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Australian tropes of nature: representation and appropriation in EFL teaching

2018, 18 S.

Konstanze Kutzbach: Australian Tropes of Nature: Representation and Appropriation in EFL Teaching

The Cultural Conundrum: Critical Theory Meets State-of-the-Art Didactics

Influenced by cultural studies, EFL teaching has witnessed an extension of the canon beyond the dominant paradigm of DWEM, opening up to a variety of postcolonial or multiethnic texts, as Thaler (2008, 137) and others have pointed out. This is in keeping with what has become a core competence in EFL teaching – intercultural learning/intercultural competence:

> A lot of the ideas and principles of intercultural learning, such as change of perspective, empathy and self-reflexivity, tolerance of ambiguity, as well as the pragmatic, affective and cognitive dimensions of intercultural competence (see for example Erll/Gymnich 2007, 149) are anchored in postcolonial theory. They relate to a concept of identity which Stuart Hall famously described as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall 1996, 6). (Kutzbach 2013, 7)

Postcolonial criticism has repeatedly expressed scepticism concerning the possibility of appropriate representation of cultures and identities in their complexity and fluidity. As famously argued with regard to (Bhabha's and Spivak's) attempts at defining the postcolonial subject:

> The debate is a struggle between those who want to align themselves with the subaltern and those who insist that this attempt becomes at best only a refined version of the very discourse it seeks to displace. All are agreed, in some sense, that the main problem is how to effect agency for the post-colonial subject. But the contentious issue of how this is to be attained remains unresolved. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1995, 9)

Thus, we are facing a double bind between appropriate representation – letting cultures speak, while at the same time running the risk of appropriating them by discourse we impose on them. This cultural predicament seems even more problematic when assessing cultural production in the context of school education – a system which claims authority of representation, because it requires comprehensibility and testability of the teaching contents in order for young learners to be able to develop and communicate a sense of shared and learned characteristics of their own and others' cultural identity.

Therefore, a conflict results from the difficulty of defining cultures as, on the one hand, based on an idea of comprehensibility – as "everything which is socially learned and shared by the members of a society" (Horton, Hunt 1976, 46), while at the same time seeking to avoid an appropriation or reduction of culture in the attempt of defining and conveying it.

Influenced by critical theory's attempts at mapping cultural identity in its complexity, several didactic models have been put forward in order to provide a conceptual basis for a holistic assessment of culture and intercultural competence in an educational context. Among the most prominent ones is Michael Byram's model (1997), which promotes the ideal of "Intercultural Communicative Competence" (3). From Byram's model, three major areas emerge along whose lines teaching goals can be categorized with regard to intercultural competence: knowledge, skills, and attitudes (see Grimm, Meyer, Volkmann 2015, 166f).

Concerning the question of testability of intercultural competence, Nancy Grimm writes:

> As to the issue of *testability*, it must be stated that knowledge (facts and figures as in *Landeskunde* concepts) seems fairly easy testable. (…) In addition to that, skills such as problem solving can be tested in oral exams or with less patterned forms of testing (essay questions). *Attitudes*, however, are notoriously difficult to test, for students can easily answer in socially acceptable formulaic utterances while acting in a completely different manner outside the classroom. (Grimm, Meyer, Volkmann 2015, 167)

Moreover, the question is – even if we assume that pupils' expressed attitudes and actions are in sync –, to what extent can we make personal attitudes the subject of evaluation at all? Thus, when teaching cultures in school, we encounter a similar – and in several ways more problematic – double bind as with teaching cultures in general.

However, the state of the art in didactics is marked by several ideas and principles that seem to facilitate the teaching goals of intercultural competence:

Didactic Principles & Paradigm Shifts

a. Goal orientation/testability => Resource/competence orientation

b. Teaching methods: analytical => creative methods (HPO (= action- and production-oriented approaches))

c. Knowledge => skills, attitudes

d. Three performance levels: comprehension, analysis => evaluation/comment

   Appropriation => Representation

The latter principles/paradigms, one could argue, leave more space for self-reflexive, multifaceted and ambiguous representations of other cultures. However, pupils' performance in oral and written contributions has to be assessed in keeping with reliable, valid and objective standards of a mainly quantitative assessment at the end of the day. This is establishing the

major area of conflict within which lesson planning and teaching cultures in the EFL classroom finds itself.

