

REFUGEE JOURNEYS

HISTORIES OF RESETTLEMENT,
REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE

**EDITED BY JORDANA SILVERSTEIN
AND RACHEL STEVENS**



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Contributors	ix
Refugee journeys	1
Jordana Silverstein and Rachel Stevens	

Part I: Labelling refugees

1. Australian responses to refugee journeys: Matters of perspective and context	23
Eve Lester	
2. Once a refugee, always a refugee? The haunting of the refugee label in resettlement	51
Melanie Baak	
3. 'His happy go lucky attitude is infectious': Australian imaginings of unaccompanied child refugees, 1970s–1980s.	71
Jordana Silverstein	
4. 'Foreign infiltration' vs 'immigration country': The asylum debate in Germany	89
Ann-Kathrin Bartels	

Part II: Flashpoints in Australian refugee history

5. The other Asian refugees in the 1970s: Australian responses to the Bangladeshi refugee crisis in 1971.	111
Rachel Stevens	
6. Race to the bottom: Constructions of asylum seekers in Australian federal election campaigns, 1977–2013.	135
Kathleen Blair	
7. Behind the wire: An oral history project about immigration detention.	159
André Dao and Jamila Jafari in conversation	

Part III: Understanding refugee histories and futures

8. From Dahmarda to Dandenong via Denpasar: Hazara stories of settlement, success and separation.169
Laurel Mackenzie

9. Step by step: The insidious evolution of Australia's asylum seeker regime since 1992193
Savitri Taylor

10. Uses and abuses of refugee histories211
Klaus Neumann

Epilogue231
Rachel Stevens and Jordana Silverstein

Select bibliography237

REFUGEE JOURNEYS

Jordana Silverstein and Rachel Stevens¹

During the Academics for Refugees National Day of Action on 17 October 2018, Behrouz Boochani – ‘a Kurdish writer, film maker, scholar and journalist’ – issued a statement calling on academics across Australia to act:

academics have a really important role in researching this policy of exile and exposing it. What I believe from living through this policy and experiencing this prison camp firsthand is that we are only able to understand it in a philosophical and historical way. Definitely Manus and Nauru prison camps are philosophical and political phenomena and we should not view them superficially. The best way to examine them is through deep research into how a human, in this case a refugee, is forced to live between the law and a situation without laws.²

In May 2013, Boochani had fled his homeland, Iran, to seek asylum in Australia. As a politically active Kurdish journalist, Boochani faced persecution from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard and likely imprisonment. Once in Indonesia, Boochani embarked on the treacherous sea crossing to northern Australia. His first attempt failed; in his second attempt in July 2013, his boat was intercepted by the Royal Australian Navy and he, along with 60 other asylum seekers, was transported and detained on Christmas Island, a ravaged 135 km² Australian territory in the Indian Ocean that is far closer to Indonesia than mainland Australia.

1 This chapter was written with funding provided by the Australian Research Council Laureate Research Fellowship Project FL140100049, ‘Child Refugees and Australian Internationalism from 1920 to the Present’.

2 Behrouz Boochani, ‘Statement from Behrouz Boochani in Support of the Academics for Refugees National Day of Action, 17 October 2018’, NDA Public Read-Ins, Academics for Refugees, available at: academicsforrefugees.wordpress.com/nda-public-read-ins/?fbclid=IwAR2ZGL1CJlvvGtYKo5vyG-rfVpcQ9_SR61orz6t19I3UMnL3eA-BruEide0.

After one month, in August Boochani was relocated to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. These precise dates are important. By virtue of Boochani's decision (or forced decision) to seek refuge in Australia in mid-2013, he inadvertently became ensnared in the Machiavellian machinations that characterised the Australian domestic political landscape throughout the 2010s and an increasingly punitive government approach to assessing – or refusing to assess – refugee claims.

How did we get here?

The detention of asylum seekers who arrived by boat has been a feature of Australian Government policy for more than 30 years. When 26 Cambodians arrived in Australia in 1989 without prior authorisation, on a boat codenamed the *Pender Bay*, the Hawke Labor Government invoked the discretionary detention provision under the *Migration Act 1958* (Cth). These asylum seekers would spend the next two-and-a-half years incarcerated at former migrant hostels in suburban Melbourne (Maribyrnong) and Sydney (Villawood) before their refugee claims were rejected and they were forcibly repatriated. In 1991 Gerry Hand, the minister for immigration, local government and ethnic affairs, declared that all subsequent asylum seekers who arrived by boat would be detained in an inhospitable former miners' camp at Port Hedland, in the north-west of the country. The following year, the Labor Government passed with bipartisan support a number of legislative changes to the Migration Act that codified retrospectively the detention of asylum seekers and made mandatory the detention of all people who subsequently came by boat, which came into effect in 1994.³ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the conservative Howard Government established more immigration detention centres, often in former military sites and typically in extremely hot and isolated locations, far removed from the assistance of their communities, immigration lawyers, human rights activists and journalists. These detention centres, although distant from population hubs, were on the mainland of Australia. This, however, would change in 2001.

