

**Jan Rupp****Katrin Althans, David Kern, Beate Neumeier (eds.):  
Migrant Australia. From Botany Bay to Manus Island**

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The title of the volume under review is both straightforward and provocative: “Migrant Australia” as a way of referencing the degree to which the continent has been shaped through migrancy and mobility is certainly plausible at a time when migration has reached unprecedented levels across the twenty-first-century world. However, none of the manifold forms of migration today – from professional to precarious migration, from migrant workers to asylum seekers and refugees – would quite seem to square with an act colonial settlement, as invoked in the volume’s subtitle: “From Botany Bay to Manus Island”. Then again, while this subtitle returns to the beginning of settler colonialism in Australia, it productively charts some uncanny continuities from colonial to present-day immigration regimes. As the contributions assembled demonstrate, Australia has frequently served, throughout this time frame, as a laboratory of dehumanizing practices, most recently epitomised by the system of offshore processing and indefinite detention of undocumented migrants and refugees on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. As the reader learns, it has also served as a role model of sorts for restrictive immigration regimes elsewhere, which makes this collection of selected and expanded papers from the biennial conference “Australian Perspectives on Migration” of the German Association of Australian Studies in 2018 a highly instructive cross-disciplinary study for scholars of Australia and beyond.

As the editors Katrin Althans, David Kern, and Beate Neumeier note in their introduction, another possible provocation consists in the fact that locating the beginning of migrant Australia at Botany Bay runs the risk of reiterating colonial historiography and “neglects earlier migratory processes involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People” (1). However, these processes “lack[] the political dimensions of migration in modern history”, they argue, so that focussing on “post-1788 migration in Australia” may ultimately also reflect back on earlier periods and serve as a way to “acknowledge the catastrophic disruption colonization brought to Indigenous Australia” (all *ibid.*).

While this temporal demarcation of migrant Australia seems fair (if debatable), the volume’s first section, entitled ‘Discourses of the Theoretical’, suggests some interesting extensions at either end of the continuum from Botany Bay to Manus Island. In the two contributions of this section, Bill Ashcroft and Sneja Gunew build on their influential and highly pertinent work on contemporary Australian writing by offering a range of concepts to grapple with the effects of migration on national imaginaries. In his paper “On Postnational Belonging”

Ashcroft meditates on a range of convergent processes which interrogate ideas of the nation both from without and within. Insights into the significance of transnational and transcultural ties are complemented by a transhistorical retrieval of Indigenous pasts. The result is a “postnationalist discourse” that deconstructs the “fixity” and “myth of nation in Australian cultural history” (11). Fiction is a privileged medium of this discourse, as Ashcroft demonstrates in a reading of Peter Carey’s *A Long Way from Home* (2017). The novel, set in the 1950s, features a road trip around Australia, during which one of the central characters unexpectedly rediscovers his Aboriginal family history. By symbolically interlacing routes of mid-twentieth century mobility with a mesh of ancestral songlines Carey’s novel retraces a very different mythical map from modern Australia.

While Ashcroft thus gestures towards important links with past processes of migration well before Botany Bay, Gunew highlights the pending task of making connections for migrant Australia in and beyond the present moment of Manus Island. Picking up on the argument of her monograph *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators* (2017), her contribution “Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators: Australian Im/Em/Migrant Writers Interrogate Museums of Identity” shines a spotlight on bodies of non-Anglo-Celtic writing that are yet waiting to be incorporated into national imaginaries. One of her cases in point is the Kurdish-Iranian writer Behrouz Boochani’s novel *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018), which is based on his experiences as detainee on Manus Island. Boochani’s account offers a shocking analysis of what he and his translator Omid Tofighian describe as “Australia’s border-industrial complex” and “systematic torture inflicted in Manus Prison”.<sup>1</sup> Symptomatically, its author – the recipient of several Australian literary prizes and hailed as one of the most important Australian writers today<sup>2</sup> – was never able to set foot in Australia and contest museums of identity from within, before ultimately being granted refugee status in New Zealand in 2019.

