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**Migrant Acculturation via Naturalisation:
Comparing Syrian and Greek Applications for Naturalisation in White Australia**

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Abstract

In 1903, the Commonwealth Australian government passed the Naturalisation Act (1903). Acquiring naturalisation, however, was not straightforward in a country that was concerned about its 'foreign element'. A key legal requirement of the Act stipulated that 'a person resident in the Commonwealth, not being a British subject, and not being an aboriginal native of Asia, Africa, or the Islands of the Pacific', who intends to settle in Australia could apply for a naturalisation. Because the naturalisation law explicitly excluded people who were from certain regions of the world, applying for naturalisation was, at its root, racialised. For Syrians and Greeks, acquiring naturalisation came to hinge on the question of whether they were to be accepted as white subjects. This article compares naturalisation application files of Syrians and Greeks to explore the ambiguous inclusivity of Australia's naturalisation law. In comparing how two groups subjected to similar external representations applied for naturalisation, it is argued that applying for naturalisation was a mode by which migrants outwardly performed their acculturation by identifying with a dominant whiteness-property nexus. In doing so, the article opens terrain in migration history to consider how acquiring naturalisation was contingent on migrants' capacity to present themselves as loyal settlers.

Keywords: naturalisation; whiteness; race; settler colonial culture; Syrian migration; Greek migration.

Introduction: The Ambiguous Inclusivity of the Australian *Naturalisation Act* (1903)

In June 1904, Abdullah Bakhash, applied for naturalisation from his place of residence in Redfern, Sydney. He had lived in New South Wales for sixteen years, working as a ‘merchant’ since his arrival into the British settler colony in 1888.¹ His application included a letter of recommendation by the proprietor of the Paddington Pharmacy, Rowland R. Hale, and a statutory declaration that noted he was born in the Syrian town of Zahlé and that he was a ‘Turkish citizen’ at birth.² Hale’s letter expressed that the two men had ‘many business transactions’ and that he found Bakhash to be an ‘honourable’ and ‘upright man’ who was ‘in every way worthy of the name of a British subject’.³ However, when the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Atlee Hunt, responded to Bakhash’s application he detailed the particulars of section 5 of the Commonwealth’s recently legislated *Naturalisation Act* (1903). Hunt explained that ‘a person resident in the Commonwealth, not being a British subject, and not being an aboriginal native of Asia, Africa, or the Islands of the Pacific, excepting New Zealand’ could apply for a certificate of naturalisation.⁴ Despite avowal of his good character, on the basis of this legal specificity Hunt informed Bakhash that because he

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¹ ‘Abdulla Bakhash, Application for Naturalisation,’ NAA: A1, 1904/6471 (ACT).

² Today Zahlé is in present-day Lebanon. Under Ottoman rule, present-day Lebanon was part of the province of Syria, which included 'the Alexandretta District in present-day Turkey, all of present-day Syria, all of present-day Lebanon, all of Palestine (present-day Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip), and part of Jordan. See, Eric J. Hooglund, 'Introduction,' in Eric J. Hooglund, (ed.) *Crossing the waters: Arabic-speaking immigrants to the United States before 1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 3-4.

³ Letter from R.R. Hale to Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, NAA: A1, 1904/6471 (ACT).

⁴ Letter by Secretary of the Department of External Affairs to A. Bakhash, NAA: A1, 1904/6471 (ACT).

was ‘a native of Syria’ he was ‘not eligible to apply’.⁵ Although disqualified from the privilege of naturalisation, Bakhash’s unsuccessful application revealed that he looked upon Australia as his home.