Against the critical backdrop of these conflicting priorities and paradigms, this paper will investigate in how far the representation of Australian nature in ELT materials captures intercultural competence in its cognitive, pragmatic and affective complexity – despite the above mentioned structural impediments inherent in the (German) school system. In other words: To what extent do teaching materials manage to strike a balance between stereotypical reduction and appropriation of Australian nature and identity on the one hand, and its presentation as a trope referring to a processual concept of identity, on the other.

The following part will start with a short historical overview of the reception of Australia in German textbooks of German and English up to WWII, before it proceeds to present an overview of selected teaching materials for secondary levels.

Diachrony: Australia in School Textbooks

In his 1985 article "Australien in deutschen Schulbüchern aus den Jahren 1788-1942", Volker Wolf provides a detailed diachronic account of the early treatment of Australia in German and English textbooks against the backdrop of political, historical and social developments. The presentation of indigenous people and nature of Australia in the late 18th and 19th centuries (1985, 174f) generally follows an oscillating pattern between degradation/at times dehumanization and fascinated exoticism – often stressing the natives' closeness to nature: "The natives go mostly naked or dressed in rough materials or animal skin, and eat their food mostly raw" (Gerlach 1826, 192 quoted in Wolf 1985, 175; *my translation*).[1] Throughout the 19th century, reports are still often subject to speculation and uncertainty, and ignorance is often concealed by statements of a rather general nature:

> Reports about the kangaroo, the platypus, the white eagle, the black swans and the dingo will soon become central components of Australian oddness [12], like "head-high grass, tree-high reeds, pears whose stalks are located at the bottom end, and trees whose leathery leaves are situated at right angles to the stalks" [13]. The weather is described, in a very stereotypical way, as "mild and healthy". (Wolf 1985, 174f; *my translation*)[2]

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[1] Original: „Sie [die Eingeborenen] gehen großentheils nackend, oder in sehr grobe Zeuche und Thierfelle gekleidet und verzehren ihre Speisen meistentheils roh."
[2] Original: „Schilderungen, wie die des Känguruhs, des Schnabeltiers, des weißen Adlers, der schwarzen Schwäne und des Dingos, gehören bald ebenso zum festen Inventar der australischen Merkwürdigkeiten [12] wie die ‚mannshohen Grasarten, baumhohen Schilfarten, Birnen, deren Stengel am breiten Ende befindlich sind, und die

This basically extends to the turn of the 20th century and WWI, however with a paradigm shift towards presenting Australian nature and people on behalf of a national purpose of education rather than a general idea of enlightenment (see Wolf 1985, 175). Wolf points out that "descriptions of nature focus predominantly on the uniformity of the continent [24]; even the ambiguous perception of nature – between incomprehension and fascination – cannot redeem its" (Wolf 1985, 176; *my translation*)[3] "sad sparseness" (Winneberger 1905, 255 quoted in Wolf 1985, 176; *my translation*)[4]. Generally, Australia's landscape represents the "very weakest achievement of nature (…). It lacks a coherent elevation that bears comparison with the Giant Mountains or the Black Forest." (Knoll 1906, 168 quoted in Wolf 1985, 176; *my translation*)[5] According to Wolf "the kangaroo – regardless of its harmfulness – is introduced as a cute protagonist in children's books." (Wolf 1985, 176; *my translation*)[6]

An example of Germany's colonial self-parading is the travel report of Amalie Dietrich from the early 20th century, in which she degrades Australia to her personal research area:

> Everything is about contrary to our world. (…) No one puts restrictions on my collection zeal, (…) I stride through the wide plains, take hikes through the jungle, have trees felled in order to be able to collect different types of woods, blossom and fruit (…). (Lesebuch für den 6. und 7. Schülerjahrgang 1927, 375 quoted in Wolf 1985 178; *my translation*)[7]

After WWI, the focus shifted away from nature, and reports on Australia figured less prominently; they were often subsumed in chapters like "Germans across the World" (Wolf 1985 176; *my translation*[8]), and had vanished entirely with the beginning of the Nazi era until 1945.

