Writing with the Australian Archive: Digital Posthuman Approaches to Australian Literature

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> *Surveying the Australian landscape and archive, one sees camels everywhere. The camel is not indigenous to Australia. It is feral. Feral here. It came by boat. It is regarded as a beast, a pest, a problem. Current solutions involve ammunition and helicopters, business proposals and conservation, research and governance. The camel is the story of various Australias. The story of arrival. Invasion. Exploration, immigration, colonisation, war. . . It is a prism through which iridescent fragments of Australia can be viewed. It is also just a hairy animal with four legs, two eyes, two nostrils, and one hump. Sometimes two.*

This is the opening to my archival practice-led research project, *A Condensed History of Australian Camels* (2023). My approach to the challenge of telling the story of the Australian archive defers, firstly, to Jorges Borges. Italian author Italo Calvino credits Borges as the creator of a genre: potential or hypothetical literature. Calvino writes:

> each of [Borges's] texts doubles or multiplies its own space through the medium of other books belonging to a real or imaginary library, whether they be classical, erudite, or merely invented.
>
> What I particularly wish to stress is how Borges achieves his approaches to the infinite without the least congestion, in the most crystalline, sober, and airy style. (50)

This insight is contained in Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), in which he proposes six literary values crucial to literature as it proceeds into our millennium: lightness, quickness, (crystal) exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency. In my creative work, I have considered these values crucial for producing the story of the archive.

A consistent visible image of the history of the Australian archive was requisite. For this I came up with the notion of telling what I have called a "condensed history of Australian camels." This introduced species seemed to me a suitable emblem with which to navigate and push the limits of the Australian archive. In discussing the visual imagination, Calvino champions a method that "starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression" (48). He goes on to explain that he would prefer one that "would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall . . . into confused, ephemeral daydreams, but would enable the images to crystallize into a well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form, the *icastic* form" (92). "Icastic" is an obsolete word in English, though common in Italian, meaning "figurative." My creative work employs an icastic form. The image of the camel is a consistent figure in the various Australian archives from which I have drawn for my project: the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland; the State Library of Queensland; the State Library of South Australia; the National Library of Australia; the State Library of New South Wales; and the State Library of Victoria. In my work, these archival images inspire a number of short stories. These stories cover a range of Australian subjects, styles, and forms—not exhaustively, but exhaustively enough that readers can imagine the (approaching infinite) number of stories one could tell.

