from (within) which it departs and *apotropaic* with regards to the mythic faculty it harnesses to anti-mythic effect.³ The ficto/critical identifies common ground with its object of critique *qua* writing, but re-deploys these mutual conditions of im/possibility following

contrary text-practical ideology *and* always already implements the particular insights of its ficto/critique in delivering it – ultimately, to emancipate the reader in relation to text-discursive form/ations.

Now, Leichhardt is a well-placed subject for (unmarked or hyphenated) ficto(-)critical writing, which intersects the fictional and the critical, simply because of his multi-layered textual output: there is the objective scientific and the epistolary subjective; but there is also the non-fictional and the fictional – both *by* as well as *on* him; then there is myth making, theorisation, and critique. Thus, his text-discursive form/ation presents a formally ficto(-)critical complex in itself. Of itself, however, it does not adopt a *ficto/critical strategy*, since the point of the (slashed) ficto/critical is to bring y/our writing to critically *self-reflect* the text-discursive form/ations it engages in critical light of the wider discursive effects they have previously had. The ficto/critical trope is thus twofold, and my idiosyncratic deployment of the slash marks its combined *ficto-critical* and *ficto-critical* emphases.⁴

Firstly, a *ficto-critical* awareness forestalls an uninformed repetition of the textual mechanisms that y/our writing shares with its object of critique. The *ficto-critical* aims to make perceptible again y/our textual conduct that retreats behind the discursive constructs it yields; to im/mediately highlight how the *materiality* of mediation is always already *abstracted* from in *immaterially* mediating. One strategy to achieve this is to *harden* the texture of writing to create frictions that can *performatively illumine*, from within, the textual work behind what it *constatively illuminates*. Thus to friction y/our flowing *readerly* conduct *in actu* is to stage an im/mediate textual intervention that exceeds what is mediated in the process. Turning the smooth surface structure into edgy, fissured, or porous textual bad/lands⁵ is *desert writing* that makes our textual conduct perceptible in a recalcitrant feat of *writing exposure*.

Secondly, a *ficto-critical* stance harnesses this *ficto-critical* awareness to target the wider discursive effects of the textual subject that is its critical object. Here y/our textual conduct, too, enters the equation: How is it – presently under way and scrutiny – implicated in these effects under critique; for instance, in a Leichhardt complex charged with the colonial project and national sentiments it advanced? One strategy in this regard works *exposure writing* that counter-continues the complex against the consequences of its former expositions. *Ficto-critically* hardened desert writing thus becomes *ficto-critical desertion writing* when it aims to re/mediate a text-discursive form/ation to re/medial effect.

Hence, write not hard like Leichhardt who received a king's pardon for his colonial services, but write hard like he who deserted the national ranks to confound the perfect

abstraction of an inland sea with desert writing. To thus write like ... hard, ficto/critically, is *desert/ion writing*. It is traitorous both to the generic fields from which it breaks and to the colonial-national ranks they sustain, with whom it also breaks. Simultaneously, the ficto/critical is exposé writing about y/our exposure to the written. It works an apotropaic kind of *exposure writing exposure* when it brings its im/mediate textual experience to coincide with the experiences it mediates – the hardships of exposure to the desert, say. As y/our writing exposure is thus met *en abyme* by its exposé, this exposes how you work on the text only as it works on you, while you always already exercise the mythic abstraction depicted within.

Between them, the *ficto-critical* and the *ficto-critical* form *desert/ion writing* that per/forms *exposure writing exposure*. Such ficto/critical writing self-reflects the writerly, textual, and generic conduct it shares with its subject *while* critiquing the wider discursive functions such conduct has had. Ultimately, the Leichhardt myth rests not only on his situational self-abstraction, *in writing*, but also on the sand of y/our compliance with it, *in reading*. The ficto/critical thus im/mediately targets the mediated mythic discourse as constitutively underwritten by its text-medial structure and y/our textual conduct – even if it *seems* hardly likely.⁶

Essay Two: Performance

How to Write Like ... Hard?

– Manifestly Untoward: The Ficto/critical –

“So much did rest with other people, but these were the immaterial, material things.”⁷

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“Moreton Bay, 27th January, 1843.