The volume’s second section, entitled ‘Discourses of the Political and State Actors’, follows Ashcroft’s and Gunew’s meditations on the role of literature in shaping imaginaries with three papers on real-life policies, forms of resistance, and compounding ideologies of migrant Australia. Derya Ozkul and Sitarah Mohammadi provide an informative history of Australia as “one of the classical immigration nations” (39), which started with the “invasion” of European colonisers and a “variety of genocidal practices” (40), for a large part then benefited from the contribution of successive generations of foreigners and from the 1990s onwards has taken a turn towards more restrictive or even punitive policies. Jamal Barnes shifts emphasis on the people at the receiving end of this penalising approach, analysing acts of protest which foreground vulnerability – such as lip-sewing and hunger striking – as a “means by which asylum seekers and refugees [...] reaffirm their dignity and challenge their arbitrary detention” (62). As Matthew Zagor shows, the arbitrary regime of migrant Australia

1 Omid Tofighian: *No Friend but the Mountains*. *Translator’s Reflections*, p. 369 (both quotations).

2 See the collection of critical responses and list of awards quoted on the jacket of Behrouz Boochani: *No Friend but the Mountains*, n.p.

is exacerbated by a “theological world-view” (67) that has prioritized Christians from the Middle East over other refugees in recent decades, a policy that resembles the infamous so-called ‘Muslim ban’ in Trump America as well as similar discriminatory biases on the grounds of religion and ethnicity in many other global North countries.

The papers in the volume’s third section, ‘Discourses of the Historical’, all present case studies around the White Australia Policy, a prototypical instance of racism and xenophobia in migrant Australia from the turn of the twentieth century onwards. Louise Thatcher revisits various stories involving the ship *Charon*, which ominously illustrate the “violent immigration policing” (89) through off-shore processing, already then, or even through the fumigation of Chinese stowaways on board the ship. In her paper, Stefanie Affeldt shows how the pervasive climate of White Australia could also at times be undercut, “through effective agency by those whose lives were otherwise framed by an overtly racist attitude” (113). She explores the migration history of a Japanese medical doctor, who was successfully lobbied for by a local expatriate Japanese community in Broome, north-western Australia. On a slightly related, maybe even redemptive note, Tihana Klepač rereads texts by the Irish-born writer Mary Helena Fortune, who emigrated to Australia in the 1850s. Through her journalism and memoirs, Fortune established herself as a writer “half a century before male literary Bohemia got professionalised” (117) and painted progressive picture of race relations that countered nationalist narratives.

The contributions in the last section, entitled ‘Discourses of the Cultural and Storyfication’, further elaborate on the role of writing, stories and images as an important counter-archive and antidote, which is a central motif of the present volume overall. In her paper, Victoria Herche explores recent cinematic representations of the often traumatic journey of Vietnamese boat people, in which the central image of the boat is variously rendered or sometimes even purposefully absent. The effect are different instances of “a mediated form that produces an ethical response with the topic of migration at large” (133). David Kern deals with the role of young adult fiction in working towards more informed and politically engaged responses. Reading young adult novels as “literary activist interventions” (147), he shows how the genre offers inclusive models of self-identification against a backdrop of anti-Muslim sentiment. Finally, Lina Pranaitytė analyses a trend towards more inclusive food cultures, such as in the TV show ‘Kriol Kitchen’, discussing the question whether this phenomenon constitutes “a proper acknowledgment of Indigenous communities” or “a commercialization and appropriation of native Australian foods” (163).

The volume’s concluding piece is an interview by Celine Yep with Human Rights Watch Australia Director Elaine Pearson, directing attention to forms of real-life activism and to current developments of migrant Australia on the ground. Given the exacerbating erosion of human rights and growing precarity in refugee systems world-wide, the interview provides some timely insights into the work of non-governmental organizations and clearly merits inclusion as well as further scrutiny in scholarly debates.

Overall, the present volume brings together a rich array of interventions while suggesting many perspectives for further scholarship to fill in additional chapters of migrant Australia within and beyond the time frame explored. The volume's individual sections are not entirely clear-cut (convincingly though mainly engaging with 'theory' or "discourses of the theoretical" in connection with literary and cultural analyses in the first section, for example); however, they profitably show how literary and cultural studies, area studies, migration studies, and activist debates can come together and unfold new interdisciplinary rigour as well as practical relevance. Such inter- and multidisciplinary endeavours are much needed to assess the mounting challenge of global migration, to contain or counter the restrictive tendencies of contemporary immigration regimes, and to reimagine and enact more humane, habitable, and just responses to migrants and refugees in Australia and beyond.

**References:**

- Boochani, Behrouz: *No Friend but the Mountains*. Transl. by Omid Tofighian. Sydney: Picador 2018.
- Tofighian, Omid: *No Friend but the Mountains*. *Translator's Reflections*. In: Behrouz Boochani. *No Friend but the Mountains*, pp. 359-374.

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