Some Ideas about Forms of Cultural Contact Resulting from German-Australian Migration

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This book is situated within a tradition of scholarship on cultural contact between Germany and Australia. Our aim in editing this volume has been to offer a series of insights into ongoing interdisciplinary research by scholars involved in areas such as German literary and cultural studies, history and ethnology.

The volume has grown out of the symposium “Germans in Australia” held in the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Sydney in March 2006. The symposium’s aim was to re-activate and review an extensive tradition of scholarship on Germans in Australia, as well as to comprise a collection of studies on German migration and cultural contact that discuss migrant movements to Australia, reciprocal cultural exchange and influence as well as contact between German missionaries and Indigenous Australia.

In this volume, particular attention is given not only to ways in which each country has made an impact on the culture, intellectual thought and aesthetics of the other, but also the way in which the stream of cultural exchange progressed between Germany and Australia. It contains the analysis of historical accounts of German migration to Australia and its impact on German communities both in Germany and Australia, as well as on Australian society as a whole. It also explores the impact of this migration movement on readings of cultural exchanges that flowed from contact between Australian and German cultures, interpretations of European cultural theory and ethnographic discourses based on readings of Australian Indigenous society and ritual, investigations of the appropriation of Indigenous songs by representatives of
German and European modernist literature and aesthetics, and critical analyses of imaginations, fictional and otherwise, of the Australian continent.

The chapter headings structuring our book reflect the variety of forms of cultural contact explored by the respective contributors. In Gutjahr’s and Veit’s core contributions under the first section heading, “Cultural Disseminations of Missionary Ethnography”, the contact between the Central Australian Arrernte tribe and Carl Strehlow, the German Lutheran missionary-turned-ethnographer, takes centre stage. Strehlow, who had acquired an impressive knowledge of the Arrernte and Luritja languages\(^1\) in order to convert these Indigenous peoples to Christianity, exceeded his missionary brief by writing down and translating their songs into the German language, and having them published in Frankfurt, Germany (1907–20). The dissemination of Carl Strehlow’s seven volumes *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (*The Aranda and Loritja Tribes in Central Australia*) through their publication in Germany is an example of how direct contact between individuals from different cultures turned into a form of cultural contact in which Australian Indigenous knowledge became a cultural product that was launched into and appropriated by European discourses. In their elaboration of the unexpected impacts of Strehlow’s activities in Hermannsburg, Gutjahr’s and Veit’s contributions exemplify the broader notion of cultural contact that informs this book. Cultural contact here does not necessarily assume direct contact by individuals, nor do the various impacts of the “exchange” necessarily imply a corporeal presence of the other in the respective countries. Indeed, in this case the textual processing of Arrernte knowledge and spirituality, which also occurred at the expense of any acknowledgement of the reality of their living conditions as a result of their double colonisation by both the British and the German Lutherans, exemplifies not only the violence that is inherent when contact occurs in “the space of colonial encounters” (Pratt 1993: 6), but also that violation is part of any act of cultural appropriation that follows upon contact.

Gutjahr’s and Veit’s contributions show very clearly that the textual processing of Arrernte culture in Germany, and indeed other European

\(^1\) See Mulvaney, Morphy & Petch 2001: 118–19; Austin-Broos 2009: 19.
countries, fed into the European interest in so-called primitive cultures on the one hand, and primitivism as a cultural phenomenon on the other. Gutjahr discusses how, at the turn of the 20th century, these primitive forms of culture functioned as models for the earliest stages of the development of European culture. Veit in turn examines the interest in primitivism on the part of various individual artists and art movements. Here, primitivism represented the birth of a new artistic practice and indeed a new aesthetic that – so it was hoped – could function to regenerate not only European art practice but also the broader European culture and, by extension, the European self. Both contributions make clear the Eurocentric perspective of these appropriations of the Indigenous Other. As van Alphen shows with reference to Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (1919) [*The Uncanny*], such interpretations and appropriations represent European encounters with the Other that are always principally an encounter with the European Self, and that result in a projection of that Self onto the Other (van Alphen 1991: 11). The appropriations of so-called primitive cultures occurred with the idea that these peoples provided a glimpse into an originary form of the human self, or into a previous stage of human development, or even functioned as the enabling mechanism that allowed one to gain a deeper understanding of the “man of culture” of that era – to look behind the cultural veneer in order to understand the history of humanity.

