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Object authenticity applied to imaginaries of racialized national culture: English-language-school sojourners in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of international sojourners attending English-language schools in Australia, exploring how social imaginaries shape perceptions of authenticity. Using qualitative stakeholder interviews, we investigate sojourner expectations of "authentic" cultural encounters and their reactions when such imaginaries meet the complex realities of multicultural Australia. Teachers play a unique role, serving as both facilitators of cultural understanding and, paradoxically as participants in a staged performance of authenticity to meet students' preconceived expectations. The study highlights the tensions of cultural authenticity in intercultural learning contexts and suggests a need for language schools to adopt critical pedagogical approaches that challenge sojourners' assumptions.

Este estudio examina las experiencias de estudiantes extranjeros en Australia, explorando cómo sus imaginarios sociales moldean sus percepciones de autenticidad. Mediante entrevistas cualitativas, investigamos la relación entre las expectativas de encuentros "auténticos" y la complejidad de la Australia multicultural. Los profesores desempeñan un papel único, ya que actúan como facilitadores de la comprensión cultural y, paradójicamente, también como participantes en una representación teatralizada. El estudio destaca las tensiones de la autenticidad cultural en contextos de aprendizaje intercultural y sugiere la necesidad de adoptar enfoques pedagógicos críticos que cuestionen las suposiciones de los estudiantes extranjeros.

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Object authenticity; social imaginaries; deficit discourses; cultural authenticity; destination image

Introduction

The purpose of this contribution is to explore how object authenticity – a concept traditionally associated with tourism – can offer insights into the nexus of education and tourism by examining the staged performances of national and cultural authenticity in Australian language schools. Specifically, we investigate how institutional pressures and students' imaginaries shape educational practices, revealing the intersections of tourism marketing, destination image, and intercultural education.

How might one evaluate the authenticity – or not – of 'a' culture (if such a thing can be said to exist in singular form, particularly at a national or supranational level; Holliday, 2010)? Who gets to

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decide whether and to what extent a culture *is* authentic? What happens when your construction is different from mine? And if your construction, like mine, originates within your *own* social imaginary, does it matter *whose* culture we are discussing? By 'social imaginaries', we mean sojourners' (and others') shared, collective images and stereotypes – originating in media and advertising, for instance – of Australian culture and society. Further, if mine is Culture X and yours is Culture Y, do I have a better claim – moral and/or epistemological – to a more 'authentic' depiction of Culture X? Or might you, an outsider, have a clearer vision of Culture X, not least as you have Culture Y to compare it to? Such questions are at the philosophical heart of this paper.

When it comes to tangible cultural heritage – a castle, for instance – determining authenticity may be fairly straightforward: documentary evidence likely attests to the castle's form and function through time, and the building itself can be seen and touched. Intangible cultural heritage, however, is by definition amorphous: UNESCO (2023) lists examples such as traditional methods of cultivating olives, weaving, beekeeping, falconry, drumming, and preparing and consuming dishes such as ceviche or borscht. While *examples* of all such cultural products can be seen and touched (perhaps also eaten, heard, or even danced), the cultural 'object' refers not to specific iterations of a dance or dish but to the underpinning 'traditions or living expressions … passed from one generation to another, [that] have evolved in response to their environments and contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future' (UNESCO, 2024). That is to say: the intangible refers to the 'culture' behind the artefacts.

Presented here is a study of young adults – in their early 20s – from Belgium, Colombia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Slovakia, South Korea, Switzerland, and Thailand. All are sojourning in Australia, learning English, staying with host families, and undertaking tourism activities, the latter both under the aegis of the schools and independently. Thus, while the sojourners are 'students' from the perspective of language-school hosts, they are also 'tourists' in terms of much of their activity. The study is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with 37 such sojourners (as well as with 11 teachers, 13 managers, and 7 teacher trainers, mostly Australian either through birth or naturalization) at 11 language schools – variously independent schools, parts of larger language-school chains, or university-run language centers – in Sydney (NSW), Brisbane and Cairns (QLD). A fuller methodological discussion appears below.

The rationale for this study is grounded in two key insights. The first of these recognizes that the social imaginaries that sojourners bring with them shape their perceptions and experiences of authenticity, often aligning with pre-established stereotypes of the Anglophone 'West' and Australian culture. This affects how they assess both their educational experience and their informal encounters with Australian society, underscoring a gap in our understanding of authenticity as a co-constructed and racialized concept in intercultural education. Second, the paper recognizes the importance of examining how language schools and host communities navigate these expectations to offer practical insights into how authenticity is 'staged' or mediated to meet the imaginaries of sojourners. By studying these dynamics, the paper contributes to theoretical discussions on authenticity in tourism studies and provides actionable insights for educators and policymakers involved in intercultural education and tourism marketing. The research question for this paper is: How do international sojourners' social imaginaries shape their perceptions of object authenticity regarding Australian national culture, and what role do language schools play in mediating or challenging these perceptions?

The paper positions itself within an important intersection of tourism and education, where sojourners come not only as language learners but also as cultural consumers navigating preconceived notions of authenticity in their host country. It makes a conceptual contribution to intercultural scholarship, applying as it does a theorizing of object authenticity to racialized constructions of 'national culture' – problematically homogenized and posited as singular – as these originate in out-group social imaginaries and as contested by/within the in-group. Within this, it is the 'marked' status of English – marker and enabler of (sometimes vague notions of) 'globalization' – that makes sojourners' perceptions of object authenticity so important. Although they are physically *in*

Australia, their notions *of* Australia originate in their home countries and are necessarily imbued with postcolonial meanings of both English as a global language and English's relationship to the Anglophone 'West' (e.g. Holliday, 2022; Thomas-Maude et al., 2021). It is no accident, therefore, that the sojourners are learning *English* as opposed to, say, Hungarian. And it is no accident that they are doing so in 'inner-circle' *Australia* as opposed to, say, 'outer-circle' Kenya (Kachru, 1985). Australia and the Anglophone 'West' are thus mutually metonymic and imbued with powerful imaginaries – projected cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital – that seem to accrete to individuals as the cachet of English-language proficiency and Anglophone-'West' cultural fluency. These, of course, transcend Australia specifically.

The notion of object authenticity has been widely discussed within the tourism literature (e.g. Rickly, 2022), as applied mainly to buildings and other heritage objects (e.g. Morgan & Pritchard, 2005) and to historical events and associated placemaking (e.g. Walby & Piché, 2015). Object authenticity has less often been theorized in relation to *cultures* more broadly, whether conceptualized nationally or supra-nationally. Some work has been done at a theoretical level, bringing together native-speakerism in English language education with authenticity in applied linguistics (Lowe & Pinner, 2016). But the present paper seeks to address an important remaining gap: sojourners' racialized authenticity discourses as these apply to the Anglophone, globalized 'West' and, in particular, to urban Australia.