Bäume, deren lederartige Blätter senkrecht auf den Stengeln sitzen' [13]. Aussagen über das australische Klima erstarren bald in der Formel ‚mild und gesund' (…)."

[3] Original: „Bei der Naturbeschreibung ist besonders von der Einförmigkeit des Kontinents die Rede (24), selbst das mit Kopfschütteln angestaute Exotische kann an dieser ‚traurigen Magerkeit' (28, 255) nichts ändern."

[4] Original: „traurige Magerkeit"

[5] Original: „allerschwächste Leistung der Natur dar (…). Es gibt keine zusammenhängende Erhebung, die mit dem Riesengebirge oder mit dem Schwarzwald den Vergleich aushielte."

[6] Original: „Abgesehen von seiner Schädlichkeit, kommt das Känguruh erstmals als putziges Kinderbuchtierchen zu Ehren."

[7] Original: „Alles ist ungefähr umgekehrt wie bei uns (…) Kein Mensch setzt meinem Sammeleifer irgendwelche Schranken (…) ich durchschreite die weiten Ebenen, durchwandere die Urwälder, ich lasse Bäume fällen, um die Holzarten, Blüten und Früchte zu sammeln (…)."

[8] Original: „Deutsche in aller Welt"

In German English textbooks, Australia is often reduced to an example of glorification of English expansion, mirroring and projecting Germany's own aspirations after the founding of the German Reich (see Wolf 1985, 179).

> An "English Reader" for a girls' school from 1939 [25] captures a kaleidoscope of what English textbooks of that time describe as typical Australian facts and features (discovery [34], convicts [35], history [36], sheep farming [37] and the gold [38], bush fires and the flying doctors. Moreover, it also provides for the first time a description of the new Australian: (Wolf 1985, 180; *my translation*)[9]
> "A fine race, tall, strong, wiry, great cricketers, much interested in horce-racing, accustomed to out-of-door-life and to plenty of sun and air." (Salewsky 1939, 109 quoted in Wolf 1985, 180)

The above account testifies to a history of pejorative assessment and – at best – patronizing appropriation, or exotic fascination with Australian nature, reading Australia in relation to German *masterculture*, often on the basis of manipulated or distorted facts. Attempts at complex representation of nature and culture as demanded today by critical theory as well as didactic theory are barely found.

Australian Tropes of Nature in the EFL Classroom

Even though there is no explicit mention of Australia in the curricula for the secondary levels, there is by now an abundance of materials such as teaching materials, text book units, critical contributions, etc. It is usually taught in 9th grade in German schools and has become a set unit in most of the main publishers' school textbooks.

I will start my analysis with examples from times, where appreciation of alterity and cultures different from our own are meant to go without saying, but, as suggested by the heading below, are still problematic in other ways.

1990s: Ingenuous Fascination and Well-intentioned Appropriation

Since the advent and growing popularity of intercultural learning, Australia – among other Anglophone postcolonial nations – has become an increasingly popular topic in EFL teaching. Publications from the 1990s testify to a predominantly knowledge-driven (*Landeskunde*)

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[9] Original: „Ein ‚English Reader' für Mädchenschulen aus dem Jahre 1939 (25) faßt kaleidoskopartig noch einmal zusammen, was in vielen kleinen Beiträgen über die Entdeckung [34], die Sträflinge [35], die Geschichte [36], die Schafzucht [37] und das Gold [38] in Englischbüchern geschrieben worden war. Zusätzlich fügt er das Erlebnis eines Buschfeuers und einer Krankenheilung durch den 'flying doctor' hinzu. Außerdem liefert er erstmalig eine Beschreibung der neuen Australier:"

approach to Australia, which often displays a rather unambiguous presentation of Australian nature and culture.