Later, in October 1909, Secretary Hunt sent a letter to the Under Secretary, P. J. McDermot in Brisbane. The letter referred to the application for naturalisation that had been submitted by a Greek ‘shopkeeper’ called Peter Kosma Freeleagus. In addition to a police report that outlined the character and history of Freeleagus since his arrival in Australia, Hunt wished to ascertain ‘whether he [Freeleagus] is a coloured man’.⁶ Two weeks later Under Secretary McDermot replied to Hunt’s request. After noting the applicant was ‘a single man’ who had lived in Australia for eight years and was the eldest of seven brothers who all lived in Brisbane, four of whom, it was noted, were already naturalised, Under Secretary McDermot responded by declaring that Freeleagus was ‘not a coloured man, and bears an excellent reputation’.⁷ In April 1910, Freeleagus acknowledged he had received his certificate of naturalization.

With over a century of hindsight, the first thing one is likely to notice about the *Naturalization Act* (1903) is its fierce *exclusivity*. Indeed, as Bakhash’s inability to apply for naturalisation reveals, it was no small matter. Barred from being able to apply for naturalisation, he was, in legal terms, an undesirable migrant. Indeed, the limitation of naturalised British subjecthood in Australia to bar ‘aboriginal natives of Asia’ profoundly shaped Asian-Australian history, for instance.⁸ It was this limitation of the law that denied Chinese people the political might with which to overcome the ‘anxious’ tides of

⁵ Letter by Secretary of the Department of External Affairs to A. Bakhash, NAA: A1, 1904/6471 (ACT).

⁶ Letter from Secretary of the Department of External Affairs to the Under Secretary, NAA: A1, 1909/13408 (ACT).

⁷ Letter from Under Secretary P. J. McDermot to Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, NAA: A1, 1909/13408 (ACT).

⁸ Section 5, *Naturalisation Act 1903* (Cmth.)

exclusionism.⁹ It was this law, still in effect during the Second World War, that left Japanese naturalised and natural-born subjects so vulnerable to the wartime hysteria that would become the federal policy of internment.¹⁰ For Syrians, being barred from the law incited protests that they were of the ‘White Christian Race’.¹¹ The exclusivity of the *Naturalisation Act* (1903) was of profound consequence. Yet, what is too easily missed from our vantage point, however, is the ambiguous *inclusivity* of the *Naturalisation Act* (1903) and its uneven effects on peoples’ lives.¹² It was the Act’s admission of ostensibly desirable non-Anglo Europeans that allowed for the migration and settlement of German, Italian and Greek peoples, for example – none of whom the framers of the Commonwealth had envisioned significantly populating the polity of the new nation when they crafted its rules for naturalisation. The law, its unforeseen inclusivity, and its unforeseen consequences, set the stage for an underacknowledged process of migrant acculturation of remarkable scope and dynamism. As such, this article is interested in acknowledging the inherent inclusivity of naturalisation law (as it related to Greeks) and the

⁹ See, David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia Qld: Queensland University Press, 1999); Kevin Wong Hoy, ‘Thursday Island en route to citizenship and the Queensland goldfields: Chinese aliens and naturalised British subjects, 1879-1903,’ *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, 6, 2004, 159-174; John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006), 38; Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Gold Scissors: The Story of Sydney's Chinese* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2008).

¹⁰ See for example, Yuriko Nagata, *Unwanted aliens: Japanese internment in Australia* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1996); Nagata Yuriko, ‘Certain Types of Aliens: The Japanese in Australia, 1941-1952’, in Vera Mackie and Paul Jones, Paul (eds.), *Relationships: Japan and Australia, 1870s-1950s* (Parkville, Vic.: University of Melbourne, Department of History, 2001), 217-23, and Joan Beaumont, Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, Mathew Trinca (eds.), *Under Suspicion: Citizenship and Internment in Australia During the Second World War* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008).

¹¹ ‘White Christian Race: Protest by the Syrians,’ *The Star*, 25 June 1909, 12.

¹² In Australian historiography, the *Naturalisation Act 1903* has been largely understood as shaping a racialist view of the nation and while I do not dispute that the Act was highly effective in excluding migrant groups based on race, this article, in a similar vein to Jane McCabe’s analysis of how Anglo-Indian’s worked New Zealand’s bureaucratic system of immigration control, expands upon a racialised reading of the Act. See, Jane McCabe, ‘Working the Permit System: Anglo-Indian Immigration to New Zealand, 1920-1940,’ *New Zealand Journal of History*, 48:2 (2014), 27-49.

contestations that arose over its intrinsic exclusivity (as it related to Syrians). In doing so, historical scholarship on ‘migrant acculturation’ in the twentieth century will be enlarged.