While object authenticity is often conceptualized through fixed cultural markers, in intercultural settings such as educational sojourning, it is more of a dynamic construct shaped by the interplay of social imaginaries, destination marketing, and personal expectations. This study adopts a socially constructed view of object authenticity, recognizing it as a concept in flux, mediated by participants' encounters with cultural diversity and their own cultural frameworks.

The paper is theoretical and exploratory in nature. We begin with a discussion of object authenticity, drawing from theoretical paradigms including ideation around staged authenticity and accessing 'other' cultures through tourism. We then explore the multiple links between tourism and imagination by considering how outsider groups interpret racialized cultures through the mediating lens of tourism. Our methodology, led by a constructivist, grounded theory approach is then introduced. We carried out qualitative, semi-structured interviews with approximately 70 participants comprising sojourners, teachers, and managers at 11 language centers located in three Australian cities.

Our data analysis explores how social imaginaries amongst sojourners to Australia are shaped by factors such as destination marketing, perceptions of difference (between Australia and Europe), preconceptions about the Anglophone 'West', and classroom expectations. We consider the formative role that pre-arrival experiences play in shaping the quest for object authenticity and the consumption of cultural experiences once in Australia. However, and our focus, and key contribution is our analysis of the backstage role of language teachers as storytellers, guides, insiders and 'friends' to language learners. We consider the theoretical and practical implications of language schools placing teachers under pressure to stage 'authentic' versions of Australia for sojourners by legitimizing stereotypical metonyms in classroom settings. We then discuss what all of this means for language schools, students, home stay hosts and tourism marketing organisations, and we challenge language schools to (re)consider their role as key conduits in the process of challenging social norms and expectations linked to tourism. In analyzing how object authenticity operates within these educational-tourism settings, this paper contributes to a growing body of research on the tourism-education nexus, highlighting how intercultural learning environments influence both destination image formation and the development of critical intercultural competences.

Theorizing object authenticity

Dating back to early Christian theology (Umbach & Humphrey, 2018), authenticity has since marched through the disciplines, drawing in/on the crisis of representation, Marxist challenges to the naturalness of human/non-human 'nature', and postmodern readings of simulation and

hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). The philosophical construct of authenticity has been widely debated within the tourism literature, serving as conceptual lens in settings as diverse as heritage tourism (Wood, 2020); gastronomy (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017), prison tourism (Walby & Piché, 2015), homestays (Mura, 2015), home-based cooking lessons (Bell, 2015), and inter-/intra-tourist experiences within, for example, Northern Lights tourism (Heimtun, 2016). In addition, authenticity has been considered as a mediating variable of destination loyalty (Fu, 2019) and tourist satisfaction (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2018). Authenticity is thus a big idea. Some tidying up is provided by conceptual models, the most influential of which is Wang's (1999), which distinguishes object(ivist), construct(ivist), and existential(ist) authenticity. As the focus of the present paper is *object authenticity* – and specifically as it applies to imaginaries of racialized national culture/s – in this section, we briefly define the construct and review the conceptually adjacent literature.

Situated at the intersection of tourism studies and education, this study leverages object authenticity as a theoretical framework to investigate the role of cultural imaginaries and staged authenticity within language schools. Traditionally used to analyze material heritage and cultural sites in tourism, object authenticity here serves to illustrate how cultural expectations and performative pressures shape educational spaces, offering a unique perspective on intercultural learning.

Object authenticity concerns itself with perceptions and co-constructed discourses of the putative realness – or unmediated selfhood; as above – of an object. The 'object' might be a heritage site (such as a castle), an artefact (such as a souvenir), or an intangible 'object' (such as a foodstuff or dance). There is some slippage, though, between object and subject forms of authenticity, so that Morgan and Pritchard (2005), in a discussion of the affective materiality of backpackers' souvenirs, found that handicrafts served as authenticity tokens in an object/ivist sense – evoking spatial remoteness and cultural exotica; the object itself was seen as legitimately authentic – but *also* in an existential sense, in that the object, in turn, provided authenticity *for the tourists themselves*. Such cachet deriving from existential authenticity is what Sørensen (2003) calls 'road status' among backpacker communities: evidence of mobilities. Thus, it may be difficult to tease apart 'object' authenticity from related forms. Indeed, while in the present study we focus on object authenticity, notions of intercultural experiences accreting as cachet – a 'road status' ma(r)king individuals (as) more 'international' and thus enhancing their cultural/economic capital – *also* seems to operate as a form of existential authenticity, as with Morgan and Pritchard's backpacker souvenirs.

In tourism, discussions of object authenticity date from Boorstin's (1961), MacCannell's (1976), and Cohen's (1988) influential works. MacCannell (2008) sets out two distinct discourses of object authenticity that variously frame tourists' expectations. The first is an essentialist, realist perspective that regards putatively authentic 'natives' as 'frozen' in their traditions. Where tourists ascribe to the first discourse, we might expect them to be disappointed if, for example, they were to visit the Amazon Basin only to observe local people wearing jeans, using iPads, and drinking lattes. Rather than problematizing their own constructions of putative cultural purity – that is, object authenticity – it may be easier to critique people and places as insufficiently 'authentic' (e.g. Ateljevic & Doorne, 2005; Rojek & Urry, 1997). In contrast, MacCannell's second discourse is a post-modern, post-structural, non-essentializing, 'hip' version of culture as ever-emergent and constantly responding to challenges; in such a discourse, object authenticity is a chimera, as no culture exists in a vacuum of fixity or purity (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Nevertheless, existentialist discourses continue to frame many sojourners' expectations, resulting in tourism providers experiencing pressure to 'stage' authenticity.

Staged authenticity (Walby & Piché, 2015) refers to the selective curation and display of cultural objects contrived to seem like a 'back stage', that is, a putatively authentic part of another world. Bruner (2005), for example, describes Masai dance performances staged for tourists in Kenya, and Crang (1997, p. 148) discusses tourism workers engaged in 'the deep acting of emotional labour'. This includes compulsorily smiling airline staff and bubbly and flirty resort staff. Similarly, visitors may be – experientially – locked up in the dark in penal heritage sites (Walby & Piché,

2015). In all such instances, the authenticity of tourism objects – whether a dance, a friendly encounter, or a heritage site visit – are stage managed so as to convey an experience that more closely mirrors tourists' own imaginaries of that object.

