

## Women's Citizenship in Early 20th Century Australasia: Re-evaluating the Global Colour Line

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### Introduction

In 2015, Roopika Risam asked the question: 'Can the database be intersectional?'. As she and others have identified, the ways standard databases are designed (and indeed most records historians use) flatten complex, intersectional identities. Intersectionality, in her words, 'has come to signify the ways that oppression manifests through multiple facets of identity that confer or withhold privilege'.<sup>1</sup> It becomes impossible to properly account for these processes, let alone to consider wider periodisation, when we flatten intersectional identities and lived experiences in order to focus on norms.

I've been thinking about this a great deal. Since 2018, I have built a database of all women who applied to be naturalised in Australia in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> I chose Australia because the system of migration and naturalisation control developed there has consistently been a model globally throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>3</sup> Equally importantly, Australia's records are simply extraordinarily detailed, and mostly digitised by the National Archives of Australia (NAA). What I have found through building the database challenges our standard understandings of period, as I will discuss here.

Focussing on women was attractive because of the size of the dataset and because women's migration history has so often been neglected. I was especially keen to identify the interplay between gender, race, class, age, and religion during the application process. Clearly race has dominated historic understanding of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period

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1 Roopika Risam, 'Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities', *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 9:2 (2015), 5. See also Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Justice Rising: Moving Intersectionally in the Age of Post-Everything', London School of Economics lecture (2018): <https://www.lse.ac.uk/gender/events/2018-19/lt/Intersectionality-at-30-A-Celebration>.

2 Rachel K. Bright, *Becoming British?: Women's Migration and Naturalisation in Early Twentieth Century Australia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: forthcoming).

3 Francisco O. Ramirez, Yasemin Soysal and Suzanne Shanahan, 'The Changing Logic of Political Citizenship: Cross-National Acquisition of Women's Suffrage Rights, 1890 to 1990', *American Sociological Review*, 62:5 (1997), 735–745 [736–7]; Eve Lester, 'Introduction', in *idem.*, *Making Migration Law: The Foreigner, Sovereignty, and the Case of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Rachel K. Bright, 'Migration, Naturalisation and the "British" World, c.1900–1920', *History of Global Arms Transfer*, 10 (2019); Evan Smith, Andrekos Varnava, and Marinella Marmo, 'The Interconnectedness of British and Australian Immigration Controls in the 20th Century: Between Convergence and Divergence', *The International History Review*, 43:6 (2021), 1354–1374. An example is the speech by Priti Patel to 2019 Conservative Party conference, *Conservative Home*, 1 October, 2019, <https://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2019/10/priti-patel-i-will-give-the-police-the-powers-they-need-to-defeat-crime-full-text-of-her-conference-speech.html>.

**Table 1<sup>†</sup>**. Approval Rates, 1901–1920. Dataset at <https://naturalisation.online>

No. Applicants	approved	rejected	incomplete	Already a subject
2281	1879	108	67	227
	82%	5%	3%	10%

<sup>†</sup>These statistics show the final decision made for women; some women applied multiple times; the final decision is shown here.

frequently identified as the ‘Age of Migration’. This is often identified as the birth of a ‘global colour line’, with Australia and the US at the forefront of designing modern migration controls.<sup>4</sup>

The standard narrative of this period, especially for Australia, is highly exclusionary and racist, with the White Australia Policy, roughly from 1901 to the 1970s, garnering significant attention. During this period, Australia, unable to block migrants according to race, instead embraced a wide variety of alternative legislation: money, education, gender, and geography were all acceptable means of discrimination across Britain’s empire, and bureaucrats were also granted significant powers to consider ‘exceptional circumstances’ (defined usually as they saw fit) when making decisions about whether to allow a migrant into Australia or whether to naturalise them as British.<sup>5</sup>

The 1903 Australian Naturalisation Act excluded ‘any person who is an aboriginal native of Asia, Africa, or of the islands thereof’.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have understood such laws within the

4 The most relevant recent studies of global migration control include Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalisation of Borders*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jane Caplan and John Torpey (eds.), *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jane Doulman and David Lee, *Every Assistance & Protection: A History of the Australian Passport* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2008); Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Radhika Singha, ‘The Great War and a “Proper” Passport for the Colony: Border-Crossing in British India, c.1882–1922’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 50:3 (2013), 289–315; Amy Fairchild, *Science at the Borders: Immigration, Medical Inspection and the Shaping of the Modern Industrial Labour Force* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Craig Robertson, *Passport in America: The History of a Document*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter (eds.), *Recognition and Registration: Documenting the Person in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Alison Bashford (ed.), *Medicine at the Border: Disease, Globalisation and Security, 1850 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Helen Irving, *Citizenship, Alienage, and the Modern Constitutional State: A Gendered History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Lester, *Making Migration Law*; Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021); Yael Berda, *Colonial Bureaucracy and Contemporary Citizenship: Legacies of Race and Emergency in the Former British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Nadine El-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); Nandita Sharma, *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Eric Richards, *Genesis of International Mass Migration: The British Case, 1750–1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