Understood as the processes by which migrants adjust and adapt to a new cultural environment in which they have settled, migrant acculturation has been framed as a multidimensional process in which migrants’ cultural heritage becomes integrated with the receiving country’s practices, values, and identifications.¹³ By comparatively examining Syrian and Greek applications for naturalization, along with surrounding debates about race, this article brings histories of naturalisation into dialogue with a growing literature on how undesirable migrants from the Mediterranean acculturated to exclusionary dynamics of settler colonial culture.¹⁴ By centring naturalisation as part of the story of migrant acculturation in White Australia, I am interested in how naturalisation became a platform in which migrants

¹³ For an overview of migrant acculturation see, Christaine Harzig and Dirk Hoerder, with Donna Gabaccia, *What is Migration History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 103-10 and Hoerder, *People on the Move: Migration, Acculturation, and Ethnic Interaction in Europe and North America* (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1993). For Australian dynamics of migrant acculturation see, James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20-21.

¹⁴ On Australian historical studies on naturalisation, British subjecthood and citizenship see, Kartia Snoek, ‘Empire, Race, Naturalisation: the Naturalisation Act 1903 (Cth),’ *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 40:1 (2012), 103-127; Kate Bagnall, ‘Potter v. Minahan: Chinese Australians, the law and belonging in White Australia,’ *History Australia*, 15:3 (2018), 458–74; Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall, *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance* (Brill, 2015); Alastair Davidson, *From Subject to Citizen: Australian Citizenship in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60-61; John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Defining Australian Citizenship: Selected Documents* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 41-86; Peter Prince, “Aliens in Their Own Land: ‘Alien’ and the rule of law in colonial and post-federation Australia”, PhD Thesis: Australian National University, 2015, 18-20. On non-Anglo migrants and settler colonial culture see, Andonis Piperoglou, ‘Migrant-Cum-Settler: Greek Settler Colonialism in Australia,’ *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 38:2 (2020), 447-47; Andonis Piperoglou, ‘Rethinking Greek Migration as Settler Colonialism,’ *Ergon: Greek American Arts and Letters* (online, 2018); Laura Madokoro, ‘Peril and Possibility: A Contemplation of the Current State of Migration History and Settler Colonial Studies in Canada,’ *History Compass*, 16:12 (2018); and Laura Madokoro, ‘On Future Research Directions: Temporality and Permanency in the Study of Migration and Settler Colonialism in Canada,’ *History Compass* 16:12 (2018); Malissa Phung, “Are People of Colour Settlers Too?” in A. Mathur, J. et al, *Cultivating Canada : Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 289-96.

who were subjected to similar external representations chose to look upon White Australia as their permanent home.¹⁵ Recognising naturalisation as a facet of migrant acculturation has the potential to shift understandings of naturalisation away from a primarily legal phenomenon (imbued with the politics of citizenship rights and privileges) and towards recognising it as part of a powerful colonialist phenomenon (tied to a possessive property-whiteness nexus).¹⁶ My intention is not to provide a panoptic survey of Syrian and Greek naturalisation applications but something more tentative yet generative: to offer a number of insights into why and how people from the Mediterranean region who were frequently rendered to be on the periphery of Australian white racial typologies sought to demonstrate that they understood and recognised the value of adhering to dominant settler Australian cultural norms – norms, it should be noted, which upheld white supremacy and possessive notions of property ownership on the lands of Indigenous peoples and habitats.