But *staged authenticity* is not the opposite of *object authenticity*, and/as staged authenticity need not be wholly confected. MacCannell (1976, p. 101) proposed a continuum of 'stages' in tourism. These are, first, the most obviously 'front stage' (for example, a tourist restaurant; arguably wholly inauthentic in a local sense, but perfectly authentic for what it is); second, a front stage that shows some of the back-stage (such as a restaurant with an open kitchen); third, a front stage arranged to *resemble* a back stage area (e.g. a replica of a famous person's home); fourth, a former back stage now set up for visitors (e.g. a disused prison); fifth, a back stage only occasionally open to outsiders (such as the homes of those offering home-based cooking lessons; Bell, 2015, p. 90); and sixth, a true backstage, in which outsiders are not welcome. Within this continuum, tourists pursuing object authenticity have been found to greatly value access to the backstage, as this appears to be an unmediated, unfiltered peek into the 'real' destination, where they get to 'experience somebody else's culture' (Park et al., 2019), in which object authenticity may be glimpsed (e.g. Bell, 2015; Mura, 2015). Further, the backstage is not just a physical place. Pursuing object authenticity may also mean getting to know local people unfiltered by tourism-focused performances. For example, in a study of Cuban *jintero/as* ('tourist riders' i.e. hustlers seeking to profit from tourists), Simoni (2014) found a 'tourist' versus 'human being' binary, reflecting 'on the perceived limitations of the tourist role and the ensuing drive to reach beyond it in order to access something of value' (p. 281).

So, whilst authenticity has been extensively studied within tourism – most often in relation to material heritage, cultural sites, and specific activities such as gastronomy or performances (e.g. Morgan & Pritchard, 2005; Walby & Piché, 2015) – there has been limited exploration of how object authenticity applies to national identities. This is particularly the case where such identities are mediated through educational tourism. This study fills that knowledge gap by examining how international sojourners' imaginaries influence perceptions of their Australian experiences as 'authentic' or 'inauthentic,' thereby extending cultural authenticity beyond static objects to include dynamic identities. cultures, and social interactions. By analyzing how cultural authenticity is constructed and interpreted in the educational tourism setting of Australian language schools, the study challenges traditional views of authenticity that privilege tangible cultural products. Instead, we emphasize the co-constructed and often racialized aspects of authenticity within sojourner imaginaries of the Anglophone 'West.' This approach broadens the scope of authenticity studies by connecting it to intercultural education, social imaginaries, and identity politics (Holliday, 2022; Thomas-Maude et al., 2021). Through this lens, the study offers insights into the roles that language schools play in either reinforcing or challenging these imaginaries, contributing a nuanced perspective to the ongoing discourse on cultural authenticity.

Out-group imaginaries of racialized national culture/s

To what extent, though, do sojourners' own imaginaries of place mediate the cultures they visit? Studying students from the USA volunteering in Cameroon, Ji Hoon Park (2018, pp. 153–154), found that participants judged putative local authenticity through a lens of their *own*, imaginaries of 'Africa', conceived homogenously and reductively:

> If students regarded Barmenda (urban, civilized, not poor, and hostile) as a corrupted, inauthentic Africa, they found Nkuv (rural, primitive, poor, innocent, and friendly) as authentic Africa … students perceived Nkuv as an authentic back region because it offered precisely the experience they had anticipated. They felt a great sense of authenticity because what signifies the authenticity of the Third World includes poverty, perceived isolation, friendliness of the locals, and the lack of things modern.

Similarly, Maddox (2015) found that US visitors to an Indian yoga center brought their own normative imaginaries of what India 'should' be like, and that these served as criteria against which

local authenticities were judged. Indeed, as out-group imaginaries served as evaluation criteria, they may also result in tourists *complaining* about putative cultural *in*authenticity. For example, De Bernardi (2019) describes visitors to Sámi Indigenous sites in Scandinavia that resulted in complaints about Sámi people's mobile phone use on a nature reserve: this was criticized as damaging to 'environmental integrity' but, as De Bernardi shows, the issue was tourists' own imaginaries of *cultural* 'integrity' (p. 252).

However, constructions of Cameroonian, Indian, and Samí national cultures – which framed visitors' experiences in the studies cited above – seem to operate rather differently from imaginaries of the Anglophone 'West' and, metonymically, Australia. Whereas Cameroon, India, and Samí cultures may be relatively unknown and not often considered by out-groups, the Anglophone 'West' wields substantial postcolonial power, seeming to operate as a conceptual receptacle for whatever the out-group wishes to project onto/into it. As Zheng (2006, p. 168) notes, of Chinese social imaginaries:

> [T]he West does not denote a geographic region but rather a field of meanings. Local and global media … form the main basis on which Chinese conceptions of the West are based. These raw cultural materials are refined into complex concepts. The final product is only tangentially related to the raw materials themselves. Thus, the process is better described as the creative use of foreign cultural products rather than the direct impact of Western culture on Chinese society. Although the starting point is the unrefined foreign materials, they only acquire meaning through the reception-production process. In this sense, the West is '(re)made in China'.

This creative and localized coding of the Anglophone 'West' – and, by extension, places and racialized human phenotypes associated with it – helps explain why Thomas-Maude et al. (2021, p. 7), in the context of Peruvians learning English in Peru, noted the:

> [P]erceived value of a generalized impression of 'Western' culture, but also a European phenotype, providing a powerful example of how [over-valuing British teachers] can reflect underlying colonial legacies of race and class-based status and power.

Ahn (2017) makes a similar finding in South Korea, noting a preference among learners for White teachers from the USA, despite the now more prevalent use of English in *lingua franca* contexts (that is, as a shared language, with no 'native speaker' present). Korean learners nevertheless defaulted to understandings of English as *belonging to* so-called 'inner circle' countries of its use (Kachru, 1985), and by extension – in their imaginaries – to White people. As a result, American English was seen as the 'superpower English' (p. 128) and the best variety to learn. Such issues have been discussed extensively within applied linguistics and intercultural studies literatures, as related to learner identity (e.g. Norton, 2013), the contested 'ownership' of English (e.g. Widdowson, 1994), the intercultural (e.g. Holliday, 2022), Whiteness/racism in/and English language teaching (e.g. Kubota, 2020; Ramjattan, 2019), the global power and prestige of English (e.g. Pennycook & Makoni, 2019), the postcolonial *meanings* of and inequities of access to English (e.g. Phillipson, 2016), and native/non-native speakerhood (e.g. Isaacs & Rose, 2022; Selvi et al., 2024). But this question is yet to be situated within a discussion of object authenticity, as in this paper.

These diverse accounts of Australia's 'authenticity' reflect a common theme: sojourners' imagined constructs of Australian culture are often based on simplified, racialized narratives that clash with their lived experiences in a multicultural society. Together, these imaginaries underscore object authenticity as a socially and racially constructed concept, where expectations are continually re-negotiated through everyday interactions. Thus, object authenticity here becomes not a static set of cultural 'truths' but a malleable, often contested space that is shaped by both sojourners' preconceptions and the diversity they encounter.