Contributions in didactic journals (usually background information and general suggestions for teaching) are predominantly fact- and knowledge-driven, focusing on Australia's history, topography and ecology. Presentations of Australian nature and culture often still show a Western fascination with exoticism and the unknown (the charm of the unfamiliar). The leading article of the 1991 issue (Australia and New Zealand) of the FUE (*Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch,* a journal for EFL teaching) by Nold and Stegmaier lists as one of the reasons for considering Australia (and New Zealand) in English classes, "the fascination with the unknown, exotic" (5).

According to the editorial by Armin Hüttermann, it is still a major goal to focus on knowledge ("landeskundliche Inhalte" (3)). And he goes on:

> this issue puts a focus on the natives, who nowadays represent a minority in both countries (Australia and New Zealand). There are fundamental differences between the Australian Aborigines and the New Zealand Maori. (…) The Aborigines epitomize Australia's past and present problems, whereas the Maori obviously play a central role in the future of national self-discovery of New Zealand (…). (3; *my translation*)[10]

Thus, the Aborigines' "special" association with nature and environment (or the lack thereof – i.e. their land being taken away from them) reduces them to a symbol of a long gone past and problematic present. Likewise, in an article about "Australia's Aborigines – Australia's past" (Schröder) in the same journal, we find discussion materials under the heading "How Australia became civilized" (16).

Therefore, differences are established between different cultural groups like New Zealanders, Australians and Aborigines, colonizers and colonized; so cultures are mostly treated as homogeneous entities by comparing and contrasting them. Thus, we are often dealing with a rather simplistic presentation of culture which focuses on the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence, yet which facilitates its testability, to refer back to Nancy Grimm's above quote and the diagram above (Didactic Principles & Paradigm Shifts).

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[10] Original: „Ein Schwerpunkt dieses Heftes liegt bei den Eingeboren, die heute in beiden Ländern (Australien und Neuseeland) Minderheiten darstellen. Dabei gibt es grundlegende Unterschiede zwischen den australischen Aborigines und den neuseeländischen Maori: (…) Die Aborigines stehen beispielhaft für Australiens Vergangenheit (und gegenwärtigen Probleme), während die Maori ganz offensichtlich bei der nationalen Selbstfindung Neuseelands (…) eine bedeutende Zukunftsrolle spielen."

A complex representation of culture in keeping with Stuart Hall's and other critics aforementioned conceptions of cultural identity as inherently contradictory and processual, is rarely to be found in didactic contributions and teaching materials from the 1990s.

In textbooks from the 1990s, we find similar developments:

In the 1991 edition of *Klett's Learning English – Orange Line 5 GK*, the first unit is dedicated to Australia and provides all in all, a rather fact-driven approach, as already indicated by the table of contents (3-6): Topics covered in "Unit 1: Australia" are

- "Facts about Australia" (3); a typical quote from that chapter reads: "There are 160 million sheep, but only 16 million people" (7)
- "The life of young people in the Australian bush" (3)
- The chapter "Around Australia" features the story of a surfing boy bitten by a shark and rescued by dolphins, drawing on the dichotomous presentation of Australian nature between fascination and danger (10; *my translation*)[11]

Similar approaches can be found in two textbooks by the same publisher from the late 1990s: *Learning English – Password Green 5* (1999) and *Green Line New 5* (1999) for grade 9 – Gymnasium). These two books are almost identical in structure and content, and both also dedicate a whole unit to Australia, the opening page of which presents pictures and basic information of natural sights of Australia – except for one picture, which introduces "Tricia from Sydney" (*Green Line New 5* 1999, 20-21). In the tasks, students are asked to describe the pictures, contrast them to "your country", and plan a slideshow of Germany for visitors from Australia. Even though we see attempts at fostering students' intercultural competence in a pragmatic perspective, the examples still testify to a predominance of a knowledge-oriented approach to what is deemed typical Australian characteristics. Through these pictures and tasks, contrasts are not only established between Australian and the Germany, but also between Australian nature and the city, as well as between the blond Aussie teenager Tricia (who is in the foreground of the photo of Sidney), and an Aboriginal didgeridoo player placed next to the pictures focusing on the natural sites. Moreover, the particularities of Australian nature are also often subject to humour and jokes, an example of which is seen in the box next to the pictures ("What do you get if you cross a kangaroo with an elephant"? "Big holes all over Australia" (21)).