In choosing to focus on naturalisation as a mode of migrant acculturation in settler Australia, this article echoes historical scholarship on the whiteness by acknowledging that ‘messiness’ was a ‘central characteristic of racial order.’¹⁷ After providing an overview on the application process for naturalisation, the article proceeds by exploring how Syrians contested

¹⁵ On Greeks and the transnational politics of whiteness see, Andonis Piperoglou, ‘Border Barbarisms, Albury 1904: Greeks and the Ambiguity of Whiteness,’ *Journal of Australian Politics and History*, 64:4 (2018), 529-543; Andonis Piperoglou, ‘Greeks or Turks, “White” or “Asiatic”: Historicising Castellorizian Racial-Consciousness, 1916–1920’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 40:4 (2016), 387-402; Andonis Piperoglou, ‘Favoured ‘Nordics’ and ‘Mediterranean scum’: transpacific hierarchies of desirability and immigration restriction,’ *History Australia*, 17:3 (2020), 510-524.

¹⁶ On property, whiteness and colonialism see, Cheryl I. Harris, ‘Whiteness as Property,’ *Harvard Law Review*, 106:8 (1993), 1707-1791; Aileen Morton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiii; Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ David Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 5 and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University press, 1999).

the naturalisation law. Here we will see how the phrase ‘aboriginal native of Asia’ was challenged, while building on historical scholarship which has examined how Syrians refuted notions of undesirability by recognising ‘the value of whiteness’.¹⁸ Next, we will return to Peter Kosmas Freeleagus and his brothers’ applications for naturalisation as means to explore how chain migration and the desire for property ownership rights rendered the Greek family as worthy of the privilege of naturalisation. The conditions of naturalisation, it is argued, ultimately relied upon migrants’ ability to perform their settler conformity.¹⁹ The motivation to naturalise, in other words, lead migrants that originated from eastern Mediterranean to outwardly identify with Australia as their permeant home. Finally, the article reflects on how Syrian and Greek engagements with the dynamics of naturalisation during the early twentieth century can be understood as part of the broader, multifaceted story of belonging in Australian settler culture.

Naturalisation, Race and Nation

As correspondence surrounding Bakhash’s and Freeleagus’ naturalisation applications demonstrate, the dynamics of naturalisation were steeped in the modern vernacular of race. In a country that was intent on bringing into being a new kind of ‘race-based’ polity, the acceptance of Syrian and Greek naturalisation applications was not straightforward.²⁰ This was

¹⁸ Ann Monsour, ‘Becoming White: How Early Syrian/Lebanese in Australia Recognised the Value of Whiteness’ in Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey, Katherine Ellinghaus, (eds.), *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the Construction of an Identity* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing in association with the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2007), 124-132. See also, Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 52-80.

¹⁹ On performance and naturalisation see, John Tehranian, ‘Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America,’ *The Yale Law Journal*, 109:4 (2000), 817-849.

²⁰ Marilyn Lake, *Progressive New World: How Settler Colonialism and Transpacific Exchange Shaped American Reform* (Harvard: Harvard University Press), 6.

especially because each migrant group originated from islands, villages, towns, and cities in that teetered on the imagined boundaries that separated Europe from Asia.²¹ Questions of a Greek migrant's *desirability* or Syrians migrant's *undesirability* rested on notions of their *ability* to maintain the racial hegemony of 'pure' white settlement and uphold 'progressive' democratic advancement in the new world.²² The arrival of people from the eastern Mediterranean therefore caused confusion among Australian legislators and bureaucrats who were keen to ensure that a 'certificate of naturalisation was issued only to persons of European descent'.²³ As Littleton Groom, protectionist Member of Parliament for the seat of Darling Downs in Queensland noted, 'Australian citizenship should be conferred only upon persons of European blood'.²⁴ Yet, what constituted a person of 'European blood' or an 'aboriginal native of Asia' was contentious. According to South Australian Senator Thomas Playford, for example, 'The term "Asia" included Syrians and others, who are as white as we are'.²⁵

²¹ Historian Philip Mansel describes this geographical region as 'at once Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, Ottoman and European, nationalist and international ... where mosques, churches and synagogues were built side by side'. See, Philip Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 1-2.

