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‘Amanda Nettelbeck, Unsettled Subjects: Race, Mobility and Colonial Citizenship in the Australian Settler Colonies’

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Amanda Nettelbeck, *Unsettled Subjects: Race, Mobility and Colonial Citizenship in the Australian Settler Colonies* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 232pp. Hardback. £95. ISBN: 978-1-0094-8943-0.

What does it mean to belong to a nation still in the process of imagining itself? Amanda Nettelbeck's *Unsettled Subjects* answers this question by tracing how ideas of citizenship and subjecthood were constructed, contested, and sometimes subverted in Australia's settler colonies across the long nineteenth century. Focused on the lived experiences of non-European residents — people whom colonial authorities increasingly gathered under categories like 'Asiatic' — Nettelbeck offers an arresting account of how race and mobility intersected to shape an imagined colonial citizenship, and why neither that category nor its exclusions were ever as inevitable as subsequent national narratives have tended to suggest.

The book's entry point is the 1897 Colonial Conference in London, where Secretary of State Joseph Chamberlain asked settler representatives to find 'a form of words' that would exclude unwanted immigrants without openly violating the formal racial neutrality of British subjecthood. This opening is characteristic of Nettelbeck's method: the gap between the rhetoric of imperial inclusion and the practical machinery of racial exclusion is where the book does most of its work. The infamous dictation test that emerged from this conference — selecting a European language at a customs officer's discretion — was not a racial policy in name, but its intent was unmistakable. Nettelbeck is interested in precisely this kind of disingenuous legal architecture and what it reveals about the ideological investments of the settler state.

The book is structured in two parts. Part I, 'British Subjects and Others in a Porous Empire', takes the abolition of slavery as its starting point, examining how the reordering of imperial labour — through Indian indenture systems, the expansion of Chinese migration, and the formal extension of British subjecthood to new colonial populations — produced contradictory frameworks governing the rights of non-European peoples. Part II, 'Citizenship Practices in the Settler State', moves into the last three decades of the nineteenth century to explore how non-European settlers — Indian traders, Chinese merchants, Afghan hawkers, Syrian naturalisation petitioners — navigated intensifying discrimination by asserting their own understandings of belonging, justice, and civic participation. Taken together, these sections demonstrate that the White Australia Policy was not a natural culmination of colonial development but a deliberate political choice, forged out of ongoing debate and, crucially, opposition.

One of Nettelbeck's most valuable contributions is her insistence on centring non-European settlers as active historical agents rather than as passive objects of policy. The book draws extensively on official correspondence, parliamentary debates, the colonial press, and petitions to trace how Indian hawkers asserted their rights as British subjects, how Afghan traders enlisted British legal protections as a form of de facto citizenship, and how Chinese settlers practised everyday citizenship through trade, neighbourhood relations, and interracial domesticity. This granular attention to lived experience gives the book considerable depth and makes visible figures who rarely occupy the foreground of Australian colonial historiography.

The category of gender receives careful attention throughout. Nettelbeck demonstrates that citizenship and subjecthood were not only racially stratified but unevenly applied according to gender and marital status — a dimension of the history that is sometimes passed over in favour of race as the primary analytic. The

book's sustained engagement with intersecting legal categories and their human consequences is a mark of its scholarly rigour, as is its impressive integration of historiography across imperial, colonial, and citizenship studies. Nettelbeck draws deftly on fields that do not always speak to one another — the history of race and empire, labour history, legal history, and postcolonial studies — and synthesises them without ever losing the specificity of the Australian case.

Unsettled Subjects is also a book with genuine pedagogical potential. Chapters from this work would serve undergraduate teaching well, offering a new and productive lens on elements of Australian history that risk becoming formulaic in semester-length curricula: the gold rush politics around Asian immigration, the ideological origins of the White Australia Policy, and the contributions of Muslim, Syrian, Indian, Afghan, and Chinese communities that are often marginalised in compressed survey narratives. Nettelbeck makes these stories feel necessary and compelling without simplifying the legal and conceptual apparatus she works through to tell them.

If the book has a limitation, it is one that Nettelbeck herself acknowledges: the sustained focus on non-European immigration means that Indigenous peoples' relationship to British subjecthood and citizenship receives only peripheral treatment, left to the substantial scholarly literature she cites rather than integrated into her analysis. This is a reasonable and clearly articulated choice, though it does mean that some of the deepest entanglements of the settler colonial project remain at the edges of the frame.

This is an important and carefully achieved work. *Unsettled Subjects* demonstrates that Australian citizenship has a long and contested prehistory — one rooted not in legal clarity, but in the messy, often contradictory negotiations of a multiracial empire. It is a fine example of what historical writing at its best can do: illuminate the strangeness of what we thought we already knew.

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