As Kathleen Blair explores in Chapter 6 of this volume, the arrival of the MV *Tampa* off the coast of Australia in August 2001 served as a lightning rod for an incumbent government unpopular with voters in an election

3 Rachel Stevens, *Immigration Policy from 1970 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 121–22.

year. When a boat carrying 438 asylum seekers began to sink en route to Australia, the nearby Norwegian freighter, the MV *Tampa*, rescued the stranded passengers, and in doing so, prevented a likely catastrophe. The Howard Government threatened the Norwegians with prosecution if they tried to land on Australian territory, specifically the neighbouring Christmas Island, and they were ordered to dock in Indonesia. The mostly Afghan and Hazara asylum seekers resisted the rerouting to Indonesia, which is not a signatory to the *1951 Refugee Convention*, leading to a diplomatic deadlock between the Norwegian, Australian and Indonesian governments. After days drifting at sea, the impasse ended when the New Zealand Government agreed to resettle 150 asylum seekers, while the Micronesian island-state of Nauru detained the remaining 288 individuals at a processing centre in exchange for Australian foreign aid.⁴

The opportunistic Howard Government used the *Tampa* incident to legislate a suite of reforms with the intention of transferring asylum seeker processing to countries outside Australia, which is meticulously documented by Savitri Taylor in Chapter 9 of this volume. In September 2001, the Howard Government introduced the ‘Pacific Solution’, which excised Christmas Island and Ashmore Reef from the Australian Migration Zone. This migration excision would be extended in 2005 to include all Australian territories except the mainland and Tasmania, while the mainland and Tasmania were excised in 2013.⁵ The excision of territories from the migration zone in 2001 marked the beginning of the Australian Government refusing asylum seekers the ‘state of having arrived’.⁶ This legal exclusion is important as it denied asylum seekers protections under Australian law and, later, access to legal challenges in the courts.

In addition to territory excision, the Australian Government delegated the detention of asylum seekers to two of its client states, both of which are recipients of Australian foreign aid.⁷ Immigration detention centres were established on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Although asylum seekers were physically detained offshore, the management of the

4 Kathleen Blair, Chapter 6, this volume.

5 Karen Barlow and staff, ‘Parliament Excises Mainland from Migration Zone’, *ABC News*, 17 May 2013, available at: www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-16/parliament-excises-mainland-from-migration-zone/4693940.

6 Stevens, *Immigration Policy*, 132.

7 In the late 2010s, the Australian Government provided over AU\$500 million in ODA (official development assistance) to Papua New Guinea; during the same time period, Nauru received approximately AU\$25 million per year. Though this figure may seem small, it is equivalent to 25 per cent of Nauruan GDP. See: www.dfat.gov.au/aid/where-we-give-aid/Pages/where-we-give-aid.

centres and the adjudication of the asylum claims remained under the control of the Australian state. Since 2001, so-called offshore processing and the long-term incarceration of asylum seekers has for the most part been the modus operandi of the Australian Government. There was a brief (in relative terms) respite between early 2008 and mid-2012, which Savitri Taylor dubs ‘the false spring’.⁸ The incoming Rudd Labor Government swept to power in December 2007 with an 18-seat majority and an election pledge to replace offshore processing with onshore mandatory detention of asylum seekers, albeit on the remote Christmas Island.

Arguably, the suspension of offshore processing was contingent on two transient contextual factors: first, the small number of asylum seekers arriving by boat in 2007–08. According to government sources, only 21 individuals arrived by boat seeking asylum in 2007–08; in 2006–07, there were 23 applicants. These figures were a fraction of the 2,222 asylum seekers who arrived by boat in 2001–02 when the Pacific Solution was introduced. With few boat arrivals and resulting media coverage, the issue of asylum seeker policy faded into the background and lost its political salience.⁹ Consequently, the Rudd Government was in a secure political position to reform asylum seeker policy with little practical impact. Second, after nearly 12 years in power, there was discontent with the incumbent government and a general desire for generational change at the top. The Rudd Government came to power with a moderate reform agenda on a range of issues, including industrial relations, climate change, education and internet infrastructure. There was therefore an electoral appetite for change, even if the reforms only moderated the excesses of the Howard years. This public desire for change, once satisfied, proved fickle. Coupled with a marked increase in the number of asylum seeker arrivals – 4,597 individuals arrived in 2009–10 – Rudd felt that his position against offshore processing, as well as his leadership of the Labor Party, became untenable.

8 Savitri Taylor, Chapter 9, this volume.

9 Unfortunately, the Australian Election Study did not include a question on the importance of refugees and asylum seekers as an election issue in 2007, perhaps indicative of a lack of interest in the issue at the time. Furthermore, there was no mention of refugees and only a passing reference to asylum seekers in Paul D Williams’s reflective commentary on the 2007 election, see ‘The 2007 Australian Federal Election: The Story of Labor’s Return from the Electoral Wilderness’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 54, no. 1 (2008): 104–25. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2008.00487.x. John Wanna similarly omitted any reference to asylum seeker policy in his summary of the 2007 election, see ‘Political Chronicles. Commonwealth of Australia. July to December 2007’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 54, no. 2 (2008): 289–341. These collective silences in political commentary and analysis suggest that the issue of asylum seeker policies simply did not register with voters or political scientists.