²² Marilyn Lake, *Progressive New World*, 6. On histories of migrant desirability in Australia see, J.P. Smith, "From promising settler to undesirable immigrant: The deportation of British-born migrants from mental hospitals in interwar Australia and South Africa", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46:3 (2018), 502–523; Val Colic-Peisker, "'At Least You're the Right Colour': Identity and Social Inclusion of Bosnian Refugees in Australia", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31:4 (2005), 615-638; and Mark Finnane and Andy Kaladelfos, "Australia's Long History of Immigration, Policing and the Criminal Law" in *Crimmigration in Australia* by Peter Billins (eds.), (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 9-37.

²³ Littleton Groom, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 9 September 1903, 1st Parliament, 2nd Session. Accessed from https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1903/19030909_reps_1_16/#debate-8 12 February 2020.

²⁴ Littleton Groom, House of Representatives, 9 September 1903, 1st Parliament, 2nd Session Accessed from https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1903/19030909_reps_1_16/#debate-8 12 February 2020.

²⁵ Thomas Playford, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 9 July 1903, 1st Parliament, 2nd Session. Accessed from https://historichansard.net/senate/1903/19030709_senate_1_14/#debate-4-s15 12 February 2020.

When the *Naturalization Act* (1903) was enacted, it removed the power of State authorities to grant naturalisation and gave the Commonwealth discretionary powers to do so.²⁶ As a process of obtaining legal entitlement, naturalisation required ‘aliens’ – usually, but not always, migrants – to renounce their previous allegiances and convert to the status of British subjecthood. Passed during a period of heightened anxieties over undesirable non-white immigration, the law and the heavily technocratic process that administered it became a key area for determining who could and could not access the material conditions that came with full participation in the racialised confines of Australian society. As the modern concepts of race and citizenship emerged ‘in close historical proximity to each other’, Australia’s naturalisation law offers a distinct vantage point from which to explore this historical propinquity.²⁷

Historical studies on naturalisation and British subjecthood have experienced renewed interest in recent years, with investigations inspired by conceptual insights provided by new imperial and transnational history.²⁸ Some studies have, to be sure, identified parallel developments between Australian citizenship and migrant acculturation, yet specific historical analysis on the interface between acculturation and naturalisation is sparse.²⁹ In 1963, for example, Charles Price noted in his formative work *Southern Europeans in Australia*, that

²⁶ David Dutton, *One of Us?: A Century of Australian Citizenship* (Sydney: New South Wales Press, 2002), 11.

²⁷ Patrick Wolfe, ‘Race and Citizenship,’ *OAH Magazine of History*, October 2004, 66.

²⁸ See for example, Kartia Snoek, ‘Empire, Race, Naturalisation: the Naturalisation Act 1903 (Cth),’ *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 40:1 (2012), 103-127; Kate Bagnall, ‘Potter v. Minahan: Chinese Australians, the law and belonging in White Australia,’ *History Australia*, 15:3 (2018), 458–74; Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall, *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance* (Brill, 2015).

²⁹ See for example, Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 156-158; Brian Galligan, Martina Boese and Melissa Phillips, *Becoming Australian: Migration, Settlement, Citizenship* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014), 141, 145-146; Helen Irving, ‘Citizenship and Subject-Hood in 20th Century Australia,’ in Pierre Boyer, Linda Cardinal, and David Headon, *From Subjects to Citizens: A Hundred Years of Citizenship in Australia and Canada* (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 2004), 9-18.

naturalisation files, which go back to the early days of colonial intrusion, offer full details concerning a migrants' village or town of birth, date of arrival, occupation, and place of residence. More recent files, he adds, also give details of parents, marriage, children, dates, and places of settlement in Australia, and ability to read and speak English.³⁰ Moreover, the associated paperwork required for applying for naturalisation was largely straightforward but the process by which applications were assessed was rather opaque. The details required to judge if someone should be granted a naturalisation certificate were clearly numbered on application forms, significant phrasing was pre-typed, and prompts on the form's margins gave an applicant a clear signal about what to write down. In section two of the Commonwealth's 'Application for the Certificate of Naturalisation', the words 'I am by birth a ...' was pre-typed and in the left margin instructions guided an applicant by noting, 'State "German Subject" or "French Citizen" etc., as case requires'. Once an application form was filled out a signed Statutory Declaration and Oath of Allegiance was attached and sent off to the Department of External Affairs for assessment.