5 Bright, ‘Migration, Naturalisation and the “British” World, c.1900–1920’.

6 Victoria Mence, Simone Gangell, Ryan Tebb, *A History of the Department of Immigration: Managing*

highly racist colonial context, one which 'was based on two main objectives: to build a community based on predominately British immigrants and to exclude non-European settlers'.<sup>7</sup>

However, recently Andrekos Varnava has explored how this was complicated by what he terms 'conditional whiteness' – basically the system allowed quite a bit of negotiating space for Cypriots to engage in debates about whether they were allowed in as 'conditional whites', often because they were literally at the geographical margins of Europe, and because they were often Christian.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Andonis Piperoglou writes of an 'ambiguous *inclusivity* of the *Naturalisation Act* (1903) and its uneven effects on peoples' lives', one which 'allowed for the migration and settlement of German, Italian and Greek peoples... none of whom the framers of the Commonwealth had envisioned'.<sup>9</sup> Basically those exceptional circumstances clauses could be used to include as well as exclude, sometimes in surprising ways.

I want to build on this history of 'ambiguous inclusivity' today, specifically by thinking about the ways in which naturalisation, and wider conceptions of citizenship, were gendered, and how this especially affected women loosely badged as 'aboriginal natives of Asia'. Then I will conclude with a reflection on our understandings of this period.

## Alice

As an example, let me introduce you to Alice Shong Kew Wong Sing, sometimes Alice Shong

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*Migration to Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia, revised ed. 2017); For a full breakdown of these early debates, see Kim Rubenstein with Jacqueline Field, *Australian Citizenship Law* (Sydney, NSW: Lawbook Company, 2nd ed. 2017), esp. 50–54. They argue that this lack of definition remains today in Australia, meaning the rights and duties associated with it are equally unclear in the most recent Australian Citizenship Act (2007).

- 7 Anne Monsour, 'Undesirable Alien to Good Citizen: Syrian/Lebanese in a "White" Australia', *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies*, 3:1 (2015), 130–156 [132]. This was a system described as 'a world divided into Europeans [good migrants] and non-Europeans' [bad migrants] – Jane Doulman and David Lee, *Every Assistance & Protection: A History of the Australian Passport* (The Federation Press, 2008), p. 42.
- 8 Andrekos Varnava, 'Border Control and Monitoring "Undesirable" Cypriots in the UK and Australia, 1945–1959', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 40:1–2 (2022), 132–176. This is not unique to Australia. See, for instance, Nicola Foote, 'Rethinking Race, Gender and Citizenship: Black West Indian Women in Costa Rica, c. 1920–1940', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 23:2 (2004), 198–212; David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 9 Andonis Piperoglou, 'Migrant Acculturation via Naturalisation: Comparing Syrian and Greek Applications for Naturalisation in White Australia', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 40:1–2 (2021), 59–78. See also Paul Jones, 'Bureaucratised Identities: Family Reunion in the First Years of the White Australia policy', Paper presented at the *Historicising Whiteness* conference, University of Melbourne, 2006 – in *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives. On the Construction of an Identity* (2007) – he makes the argument that even at the border, when family reunions were abolished in 1905, to prevent families joining their Chinese husbands in Australia, the list of exceptions meant that what actually happened was relatively fluid.

Kew Young, who applied for naturalisation in 1910.<sup>10</sup> She was born in Queensland (this meant that she was born a British subject), had Australian-born children and was in a ‘sound’ economic position, details she emphasised in the cover letter with her application. She also drew attention to her ‘English’ mother, Mary Amelia Coe. What she did not emphasise was that her father was a Chinese storekeeper in Gympie (the centre of the Queensland goldrush of the period) named Ah Young. Upon her parents’ marriage, based on how we think nationality law worked, Mary ‘became’ Chinese. Alice too married a Chinese man, usually named as Wong Sing Kew Young, in 1908, and in turn ‘became’ Chinese.