Since 2008–09, the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat steadily increased, peaking in 2012–13 with 18,365 arrivals. Furthermore, in 2011–12 the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat eclipsed the number of asylum seekers arriving by air for the first time.¹⁰ Although both boat and air arrivals requested onshore asylum (as distinct from applying for refugee status offshore, typically in a third country), air arrivals have never triggered a public frenzy simply by virtue of their successful passage through immigration and customs at their port of entry. Conversely, since the first boats of Vietnamese asylum seekers reached the shores of northern Australia in 1976, these migrants have been the subject of hostility, politicking and incarceration, predicated on racist fears of contagion, imaginary threats to security and alleged criminality.¹¹

Compounding matters further, between 2010 and 2013 there were a series of high-profile tragedies in which asylum seekers drowned at sea and many more had to be rescued during their journey to Australia. For example, on 15 December 2010, a boat carrying 90 asylum seekers from Iraq and Iran crashed into rocky cliffs at Christmas Island during a monsoonal storm. Fifty people – 35 adults and 15 children – died, the most significant asylum seeker disaster (in terms of lives lost) to occur on Australian territory at that time. Images of distressed bodies and rickety boats floating in choppy waters blanketed TV and print news coverage. Sensational reporting dominated tabloid newspapers and articles were mostly written from the perspectives of local Christmas Islanders, not the surviving asylum seekers. For instance, *The Daily Telegraph* reported anecdotes from locals: ‘We witnessed people actually drowning. To see people die and not to be able to do a darn thing is one of the worst things you can possibly do’.¹² The next day, Melbourne tabloid *The Herald Sun* similarly reported on the experiences of helpless witnesses. One local

10 This data is sourced from the Parliament of Australia research paper, ‘Asylum Seekers and Refugees: What are the Facts?’, *Research Paper Series 2014–15*, last updated 2 March 2015, available at: www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/rp/rp1415/asylumfacts#_Toc413067443.

11 For further discussion, see Rachel Stevens, ‘Political Debates on Asylum Seekers during the Fraser Government, 1977–1982’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 4 (2012): 526–41. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2012.01651.x; Katrina Stats, ‘Welcome to Australia? A Reappraisal of the Fraser Government’s Approach to Refugees, 1975–1983’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69, no. 1 (2015): 68–87. doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.952707.

12 Alison Rehn, ‘Now 50 Feared Dead After Asylum Boat Crashes off Christmas Island’, *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 15 December 2010.

woman described the scene of the accident: 'It was horrible. They were screaming and yelling for help and falling into the ocean. We just felt so hopeless, there wasn't anything we could do'.¹³

Within a month, there was another tragedy at sea in which 17 asylum seekers drowned off the coast of Java, Indonesia, en route to Australia. In December 2011, an overcrowded vessel sank, resulting in the deaths of at least 160 mostly Afghan and Iranian asylum seekers. Between June and October 2012, there were five separate incidents in which collectively 287 people perished.¹⁴ The Opposition, then led by conservative hardliner Tony Abbott, seized the opportunity to capitalise politically on the asylum seeker tragedies. The conservatives reframed the debate over onshore versus offshore processing, arguing illogically that interdiction and offshore processing saved the lives of asylum seekers. Thus, the Abbott Opposition cloaked their anti-asylum seeker policies in the language of humanitarianism. The hollowness of the conservatives' rhetoric was plain to see; however, by late 2010, the Labor Government had a new leader, Julia Gillard, and was clinging onto power in a hung parliament. Insecure and reactive in leadership, and long holding less sympathetic views about refugees, Gillard sought to quash debate around asylum seekers by reversing Rudd's reforms and reinstating offshore processing in Nauru and Manus Island in late 2012.

Over the last 20 years, politicians of both major parties have used the arrival of asylum seekers to try to gain a political advantage in some way. As a divisive issue, polling data indicates there are sizeable minorities on both sides who are sufficiently galvanised, making a major policy change unlikely in the present environment. The Australian Election Study (AES) has been measuring political attitudes among a nationally representative sample of voters since 1987. Questions about asylum seekers and refugees began in 2001 and have continued in every election year except 2007. The longitudinal nature of this survey, as well as the use of exact question wording, enable comparisons over time, and the data presents a very muddled picture.

13 Staff writers, 'Christmas Island Tragedy: Screams, Yells and then they Drowned', *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 16 December 2010.

14 These figures are drawn from *SBS News*, 'Timeline: Asylum Seeker Boat Tragedies', available at: www.sbs.com.au/news/timeline-asylum-seeker-boat-tragedies.

In the AES surveys, there are three questions that address political attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. One, what is the most important non-economic election issue for you? Two, which is your preferred political party policy on refugees and asylum seekers? Three, should boats carrying asylum seekers be turned back or not turned back? The results from the survey are compiled in Table 1.