Further, whereas learners of English in Peru or Korea, as above, deal with one construct of cultural 'otherness' – the (idealized, imagined) Anglophone 'West' as represented by UK/USA teachers (and also e.g. by classroom materials; Gray, 2023) – sojourners in the present study deal with at least three types of cultural 'others'. Clearly, as they are in Australia, one focus is on national (and local,

'small') Australian culture/s (after Holliday, 1999). However, an Australian sojourn also necessitates engagement with imaginaries of the broader Anglophone 'West' and also engagement with their sojourner peers from different linguacultural backgrounds. Thus, while object authenticity as it relates to culture concerns itself with the motivation of *seeing into someone else's world* – as with the tourism studies cited above, from Cuba, India, Cameroon, Scandinavia, for instance – it is not clear *which* culture/s is/are the sojourners' main target/s in the present study. Indeed, in one of very few detailed studies of Australian English language schools, Senior (2006) notes that intercultural conflict often arises *among the students*. For example, she describes a group of Korean and Japanese learners whose English lesson, on an August 6th, had been planned to commemorate the anniversary of the atom bomb attack in Hiroshima. While the (Australian) teacher had intended 'to end the lesson with one minute's silence in which the class would collectively remember all the Japanese civilians who died at Hiroshima' (p. 137) – the Koreans noisily protested, noting that many Koreans – relocated as forced labor to Japan – had also died in the attack. '[E]motions in the class were running high', Senior notes (ibid.), writing that part of the teacher role is to smooth out such intercultural tensions. So, when the sojourners describe a sometimes vague desire to 'internationalize themselves', they may primarily be thinking about the global utility of English and the cachet associated with a stint in the Anglophone 'West'. But meeting – and perhaps learning to get along with – people from very different cultures is inevitably part of the experience, too.

Materials and methods

In terms of data collection, we undertook semi-structured interviews with sojourners, teachers, and managers at 11 language centers in the Australian cities of Sydney, Brisbane, and Cairns between 2012 and 2019. These institutions were varied and included four independent schools, four international franchised schools, and three university centers. The nationalities of the sojourners were varied; this mattered, as some meaningful 'us-and-them' discourses became apparent during data analysis. For this reason, nationalities are given alongside pseudonyms in our discussion. Our qualitative data took the form of a sizable corpus of transcribed interviews, amounting to over 200,000 words.

68 participants were interviewed for this study. Our sample comprised 37 students (aged between 20 and 25 years), 11 teachers, 13 managers, and 7 teacher trainers. The sojourners interviewed came from Belgium, Colombia, France, Germany, Mexico, Italy, Japan, Slovakia, South Korea, Switzerland, and Thailand. Most of the teachers and managers were Australian. With the consent of participants, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed and analyzed using inductive analysis. Inductivity here means that each interview built on previous data generation, with the researcher posing some new questions as the project developed, drawing out themes throughout rather than there being distinct data generation and analysis phases. This relied on transcribing data throughout as well as on the use of ethnographic field notes (see below – in Belgian Marie's data excerpt – for an example of use of fieldnotes to focus on participants' wording as evidence of out-group conceptualizations of putative Australian object authenticity). In particular, anonymised data excepts from other interviewees were often used as discussion prompts. An example of data generated in this way is when Ulrike and Marta discuss the importance of their teacher's role as a local 'guide', which Mark (a Director of Studies) affirms is a common strategy taken by teachers. However, he adds depth to this finding, noting that the teacher-as-guide strategy only works 'if they've got the personality to carry it … if you're that kind of charismatic person and you can make a story … make it entertaining' (see below). Without use of such an iterative approach, Ulrike and Marta's insight would be only partial. Yes, it *does* seem to matter that teachers play a role as guide, but only if the teachers are *also* representative of putative object authenticity, namely: friendly and approachable Aussies (who are also White, as discussed below).

The sojourner participants were interviewed in small groups, and interviews lasted for approximately one hour. Some sojourners, and all language-school staff, including teachers, were interviewed on a one-to-one, face to face basis. The format of interviews (one-to-one, or in groups) was dictated by individual preferences and availability. While each interview type yields a similar *volume* of data, contrasting *types* of data are elicited from each approach. The group interviews resulted in notably richer data, since participants discussed and debated relevant issues through natural dialogue. Longer excerpts from these interviews are reproduced in our findings section to preserve the authenticity and depth of these discussions. Participants were encouraged to speak to areas of expertise and personal interest. Our study therefore takes orientation from the onto-epistemological positions of relativism which views reality as conditional / positioned, and subjectivity, which holds that what and how we know depends on our positioning (Mills et al., 2006).

Our analysis takes inspiration from Charmaz's (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory model, with theorizing undertaken inductively and iteratively via data-construction. In this sense analysis is layered and analyzed upwards using open, axial, and selective coding tapering out towards the point of data saturation. We took this process further however by re-analyzing the original findings using an interdisciplinary perspective occurring *after* Charmaz's theorization stage. We initiated this point in the process by interrogating the original data set and our initial interpretations of it. Our starting point was to explore critical intercultural competence and to understand what this is, and how it is acquired. Further lines of enquiry dovetailed from that baseline. For example, we explored whether sojourners even seek to acquire intercultural competence in the first place, and if not, what do they hope to 'take' from a visit to Australia? What are the implications of these aspirations for language centers, for teachers and for the learners themselves? Ultimately, our questions coalesced around a theoretical focus on object authenticity. As such, the original data, and our initial interpretations of it were reinterpreted in the specific context of object authenticity.

Results and analysis

Having centered a core theoretical perspective – object authenticity, wherein the 'object' is an entire culture, problematically singular and homogenous, as imagined from the outside – we now turn to the results of our study. This is organized into three results-and-discussion sections, themed as follows: imaginaries of cultural difference; insider access and staged authenticity; and multiculturalism and the question of race. In analyzing the data, we think with theory (after Jackson & Mazzei, 2022), which is why the paper is organized into combined results-and-discussion sections. We then conclude with an exploration of broader implications and some brief practical suggestions, proposing that (thinking with) this study might, in turn, inform future sojourners' experiences and language schools' practices.