Gutjahr contextualises Strehlow’s work within the philological, ethnographic and psychoanalytic scholarship in Europe at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Writing from a philological perspective, she shows how Strehlow’s linguistic knowledge and understanding – as his editor, Leonhardi, emphasises in the foreword to Strehlow’s work, Strehlow could communicate with the Arrernte in “their mother tongue” (Leonhardi 1907: 1) – enabled and delivered an unprecedented insight into what Strehlow conceived as Arrernte and Luritja “myths, legends and fairy tales”.2

The centrality of language in Strehlow’s contact with the Arrernte and Luritja meant that from the outset he differed from the British

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2 See Nicholls’ insightful contribution “Anglo-German mythologies: the Australian Aborigines and modern theories of myth in the work of Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow” (Nicholls 2007).
colonisers, for he sought to gain something through personal contact with the Arrernte and Luritja that was of value to him: their language. This was initially envisaged to be employed as a communicative tool to prove to the Aborigines that Christianity was in actual fact not a foreign concept but indeed a universal truth. Yet this linguistic exchange with those he sought to familiarise with Christian concepts developed into a powerful interaction that – as Kenny discusses in her contribution on Strehlow’s mission – even led, to a degree, to Strehlow’s revision of his vocation from that of a converter to a collector and ethnographer, thus preserver, of Indigenous tradition. However, as Veit states, the appropriation of Indigenous narratives always means that they are taken out of their context and “acquire an unfamiliar meaning on both sides” (see Veit’s contribution to this volume). This phenomenon becomes especially evident in Gutjahr’s delineation of how European discourses of the human incorporated the ethnographer’s interpretation of Indigenous myth in order to project the civilised European Self onto, and search for the origin of the European Self in, “die Wilden” [the primitives]. Gutjahr thus demonstrates that most of what was derived from the rituals and ceremonies of the so-called primitives had in the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries become a self-referential and self-perpetuating hermeneutic endeavour. Freud’s attempt to universalise the human psyche by transcending continents from the comfort of his home in Vienna is one of the clearest examples of this.3

Strehlow’s translation work with respect to the Arrernte and Luritja narratives not only provided a new insight into the organisation, spirituality and “Welterfahrung” [experience of the world] of these people; they also provided writers, in this case the Dada artists, with new linguistic material, which they used to invent a new poetic aesthetic that subverted mainstream literary conventions and perceptions. As Veit shows, Tristan Tzara, through his own French translations of the Arrernte and Luritja songs via Strehlow’s transcriptions and translations,

3 The anthropologist Austin-Broos describes the Arrernte as the icon of Europe’s primitive and states that the Western-Arrernte, Strehlow’s main source of reference, “have been frozen in the European gaze, circa 1900. Their culture then has become the culture of a people lodged in mythical time. A century and more after the invasion, the task of anthropology is to dislodge them from that time and address their experiences” (Austin-Broos 2009: 21).
fantasised about the resurrection of an originary poetic language and rhythm that would render a new manifestation of art possible.

The contributions in the second section of the book titled “Living the Mission: Religious Disseminations” focus on the life and work of Carl Strehlow at the Hermannsburg Mission in Central Australia. Kenny explores the way in which Carl Strehlow tried to establish a Lutheran world in Ntaria, the Arrernte land to which he had been posted. She examines his mission practice in the context of his training at the Neuendettelsau Mission Seminary and traces his intellectual roots back to a number of Lutheran teachers and scholars who provided the different intellectual strands that informed Strehlow’s practice. The theologian Warneck is particularly notable in this context, as he emphasised – in the tradition of Luther – the importance of learning local languages in order to most effectively convert people to Lutheran Christianity. Kenny demonstrates how Strehlow, in the remote context of the Finke River Mission, was able to replicate a Lutheran community based on patriarchal notions of the Lutheran family.

Further insight into this Lutheran “holy family” is provided by Bandhauer’s and Veber’s contribution, which examines this concept not only with regard to the patriarchal structure that was imposed on the Arrernte in the framework of Strehlow’s missionary work in their community, but also with respect to its replication and application within the confines of Strehlow’s own family. Bandhauer’s and Veber’s attention to the creation and allocation of gender-specific roles and the part played by this in the configuration of the patriarchal structure commences with a reading of the letters of courtship exchanged by the young Carl and his fiancée Frieda at the beginning of their relationship, while Carl was first in Bethesda then Hermannsburg, and Frieda still in Germany.