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[11] Original: „Fakten über Australien; „Das Leben Jugendlicher im australischen Busch"

The subsequent pages also use authentic materials, thus complementing historical background knowledge with a personal, affective perspective. These include, for example, the lyrics of the song "I am Australian" – (Woodley, Newton 1987), combined with an information box providing a rough matter-of-fact sketch of Australian history including a very short note on the Dreamtime:

> The time of the creation of the world is known to the Aborigines as "Dreamtime" (…). There are many traditional songs and legends that tell of the creation of the land, its plants, animals and people" (74). One of the tasks then asks the students to "match up the information points with lines from the song" (74) and to find them in the "map at the back of your book" (74).

Tasks like that typically represent a predominant focus on testable knowledge; but there are also attempts to include affective and pragmatic skills (performance levels: comprehension, interpretation/analysis, as well as comment/re-creation of text i.e. [*Anforderungsbereiche* 1-3, see *Vorgaben Zentralabitur* [A-level curriculum] 2017, online]), in which nature often provides a (mostly visual) impulse for undirected and very open tasks, for example a picture of the outback: "Use the picture as the inspiration for a poem, a song text or an advert" (*Password Green 5* 1999, 79).

All in all, the presentation of nature and culture is often formulaic and based on a homogeneous notion of identity; it often works via establishing contrasts, between, e.g., fascinating nature-dangerous nature; nature-city, Aboriginal-Australian; past-present. Nature and geography are often appropriated and subject to either exotic fascination with the unknown, or to warning of danger (as e.g. the shark story mentioned above).

In rare instances, this simplification takes the shape of misrepresentation and distortion of geo-historical facts, as the following example from the same book shows:

"A World Map of a Different Kind": is the inside cover of both books, *Password Green 5* and *Green Line New 5* (1999). The map represents Australia by, first of all, a reference to its history: "1769: Captain Cook discovers the Aborigines, who had been hiding there for 40,000-60,000 years". This is complemented by showing an Aboriginal who exclaims: "Uh-oh. Discovered!" Needless to say, this goes beyond cultural and territorial appropriation, it utterly misrepresents and distorts the discourse of Aboriginal history and territoriality.

<u>Synchrony: The 2000s/21st Century: Competence-oriented Attempts at Representation</u>
<u>(Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes)</u>

21st century publications on Australia in German didactic journals witness a proliferation and differentiation of topics; however, with Australia still being a fairly new topic in EFL teaching, a lot of didactic publications come in the form of short introductory notes. These usually provide some (anecdotal or matter-of-fact) basic information, complemented with rough lesson plans, pictures, or other input materials such as references to websites. To a greater extent than before, the articles are written by Australians, thus claiming authority through authenticity, and complementing the cognitive dimension of IKL with personal attitudes and first-hand pragmatic advice.

The task formats still often adopt a formulaic approach to the text, but are more differentiated and complex than before. The representation of nature, too, is becoming more complex and ambiguous, with a more differentiated presentation of Aboriginal nature-based mythology and culture, the beauty of nature itself, yet also warning of the dangers:

Matthias Schneider's article "Destination Australia: Tourists in Australia should enjoy its natural beauty with care" (*Praxis Englisch*, 1/2009), for example, provides tourists with advice about Aussie nature, which is spectacular but also dangerous: An example of this is the story about Uluru and the phenomenon of "sorry rocks" – tourists returning pieces of rocks unjustly taken away, after having experienced bad luck. Other examples include a tourist eaten by a crocodile, or a cane toad plague caused by careless people who have brought animals and plants from other continents. In a similar vein, Miriam Hils' article from 2009 "Seeking Protection from the Australian Sun" (*Praxis Englisch*, 1/2009), warns of climate-related dangers in Australia.

Another emerging topic figuring prominently is that of saving the environment/sustainable energy, as for example thematized in the 2008 article "Solar Cities – A Vision of the Future" by Niamh Griffin. This also shows another trend of its time: next to the fascination with spectacular or dangerous elements of Australian nature, the presentation now increasingly includes every-day aspects and topics.