Australia as culturally *different*

The following extract from a sojourners' focus group expresses some common pre-arrival outgroup imaginaries of place:

Researcher:	Before you came here, what was your picture of Australia?
Mathilde:	Sun.
Emilie:	Sea.
Sabine:	Good-looking surfer boys running around.
Emilie:	Nice people, they're all friendly.
Sabine:	Like everybody's really relaxed all the time.
Mathilde:	Yes. … People are really relaxed, I think.
Sabine:	Compared to cities in Europe …

Emilie: Yes.
Sabine: Everything's relaxed. In Europe, everybody's stressed all the time. (Focus Group: Mathilde & Sabine, German, & Emilie, Belgian)

This chimes well with broader pre-arrival imaginaries recorded among participants: most voiced expectations that things would be 'different' and 'brighter' compared to home, and that people would be 'outgoing', 'bright', and 'friendly'. Some also mentioned hopes that they might become 'friends with [their] teacher' and that they would have 'teachers who empathize' with them. These are keywords from the data, emerging variously and repeatedly.

Where do such expectations come from? Social imaginaries stem in part from destination marketing, as Julia suggests:

> The [*Tourism Australia*] advertising campaign, which is the selling of Australia overseas, is full of the blonde, blue eyed, bronzed people who are on surf boards with big smiles. (Julia, Director of Studies)

But while *Tourism Australia* advertisements *do* rely on such sun-sea-surf images, this is not the whole story. As Mathilde and Sabine note, the expectation of a national 'relaxedness' *contrasts* with 'cities in Europe'. A key framing device, then, seems to be cultural *difference*. But whereas Australia/Australians may be constructed as more relaxed than urban Europe, *difference* seems to play out differently for non-Europeans:

> Before I arrived here, I thought that this country was like United States, like a big city, busy city. All the people may be stressful, maybe angry. But when I arrived here, I saw that all the people was very organized, all the things was just very organized … . Here people maybe thinking of you if you have a problem, [people ask] 'are you okay?' Friendly. (Andrés, Colombian)

Again, *difference* is key, although, in this case, there seems to be a pre-arrival conflation of the Anglophone 'West' more broadly, with comparison made to this more amorphous notion of Westernized places – exemplified by the USA – as 'busy', 'stressful', and 'angry'. The centrality of *difference*, as framing heuristic, may in turn explain *classroom* expectations:

> First of all, I thought, I just wish[ed] that all the teachers [here] have special way to teach English correctly. So, once I had a question to my teacher but she can't answer to me. So, I'm really disappointed, because I didn't expect that situation. So, yes, that was a bit different … In Korea, [the teachers] are strict, so they always made us to study. But here … .I don't think it's strict enough. (Hye Jun, Korean)

Key here are the ideas of correctness, a 'special' way to teach English, teachers' capacity to answer any/all questions, and – crucially – the contrast with Korean classrooms.

Based on the above observations, deficit discourses come into sharp focus in our analysis as the evaluative comparisons sojourners make between their host culture and home culture, often resulting in judgments that frame Australian cultural or educational practices as lacking or insufficient. Hye Jun's disappointment with the teachers' methods reflects a deficit discourse, as she applies an evaluative lens from her home culture to assess Australian teaching styles. Sojourners' imaginaries can thus lead to assessments that sometimes devalue authentic local practices when these diverge from their expectations, affecting satisfaction and perceived authenticity amongst students.

That is, *difference* becomes a framing heuristic in the sojourners' evaluation of object authenticity. So, while Hye Jun wishes the teachers were stricter, she seems content with the discrepancy by framing it within a discourse of difference. Other sojourners are pleasantly surprised, finding ways of pluralizing and complexifying the cultural authenticity they find. Andrés, for example, had pictured 'busy' and 'stressful', but is pleased to find 'friendly' and 'organized'; while not quite what he had imagined, these are, indeed, cultural differences.

As such, 'object authenticity' is constructed as sojourners' judgments of cultural *realness* or legitimacy based on their own pre-existing imaginaries of Australia. When sojourners assess aspects of their experiences – whether interactions with teachers, host families, or cultural sites – they measure authenticity against their expectations of an 'authentic Australia.' Here, object authenticity

is thus rooted in perceived alignment with stereotypical attributes of the Anglophone 'West' (e.g. 'relaxed,' 'friendly,' or 'outgoing' as described by Mathilde and Sabine). In this sense, authenticity can be both socially constructed and racialized, illustrating how these perceptions guide sojourners' satisfaction or disappointment with specific aspects of their experience.

Cultural insider access and staged authenticity

Another commonly expressed pre-arrival hope was that, by studying English in Australia, sojourners would be able to make connections with 'real' Australians, not least their teachers:

> In my country it's almost impossible to be a friend with a teacher, [as a student], because of my culture. But unlike my culture, it's different here. I think it's better because they empathize with us. I can easily [talk] about my problem. (Hyori, Korean)

> My favourite teacher is my morning class teacher. … He tries to make conversation with many classmates and he talk about his private story, it makes me closer. (Emiko, Japanese)

Such hopes reflect a desire to access the cultural backstage, conceptualizable as part of the quest for object authenticity. Hyori's emphasis on empathy – co-feeling – and Emiko's appreciation for her teacher's 'private story' suggest a desire for access beyond the front stage of a touristic experience. This means that teachers' exposition of everyday Australian cultural artefacts is appreciated:

> Ulrike: Last week [we learned] about crime, law, and [our teacher] told us the whole story about [Lindy] Chamberlain with the dingo. Yes, it's like the dingo story is really famous in Australia but we didn't know about it.
> Marta: Yes.
> Ulrike: So, it's good that we do now. … I really want to learn about the culture. … [Our teacher], she's like our guide here.
> Marta: Yes, I mean for example, when we went to [an art gallery] and I really liked it and it was something new. … And next time or today she brings typical Australian food[.] (Focus Group: Ulrike, German & Marta, Slovak)

A trip to a gallery and the sampling of local foods – standard touristic offerings – can be considered very much front-stage activities, in which a culture overtly displays itself to others. What is notable, though, is that these things are being presented in a *classroom* by a *teacher*, which suggests that part of the teacher role is to offer cultural insights and access. Thus, the teacher's explanation of the Lindy Chamberlain dingo case – which refers to a very famous 1980s news story; common knowledge in Australia, but less familiar overseas – is an example of backstage access. By explaining the event, the teacher gives students a nugget of 'insider' cultural access: a chance to understand a passing reference, perhaps, or grist for the mill of broader cultural understanding, as they make sense of why the case was so notorious.

In this sense, object authenticity extends beyond standard teaching practices, as teachers are expected to stage cultural narratives that resonate with sojourners' preconceived images of Australia. This performative aspect is not as prominent in other teaching contexts, where educators are not typically required to project or embody national or cultural identity. Instead, the language-school teacher's role intersects with tourism, placing unique demands on them to present 'real' cultural insights that affirm, rather than challenge, students' imaginaries.