While Kenny’s focus is Strehlow’s public role as the head of the mission, Bandhauer’s and Veber’s concern is the private sphere of the family beginning with the courtship relationship between Strehlow and his fiancée, then wife, Frieda Keysser. This private sphere is the central focus of their correspondence as Frieda prepares to migrate to the foreign territory of Central Australia. The narratives that Carl provides of everyday life at the mission and those that Frieda relates about her preparations for migration and marriage illustrate the extent to which
both were prepared to go in order to impose pre-given structures of Lutheran life and religious practice in their new environment. Frieda’s subordinate and supporting role as Carl’s companion in his missionary project simultaneously indicates her authority in the household of the mission station. Their correspondence with each other, as well as with superiors and acquaintances in the course of their life at the Hermannsburg Mission, provides insights into the couple’s experience and makes comprehensible their standing in Australian history as “an icon of intercultural experience”, as Austin-Broos calls it (Austin-Broos 2009: 21).

The third section engages with narratives of national and cultural identity. The four contributions in this section review a number of accepted historical accounts of migration and exploration as well as the critical discourse around these narratives. Their diverse analyses yield new and unexpected insights into aspects of cultural contact arising from German participation in different episodes of Australia’s history.

Fischer’s informative survey of scholarship concerning “the German presence in Australia” offers an overarching context for his argument that the accepted discourse regarding the success of Australia as a settler society in terms of the tripartite “assimilation-integration-multiculturalism” model must be called into question when considering the German migrant experience since World War I. Fischer draws attention to the apparent paradox that whilst the last two decades have seen a substantial increase in the number of persons identifying as German-Australians compared to that in the immediate aftermath of both World Wars I and II, there has simultaneously been a serious decline of German as a community language compared to other European languages such as Italian, French and Dutch. He seeks to explain his observations through the hypothesis that the changing perception of Germans by Anglo-Celtic Australians shaped and continues to shape the experience and self-perception of German migrants in Australia. This perceived connection to their country of origin and its historical heritage never ceases to have some bearing on the lives of Australian residents from a German background, even if they themselves wish to identify mainly or absolutely with Australian society. Drawing on social, historical, linguistic and other research about German communities in Australia to formulate his argument, Fischer discusses the sociopolitical impact of
World Wars I and II, as well as that of events that do not even involve the migrant country, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall. How German-Australians fared with regard to policies designed and implemented by the Australian government is, according to Fischer, always also a reflection of what occurs in Germany.

Likewise on the subject of Anglo-Celtic perceptions and changing attitudes towards Germans in Australia and Germany during wartime is Williams’ contribution to this volume. Williams demonstrates that what is often perceived as anti-German sentiment in Australia undoubtedly has its roots in Australia’s World War I experience. His even-handed treatment of anecdotes and experiences of German-Australian World War I veterans and their families related as oral history, in letters, film and newspaper articles, provides examples of both positive and negative attitudes on the part of Anglo-Celtic Australians and Australian government policies, particularly those of the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF), towards German-Australians. Until World War I, a primarily positive attitude towards German-Australians and Germany as a nation predominated, with Australia and Germany having enjoyed a healthy trade relationship that in the eyes of the British even threatened to displace Britain’s favoured trading-partner status with Germany. Although the experience of World War I caused a hiatus in relations between the two countries, Williams’ examination of primary sources of the time demonstrates that German-Australian relationships within Australia were much more complex. Letters from German-Australians who had enlisted in the AIF and were accepted to fight alongside the British against their country of origin or ancestral heritage testify to the complexity of Australian perceptions of their German compatriots. Australians who were part of the German migrant community found themselves in a liminal space, a space where what Geertz calls “systems of meaning” (Geertz 1973: 12) meet and clash, in which self-perceptions on the one hand, and the ascriptions that the majority projected onto the German migrant community on the other, needed to be negotiated on a daily basis. Fischer’s and Williams’ analyses of particular narratives and counter-narratives of cultural contact thus portray the problematic nature of generalisations, showing that these are always influenced by specific imaginations of nationality and ethnicity.
Also investigating the topic of migration but parting from the discussion of German-Australian migrant life in the 20th and 21st centuries is Reynold’s sociohistorical study dealing with a relatively large-scale German immigration wave from the Duchy of Nassau to Australia in the 19th century. Reynolds, like Williams, also uses personal letters as a primary resource, in this case the correspondence between those who migrated from Nassau to Australia and those who stayed behind in Nassau. Reynolds enquires why such a comparatively large proportion of that population chose to migrate at that particular juncture, and in comparing and contrasting the material in these letters with state records, she shows that the reasons given for migration by the Nassau immigrants in their personal correspondence often differ from that stated in the official data. With reference to the psychological theory of the “migration-prone personality” elaborated by Cropley and others (1986), Reynolds suggests that the impulse to migrate could be as rooted in the individual’s psychology as it may be externally motivated.