Table 1. Compilation of AES survey questions that relate to asylum seekers (in percentages)

Year of survey	2001	2004	2010	2013	2016	2019
Most important non-economic issue						
Refugees and asylum seekers	13	3	6	10	6	3
Preferred party policy						
Coalition	46	36	38	41	34	35
ALP	15	22	21	19	19	25
No preference	27	22	27	27	34	22
Attitudes towards asylum seekers						
Boats should be turned back	52	54	51	49	48	50
Boats should not be turned back	20	28	29	34	33	28
No response/undecided	28	18	20	17	19	22

Source: Data compiled by authors from data in Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *Trends in Australian political opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study, 1987–2019* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2019). Downloaded from australianelectionstudy.org.

From the data in Table 1, it is evident that public attitudes are divided on the mandatory detention of asylum seekers. Since 2001 there has been a consistent majority or near majority of respondents who support the turning back of boats containing asylum seekers, despite it constituting refoulement and thus being illegal, as well as immoral and deeply violent. But there has also remained a steady group of opponents, ranging from one in five to one in three respondents. Furthermore, when asked whether boats should be turned back, between 17 and 28 per cent of respondents did not provide a response or were undecided. The presence of so many undecideds speaks to the intractability of a pernicious and long-lasting debate within Australian politics, which has left many unwilling to engage or care about refugees. On the question of preferred political party policy, no political party has received a majority, although the policies of the Coalition parties (generally viewed as more restrictive than the Labor Party), have been the most popular among respondents. Importantly,

on average, approximately one-third of respondents had no party preference on asylum seeker policy, which reinforces the argument that a substantial minority of voters are disengaged.

Voter apathy on asylum seeker policy is also evident when respondents were asked to select the most important non-economic issue. In the full AES report, results showed that respondents consistently selected health as the most important non-economic issue, closely followed by environmental/global warming. The data in Table 1 reveals voter volatility on the proportion who nominated asylum seekers/refugees as the most important non-economic issue, with response rates ranging from 3 to 13 per cent. Heightened attention to asylum seekers typically coincided with high-profile events, such as the *Tampa* incident in 2001 and the drownings of asylum seekers from December 2010 through to 2013. As of 2019, asylum seeker policy has once again been relegated to the background, with only 3 per cent declaring the issue as their most important. In conclusion, the data from the AES provides compelling evidence that Australian voters are deeply divided on how to respond to the arrival of asylum seekers by boat, and that this issue will not influence voting behaviour for the vast majority of Australians. These findings have been replicated over the past 12 years in the annual Scanlon Foundation Survey on Mapping Social Cohesion. These reports – which can be viewed online – consistently show that, while a small minority believe asylum seekers are poorly treated under current policies, only 2 per cent of respondents identified asylum seekers as the most important issue facing Australia.¹⁵

The decision of the Labor Government to reinstall offshore mandatory processing was more than a retreat to the policies of the Howard years; it signalled the beginning of an increasingly aggressive and militarised approach to asylum seekers. When Kevin Rudd seized the leadership of the Labor Party, thus beginning his brief second term as prime minister, his approach to asylum seekers had no resemblance to his 2007 commitment to end offshore processing. In July 2013, Rudd announced that any asylum seeker who arrived without a visa – that is, by boat – would not be eligible for asylum in Australia. Instead, intercepted asylum seekers would be taken to Manus Island and have their refugee claims adjudicated by the Papua New Guinean (PNG) Government. Should they be successful,

15 Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, 2019* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2019), 37, available at: scanloninstitute.org.au/research/surveys.

asylum seekers could resettle in PNG but never make a claim for asylum against the Australian Government. In return for their cooperation, the Australian Government offered the PNG Government financial aid. The blanket refusal of the Rudd Government to consider claims for refugee status among asylum seekers marked yet another turning point in the Australian Government's increasingly hostile approach to asylum seekers: from onshore mandatory detention in cities, then in remote desert towns, to the Pacific Solution and, finally, forced resettlement in a poor neighbouring nation.

It is at this time in July 2013 that Behrouz Boochani arrived in Australia, albeit on Christmas Island. Boochani was one of the first to be subject to the Rudd Government's new policy, and, in August 2013, he was relocated to Manus Island processing centre. In effect, Boochani was imprisoned indefinitely, languishing on an impoverished island with no prospect of resettlement in Australia. During his incarceration, the Coalition (conservative) parties came to power in September 2013. For the most part, the incoming government continued the policies of their predecessor, but also added a mix of hysterical rhetoric under their new strategy, Operation Sovereign Borders, along with tightened media access to government information on this policy. Boochani remained incarcerated at Manus Island processing centre until October 2017, at which point the centre officially closed. He, along with the other male asylum seekers imprisoned there, was forcibly moved to 'another prison camp' on the island, living a precarious existence among violence, hunger and protests.¹⁶ At the time of writing, Boochani is living in New Zealand having been granted refugee status, while hundreds of other refugees and asylum seekers remain living precarious and unsupported lives in Port Moresby (PNG), Nauru, and Australia awaiting medical treatment, unable to either leave or re-establish themselves in the manner that they would choose.