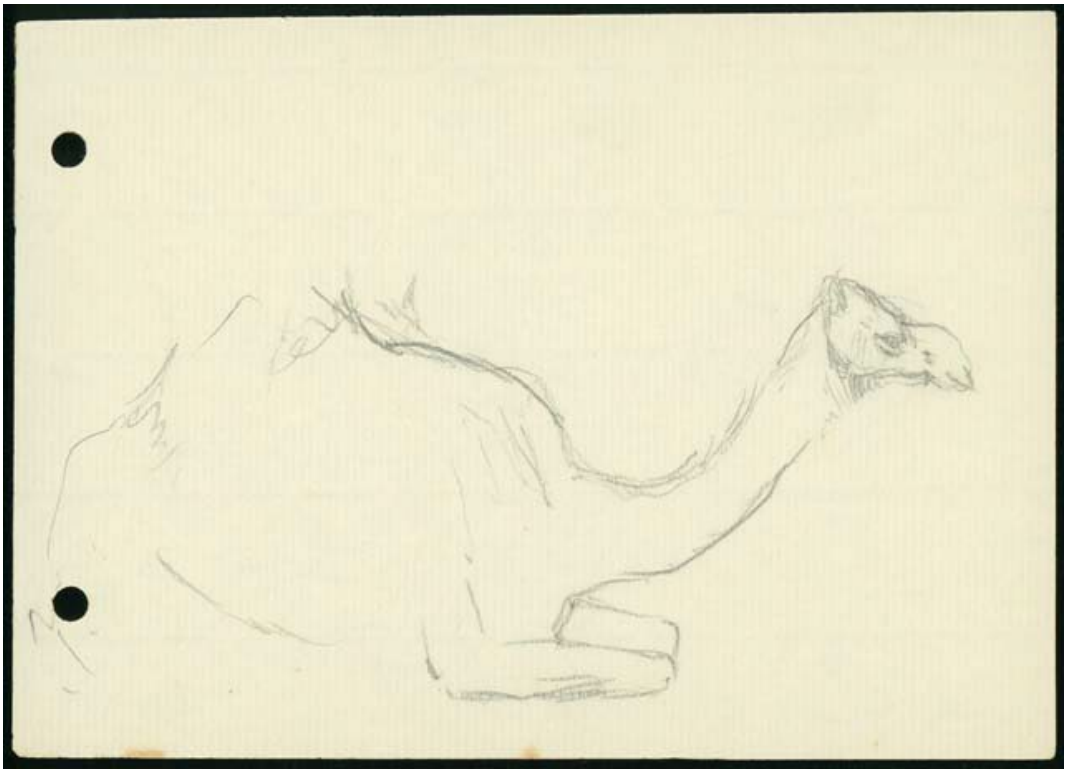

Fig. 1. Teague, V. (1933) "Camel study." Accession# H2010.123/55 Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, VIC.

In *Archive Fever: Derrida, Salman Rushdie, and the Genesis of Secrecy* (2019), Vijay Mishra discusses Derrida's unique use of the word archive:

> In Derrida's deconstructive reading of the word, an archive becomes less straightforward, less stable (against our normative understanding of it as a repository, a library, a collection and so on) and a lot more problematic because the "order of the commencement and the order of the commandment" do not necessarily follow the same logic. (20)

I view the Australian archive as a problematic and posthuman text. By problematic, I mean in the same way Natalie Harkin views the Australian archive as having misrepresentations, gaps, and misreadings of histories from demographical perspectives. Regarding the posthuman, I refer to N. Katharine Hayles's definition, which she characterises by the following assumptions: (i) that the posthuman perspective "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation," (ii) that consciousness is an "epiphenomenon" or a "minor sideshow," (iii) that extending or replacing the body, thought of as the "original prosthesis," is a continuation of "a process that began before we were born," and (iv) that the human being can be configured so that it can be "seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (2).

In my view, the best description of a potential posthuman text is Borges's fictional library in his short story "La biblioteca de Babel," or "The Library of Babel" (1962). It depicts a library that contains approaching-infinite number of books that have every possible ordering of twenty-something symbols. As Borges's narrator explains: "he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite)" (54). Borges's proposed fictional library has been realised digitally by Jonathan Basile. It contains all possible pages of 3200 characters, about 10^{4677} books. It also contains a search function, in which a user can

search for a particular phrase. The work in its entirety, however, cannot be "read" in any practical, human way. While the work contains undiscovered poetry and wisdom, it is not accessible. As if to illustrate this point, the phrase "undiscovered poetry and wisdom" occurs within this approaching-infinite text. To construct any meaning the reader would have to know what they were looking for. This is what characterises contemporary creative practice: it is less an act of discovery and more an act of navigation and orientation.

As well as responding to the problematic and posthuman archive, my creative work responds to the emergence of the maximalist novel, as defined by Stefano Ercolino—the big, fat, thick postmodern novel, defined as "an aesthetically hybrid genre of the contemporary novel that develops in the second half of the twentieth century" (xi). Ercolino lists Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) as examples. This mode, as a practical matter, strikes me as unsustainable, as it pushes the limits of the "human" text. In my view, the maximalist aesthetic attempts to emulate or give an impression of the posthuman that inspires it. Without the assistance of nonhuman or programming assistance (such as in Basile's *The Library of Babel*), however, this effect cannot be achieved in any meaningful way.

