

# EPILOGUE

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According to recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures, there are currently 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, a statistic that includes 41.3 million internally displaced people, 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers.<sup>2</sup> If such people were a country of their own, the nation of the forcibly displaced would be the twenty-first largest country in the world by population size. To put this ranking into context, this nation would be larger than the United Kingdom or France, and just a smidge behind Thailand. Despite the sheer number of refugees in the modern world, discourse and debates surrounding their existence and experiences remains strikingly restricted. The stated purpose of this collection of essays is to open a space for thinking about the histories, presents and futures for refugees and asylum seekers. Through rigorous and accessible analyses, the authors in this volume hope that readers will come away with an appreciation of the multiplicity of refugee stories, which proscribes any simplistic narrative of refugee journeys.

This collection is deliberately designed to bring together the writings of practitioners and academics from different disciplinary backgrounds. The scope of the book is broad, covering the sweep of twentieth and early twenty-first century refugee history, and while focused on Australia, is mindful of international trends and the inherent transnational nature of refugee journeys across national borders. The methodologies and

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2 'Figures at a Glance', UNHCR.org, as at 18 June 2020, available at: [www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html).

backgrounds of the authors also vary and include legal scholars, historians, sociologists, journalists and former refugees who have since resettled in Australia. What we have, then, is a collection of diverse accounts tied together by a shared interest in promoting rigorous and accurate public discussions on, with and by refugees. With distinct chapters all telling a specific story, how then can we make sense of this collection? What should readers take away from the essays?

Legal scholars and practitioners Eve Lester (Chapter 1) and Savitri Taylor (Chapter 9) provide us with the complex and essential legal backdrop for understanding the approach of the Australian Government to the resettlement, or exclusion, of refugees and asylum seekers. By outlining the modern refugee protection framework, Lester astutely notes that Australia's approach to refugee resettlement has long been situation specific and highly differentiated. Both the *1951 Refugee Convention* and the *1967 Protocol* were born out of the Cold War and in the shadow of the Holocaust. These historical factors influenced who was defined as a refugee, how they were resettled and on what basis. Lester also observes that the notion that receiving states resettle refugees for purely humanitarian reasons is overly simplistic. Indeed, state actions are mostly guided by utilitarian factors (such as the need for labour or the desire to entrench colonial settlement of Aboriginal land) and geopolitical interests, with the refugee appearing as a 'secondary consideration'. Savitri Taylor, meanwhile, draws our attention to the long legal roots of the mandatory detention regime. With anxieties about migration dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, Australia's colonial founding fathers devised a national constitution that bestowed on the Federal Government absolute authority over matters relating to naturalisation and aliens, and by extension, emigration and immigration. With what Taylor has dubbed the nation's 'original sin', the Constitution has allowed politicians from both major parties to withstand some juridical challenges to the legality of detaining asylum seekers. Some may wonder: how on earth is the indefinite offshore detention of people seeking asylum *legal*? Well, in this case, domestic constitutional law overrides international law (and moral expectations), granting the nation's political leaders a legal defence to imprison indefinitely refugees on Pacific islands.

One of the important contributions this collection makes is that the experiences of former refugees are provided space. As we mentioned in the introduction, so much ink is used writing *about* refugees; it is vitally important that academic works allow room for refugees to speak for

themselves. In this volume we work towards that, often going partway with a researcher as intermediary. Melanie Baak (Chapter 2) explores what it means in Australia to be labelled a refugee and if one can ever shed this descriptor. While some refugees of European backgrounds can potentially vanish into whiteness, and thus maybe enjoy all the privileges this entails, refugees who are visibly different often remain haunted by the label and stereotyped as someone in deficit and in need of assistance. Baak argues that we should ‘rehumanise’ refugees by hearing their stories in all their complexity, and through this, repair broken dignity. In Chapter 7, *Behind the Wire* journalist André Dao joins narrator Jamila Jafari to reflect on the unique benefits and challenges of creating a multi-platform oral history project for public consumption. Rather than being relegated to an object to be analysed, the *Behind the Wire* team explicitly maintain the subjectivity and agency of their narrators. In this ‘behind the scenes’ examination of the processes involved in creating refugee stories, Jafari acknowledges the tension between wanting to share her story but not wanting to share *too much*. Laurel Mackenzie (Chapter 8) continues this exploration by discussing the narratives of three Hazara refugees, living in Dandenong, south-east of Melbourne. The Hazaras represent one of the country’s newest migrant communities, but beyond community circles, little is known of their experiences of fleeing Afghanistan. Mackenzie demonstrates that Salmi, Hassan and Jahan understand their journey through the prism of their family. Rather than focusing on individual perspectives, these Hazaras stress the importance of securing safety for all family members and the devastation that is felt when families remain separated.