Scholars have identified this process of women losing their nationality upon marriage as ‘de-naturalisation’, a gendered stripping of nationality from any woman who happened to marry a foreigner. This sort of law existed in almost every country in the world until well after WWII, and is clearly a major example of gender discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

According to existing scholarship, we ‘know’ that the entire system of border control in Australia, the US, and other settler colonies was designed from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in order to exclude Chinese migrants in particular.<sup>12</sup> And we ‘know’ that women who married foreigners were de-naturalised; in Britain, they were not allowed to apply to be re-naturalised until they were widows. Australia’s entire border regime, of which naturalisation was a core part, was sexist, racist, and highly eugenicist. Alice, you might think, would clearly be rejected, as she was identified by the Australian officials as a ‘native of Asia’ through her husband. Her husband had already filled in a form applying and been swiftly rejected on those grounds. Furthermore, because of concerns about heredity and the dangers of racial mixing, her own mixed heritage would seem to literally embody exactly the type of people Australia’s border regime was designed to exclude. In fact, someone pencilled ‘Chinese’ at the top of her application, showing how administrators identified her and emphasising that she was not seen as conditionally white. Indeed, she was a product of, and had engaged in, exactly the kind of sexual relationship which filled so much of the ‘yellow peril’ popular press.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this, she was successful.<sup>14</sup> Nor was this an anomaly. In my study, just under 47% of all applicants were married, and their success rate was an astonishing 89%, suggesting that married women generally were allowed to apply for naturalisation in their own right, despite

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10 NAA: A63, A1910/4814.

11 Helen Irving, 2018.

12 Such studies usually focus on Chinese men. There is some exceptional work on Chinese Australian women. Especially relevant are Alanna Kamp, *Intersectional Lives: Chinese Australian Women in White Australia* (2022); Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (eds.), *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance* (Brill, 2015); Bagnall ‘Across the Threshold: White Women and Chinese Men in the White Colonial Imaginary’, *Hecate*, 28:2 (2002), 9–29; Bagnall, “To His Home at Jembaicumbene”: Women’s Cross-Cultural Encounters on a Colonial Goldfield’, in Jacqueline Leckie, Angela McCarthy and Angela Wanhalla (eds.), *Migrant Cross-Cultural Encounters in Asia and the Pacific* (Routledge: 2017).

13 Bagnall ‘Across the threshold’, 9–29.

14 NAA: A63, A1910/4814, Alice Shong Kew Wong Sing (1910); See a similar example at NAA: A1, 1908/6179, Sarah Jane Karl, nee Wilson (1908). A63, A1910/7244, Naturalization British Women married to aliens, C. Hughes, Attorney-General, Opinion: Eligibility of a British Born Woman Who Has Married an Alien to Apply for a Certificate of Naturalization, to DEA, 7 November 1910.

**Table 2.** Marital status.<sup>15</sup>

Status	Count	% of 2281	Approved	Already a subject	Approved (minus already subject)
Married (all)	1070	47%	796	178	89%
Married British-born (de-naturalised)	131	6%	75	24	70%
Widowed (de-naturalised)	106	5%	95	3	92%

**Table 3.** 'East Asian' Applicants, 1901–1920

'Nationality'	Count	Approved
Chinese	20	15 (1 incomplete; 1 already a subject; 3 denied as husband still living)
Japanese	2	1 (1 husband still living)
New Caledonia / Nouméa (French)	4	3 (1 rejected as 'coloured' aboriginal of Pacific island)

still living husbands<sup>16</sup>.

'Asian' women were largely no exception to this. In Australia, all British-born women who married Chinese men were successful in applying for naturalisation until 1916. In 1916, Australia changed policy (but not law), due to significant pressure from Britain who wanted more uniformity of naturalisation laws across the empire. There's a lot of complicated issues of sovereignty bound up in this shift; essentially after 1916, 'Asian' women were still naturalised, but only once widowed, in line with Britain's own policy.

These numbers, while small, are striking if we recall the purpose of the White Australia policy and if we examine who was actually rejected. Of the 101 women rejected, 49% were classified as enemy aliens due to World War I. 18% were rejected as 'an aboriginal native' of Asia, Africa, or Pacific Islands; a similar number were rejected for having living husbands (all from the end of 1916 onwards). Of those rejected for being an aboriginal native, 15 were born in 'Syria'; the other 3 were born as British subjects but identified as Chinese or Japanese through their husbands. In all three cases, the files indicate that they were rejected because their husbands were still alive. All widows with similar applications were successful.

It can be easy to think that the issue was racial; 'Syrian' women, actually born in the Middle East, were deemed 'real' aboriginal natives under the meaning of the legislation, while the 'Chinese' or 'Japanese' women were not 'really' natives at all, as all were born as British

15 See also Rachel Bright, 'Rethinking Gender, Citizenship, and War: Female Enemy Aliens in Australia during World War I', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 40:1–2 (2022), 13–58.

