

Katrin Althans, David Kern, Beate Neumeier (Eds.)

# Migrant Australia

From Botany Bay to Manus Island

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Katrin Althans, David Kern, Beate Neumeier (Eds.)

# **Migrant Australia**

**From Botany Bay to Manus Island**

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**Migrant Australia: From Botany Bay to Manus Island /**

Katrin Althans, David Kern, Beate Neumeier (Eds.)-

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# Migrant Australia: An Introduction

Katrin Althans, David Kern, and Beate Neumeier

## From Botany Bay to Manus Island

“Australia is an immigration country by design,” argue Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller in the current edition of their book *The Age of Migration*, “originating in British colonial settlement” (191). They continue to give a concise overview of the history of immigration to Australia from its start as a penal colony to present-day policies of ‘extra-territorial asylum processing.’ The title of our volume, *Migrant Australia*, seems to suggest a similar trajectory, as the contributions included here also focus on events and developments of immigration from 1788 up to the current asylum regime, *From Botany Bay to Manus Island*. This focus on post-1788 Australia, however, runs the risk of once again granting 1788 the status of a watershed moment at which history was introduced to a hitherto pre-historical continent.<sup>1</sup> It neglects earlier migratory processes involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: as archaeological evidence and recent studies have shown, Australia was peopled by early humans as early as 60,000 years ago (Clarkson et al. 309) who did not come there by chance, but by “intentional and directed voyaging” (Bird et al. 6). Yet this early migration is part of what Ann McGrath refers to as deep history, “an epoch of immense, arguably history-defying duration” (1), and as such lacks the political dimensions of migration in modern history in general, and post-1788 migration in Australia in particular, which still perceptibly resonate today and which we would like to address in this volume. With this editorial decision we do not want to ignore an Indigenous Australian “sense of the past as an immediate part of a living contemporary landscape” (McGrath 4), rather, we want to acknowledge the catastrophic disruption colonization brought to Indigenous Australia.

Only 2.8 % of the Australian population identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin as at 9 August 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population”). As at 23 April 2021, an estimated 29.8 % of the Australian population were born overseas, which amounts to over 7.6 million migrants living in Australia today as compared to an estimated 18 million people being born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Migration, Australia”). In terms of cultural diversity, Census data show that people who stayed in Australia on Census night (9 August 2016) identify with over 300 ancestries, among which Anglo-Saxon

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1 The very concept of defining anything predating written records as pre-history is a product of colonial bias against non-European histories: already contested in the 1970s (cf. McCall 733–34), the term pre-history perpetuates the depiction of Indigenous cultures as primitive and frozen in time and needs thus to be discarded altogether.

ancestries (English, Australian, Irish, and Scottish) and Chinese ancestry are the five leading ancestries people named (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Cultural Diversity Data Summary”). In 2019, England and China also ranked first and second as countries of birth of residents born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Migration, Australia”). The bare numbers collected here function as statistical illustration of two decisive moments in Australian immigration history, one being British colonialism and the subsequent dispossession, attempted assimilation, and near annihilation of Australia’s Indigenous population, the other being the White Australia policy which specifically targeted Asian immigrants, as Stefanie Affeldt and Louise Thatcher closely analyze in their contributions to this volume. The trajectory of Australian immigration history and its shifting and changing political background over time is covered in depth in Derya Ozkul and Sitarah Mohammadi’s contribution, which aims to trace the many complicated and troubling links between the moment of invasion and contemporary policy regimes.

Migrant Australia thus seems to be meticulously – one is even tempted to say obsessively – mapped in statistics of countries of origin and of cultural groups. Significantly, those statistics are based on a seemingly clear-cut definition of who is considered a migrant or who has migrant ancestry in Australia: those born overseas (first-generation Australians)<sup>2</sup> and those who do not identify as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People origin, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics provides us with categories, and, as de Haas, Castles, and Miller remind us, “Categories are essential tools for understanding migration” – but, they go on, “the uncritical use of categories can also be a source of confusion and distortion” (21). It is the choice and use of categories which puts a bias on what seem neutral and unprejudiced data. Two cases in point are, first, the history of asking for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, a question that before the 1971 Census was used “to exclude them from population estimates for each state/territory,” which is why there are no detailed cross-analyses available for Indigenous people in earlier Censuses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Indigenous Status (INGP”). Similarly, second, the seemingly clear-cut category “Australian Born” needs to be considered in relation to changes in “the definition of geographic Australia” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Australian Born”). The categories ‘Australian born’ and ‘Ancestry’ do equip us with analytical data to describe the development of and current situation in migrant Australia, but the bare categories fail to tell us about the (hi)stories and discursive practices, the structures of power to determine and police (un)belonging behind both data and categorization.

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2 According to the Census glossary, data of people who are not born in Australia and who intend to stay in Australia for more than one year are analysed through the variable “Year of Arrival in Australia” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Year of Arrival in Australia (YARP”).

3 Available Census information shows no cross-analysis of people who identify as being of both Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People origin and non-Indigenous ancestry. Any information available on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People is related to other sets of data, such as age, housing, education, place of residence etc. (cf. Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population”).