Another survey of letters which reveals discrepancies between narratives of a particular event is van der Lubbe’s examination of letters exchanged between the head of the British Admiralty, the Earl of Sandwich, and the father and son team, Johann and Georg Forster. Her contribution is based on exhaustive archival research that casts light on the struggle for determination and ownership of the Cook narrative both in terms of what was written, and also in terms of what van der Lubbe calls “the race for the press”. Writing the narrative of Cook’s second voyage was an important step in the composition of a foundational myth about the discovery of Australia. Who had been approved to write it, who had the rights to it and who was then authorised to publish and translate it, all emerge as highly controversial and contentious issues. The Forsters, who were originally commissioned to write the story, found themselves increasingly sidelined by the interests of the British Admiralty, for both official and private reasons.

The urge to control Cook’s story is a salient example showing how seemingly undisputable “factual” reports can be materially tainted by the personal interests of those who assert ownership. This demonstrates how narratives that are endowed with the status of official histories, and that allegedly represent the interests of the nation, are in fact dependent
on and effectively determined by an authorised narrative perspective. Thus, the British Admiralty sought to dismantle Forster’s original account, an account they had previously agreed to support, and subordinate it to the overriding perspective of Cook’s diaries. This point can be developed further using an insight of the historian White, who writes that “plot is not a structural component of fictional or mythical stories alone; it is crucial to the historical representations of events as well” (White 1987: 51). In these terms, legitimation and authority are immanent to narrative form and are established within and through the act of narration itself.

The fourth and final section of the volume presents discussions of two utopian representations of Australia in German-language fiction. The time lapse of two centuries between the fictional works considered in this segment of the book facilitates a comparison between an 18th-century example of the literary formula of idealising the non-European wilderness on the one hand, and a contemporary deconstruction of this idealisation on the other.

Wilson interprets the novel Abentheuer auf einer Reise nach Neu-Holland (1793) [Adventures on a Journey to New Holland]. In this novel by Therese Huber, who had never set foot on Australian soil and who drew her information partly from accounts written by the above-mentioned Georg Forster, the convict colony of Australia, and more specifically Norfolk Island, is presented as a counterpoint to perceived undesired and dangerous developments in Europe, such as those in postrevolutionary France. Europeans who had suffered injustice and violation in France and in Britain are miraculously united on Norfolk Island. Its empty spaces become the projection screen for fantasies of refuge and the opportunity for self-regeneration and new beginnings. Through her analysis of the thematic complex ‘revolution-guilt-regeneration’ that shapes the trajectory of the plot, Wilson shows how the island, which historically was the prison for the most hardened convicts, in this literary imagining becomes the site for a new society. This new society draws heavily on the idealised middle-class family as the source of “an ideal model of governance”, as much because of the moral values it espouses, as for the humanising influence it exerts on the public sphere.
While the novel Wilson discusses is a sentimental utopian projection typical of its time, Urs Widmer’s 1993 novella, Liebesbrief für Mary [Love Letter for Mary], is an ironic deconstruction of stereotypical images of Australia as a contemporary utopia in the German-speaking world. Giesler shows that Australia, and especially the Outback, functions as an ideal and as a site of desire and longing, in which two authors search for a woman they both loved and lost to the continent. Widmer parodies the European fixation on the vast and pristine spaces of the Australian Outback by locating this utopia as a non-existent place in a non-existent desert in the – whilst existent – very barren Outback. Drawing on a cocktail of stereotypical perceptions of Australian Aboriginal myths on the one hand, and of Australia as the dumping site for nuclear waste – a disaster zone indeed – on the other, Widmer’s novel, according to Giesler, can be read as a text where the idea of the foreign and exotic as a new possibility of authentic origin is at least deconstructed, if not altogether decomposed.

This last section presents examples of readings of literary texts, which are situated within an anthropological context of literary scholarship. Literary anthropology assumes that the human is not only constituted by language, but also by literature. Travel accounts – including non-fictional ones – letters, historical narratives, as well as translations and appropriations of the myths of perceived original and primitive cultures share with literature their capability and need to fictionalise and imagine (see Assmann, Gaier & Trommsdorff 2005). Where intercultural contact is concerned, this need often originates from a strong urge to assert one’s own identity, culture and nationality as well as – as Wolfgang Iser puts it with regard to the fictive and the imaginary – “to extend oneself” (Iser 1993: xi) by appropriating and thus fictionalising the Other.

This volume, we hope, shows how scholars of literary criticism, history and ethnography can, through textual and linguistic analysis, both uncover these fictionalisations, and, as well, reveal the meanings of these fictionalisations for the respective author’s experience of cultural contact.
Bibliography