A lot of contributions are again dedicated to nature and its role in Aboriginal mythology, however with an increasingly complex variety of materials and tasks: these help students understand and work with the concept of Dreamtime, having them write their own Dreamtime stories as creative writing tasks; suggestions for lesson planning also entail the introduction to introducing dot paintings along with suggestions for interdisciplinary projects with art classes,

etc. Despite these developments, it also becomes clear that a thin line remains between representation and appropriation/stereotyping.

Embedding Australian Topics in Competences

The textbooks follow similar structures. The current curricula's shift in focus away from teaching goals towards a focus on skills and competences manifests itself in the latest generation of English textbooks in different ways. As we are moving towards competence orientation and complexification of intercultural dimensions, it becomes more difficult to assess textbooks by the table of contents: in the latest generation of textbooks, which aims to cater to the curricula by giving up teaching goals in favour of competences, table of contents become less explicit and telling – and therefore the materials less ready to teach. This is mirrored at the thematic level by approaches to nature and culture which testify to an awareness of possible cultural sensitivities.

In contrast to its predecessor *Green Line New 5* (1999), the latest, 2009 edition of *Green Line 5* opens with a map on the inside cover, displaying natural and cultural sites in a plain and more matter-of fact style. It is worth noticing, looking at the table of contents, that it is increasingly difficult to discern the concrete topics covered. It can be argued, that this generation of textbooks, as indicated by the table of contents, in the service of competence orientation, shifts away the focus from clear cut and easily accessible knowledge of facts, subordinating Australia as a topic to the different competences of EFL teaching. What we find as headings in the table of contents is often not very telling; the table of contents' major chapter headings/sub-categories in bold print are: Text A, Text B, Skills, Language, Writing Texts, Wordwise and Checkout. The skills section reads, for example: "Skills => Listening Skills => Taking Notes => A boat trip of the Great Barrier Reef – Learning about distinguishing characteristics of Australian English – Listening: Learning about the function of listening for global and detailed understanding – running an Internet project." (2009, 4; *my translation*)[12]

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[12] Original: „Skills => Listening Skills => Taking Notes => Eine Bootstour des Great Barrier Reef – Die Eigenart des australischen Englisch kennen lernen – Listening: Die Funktion von Global- und Detailverständnis kennen lernen – Ein Internetprojekt durchführen."

A "now you can" box in Unit 1, "Australia", sums up the competences that pupils should have acquired in the unit:

> Now you can:
> - Talk about Australia (Aboriginals, settlers; nature/animals).
> - Take better notes while you listen for gist and details.
> - Use "used to" correctly.
> - Recognize when to use "let", "make" and "have" (for *lassen*).
> - Write a story with different elements. (22)

In a similar way, the table of contents in *English G 21* 2010 (*Abschlussband für die 5-jährige Sekundarstufe I*)[13] goes into greater detail about study skills and the different competences and structures than about the thematic contents of the unit on Australia. A whole page is dedicated to the Aboriginal people and their relationship to nature via the dreaming (see page 16), trying to make pupils understand the complex concept at a cognitive level as the first step, in order to provide them with the basic knowledge for the following tasks focusing on pragmatic and affective aspects of intercultural competence. Along the lines of the different performance levels, students are asked to think about similarities ("Task 1a: What other stories about how the world was created do you know. How is the Dreaming similar or different?", 16), or empathize with and adopt the perspective of Aboriginal people ("Task 1b: From what you have learned about the Dreaming, explain what attitude Aboriginal people probably have to the natural world.", 16)

We also find an increasing number of references to nature in authentic cultural discourse – an example of which is the chapter "In the Outback", adapted from the novel *A Prayer for Blue Delaney* by Kirsty Murray. As a creative writing task, students are asked to write an ending for the story, or to rewrite the story ("Imagine you are Colm. Rewrite part of the story from your point of view, using 'I'", 25).