As the differing assessments and associated correspondence in both Bakhsh's and Freeleagus' respective applications reveal, however, there was a significant amount of individual discretion on the part of bureaucratic officials. An uneven and variable assessment process, for example, sometimes resulted in an applicant appealing an initial decision and further documentation, like letters of support, was sometimes supplied. This 'elasticity' within the law, as Secretary Hunt wrote in 1914 in a memorandum to the Minister for External Affairs, was deliberately designed so government officials could exclude applicants on the basis of racial undesirability. Yet, while there had been 'practically unanimity respecting the black, brown and yellow races,' considerable issues arose on 'questions relating to the admission of Syrians.' 'So far as their general appearance goes', Hunt added, 'they cannot be distinguished

³⁰ Charles Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1963), 15.

from the people of Southern Italy, Spain or Greece.’³¹ Despite this confusion over how to racially place Syrians, applications for naturalisation - whether they were successful or not - offer a condensed biography of migrant lives. Moreover, applications not only reveal a desire for political status but also demarcated proof of a migrant’s appeal to belong to the nation, ‘by having assumed its language and thus access to its culture’.³² As we shall see, when Syrians and Greeks applied for naturalisation, albeit in different ways, they were keen to prove that their cultural heritages and modes of settlement were in unison with the expectations of the settler state.

Syrians Perform Adaptability

The question of whether Syrians met the racial requirement of the naturalisation law became divisive almost immediately after the Act was legislated. In May 1904, for instance, the definition of ‘aboriginal native of Asia’ was brought into question when Joseph Bakhsh applied for naturalisation from Charters Towers in Queensland. Describing himself as a ‘draper’ and a ‘citizen of the United States of America, having been born in New York of Syrian parentage’, Bakhsh’s application seemed to explicitly challenge the exclusionary specificity of the Act.³³ When considering the application, Secretary Hunt wrote a

³¹ Memorandum sent by Secretary Atlee Hunt to Minister for External Affairs, cited in A. T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration To Australia: The Background to Exclusion 1896-1923* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 141-142.

³² Alastair Davidson, *From Subject to Citizen: Australian Citizenship in the Twentieth Century*, 42; See also, Trevor Batrouney, ‘From ‘White Australia’ to Multiculturalism: citizenship and identity’ in Ghassan Hage (ed.) *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 37-62; Ann Monsour, *Not Quite White: Lebanese and the White Australian Policy 1880-1947* (Teneriffe: Post Pressed, 2010), 51-60; Kate Bagnall, ‘Anglo-Chinese and the Politics of Overseas Travel from New South Wales, 1898 to 1925’ in Kate Bagnall and Sophie Couchman (eds.), *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance* (Brill, 2008), 211; Rachel Bright, ‘Migration, naturalisation, and the ‘British’ world, c.1900-1920,’ *The Journal of Research Institute for the History of Global Arms Transfer*, 10 (2020), 27-44.