However, a conflict that necessarily emerges is how teachers might walk the line between 'exposing' Australian insider insights while maintaining (and perhaps 'performing') object authenticity *as the students imagine it*. While sojourners *do* seek a cultural entry point – access to the backstage, as with the Lindy Chamberlain story – most do not want their certainties to be disrupted. The following excerpts speak to this complexity, in which teachers are expected to share something of the backstage but only insofar as this can be done in an 'outgoing' and 'bubbly' way. This is vital, as these are the sojourners' framing imaginaries:

> [In class, some of the most successful teachers] just talk about, say, why Australians like meat pies so much. Or what their dad used to do when he was living around here. … I think most of [the students] actually do go for it, if they've got the personality to carry it. That's the thing, is that if you're that kind of charismatic person and you can make a story, a yarn, spin a yarn, and make it entertaining. I think the students … feel like they're learning some aspect of Australian culture. (Mark, Director of Studies)

Social imaginaries can therefore be conceptualized as the shared, collective images that sojourners bring with them about Australian culture and society. These imaginaries originate in media, tourism advertising, and global stereotypes, shaping sojourners' desires for certain 'authentic' experiences. The above responses from Mathilde and Sabine reveal a collective imaginary of Australia as embodying specific traits (e.g. 'blonde, blue-eyed, bronzed people,' 'relaxed,' 'different from Europe'), which these sojourners use as benchmarks to validate their cultural encounters. Viewing social imaginaries in this way enables an exploration of how these ideals affect the ways in which sojourners interpret teacher behaviors and host settings, reinforcing or challenging their anticipated cultural authenticity.

In addition, staged authenticity comes into focus here as the deliberate presentation of aspects of Australian culture that conform to sojourners' imaginaries, often through language-school practices and teacher roles. Teachers, for example, take on the role of cultural insiders who present familiar elements of Australian life (e.g. discussions of 'meat pies' or the 'Lindy Chamberlain dingo story') as curated backstage insights. Such insights clarify how language schools intentionally fulfill or construct cultural narratives to match sojourners' imaginaries, leading to experiences that, while partially 'authentic,' are selectively tailored to meet expectations. The sojourners' satisfaction with these experiences reflects the effectiveness of such staging in meeting preconceived notions.

The teacher role, then, comprises elements of storyteller, guide, insider, and friend. To succeed, teachers must be 'that kind of charismatic person', as Mark puts it. This speaks to what Crang (1997, p. 148) called the 'the deep acting of emotional labour' through which 'employees' selves become part of the product … their personhood is commodified' (p. 153). It also resonates with MacCannell's (1984) conceptualization of the 'museumized group'; when group members of an ethnic attraction become frozen in an image of themselves. In the descriptions of some school managers, we can see the staging of authenticity taking place:

> [One of our teachers, Manny]'s got that coolness. He's a soccer player. … He's hunky looking. The girls love him. He's married, so it's all safe … But that just makes all the girls go goo-goo over him. The boys hang out the front [of the building] and he plays basketball with them. … So, he's, for me, a dream type of teacher, where the students love him. … [The students say] 'Manny is the most wonderful teacher ever'. When it comes to photos, when they're leaving, it's, 'Manny, Manny; every student that's had him [wants a photo with him] … If Manny was small and nerdy and wore glasses, would the reaction be the same? … I think probably not. (Amy, Director of Studies)

> We started instituting these leaving surveys [and we improved our satisfaction rate]. … So, I'm really happy about that. But, in a way, part of me died in the process. Because the way that you really keep students happy has not been to institute a rigorous academic curriculum with clear objectives. … It's really to think much more carefully about what customers want and their expectations. Trying to hire teachers who really have that personality. That personality for teaching, their personality carries the class and keeps the people on board. (Mark, Director of Studies)

As Mark and Amy attest, their hiring decisions are based not mainly on the ability to *teach*. Instead, they hire teachers who 'have that personality' and who are 'cool'. Also important is that they be 'hunky looking' rather than 'small and nerdy'. As Mark suggests, this is not his preferred course of action. But he bows to the pressure to provide what customers demand. The result is a problematic circle of certainty in which truth is imprisoned. The sojourners' *own* imaginaries, informed by destination marketing and other media, frame what can occur in the setting. While they *do* want some backstage access, they also – perhaps mainly – want for their own certainties to be reinforced rather than challenged. This puts language schools under pressure to stage authenticity by hiring fun, hunky teachers – or perhaps 'teachers'.

While relatability and storytelling are valued qualities in most teaching contexts, in international language schools these attributes take on a unique function. Teachers are not only educators but also *mediators* of 'authentic' cultural experiences, often selectively curating narratives to meet students' idealized notions of the host culture. This performative role situates teachers as embodiments of the students' social imaginaries, positioning them as both cultural insiders and providers of 'backstage' access, rather than solely as instructors. Thus, the teacher's personality and storytelling ability become instrumental to sustaining the constructed object authenticity that sojourners seek in their cultural immersion.

Multicultural Australia and the question of race

As discussed, the sojourners project onto Australia an imagined *difference* from their own cultures, and language schools then offer them a safe – if somewhat staged – opportunity to access cultural otherness. But the circle of certainty breaks down when they leave the classroom. Whereas teachers and school managers carefully stage an imagined authenticity for the sojourners – projecting back to them what they already 'know' Australia to be – this is absent from other spheres of Australian life. Specifically, as many of the sojourners seem to be drawing on what Julia called the 'blonde, blue eyed, bronzed people' stereotype, many struggled with the fact of Australia being rather more multicultural and much less White than they had imagined. The following excerpts tease out the issues:

Marie: I know Australia is really multicultural and stuff, I know. But on the other hand, my [host] family's from Fiji. It's like: I'm not in Fiji; I want to have the real Australian thing.
Researcher: What's the real Australian thing?
Marie: I think that's the hard thing about Australia. You don't really have your own culture. Your culture is too multicultural. (Marie, Belgian)

Marie's wording *and* her worlding are important here. As the interviewer, I (Phiona) made a two-word note during the interview: *your, too*, expanding afterwards:

> *Your* culture. *Too* multicultural. (Not *very*, but *too*; like it's a bad thing.) … Marie takes me for Australian. She's just described her host family as *Fijian*, although they're migrants in Australia, exactly like me. But I'm White, my accent is British, and so is Australia "my" culture, and not 'theirs'? (Phiona, fieldnotes)

Implicitly: yes. Australia is associated in the sojourners' minds with White people, including White migrants who may or may not be naturalized as Australians. In contrast, non-White migrants – naturalized or not – may seem less 'authentically' Australian. As a result:

> We often have issues with students who say, 'I'm staying with a Sri Lankan family', [or], 'they're Indian'. … 'Indians aren't English speakers'. You know, we're in Australia, which is supposedly a multicultural country, and these are people who speak excellent English … but they're not White. The students are stressed by the fact that they're not with a White [family]. You know, their ideal of what it is to be in an Anglo culture. (Julia, Director of Studies)

This suggests some slippage, in sojourners' imaginaries, between 'Australia' and 'Anglo' subcultures *within* Australia. Established from 1788 as a British penal colony, twentieth-century Australia received over a million post-war British migrants on assisted-passage schemes, and British-born people still comprise Australia's largest migrant community, although as their median age skews more than twenty years older than the general population, first-generation British migrant numbers are declining, even as the UK is still among Australia's top-ten migrant source countries (Home Affairs, 2022). Historically, then, Australia has had a strongly 'Anglo' culture. In addition, 'Anglo', as Julia puts it, may refer beyond Australia, to the wider Anglophone 'West': Kachru's (1985) 'inner circle' of English, which includes both the UK and Australia. Per such framings, British migrants may thus appear to the sojourners to be more 'authentically' Australian than, for example, Fijians, Indians, or Sri Lankans.