The latest edition of Diesterweg's *Camden Town 5A/G8* from 2016 shows one page with a brief mention of Australia (displaying pictures of Sydney Opera House and Ayers Rock) integrated in a chapter "A Journey through the Commonwealth" (see page 56f); Australia is not mentioned explicitly in the table of contents). The competence oriented tasks are rather open, generic and of modular style – covering the different Commonwealth countries under the same task cycle,

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[13] Grade 9, the last year of the lower secondary levels

thus emphasizing similarities instead of differences/contrasts: Tasks ask students, for example, to "[c]hoose a Commonwealth country in which English is spoken as first language by the majority of the population. You can use the map at the end of this book. Find out differences from British English" (56), or: "Prepare an itinerary for a one-week trip to a Commonwealth country you would like to visit. Think about where you would go, what you would want to see and do give reasons" (56).

Notting Hill Gate 5A 2009, the latest edition of Diesterweg's textbook for comprehensive schools, dedicates a whole chapter to Australia and, likewise, provides detailed information about the skills connected to it. The table of contents limits the information about the themes and topics of the unit to a very cryptic and general mention of the unit's title "Down under" and its three sub-headings "Life in Australia", "Aborigines" and "Optional: The dingo" (6). A much more detailed focus is put on the competences to be acquired in this unit, which are provided in a detailed list next to the three sub-headings:

> You can
>
> - say what your plans are
> - say how far away a place is
> - give someone an idea of something
> - say that you are often asked about something
> - ask why someone is crying
> - say that you are scared stiff
> - say what you are (not) thinking about yourself
> - say that you think something is totally unlikely (6; *my translation*)[14]

Again, the table of contents says more about the competences than the contents, and just gives a general idea of an otherwise very complex treatment of Australia in the unit itself. In contrast to Camden Town, nature figures prominently ("Australian animals" (117); moreover, the unit

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[14] Original: „So kann man …
- sagen, welche Pläne man hat
- sagen, wie weit ein Ort entfernt ist
- jemandem eine Vorstellung von etwas vermitteln
- sagen, dass man oft nach etwas gefragt wird
- fragen, warum jemand weint
- sagen, dass man vor Schreck erstarrt ist
- sagen, was man über sich selbst (nicht) denkt
- sagen, dass man etwas für völlig unwahrscheinlich hält."

presents a wide selection of activities in a section about "(l)ots of things to do" in Australia (119), or a listening task about a young Australian woman's 47-day hike through the bush ("The bush, the track and me", 116).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that impediments to appropriate cultural representation (in a deconstructivist sense) are endemic to teaching contexts: appropriate cultural representation conflicts with basic requirements of teaching: intelligibility, testability, and selection. Against this backdrop, the following aspects have become evident:

- Nature functions as a significant trope which reflects on an underlying understanding of identity and locates the latter between appropriation and representation
- Influences from the field of critical theory and current principles in didactics/the curricula, such as competence orientation, facilitate and foster developments towards an increasingly complex representation of Australian nature and culture along the following stages:

    1. Early (Colonial) approaches to nature and culture: a degradation/dehumanization of the Australian native population by emphasizing their closeness and similarity to nature, often testifying to a patronizing fascination with the exotic from a Western perspective
    2. Nature and culture in 1990s: Ingenuous fascination and well-intentioned appropriation
    3. Nature and culture in the 2000s/21st Century: Competence-oriented attempts at representation along the lines of knowledge, skills, and attitudes

One could argue that the representation of Australia benefitted from the didactic paradigm shift towards competence orientation, because Australian nature and culture are losing their iconic status as objects of exotic fascination. Instead, nature can be seen as a trope which calls up contradictions within cultural groups, not only between them.

Outlook: The Pathos of the Particular?