³³ Joseph Bakhsh Application for Certificate of Naturalization, 24 May 1904, NAA (ACT): A1, 1904/4079

memorandum to the Minister for External Affairs, noting that although Bakhash was ‘of [the] Asiatic race’ he was ‘not a native of Asia’ and therefore ‘he is not in strictness debarred from applying for naturalisation’.³⁴ ‘As, however,’ he continued, ‘the intention of parliament apparently was to refuse the privilege of naturalisation to persons of Asiatic descent,’ he sought advice to enforce his authoritative discretion under the provision of section 7 of the Act, which allowed applications to be admitted or rejected without reason.³⁵ Although Bakhash’s application was ‘duly considered’ he was not issued with a certificate.³⁶

While there is no evidence of Bakhash protesting the decision, some Syrian migrants did contest being labelled as ‘aboriginal natives of Asia’. When Richard Dimitri Saleeby was refused naturalization, for example, he openly challenged the racialised limitation of the law. His refutation was loaded in an acculturating logic that revealed his pre-migratory sense of self was tied to civilisational, linguistic, and racial claims of acceptability. First, he noted that ‘the modern Syrian has no relation whatsoever to the ancient Aboriginal Syrians’. Second, he claimed that ‘the Syrian language is not spoken by the present nation, although they are called Syrians’. Thirdly, he professed that ‘the lineal line’ of his ‘ancestors’ dated ‘back from the Crusaders, as the name of the family bears this contention out, being the literal Arabic translation of ‘Crusaders’. And, finally, he made an explicit claim to the whiteness of Syrians, declaring ‘the modern Syrians are admitted to be of the white or Caucasian races of the world and no coloured stigma has ever been attributed’ to them. Saleeby’s contestation over the term ‘aboriginal native’ was seriously considered but it was decided that the restrictive phrase was ‘meant to be a practical modern distinction’ and ‘not a distinction depending on knowledge of

³⁴ Memorandum from the Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 7 June 1904, NAA (ACT): A1, 1904/4079

³⁵ Memorandum from the Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 7 June 1904, NAA (ACT): A1, 1904/4079

³⁶ Letter from the Hon. Charles McDonald, M.P. to Secretary Atlee Hunt, 3 August 1904, NAA (ACT): A1, 1904/4079

the obscure beginnings of history'. As the Attorney General Henry Higgins ruled, 'a person of Syrian race born in Syria is an aboriginal native of Asia within the meaning of the Act'.³⁷ Clearly, Saleeby' ancestral, linguistic, and racial claims did not hold sway within the limitations of the Act and he was again refused naturalisation.³⁸

Later in November 1914, Saleeby wrote to the Mayor of Redfern, John Leitch, to make a representation on his behalf for the purposes of acquiring naturalisation. This time, however, his civilisational and racist claims to be of European ancestry were abandoned for a narrative of respectable settlement. He noted that he has been 'a resident in the Commonwealth for over 20 years', had engaged with a series of commercial endeavours, established a self-run business, was 'married to an Australian born lady', and had four children. He emotively added:

I cannot view myself but as an Australian since all my interest and my whole life are devoted to the best interest and welfare of my adopted home. You have no idea ... of the cruel injustice the Naturalisation Law inflicts upon men whose only crime is their birthplace while in every other respect may be far above the average citizen and certainly superior to many so called desirables.³⁹

Mayor Leitch forwarded his letter to the Department of External Affairs together with a letter of support that further advanced his claim. It was noted that he was 'well educated,

³⁷ Letter from Attorney-General Henry B. Higgins to the Minister for External Affairs, 9 June 1904. *Selected Opinions of Attorneys-General of the Commonwealth of Australia with Opinions of Solicitors-General and the Attorney-General's Department, 1901-50*, Vol. 4, 251. Accessed online: <https://legalopinions.ag.gov.au/> See also, Anne Monsour, *Not Quite White: Lebanese and the White Australian Policy 1880-1947*, 33.

³⁸ Although not always successful, Monsour reveals the practice of claiming to be European rather than Asian was deliberate and widespread among Syrian who wished to circumvent the limitations of naturalisation. Between 1904-1905, for example, several applicants claimed to be 'Italian', 'European Turks', and 'Greeks'. By 1905, however, Mansour suggests that the Department of External Affairs became aware that some Syrian applicants were claiming false nationalities and subsequently enforced a stricter program of assessment. See, Ann Monsour, *Not Quite White: Lebanese and the White Australian Policy 1880-1947*, 68.