But the present day is rather different from this historical description of Anglo-Australia. Whereas most twentieth-century migrants to Australia came from the UK, between 1986 and 1991, Australia's Chinese-born population more than doubled, such that in 2011, China surpassed the UK as Australia's primary source of permanent migrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). By 2023, the top five source countries for skilled migration were, in order: India, China, Nepal, New Zealand (including naturalized New Zealanders, born elsewhere), and the Philippines (Home Affairs, 2023), and of the 3.3 million migrants who came to Australia (total population: 26 million) between 2006 and 2021, over one quarter (27.1%) were born in China or India (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Modern Australia is thus a migrant nation: 29.3% of Australians are first generation migrants (i.e. born overseas) and more than half (51.5%) are second-generation (with one or both parents born overseas; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This is a statistical reality with which many of the sojourners grappled as they struggled:

Mathilde: We have, like, the stereotype of really big, blond guys and when I'm on the bus on my way home they're only Chinese guys.
Emilie: Yes. That's right.
Sabine: Yes, so different. Yes.
Mathilde: When I'm on the bus I don't think I'm in Australia, it's like I'm in China.
Emilie: Yes.
Mathilde: Yes, but I think, I knew that there were a lot of Asian people [here], but I thought it was more mixed … . You really see, like, there are so many Asian people. (Focus Group: Mathilde & Sabine, German, & Emilie, Belgian)

These excerpts describe complex negotiations between an imagined 'Australia' – White, Anglophone, and overlaid with blond-surfer stereotypes – and sojourners' experiences of Australian multiculturalism. As a result, Mathilde's '[i]t's like I'm in China' and Marie's 'I'm not in Fiji', are problematizations of object authenticity. At issue is the gap between imaginaries and reality: while multicultural and multi-ethnic in fact, Australia is still 'Anglo' in the sojourners' imaginaries. And while language schools can stage manage aspects of the sojourner experience, they cannot change the demographics of the country. But they *can* hire White and/or 'European-looking' teachers, as discussed next.

Staged authenticity and the question of race

As discussed, research in applied linguistics has long problematized 'nativeness', and much work in that space speaks to the difficulties faced by non-native teachers (e.g. Isaacs & Rose, 2022; Kubota, 2020; Phillipson, 2016; Selvi et al., 2024). Our finding is rather different, in that *race* rather than *speakerhood* seems to be what matters in this context. As shown, these are hybrid tourism-education settings in which sojourners' framing expectations insist that teachers and host families be White, thereby offering 'museumized' ethnic status as part of the experience. This was exemplified by the case of much-loved teacher, Manny.

But Manny is *not* White. He was not born in Australia. In fact, he is Brazilian, a native user of Portuguese. But he is in great demand, alongside other non-native-English teachers:

> In my [teaching] staff at the moment, I've got … two Brazilians, one Scottish, one English, one Irish, a South African and two from New Zealand. I also had Canadian, Finnish, Norwegian … [and] Dutch. (Amy, Director of Studies)

This except speaks to the relative importance of teachers' appearance – and specifically their perceived ethnicity – rather than speakerhood, native or otherwise. Amy continues:

> Would it work the same if I had an Asian teacher … and Japanese students? I don't think it would. I think [Japanese students] they're a bit harder to sell to in their expectations. I think they've come all this way and their expectation is to have someone who looks completely different [from them]. Yeah, if you looked

> at Manny, I mean he could be Brazilian, Italian … He's European looking. I don't think it would work if I had a Korean-looking or Japanese-looking [teacher]. [The students are buying] an image. Just a Western image.

Again, a discourse of *difference* is invoked, allowing Amy to disallow ethnically East Asian-looking teachers on the grounds that the Japanese and Korean students are 'harder to sell to'. Martin, however, may be a better 'salesman', describing the work he does in managing students' expectations of exactly such a teacher:

> [One of our teachers,] Su Ming, gosh, I don't know where [her family] is from, but she's grown up in Australia. So, if they're not aware about [how multicultural Australia is], they learn pretty quickly … All our marketing material and all our brochures and all our orientations, all point to the fact that they're in Australia, which is multicultural. It's definitely not what they expect, but that's to be expected. (Martin, Director of Studies)

Martin – himself German-Australian and a non-native English user – is quick to defend Su Ming's legitimacy as both Australian and a teacher of English, just as Amy defends Manny. But they take different approaches. Whereas both employ both non-native and native speaker teachers (as did all the schools in the study), Martin chooses to focus on managing students' expectations ('they learn pretty quickly'), though marketing and orientation processes. In contrast, Amy practices hiring discrimination, choosing not to employ 'Korean-looking or Japanese-looking' teachers, saying that she does not 'think it would work'.

Sadly, she might be right. Others report overt anti-Asian racism, aimed not primarily at teachers (perhaps because few find jobs in language schools?) but at students' Asian peers:

> We've got European students who will say to me, 'Oh there's quite a lot of Asians', and they'll do the slitty-eyed gesture. I'll say, 'Yeah, that's interesting; my wife's Japanese'. They'll go, 'Oh right, yeah, sorry'. (Mark, Director of Studies)

> Europeans, some of them we've had, refused to go into their class because there were too many Asians. … They'll make a slant-y eye gesture. They'll actually do that. I've had quite long and quite difficult discussions about needing to be culturally accepting … Teaching [them] that they are going to have to get to know people with an Asian background. … But to what extent is that the fault of the marketing? [Amy's school is part of an international language school chain, and unlike Martin, whose school is independent, she does not control the marketing materials.] If you look at our brochure … the faces are predominantly European and nice-looking South Americans, all young people. So that expectation, I think, is partly the company's fault. If everything that you're shown shows 95 per cent of White faces and young people having a good time in Australia, then you get here and your class … 10 out of 15 people [are] … Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Thai. But they [European students] can't even distinguish between [different Asian ethnicities]. They just look 'Chinese'. (Amy, Director of Studies)

That the Europeans apologize to Mark suggests that they know very well that their behavior is problematic. However, these excerpts are the logical end point of a quest for object authenticity wherein Australia represents an Anglophone 'West' as framed by out-group imaginaries in which there is substantial conceptual slippage between Whiteness, English, and globalization. As Amy notes, advertising materials that center Whiteness do not help, although these are doubtless designed to appeal to markets where such slippages prevail.