While the maximalist novel may convey the superfluity of the archive, in order to allow the reader to navigate their way out from under its weight, the archive must be lightened. Calvino defines lightness by its binary opposite: weight. One of Calvino's reasons for treasuring lightness is a desire to write in such a way as to represent his own era. In contrast to Medusa's stare, Calvino argues that writers should be light like Perseus atop Pegasus. This is not to suggest that a writer should negate or ignore the world's weight. Like Perseus, who beheaded the Medusa, the writer should be light without negating or neglecting weight. This is what I have attempted with this project—to take the weight of the archive and to lighten it by tracing it with quickness. Quickness, like lightness, is one of the values treasured by Calvino. Through this "camel train" of images, I suggest that a quick "route" through the Australian archive may be established.

Fig. 2. (1898) "Camel train crossing the desert." Lantern slides of the Burke and Wills Expedition, MS 13867, Accession# MS13867/51. State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, VIC.

Obviously, this work does not depict the entire archive. Borrowing from a debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky, Calvino distinguishes between two types of exactitude:

> The crystal, with its precise faceting and its ability to refract light, is the model of perfection that I have always cherished as an emblem, and this predilection has become even more meaningful since we have learned that certain properties of the birth and growth of crystals resemble those of the most rudimentary biological creatures, forming a kind of bridge between the mineral world and living matter. (70)

In contrast to the crystal, the flame, invites "vertigo [that] seizes me, that of the detail of the detail of the detail, and I am drawn into the infinitesimal, the infinitely small" (68–69). Calvino prefers crystal exactitude, to allow the work to grow organically. By mapping out a few "consistent" characteristics of the "crystal" (in this case, the visual of the camel), the work can grow as an encyclopaedia does, as "a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world" (105).

This initial "static" work combines text and images that have been arranged to evoke the mood of the fiction. Inspired in part by the visibility utilised by Australian author Ross Gibson in *The Summer Exercises* (2008) and *Life After Wartime* (1999–2013, created with Kate Richards), the result is what Ross Gibson calls "extractive realism." This term Gibson develops from Lukács's comparisons of Zola's naturalism and the realism of Tolstoy's narration:

> naturalism is additive and diffuses focus as more and more details are supplied, which means that realism is bolder and more useful than naturalism because realism is extractive in the way it draws out the definitive, structuring elements of a scene. Whereas naturalist art casts gentle light on surfaces concealing a deeper reality, realist art helps us probe into the reasons and feel the shaping forces subtending reality. ("Extractive Realism" 48)

"Extractive realism" is not verisimilitude or obsessive observation, but a construct pieced together. Gibson writes: "details have the impress of the originating reality; and for all their fictional 'panache,' the artworks that get brewed from the details still display a staunch allegiance to something real" (47). Through these values, I contend, the history of the archive can be navigated, in a way that invokes as a method "recombinant poetics"—a term coined by media theorist Bill Seaman. In such poetics, computer code "enables a jump from literary invention to literally inventing" (423). Because the entirety of the Australian archive is far too vast and weighty for any one person or print piece to encompass, new modes and media must be relied upon to "lighten" our engagement. In *Life After Wartime* (1999–2013), Gibson and Richards employ recombinant poetics to propose an approaching-infinite meditation on archival materials by using computer code to combine text and images.

This organisational form is inspired in part by Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), which Calvino regards as the "last real 'event' in the history of the novel" (121). Perec's creative process involves drawing up a list of multiple categories and dispersing these across each of the novel's one hundred chapters (minus one, as the novel contains only ninety-nine chapters). Likewise, in my project, the consistent visual image of the camel, reimagined through various subjects, styles, and forms, is intended to generate an impression of "completeness." It also contains a story about the camel's antithesis, which I posit as the walrus:

> *The camel stores its fat on top of its body, whereas the walrus stores its fat below; the camel has long legs, whereas the walrus has stubby flippers; the camel has internal teeth, whereas the walrus has great tusks; the camel takes great strides, whereas the walrus hobbles along on land and glides in water. The comparison can continue indefinitely, provided one has a complete biological understanding, which I do not.*