MY DEAREST MOTHER.—I have by now concluded large journeys in this colony. I have seen much, and suffered a great deal. Often in the solitude of the lonely forest, on high mountains, and at my campfire at night, wrapped up in my woollen blankets, did I think of you all. Your son leads a curious life. [...] Think of a young peasant, in pants and coat, riding on a small, black horse, knapsack and blankets over a saddle, a heavy pick at his side, and a small one in the pocket, and you will have a fair idea of your son riding through the forests of Australia.”⁸

*

... do you follow / these lines / exploring an unmarked con/text / a carte blanche / for mythic situational self-abstraction / via the page / which clean sheet / before the textual map / is not the territory / of a terra nullius / as much as / it comes to paper over / that context / conned by the text / and its im/mediate con/text / that cannot whitewash itself / of the representational violence / both constitutive and contingent / of marking as unmarked / the ground it covers / in abstraction / which is why / these im/material things / need to re/gain their traction ...

*

“May 26. [1845] We continued our journey over the most mountainous and rocky country we had ever passed. [...] At the end of the stage, basalt was found to have broken through the granite.”⁹

*

... idiosyncratic particulars * and layers / shot through this **complex** / MICA \ to **harden the texture** / this im/material thing / make it “bad lands to cross”¹⁰ / **harden the scripture** / into bad/lands “that w[ill] not succumb to colonial ambition”¹¹ \ BASALT | to **friction the flow** of this *fine-grained discursive abstraction* / from the **manifest concrete ground** | GRANITE | into the *transcendence* / of a **massive** myth / re/gain the **textual opacity** of this *crystal structure* / of its discursive form/ation | FELDSPAR \ re/gain **a sense of the geological traction**¹² / of its textual conduct ...

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“[May 31. 1845 (cont)] The rock was still granitic, with small outbreaks of basalt; the leaflets of white mica were visible everywhere in the soil and in the large anthills, whose building materials were derived from the decomposed felspar.”¹³

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“Ludwig Leichhardt's interior life throws up clues to his fatal fascination with inland exploration.”¹⁴

*

“[I]t is a pleasure to see how the country which I have touched in my wanderings begins to stand out from the unknown and undescribed interior of Australia.”¹⁵

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“Last night I observed the Boiling point of water and determined our elevation to be 1462 feet.

A.	211.25	
B.	210.75	the thermometer was 78°f.
	1.35	the time was 6 ocl. P.M.
	209.40	
	1534	
	205	
	1329	
	1100	
	1461.900” ¹⁶	

*

... the bottom line / it is not long division / but still a calculating textual operation / that splits psycho- from -geography / “fictionalized through documentation”¹⁷ / with considerable remainder / a gap / the mythic habitat / of this in-between figure / who abstracted himself alike / from the scene / into his (real world referential) writing / as the remaining absence / of the present remainder / in y/our (fictional world constituting) readings ...

*

“Prussia recognised his achievement by granting him a king's pardon for having failed to return to Prussia when due to serve a period of compulsory military training.”¹⁸

*

... desert writing / write a desert / write like ... hard / desert Leichhardt / the deserter / the colonial myth / a desert / the national myth / a desert / obstruct their textual progress / friction

their discursive transcendence / desert colonialism / desert nationalism / pre/scribe a denser form/ation for posterity / to undermine what underwrites / this mythographic massive / that cracks and crumbles / in y/our hands / until it runs through y/our fingers / like desert sand / together with its mythic mirage / blown away / by ficto/critically / pre/post/erous / desert/ion writing ...

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“The duty has been assigned to me of presenting to you, on behalf of a numerous body of colonists, an acknowledgment of the grateful sense they entertain of the services rendered by you to the cause of science and to the interests of this colony.”¹⁹

*

... let the myth die / of ficto/critical exposure / to its own traction / counter-continue its momentum / of magic attraction / of mythic abstraction / work an anti-myth / apotropaically / via exposure writing exposure / that exposes you / to a harder scripture to follow / a harder texture to abstract from / to the ficto/critical / that exposes itself / as built on the same sand / as the writing whose effects / it hopes to re/mediate / together with y/our reading agency / to post/colonial / post/national / post/generic / re/medial effect ...