16 The issues around this are too complex to explore here but a longer analysis will appear in my upcoming book, *Becoming British?: Women and Migration in early twentieth century Australia* (MUP, forthcoming).

subjects. This cannot be the only reason (those Nouméa women were all born as French subjects). Annie and others like her were born ‘British’ technically, but according to thinking at the time, they hardly conformed to standard ideas of desirable British racial identity. And it is worth remembering that this certificate of naturalisation gave women like Alice access to the vote, to maternity cover, an old age pension, an invalid pension; in her specific case, it was required for her to secure a bank mortgage.<sup>17</sup>

Nor was Alice unique. Even in cases where women’s ‘Britishness’ was even more marginal, acceptance was still the norm. Let’s examine Lilian Fanggett, who was born in Hong Kong and twice married Chinese men during her long residency in Tasmania. Like Alice, she applied in order to purchase a property. There were many reasons why you would expect her to be refused: the Police Report cast doubt on her claim to being born in Hong Kong, as she had no proof, and emphasised her appearance as ‘Chinese’.<sup>18</sup> Her second husband still lived, and had been rejected as an aboriginal of Asia. However, Police also described her as ‘a highly respectable woman’<sup>19</sup> and she was approved.

Such trends carried on after the war too. While only preliminary searches have been completed for ‘Asian’ women in the interwar period, of the 7 ‘Chinese’ women so far identified, 6 widows were approved, and one married woman was not as her husband still lived.<sup>20</sup> They were a similar combination of people with family links to China (usually through a spouse or father), but born in a British territory.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

That women were so readily accepted is surprising, given what we think we know about this period of migration control, and specifically White Australia. In fact, scholars like Jen Kain have highlighted how deeply committed to eugenicist ideology most of the administrators governing migration to Australia were during this period.<sup>22</sup> Scholars have rightly focused significant attention on the racialisation of migrant bodies; this is important.

But even at the peak of eugenics, in a place like Australia where it was deeply embedded, there were other ways women were desirable, ways which connect to the complex intersectionality of these women’s lives. Female applicants demonstrated their citizenship desire and desirability through having children and then ‘giving’ them in service to winning WWI, what I called in a recent article ‘womb citizenship’.<sup>23</sup> Both Alice and Lilian emphasised

17 NAA: A63, A1910/4814, Alice Shong Kew Wong Sing (1910).

18 Lilian Fanggett, From NAA: A1, 1913/3773.

19 Lilian Fanggett, From NAA: A1, 1913/3773

20 See in particular NAA: A1, 1927/17460, Mary Wong SIM – Naturalisation certificate; NAA: A1, 1934/7298, Lee, Annie Tong – application for naturalization.

21 The ‘Scotch’ applicant was NAA: A1, 1927/17460, Mary Wong Sim; an example of a woman with a Chinese father and ‘British’ mother can be found at NAA: A1, 1935/10248, Emily Mary Lee.

22 J. S. Kain, *Insanity and Immigration Control in New Zealand and Australia, 1860–1930* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

23 Rachel Bright, ‘Rethinking Gender, Citizenship, and War: Female Enemy Aliens in Australia during

their roles as mothers of British children and having themselves been born in British colonies. They also presented themselves as nice, middle-class people trying to buy property. And Australia needed people and investment. Their investments, both financial and maternal, were clearly viewed as positive contributions to the broader colonial enterprise.

Perhaps even more importantly was a constant refrain amongst officials: these women, often because they were women, were 'harmless'. Allowances were made for women that were not made for their husbands or brothers. While still racialised, these women were clearly allowed a far more inclusive version of subjecthood than men. If we take the evidence of husbands and other relatives, no 'Asian' men succeeded. This suggests a clear and consistent gender difference. Throughout, the overwhelming impression was that Australia needed women, and babies, and that women were essentially harmless. The bureaucratic system was really there to police male applicants.

Part of the purpose of combining the metadata around naturalisation with nuanced individual stories is the ability to draw out these ideas of 'normal' and 'desirable' citizens, and to recognise the gaps which can exist between rhetoric, law, and lived experiences. Because of my database, I am particularly interested in the highly flexible categorisations of 'race' and 'nationality' evident in records like theirs – how can I as a historian build a database that recognises this complexity of self-identity and state identification, of the messy lived experience of White Australia Policy? Do I classify someone like Annie as Chinese or British or Australian? Is Lillian Australia, British, Chinese, or Hong Kong? Clearly, how I tag them affect the ways I might then interpret the metadata about issues like race and decision-making. What I've found here hints I think at some larger issues within the way scholars consider the relationship between the birth of modern migration control and gender.<sup>24</sup>

It should also make us think about the dangerous and misleading dominance of data. East Asian women were a tiny minority of migrants and of naturalisation applications. It is all too common to ignore such small groups in the broad narratives and periodisation of the 'Age of Migration'. But as these cases show, we then fail to actually understand the period, or the lived experiences of that period.

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World War I', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 40:1–2 (2022), 13–58.

24 Gender is frequently ignored or marginalised, including in Walia, *Border and Rule*; Nadine El-Enany's *(B)ordering Britain*, and major 'classics' like Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 6th ed. 2020) and Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*.