Conclusion

Our study produces several theoretical and practical considerations and will facilitate a greater understanding of the intersection between language-school tourism experiences and destination image formation amongst tourism managers and scholars. The development of intercultural awareness and competence that the sojourners anticipate is, our analyses suggest, incomplete at best since their preconceived social imaginaries of Australia are legitimated in classrooms rather than challenged. This perpetuates the conventional wisdom; that travel 'broadens the mind', and that intercultural experiences alone can foster cultural awareness and competences. However, whilst travel experiences are clearly necessary to facilitate the appreciation of new cultures, they are not, on their own, sufficient to catalyze cultural competence amongst sojourners. Rather, we argue that a

conscious intervention in the problematic circle of certainty is necessary, and that language teachers/schools have a role to play as interpretive vehicles in mediating language-travelers' experiences of host destinations. Language schools and classrooms are spaces in which constructed 'authenticities' can and should be challenged so that intercultural experiences based on the *realities* of public culture within destinations can become richer, and of greater value to sojourners.

Theoretically, our study speaks to acculturation, and the idea of challenging students to critically reflect on their own 'complex system of presumptions' (Vogler, 2002) when it comes to destination authenticity. Our findings support calls for new classroom-based exercises in critical thinking designed to challenge culturally shaped preconceptions, and to renegotiate inauthentic social realties that are learned prior to traveling. The only alternative to this is a continuation of the circle of certainty we describe earlier, leading to predicable and predetermined cultural experiences that simply confirm/reward stereotyping. We argue that sojourner experiences would be far more valuable if they empowered learners to discover a more nuanced, 'real' version of Australia based on the unveiling (in classrooms) of the various contradictions, anomalies and paradoxes of Eurocentric tourism imaginaries of Australia. In this sense, our paper contributes to theory on cultural proximity (Kastenholz, 2010) and to enable more effective forms of cultural proximity, we propose a rethink when it comes to classroom-based activities centered around cultural learning to bridge the gap between familiarity and novelty.

In addressing the complexities of cultural issues in class, teachers can start to problematize the essentialist views of culture that are so often maintained and circulated through tourism marketing media. Classroom approaches organized around critical thinking could provide sojourners with a more varied vocabulary, and a greater appetite to resist what is 'known' about Australia via social imaginaries. This could satiate their desire for what Rasmi et al. (2014) call 'true host-culture immersion' and offer a means to accumulate higher value social and cultural capital via tourism-education experiences.

Our findings thus indicate that the notion of object authenticity in sojourning contexts is inherently flexible, constructed through an interplay of preconceived cultural frameworks and the realities of a multicultural host society. This nuanced understanding of authenticity challenges fixed cultural representations and highlights the role of intercultural learning in reshaping these constructs. By fostering an environment that questions stereotypes and offers a more inclusive view of Australian society, language schools can support sojourners in developing a broader perspective on authenticity that encompasses diversity rather than relying on narrow imaginaries.

In contributing this study, we also address a shortfall in fieldwork on intercultural tourists' (noting the focus is typically hosts) experiences by creating novel findings from a study of language-travelers. Teaching cultural difference, as an alternative to confirming cultural preconceptions means that teachers can come closer to playing the role of a critical friend that can encourage sojourners to challenge their own preconceptions about 'Australian-ness', rather than playing stereotypes back to them. Since teaching is an interactive tourism encounter, trust is central to the host–guest relationship to the extent that that host plays the role of part friend and part tour guide. This creates an opportunity for language centers and teachers to play an increasingly active and responsible role in creating much more authentic and engaging intercultural learning experiences. Our study therefore foregrounds the importance of how destination perceptions of Australia amongst sojourners are shaped inside the discursive conditions of language-classrooms as the backstage of tourism performance. Within these discursive conditions, authenticity is currently aligned to out-group social imaginaries of racialized Others. We therefore contribute to emerging debates about the relationship between traveling and learning as a neglected area of enquiry amongst tourism researchers. Our analysis addresses not just *how* travelers learn, but what and where they learn, and it spotlights the current influence that pre-visit prior-knowledge has on both learning outcomes, and destination image formation.

The implications for the various stakeholder groups in our study are varied. For language schools, the study unearths an urgent need to contemplate new, more creative approaches to the

teaching of culture as part of language learning where learners are invited to notice, compare and reflect on culture to create a more nuanced appreciation, and to challenge stereotypes. For students there are clear opportunities to benefit from the advances in language learning overseas that we propose. Intercultural competence is viewed as an increasingly vital skill across a range of careers. *Critical* intercultural competence, we argue is far more valuable, since it is likely to result in graduates that are problem solvers who are more able to challenge assumptions and view situations from multiple perspectives.

We propose that future research can now be carried out to further test the idea of mediating sojourner's cultural experiences of other countries. Since the study is restricted to Australia, it would make sense to contrast the results with a similar study undertaken in the USA and/or the UK since these nations are recognized market leaders in English language-travel.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Dr Phiona Stanley is an Associate Professor at Edinburgh Napier University. Her academic publishing includes five Routledge books on topics including: Westerners teaching English in China, backpackers learning Spanish and engaging in volunteer work in Latin America, and the gendered cultural pressures women experience to 'fit in' socially, even now. Methodologically, she has edited two books on autoethnography and its intersections with culture/the intercultural. She has also published around 40 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. Thematically, Phiona's work is all about mobilities and the 'intercultural' in its broadest sense: complex comings and goings of humans, non-humans, and objects in specific times and places. Within a broad focus on how cultures operate, she is particularly interested in gender, embodiment, and other normative 'rules', and in the tensions between conventionality and singularity. This has required an ambitious traversing of disciplinary boundaries and an innovative cross-pollination of theory.

Dr Craig Wight is an Associate Professor at Edinburgh Napier University. He has authored a number of publications on tourism and heritage management in top rated journals and in edited collections. He has also undertaken a wealth of tourism, hospitality, leisure and cultural research and consultancy for a range of national and international clients within the public, private and voluntary sectors. He is a recognized expert in the area of genocide heritage in European city destinations and recently gave an interview to the New York Times on this topic. Most recently, Craig has produced research looking at visitor reactions to genocide heritage museums on social media, and public responses to moral transgression at European Holocaust heritage sites.

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