The flipside to any discussion about the experiences of refugees is an examination of perceptions of refugees. Two chapters in this book unpack how refugees are portrayed and, importantly, who benefits from such depictions. Ann-Kathrin Bartels (Chapter 4) examines media portrayals of asylum seekers in West Germany during the 1980s. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia and collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe, West Germany rapidly became a major recipient country of immigrants, ushering in a period of heightened tensions surrounding national identity and xenophobia. Bartels argues that public debates around asylum seekers are driven by the politics of fear and (racially defined) notions of nationhood. These drivers help create a perception of threat, whether that be over jobs, standards of living, values or culture. These forces are presently at play throughout Western Europe and even

Scandinavian countries, once considered the bedrock of liberalism and tolerance of marginalised others. Kathleen Blair (Chapter 6) also considers the political and electoral gains politicians seek by scapegoating asylum seekers in Australia. Looking at three federal election campaigns in 1977, 2001 and 2013, Blair documents the remarkable consistency in the derogatory language employed to describe asylum seekers. While terms such as ‘queue jumper’ and ‘bogus asylum seeker’ have been in the political discourse for over 40 years, what is new is the effectiveness such rhetoric has on shaping electoral outcomes.

Lastly, three chapters in this collection seek to challenge existing orthodoxies in refugee histories. Jordana Silverstein’s chapter on Australian imaginings of Vietnamese and Timorese child refugees in the 1970s and 1980s draws our attention to the ways in which categorisation itself is a problematic process (Chapter 3). When so much public discourse has been focused on releasing children from detention, Silverstein’s chapter presents a sharp reminder of how bureaucracies seek to control children and silence them as well. Her reflections on the ethics of accessing sensitive welfare case notes on children – who by now would only be in middle age – is an important reminder to historians that even declassified government archives contain material that may cause harm. In Chapter 5, Rachel Stevens considers Australian responses to the East Pakistani refugee crisis in 1971, an event largely forgotten by those outside of South Asian communities. Although it is widely acknowledged that history writing is a highly selective process, Stevens asks: Why is it that some atrocities (and the ensuing exodus of people) are remembered and memorialised while others are forgotten? Do we only write about and remember the migrations in which the refugees resettled in the West? Does the refugee need to have some impact on *us* if we are to acknowledge them? In the final chapter, Klaus Neumann (Chapter 10) extends this reflection on historical practice, challenging us to avoid the temptation of trying to make lessons out of the past or forcibly create a linear narrative to understand our current world. Instead, Neumann argues, we should produce histories that are unsettling, and even unwieldy, as this is how we can imagine futures not yet contained in the present.

The 10 chapters in this collection cover much ground but they are connected by a single theme: resistance. In terms of the representations of refugees, we encourage readers to challenge stereotypes and ways of categorising groups of people. With refugee policies, we hope readers find in this volume a nuanced understanding of the legal apparatus that enable

policies of mandatory detention to continue, and with this knowledge, be empowered to challenge the legal foundations of the refugee detention regime. We also encourage readers to resist the dehumanisation of refugees and provide ample space for refugees and former refugees to tell their stories, in all of their messy complexity. There needs to be an appreciation that their refugee journey is just one part of their lived experience.

What we have, then, is a collection of essays that provoke thought, challenge assumptions and defy neat narratives. We are also left wondering, almost inevitably, what is next? It is here that we find ourselves often stuck. If many of the origins of refugee movements are caused by state actions, how can the solution also lie with state actors? If mobility is a human reality, why do states remain in perpetual opposition to the refugee journey? We don't pretend to offer the answers, but we do hope to prompt more questions and engage in more conversation.

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