Amidst government secrecy on the execution of a brutal government policy, incarcerated asylum seekers filled the vacuum, providing firsthand accounts of life on Manus Island and Nauru. Boochani is perhaps the most well-known asylum seeker-cum-activist in Australia, and has published

16 'A Message from Behrouz Boochani – Kurdish Refugee and Independent Journalist', Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 28 November 2017, available at: web.archive.org/web/20190203095505/www.asrc.org.au/2017/11/28/message-behrouz-boochani-kurdish-refugee-independent-journalist/.

widely in a variety of media, including his award-winning memoir, *No Friend but the Mountains*.¹⁷ During the October 2018 Academics for Refugees National Day of Action, Boochani urged academics:

to do research that unpacks where these [asylum seeker] policies stem from, why they are maintained and how they can be undone. It's the duty of academics to understand and challenge this dark historical period, and teach the new generations to prevent this kind of policy in future.¹⁸

This book in part is a response to Boochani's call. Academics, activists and refugees have a duty to dissect the history and current state of affairs on refugees and asylum seekers. In the context of tight government control of information and, at present, minimal media coverage, the edited collection makes an intervention into academic and public discourses, opening a new space to think about the histories, presents and possible futures for refugees and asylum seekers. These are important public and political discussions to have and will have relevance well beyond Australia's borders, as Western countries around the world continue to tighten their borders and institute ever more violent controls over people seeking asylum.

Aims

At its heart, *Refugee Journeys: Histories of Resettlement, Representation and Resistance* understands refugee policy and asylum-seeking movements as a process: refugees undertake physical journeys between countries, and then face the journey of settling and integrating – whether permanently or temporarily, with full or partial social support – in a new place. Those journeys are shaped by a multitude of personal, governmental, social and political forces. What then are those forces? This book provides an exploration of some of them. It presents stories of how governments, the public and the media have responded to the arrival of people seeking asylum, and how these responses have impacted refugees and their lives. The chapters within mostly cover the period from 1970 to the present, providing readers with an understanding of the political, social

17 Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, trans. Omid Tofighian (Sydney: Picador, 2018).

18 Boochani, 'Statement', available at: academicsforrefugees.wordpress.com/nda-public-read-ins/?fbclid=IwAR2ZGLICJlvvGtYKo5vyG-rfVpcQ9_SR61orz6t19I3UMnL3eA-BruEide0.

and historical contexts that have brought us to the current day. *Refugee Journeys* also considers possible ways to break existing policy deadlocks, encouraging readers to imagine a future where we carry vastly different ideas about refugees, government policies and national identities.

With contributions from academics and activists from a diverse range of backgrounds, *Refugee Journeys* is unique as it provides space for multiple perspectives. Where public discourse often prioritises flattened and simplistic stories and solutions – such as the idea that all boats must be stopped, or that there is a queue that some jump, or that newly resettled refugees do not deserve financial and material support – this book encourages readers to think outside the box. By offering an edited collection, rather than a single-authored monograph – many of which exist and make important contributions to public discussion – we hope to present readers with a much-needed cacophony of different approaches, with multiple speakers and writers jutting up against each other, creating the space for new ideas to thrive. Against singular narratives, there is an urgent need in the Australian landscape for diverse interpretations. Other recent texts have focused on particular questions, such as detention systems, or temporariness, or refugee testimonies. *Refugee Journeys* is able to span a broader range, thereby offering readers the opportunity to understand the fuller social, political, cultural and historical contexts in which refugees and asylum seekers navigate their journeys and the repressive governments with which they interact.

Themes of the book

One of the central methods, or approaches, of this book involves the exploration of some of the different ways that histories and stories are, and have been, used by refugees and asylum seekers, researchers, writers, social workers, community workers and policymakers. Some chapters explore personal histories, whether narrated by refugees and asylum seekers themselves, or refracted through the words of social workers, anthropologists, community workers or historians. Other chapters explore national or community histories, thinking about how they have been understood by newspapers, politicians and historians. Many chapters demonstrate the interplay between individual and communal, private and public, stories. This volume thus responds to anthropologist Miriam Ticktin's recent call for scholars, and the public, to pay attention

to the histories that people carry, and to do so in a way that evades the stereotypical discourses of vulnerability and loss that are often understood to be carried by refugees and asylum seekers. Rather than producing a reductive humanitarianism that sees rich nation-states in the role of ‘saviour’ to vulnerable and crisis-laden refugees and asylum seekers, the histories and stories that people write need to contain greater subtlety and complexity. As she writes:

humanitarianism provides little room to feel and recognize the value of particular lives (versus life in general), or to mourn particular deaths (versus suffering in general); and little impetus to animate political change.¹⁹

Instead, this humanitarianism buttresses a binary of racialised rescuer and rescued, of asylum seekers as incapable of determining their own futures, and of the white nation-state as the subject who must always be in control. As Melanie Baak highlights in her chapter in this book, it is necessary to write histories, and create understandings, that avoid the ‘deficit model’, representing the place of refugees and asylum seekers in the world not as loss or crisis or impossibility.