And yet despite its immensity, the archive, as Natalie Harkin asserts, has vast limitations. In writing about the impact of colonisation on her family, Harkin writes:

> I needed what was beyond the so-called-official record, to enter those hidden in-between places full of mystery, pain and possibility; to peel back layers of memory and flesh and liberate our stories and skin, particularly for the women in my family. I wanted to move beyond the healing-place and confront the generations of silencing and racial-sexual oppression head-on. And, drawn to de-colonial and black-feminist writers, I yearned for and toward that space to destabilise and subvert the white-supremacist "archons" (Derrida 2) who had wielded great power and who had persisted in dominant, violent, colonising narratives of us; that space where my critical Aboriginal-sovereign-woman's voice might be heard. (3)

This need for "what was beyond" necessitates going beyond the literary-critical mode, and veering into practice-led research, into what Harkin labels "archival-poetics" on which I model my practice-led project. Practice-led research is defined by Smith and Dean as

> an activity which can appear in a variety of guises across the spectrum of practice and research. It can be basic research carried out independent of creative work (though it may be subsequently applied to it); research conducted in the process of shaping an artwork; or research which is the documentation, theorisation and contextualisation of an artwork—and the process of making it—by its creator. (3)

In forging its own "archival-poetics," my project combines the second and third practice-led approaches outlined by Smith and Dean above: my archival research shaped the development of the work, and the work and creative process that produced the work was subsequently theorised. Such creative approaches are requisite, as traditional academic approaches fail to address the problematisation of the processes by which the archive has been established. As Nathan Sentance writes:

> Most people think of archives, especially big government archives, as either neutral sites of memory and history, or as mundane, boring storage facilities for administrative records, or they don't think about them at all. But the poet Dr Natalie Harkin (Narungga) knows what many First Nations people know, that official archives are a powerful colonial weapon as well as a site of mourning. They are time capsules and they are also bullets. Created by state-sanctioned surveillance and violence, these archives have the power to sustain and reproduce that same violence.

To combat this, a level of imagination is required to "re-map" or "decolonise" the archive. Harkin (2014) writes: "Our family archives are like maps that haunt and guide us toward paths past-travelled and directions unknown. We travel through these archives that offer up new stories and collections of data, and a brutal surveillance is exposed at the hands of the State" (4).

Fig. 3. (1893) "Unloading camels at Port Augusta [B 68916]."
Port Augusta Collection, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.

In my project, the decision to include or exclude images of Indigenous Australians with camels posed challenges. For this narrative, following Ambelin Kwaymullina's claim that "silence does not always exist to be filled; sometimes it should be interrogated" (this quotation is one of five that open the narrative), I debated whether or not these images should be included. Following the protocols for using First Nations cultural and intellectual property in the arts ("Protocols"), I requested permission from the various archives and was advised simply to include a warning at the beginning of the work. Even as I did so, I debated my own agency or authority to "fill" a respectful void of silence. Yet the exclusion of these images likewise seemed inappropriate. As I wrote in *A Condensed History of Australian Camels*: "*To not include is to disregard. To include is to assume. In a world of saturated media and information, in these constructed, meta-fictional, hyper-alert times, should respect be given to inclusion or silence?*" My solution was to write a metafictional piece about the archival image, and about my decision not to tell a particular narrative. This non-story of an Indigenous man with two camels towing a dead horse was expressed in my project this way:

> *While this viable brumby culler could be resurrected by words typed into a computer and printed on pages, while such a structure and depiction could appear truthful and persuasive to some non-Indigenous and Indigenous readers, there is much of this man's interior life that would not be dramatized: a hypothetical hidden retrospective fountain of experience, an unseen ocean of remembrance capable of internal strength and illumination that goes beyond the introduction of camels to Australia. All of this may or may not exist for this man. Not all experiences are universal. Not all experiences are shared. Indeed, the word "universal" emerges in the 14th Century, in Middle English, well after so much Indigenous history.*