One of the major principles of state-of-the-art teaching is aspiring to an authenticity of contents and materials. In this context, fictional genres provide authentic access to topical cultural themes by letting cultures speak for themselves. In a short outlook, I will suggest the prolific genre of short film as a medium with great potential to represent the particularities of cultural identity and heritage, while at the same time elevating it to a universal perspective on culture(s). As Monika Plümer puts it in the lead article of the 2014 issue "Australia" (*Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch*):

> In order to engage in a dialogue with new worlds and experiences, ambivalent feelings and unknown people, we need research questions about connections not represented in European world views and contexts as well as "metaphors that work across ideological, historical, and personal differences" (Meier 1995: 7). (Plümer 2014, 127; *my translation*)[15]

(The broad cultural focus displayed by the latest *Camden Town* edition mentioned above can be considered an example of this trend). Tying in with this, I would like to briefly introduce three short films that illustrate the latter part of Plümer's quote. A common feature shared by all three films is the way they play with nature, counteracting the pathos and exotic fascination often entailed therein: retaining (Australian) cultural particularities as a narrative reference point, each of the films also exceeds the pathos of the particular by normalizing/universalizing it through persiflage, melodrama, and humour, respectively:

The short film *Waterbourne*, directed by Ryan Coonan (2014), can be read as a persiflage on the genre of Zombie film. With the setting in a small village in the Australian countryside, it draws on familiar cultural connotations and concerns, as harmful algae in the water cause mutations in humans and animals alike. After a ranger puts up a sign warning of the harmful algae (quote sign) and warns an elderly resident not to drink from the water of the lake, the zombie action is only a minute away, as one of the mutated kangaroos kills both of them. Thus, through the exaggerated and caricaturizing ending of a mutated zombie kangaroo's killing spree, the film transcends the cultural particularity and opens it up to a more global universality of human hubris abusive to nature, which raises cultural concerns by bringing together the zombie genre and global environmental issues through persiflage.

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[15] Original: „Um im Unterricht mit neuen Welten und Erfahrungen, ambivalenten Gefühlen und unbekannten Menschen in einen Dialog einzutreten, brauchen wir Forscherfragen nach Zusammenhängen, die in europäischen Weltbildern und Kontexten nicht repräsentiert sind, und 'metaphors that work across ideological, historical, and personal differences'."

Simon Cottee's 2014 short *The Duck*, a nine-minute adaptation from Ben Loory's eponymous short story, suggests another approach at universalizing and transcending tropes of nature while at the same time anchoring them in cultural particularity. A duck is desperately in love with a rock and eventually, with the help of a female duck, throws it off a cliff in order to end his suffering from this – obviously – unrequited love. This – as I would suggest – affectionate/ melodramatic display of love between animal and inanimate nature can be read as yet another example of cultural tropes radiating beyond the significance of a particular cultural phenomenon.

A third example is Eddie Bell's *Grey Bull* (2014), which deals with Martin, a refugee from South Sudan who has settled in Australia with his family. During his work at a slaughterhouse, Martin feels a special connection with one of the bulls, whom he "recognizes as a spiritual totem" (shortoftheweek 2016, online). In order to save him, he takes the bull home with him, and tries to make him part of his family life, which leads to a lot of bizarre and funny situations, when he insists the bull stay in the living-room while Martin and his family are watching TV. His family's unwillingness and inability to comprehend exacerbate Martin's feeling of unbelonging and being "torn between his ancient cultural identity and his family's new life in Australia" (shortoftheweek 2016, online). He eventually sacrifices his totem in a tribal ritual. In a similar way as the previous two examples, *Grey Bull* extends cultural particularities and gives them a broader implicational context. Thus, the film displaces tropes of nature and their profundity through humour, by putting them in a bizarre and outlandish context.

A Refined Version of "The Very Discourse It Seeks to Displace" – Or the Best of All Possible Worlds?

So it is probably an insoluble question to determine if school teaching of Australian cultures is eth(n)ically legitimate and does justice to Australia's complex and processual heritage and identity. If we follow a critical postcolonial line of argument, it is probably not – and can possibly never be. The answer to the above question is probably best to be found along philosophical and personal lines – i.e. along the question, if it is better to leave things untouched for fear of misrepresentation/appropriation, or to attempt representing them regardless of the fact that you can never do justice to culture in all its facets. Especially authentic sources like literature and film are important references in aspiring to cultural representation. The suggested readings

of the short films above may have indicated a possible way out of the cultural conundrum, but may at the same time be seen as a step towards radical universalism and deculturization.

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