Similarly, anthropologist Liisa Malkki writes of the ways in which refugees have been too often understood by Western authorities and actors as ‘speechless emissaries’, incapable of speaking for themselves, or determining their own futures. ‘Such forms of representation’, she argues, ‘deny the very particulars that make of people something other than anonymous bodies, merely human beings’.²⁰ In this book, successive chapters write against such forms of representation, presenting explorations of, and critical engagements with, the histories that refugees carry in all their multiplicity, individuality and communality. This collection of essays is concerned with thinking about how people label and understand themselves, how they are understood by others and the impacts these labels have.

This deliberately interdisciplinary book seeks to write new histories of Australia and the world’s relationships with refugees and asylum seekers, and of refugees and asylum seekers’ relationships with Australia and the world. We seek to write new histories of ideas and practices of generosity

19 Miriam Ticktin, ‘Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2016): 256.

20 Liisa H Malkki, ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization’, *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 388. doi.org/10.1525/can.1996.11.3.02a00050.

and humanitarianism, interrogating the often-triumphalist popular histories of Australia's past that currently exist.²¹ There is not one past but many being narrated in this book: these are temporally and spatially different pasts, but they also differ depending on who is the author and their positionality and relationality to the pasts that are being described, analysed and critiqued. This volume, then, seeks to make accessible and approachable the complexity of what is at stake in the possibilities of researching, writing and narrating these histories.

State of current research

As Klaus Neumann, Sandra M. Gifford, Annika Lems and Stefanie Scherr made clear in a 2014 article that explored trends and approaches in research on refugees in Australia from 1952 to 2013, there has been an 'exponential' increase in the publication of research on this topic since the end of the 1970s.²² This trend has continued, as demonstrated in Ruth Balint and Zora Simic's 2018 State of the Field review essay. Their review explores the large body of literature on histories of migrants and refugees in Australia and notes that, 'for those of us who work in the field, there has always been enough scholarship to sustain and inspire us', with many 'exciting' publications coming from researchers at all levels of academia and from across the country.²³ As Neumann et al. note, the sheer number of research institutes, grants, and workshops and conferences around the country in the 2010s further testifies to this large and growing body of research and writing.

There are, however, numerous gaps in the scholarship, which they identify: intersections between histories of the border and settlement processes, and between categories of refugee, asylum seeker and permanent resident, as well as histories of humanitarianism.²⁴ They conclude their survey by noting:

21 Klaus Neumann, Chapter 10, this volume.

22 Klaus Neumann et al. 'Refugee Settlement in Australia: Policy, Scholarship and the Production of Knowledge, 1952–2013', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 2. doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.864629.

23 Ruth Balint and Zora Simic, 'Histories of Migrants and Refugees in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 49, no. 3 (2018): 378. doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2018.1479438.

24 Neumann, Gifford, Lems and Scherr, 'Refugee Settlement in Australia', 12–13.

Australian scholarship on refugee settlement needs to reinvent itself by taking stock of its past, and firmly situating new inquiry within the broader contexts of migration, humanitarianism and globalisation, to ensure that it does not uncritically endorse current thinking and practice but contributes to charting new approaches to responding to and understanding refugees in Australia and elsewhere.²⁵

The large increase in scholarship examining refugees and asylum seekers in and around Australia and the world makes a full exploration of this literature impossible. However, there are four key areas of recent scholarship with which we are engaging here. Firstly, we are engaging with texts that think about the broad historical contexts in which current refugees and asylum seekers today live. Following on from the path set by texts such as Klaus Neumann's *Across the Seas: Australia's Response to Refugees: A History*, Madeleine Gleeson's *Offshore: Behind the Wire on Manus and Nauru*, Claire Higgins's *Asylum by Boat*, William Maley's *What is a Refugee?* and Jane McAdam and Fiona Chong's *Refugee Rights and Policy Wrongs*, various chapters in this volume explore the policy settings, influence of politicians and roles of officials in controlling refugee and asylum seeker journeys to Australia and through the labyrinthine processes that determine how they will live.²⁶ In both their individual work and their collective work with others on the Deathscapes project, Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese outline the racial and colonial histories and presents in which refugee and asylum seeker controls are instituted.²⁷ As these books and projects collectively make clear, there are a wide variety of bureaucratic, social, cultural and political histories that combine to determine how

25 Ibid., 13.

26 Klaus Neumann, *Across the Seas: Australia's Response to Refugees: A History* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2015); Madeleine Gleeson, *Offshore: Behind the Wire on Manus and Nauru* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2016); Claire Higgins, *Asylum by Boat: Origins of Australia's Refugee Policy* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017); William Maley, *What is a Refugee?* (Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2016); Jane McAdam and Fiona Chong, *Refugee Rights and Policy Wrongs* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2019).