This initial static work, through funding by the Australia Council for the Arts, has subsequently been remixed into three digital literary iterations: the chronological, the augmented, and the recombinant. Working with three digital poets and artists (Karen Lowry, Louis Pratt, and Chris Arnold), the archive has been further reimagined. The intended effect is similar to Will Luers, Roger Dean, and Hazel Smith's "novelling," which they define as a "generative system that . . . arranges fragments of media . . . in 6-minute cycles. Every 30 seconds the interface changes, but the user may also click the screen at any time to produce a change" (n.p.).

In a sense, novelling and this digital *Recombinant History of Australian Camels* are literary machines. They produce or perform (approaching infinite) recombinative versions of the input material. This is, then, another posthuman text, but one that is lighter, quicker, visible, multiplicitous, consistently inconsistent, and that grows with crystalline exactitude. It does not tell the story of the entire archive but shows how a variation could be employed in order to do so. Such approaches are necessary not only for navigating the posthuman weight of the archive, but the posthuman weight of contemporary interconnected reality. Mishra writes:

> There are "grave consequences" (Derrida's proviso) if the processes and procedures by which an archive gets established, the manner in which it is classified and any matter relating to its consignation were disputed, interrogated or questioned. "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory," writes Derrida in a footnote (p. 4), a point made so manifestly obvious in the Julian Assange-WikiLeaks-Snowden exposure of classified (archived) documents. A science of the archive must keep the two sides of the Greek arkhē/arkheion firmly in the foreground which means that we need to address the power by which an archive is authorised and the principles which govern its implementation, its classification and the like. (21)

Addressing such "grave consequences" of the Australian archive is difficult on a practical level given its posthuman nature. Nonetheless, this practice-led research, which attempts to lighten and make visible the posthuman weight of the archive, attempts to lay bare the nature and characteristics of this archive, if not to convey the archive itself.

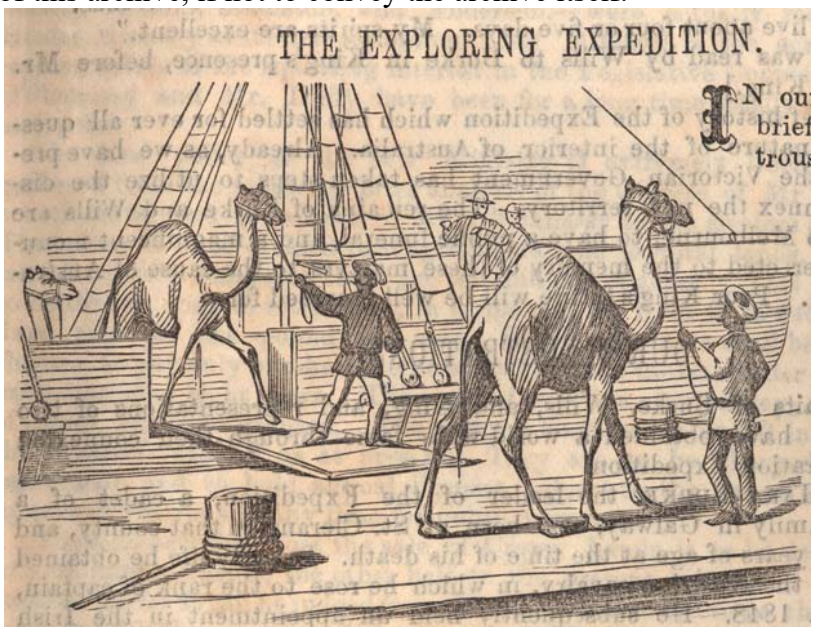

Fig. 4. East Melbourne (Vic.): Herald Office (1861) "[Camels disembarking]." Accession# NLA00/12/61/1, Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, VIC.

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