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“As for Voss, he had gone on to grapple with the future, in which undertaking he did not expect much of love, for all that is soft and yielding is easily hurt. He suspected it, but the mineral forms were an everlasting source of wonder; feldspar, for instance, was admirable, and his own name a crystal in his mouth. If he were to leave that name on the land, irrevocably, his material body swallowed by what it had named, it would be rather on some desert place, a perfect abstraction, that would rouse no feeling of tenderness in posterity.”²⁰

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“When I consider how lucky I have been in my progress up to now, I entertain the hope that our Almighty Protector will permit me to bring my favorite plan to a successful end.

Your sincere friend,

LUDWIG LEICHHARDT.

*Mr. Macpherson's station, Cogoan, 3rd April, 1848.”*²¹

Notes

¹ I deploy the slash as a typographical contrivance to make perceptible different layers of meaning that may have to be held in suspension within a word. For example, the relational potential of “in/formed”

comprises “formed” as well as “informed,” and thus also “brought in formation.” There is thus precision in the ambiguity of such unorthodox spelling.

² This notion is taken from Aritha van Herk. *In Visible Ink: Crypto-Frictions, The Writer as Critic: III*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1991.

³ This notion is taken from Michael Taussig. “The Corn-Wolf: Writing Apotropaic Texts.” *Critical Inquiry* 37.1 (2010): 26-33.

⁴ Whereas the emphasis on “-critical” should be self-explanatory, the emphasis on “ficto-” makes sense against the background of a deconstructed notion of the hierarchical fiction / non-fiction binary, which posits *fiction* as the primary term at work on the constitutive level of our text-medial practices.

⁵ This notion is taken from Ross Gibson. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002, 13-4.

⁶ I have previously developed the core ideas of this essay in much greater detail in Gerrit Haas. *Ficto/critical Strategies: Subverting Textual Practices of Meaning, Other, and Self-Formation*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017.

⁷ White, Patrick. *Voss*. London: Vintage, 1994, 38.

⁸ Leichhardt, Ludwig. *Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt's Letters from Australia during the Years March 23, 1843, to April 3, 1848*. TL. L. Politzer, trans., ed. Melbourne: Pan Publishers, 1945, 26. <<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/148480>>

⁹ Leichhardt, Ludwig. *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia, from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, a Distance of Upwards of 3000 Miles, During the Years 1844-1845*. London: Boone, 1847, 268. <<http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN26541301X>>

¹⁰ Gibson, Ross. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002, 14.

¹¹ Gibson. *Seven Versions*, 14.

¹² You may also want to consult: Ludwig Leichhardt. *Beiträge zur Geologie von Australien*. Heinrich Girard, ed. Halle: Schmidt, 1855. <<http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN508034604>>

¹³ Leichhardt. *Journal*, 274.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, Ross. ““Lost Soul Rides Into the Sunset,” a book review of John Bailey’s *Into the Unknown*.” *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 9 June 2012.

<<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/lost-soul-rides-into-the-sunset-20120607-1zx6r.html#ixzz2hM21oIW6>>

¹⁵ Leichhardt. *Letters*, 54.

¹⁶ Leichhardt, Ludwig. “Log of My Journey from Port Stevens to Peak Range (20.10.1846 – 28.7.1847).” Dan Sprod. *Proud Intrepid Heart: Leichhardt's First Attempt to the Swan River, 1846-1847*. Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1989, 152. <<http://leichhardt.sub.uni-goettingen.de/pdf/log-of-my-journey-Leichhardt.pdf>>

¹⁷ Lichtenstein, Rachel and Iain Sinclair. *Rodinsky's Room*. London: Granta, 2000, 7.

¹⁸ “Ludwig Leichhardt.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation*. 27 August 2013. Accessed 22 October 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_Leichhardt>

¹⁹ “The Leichhardt Testimonial.” An extract from the *Sydney Herald*. 22 Sept 1846, published as an appendix to: Leichhardt. *Journal*, 539.

²⁰ White. *Voss*, 41.

²¹ Leichhardt. *Letters*, 70.

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