27 Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), doi.org/10.1057/9780230103122; Suvendrini Perera, 'White Shores of Longing: "Impossible Subjects" and the Frontiers of Citizenship', *Continuum* 23, no. 5 (2009): 647–62. doi.org/10.1080/10304310903154693; Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, 'White Law of the Biopolitical', *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* 3, no. 1 (2012): 87–100; Joseph Pugliese, 'Migrant Heritage in an Indigenous Context: For a Decolonising Migrant Historiography', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 23, no. 1 (April 1, 2002): 5–18. doi.org/10.1080/07256860220122368; Joseph Pugliese, 'The Incommensurability of Law to Justice: Refugees and Australia's Temporary Protection Visa', *Law and Literature* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 285–311. doi.org/10.1525/lal.2004.16.3.285; Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, 'Deathscapes: Mapping Race and Violence in Settler States', 2016–2020, available at: www.deathscapes.org/.

refugees will be thought of, and affected by, national and international systems of regulation. They also make clear that the refugees themselves play an important role in determining their own histories, pushing back and resisting the controls placed on them where necessary, narrating and enforcing their own self-determination where desired.

Secondly, there is a growing and important body of research that addresses Australia's broader refugee and migrant community histories. We have recently seen the production of Jayne Persian's *Beautiful Balts: From Displaced Persons to New Australians*, Albrecht Dümmling and Diana K. Weekes's *The Vanished Musicians: Jewish Refugees in Australia*, Alexandra Delliou's *Histories of Controversy: The Bonegilla Migrant Centre*, and Joy Damousi's *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War: Australia's Greek Immigrants after World War II and the Greek Civil War*.²⁸ These accounts, like many of the chapters in the current volume, explore smaller communities, examining their experiences of migration and settlement, the histories that brought them to Australia and the larger Australian histories into which they were thrust. This literature points us to the importance of thinking beyond the level of the nation-state, reminding us of the everyday ways in which lives are lived and journeys are negotiated. Individual people and their histories – as Miriam Ticktin and Liisa Malkki argue – need to be narrated in order for their full humanity to be recognised.

As such, biographical accounts and memoirs of refugee journeys and resettlement in Australia are a third area of scholarship with which this volume engages. Partly as a result of the Australian practice of mandatorily detaining asylum seekers who either attempted to, or successfully came to, Australia, from the late 1980s – a practice that, coupled with other punitive regimes, continues to exist – as well as the practice of autobiographical and memoir writing in Australia and internationally, among other factors, there has been a growth in publications written by people who identify as being, or having been, refugees. These publications tell individual stories, but they also tell broader, larger stories of refugee journeys. Books such as a Teresa Ke's *Cries of Hunger*, Carina Hoang's *Boat People: Personal*

28 Jayne Persian, *Beautiful Balts: From Displaced Persons to New Australians* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017); Albrecht Dümmling, *The Vanished Musicians: Jewish Refugees in Australia*, trans. by Diana K. Weekes (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2016); Alexandra Delliou, *Histories of Controversy: The Bonegilla Migrant Centre* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017); Joy Damousi, *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War: Australia's Greek Immigrants after World War II and the Greek Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316336847.

Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus, 1975–1996 and the reissue of Colin McPhedran’s *White Butterflies*, among others, have opened these stories and these modes of narration up to new audiences.²⁹

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, there is an increasing emphasis in the Australian scholarly and public sphere on highlighting refugees writing and speaking in new formations. There are a range of projects, often co-produced by refugees and asylum seekers and Australian citizens, that have influenced this volume. Indeed, as the chapter here by André Dao and Jamila Jafari explores, projects like *Behind the Wire* – through which people who have been imprisoned by Australia as part of its mandatory detention regime share their experiences – provide an important new method of narrating histories and exploring refugee journeys. Similarly, Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains*, the Facebook page *Free the Children NAURU* and *The Messenger*, a podcast by Abdul Aziz Muhamat and Michael Green, provide spaces for speaking out in the midst of these journeys through Australian carceral and bureaucratic regimes.³⁰ All of these books and projects provide important background to the present volume, and we seek to build on the ideas and knowledge that these others have produced.

Outline of the book

This collection is divided into three sections, with each section containing a series of chapters that provide snapshot explorations of the histories of different aspects of the journeys that refugees take, and the settlement processes and modes of control – juridical, narratorial, cultural and political – that governments, states, bureaucracies and others have exerted over refugee and asylum seeker peoples’ journeys. From ‘Labelling refugees’ to ‘Flashpoints in Australian refugee history’ to ‘Understanding refugee histories and futures’, each section of this book contributes to exploring the argument that ‘refugees’ are made in part through strict controls on the movement of populations and the delineation of borders and construction of identities, but also through self-description and

29 Teresa Ke, *Cries of Hunger* (Fremantle: Vivid Publishing, 2017); Carina Hoang, *Boat People: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus, 1975–1996* (Fremantle: Beaufort Books, 2013); Colin McPhedran, *White Butterflies*, updated edition (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2017).

30 Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*; *Free the Children NAURU* available at: www.facebook.com/childrennauru/; *Behind the Wire* and the Wheeler Centre, *The Messenger*, available at: www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/the-messenger?show_all=true.

self-determination. This book offers reflections on the very nature of this storytelling, arguing that the histories that are told, and those that are forgotten, fundamentally shape how people and journeys will be understood and made known by those witnessing them.

Beginning with the notion of ‘labelling’, this volume will introduce readers to histories of the ways that governments, settlement procedures and bureaucracies have worked to name, control and, at times, demonise displaced people. In the first chapter, an overview of the state of Australian and international legal and governmental approaches from World War II to the present is provided by legal scholar Eve Lester. Lester demonstrates that there have been various shifts and turns in how the national and international community labels and understands refugees and asylum seekers. In the next chapter, Melanie Baak, a refugee education researcher, comments: ‘the question becomes, when, if ever do people who have been refugees, stop being refugees (with all of the frames of recognition this entails)?’ That is, what is the temporal, emotive and descriptive quality of these labels? Baak explores how Dinka women from South Sudan, among others, narrate themselves and their histories in the face of such labelling. In the following chapter, historian Jordana Silverstein offers an exploration of labelling from another side, exploring the ways that those social workers and government employees who controlled the lives of refugee children in the late 1970s and early 1980s labelled, described and thus imagined unaccompanied Vietnamese and Timorese refugee children. While Baak and Silverstein explore the international coming to the national – refugees coming to Australia – historian Ann-Kathrin Bartels examines the resonances in Germany of the Australian context, providing further evidence of the idea that what happens in Australia is not merely contained within our national borders. Bartels explores newspaper instantiations of public discourses of asylum seekers as ‘bogus’ or ‘economic refugees’ that denigrate them for being criminals and focus on their ‘cultural differences’. These histories from outside Australia thus shed light on the ways that similar projects of the construction of national identity, and the labelling of refugees as Other, are promulgated within Australia.

In the second section of this volume – ‘Flashpoints in Australian refugee history’ – three snapshot histories are provided that offer readers an excursion through the different ways that refugees and asylum seekers have been understood within Australian history, thus providing a greater sense of the national context. In her chapter, historian Rachel Stevens

shows the ways in which Australians responded to the 10 million refugees who emerged from the Bangladesh Liberation War against West Pakistan in 1971. This chapter thus provides an opportunity to reflect on the gap between government refugee policy and community attitudes in 1971, with many in the community supporting refugees in ways that the government did not. This issue of public and governmental approaches is further developed by social scientist Kathleen Blair in her exploration of the media messaging around the 2013 federal election campaign in Australia. Blair's chapter responds to Bartels', providing the Australian experience of such narratives of demonisation. Finally, in writers André Dao and Jamila Jafari's chapter, Dao interviews Jafari as they work together to understand what it was like for her to share her story through the *Behind the Wire* project. Through this interview we are able to get a more complex understanding of the ways that stories can be told and people can make a claim to narrating their own pasts. This chapter speaks to many of the other chapters in the book, pointing out the necessity of people controlling their own stories and modes of narration, determining how they themselves will be represented.

The third and final section of this volume is called 'Understanding refugee histories and futures', and it moves readers towards grasping the ways that histories of this past can be, and are being, written, prompting a consideration of how refugee pasts shape future possibilities from the perspective of both refugees and policymakers. What are the stories being told? What narratives do they put forward? It is these questions that animate this section. Sociologist Laurel Mackenzie's chapter opens the section, as she documents the various impacts – both practical and emotional – of Australian Government policy at the grassroots level, focusing on the transition experiences of a group of Afghan Hazaras in Australia. Through her fieldwork, Mackenzie works to understand how these Hazara refugees understand themselves and their journeys. With this new understanding of the ways that individuals narrate their lives and histories, this section then turns to a chapter by legal scholar Savitri Taylor, who examines the 'incremental steps' taken on the journey to Australia's current asylum seeker policy settings and considers the implications of that history for the next 25 years. Taylor argues for the central role that the White Australia policy has played in shaping all future immigration policies, and explores this through a focus on two key features of contemporary asylum seeker policy – mandatory detention, introduced in 1992, and offshore processing, initially introduced in 2001.

This racial history is, indeed, a thread that runs throughout the chapters in this volume. Finally, this section concludes with an exploration of the histories that have been told by Klaus Neumann, a historian. Neumann argues against certain orthodoxies in Australian refugee and asylum seeker historiography, suggesting that, by examining little-known stories and bringing them into prominence, and by considering new ‘genealogies of current policies and practices’, we can imagine new ways of understanding the past and present, as well as conceptualising viable possible futures.

Together, this book highlights the role of individual, communal and governmental stories. Woven throughout the volume is a series of new explorations of the different aspects of the journey across land or water or by air, through bureaucracy and imprisonment and settlement processes, and into representation in government, public and media discourse, that refugees and asylum seekers have taken and continue to take. Through these chapters, we gain a sense of the vital role that history-writing, and thinking historically, can play in discussions about the place of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia and internationally. At this moment, when Australia’s borders are hardened and support services are being retracted – as in many other places around the world – it becomes ever more crucial to understand these histories anew and reconceptualise how new thinking, storytelling and activism could happen from here.