³⁹ Department of External Affairs Correspondence Files, Annual Single Number Series: Naturalisation of Asiatic, 1911-1955, NAA: CRS A1 15/3101, cited in Trevor Batrouney, 'From 'White Australia' to Multiculturalism: citizenship and identity,' 45-46.

businesslike, respectable, and thoroughly Australian in sentiment'. Syrians in his municipality, the Mayor added, had donated significant funds to the 'Lord Mayor's Patriotic Fund' and the 'building of our South Sydney Hospital', revealing 'great Public spirit and kindness', 'industry and shrewdness'. 'Being put on a level with Chinese, Lascars, etc.,' the Mayor concluded, 'hurts them very much, as they claim that they are Caucasians and not Asiatics. Can you help him to get naturalised, for his wife and children's sake, as well as his own. (they are Australian born).'⁴⁰

As the correspondence that surrounded Saleeby's applications for naturalisation suggests, the ability for some Syrians to be seen as worthy of naturalised British subjecthood rested on conditional prerequisites in which only total assimilation would be tolerated. In an environment where Syrians fell into a sector of Australian racial typology fraught with ambiguity, they began to rely heavily on their ability to performatively prove their assimilability to convince bureaucratic administrators of their merit. Performance of acculturation was evident in two ways. First, an applicant could point to a selective historical consciousness in which civilisational, and linguistic lineage was aligned with racial notions of Europeanness, and therefore with the imagined racial parameters of the Australian settler state. Second an applicant could point to both his personal dramaturgy of Anglo settler conformity and the integration of Syrians more broadly into the core settler values of self-reliance, Asian exclusion, public-spiritedness, and loyalty. In this sense, the process of applying for naturalisation created a platform in which Syrians sought to perform a new self-understanding of themselves as respectable, adaptable, and, above all, permanent members of Australian society. As they encountered and interpreted the exclusive limitations of the law, distinctions between language and civilisational ancestry became less significant and outwardly performing

⁴⁰Department of External Affairs Correspondence Files, Annual Single Number Series: Naturalisation of Asiatic, 1911-1955, NAA: CRS A1 15/3101, cited in Trevor Batrouney, 'From 'White Australia' to Multiculturalism: citizenship and identity,' 45-46.

one's permanency became a key criterion. Such conformity was also expressed in Greek applications for naturalisation, albeit via a different mode of proving their acculturation.

Greeks Claim Permanent Settlement

When Greek migrant Peter Kosma Freeleagus applied for naturalisation in 1909 the constructed yet pervasive use of race in the naturalisation law meant that bureaucratic administrators sought to ascertain if he was a 'coloured man'.⁴¹ The confirmation that he was 'not coloured', however, did not prevent the External Affairs Department from questioning the racial status of two of his brothers when they applied for naturalisation in 1911. In response to the department's questioning, the Under Secretary in Brisbane established that George Freeleagus was 'a person of good character and he is not a coloured man', while Anthony Freeleagus was described to show 'a very high character' and was 'not a coloured man'.⁴² Despite affirmation that they were not coloured, the prohibitive clause of the Act clearly created speculative concern in relation to the racial desirability of Greeks. In 1920, however, the prohibitive clause of the Act was inadvertently removed when the Commonwealth adopted the new *Nationality Act*. The Act made no reference to race, based on the *British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act* 1914, and completely removed the phrase 'aboriginal native' from the limitations of the law.⁴³ Although it was expected that exclusions were based on more flexible racial

⁴¹ Letter from Secretary of the Department of External Affairs to the Under Secretary, NAA: A1,1909/13408 (ACT).

⁴² Letter to Department of External Affairs, George Kosma FREELEAGUS – Naturalization, NAA: A1, 1911/5377; and Under Secretary Letter to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, NAA: A1, 1911/6207 (ACT). All the Freeleagus brothers were related to Christy Kosmas Freeleagus, the Greek Consul in Australia. Born in 1888, Christy Freeleagus had migrated from the island of Kythera in 1901 and by 1907 he had naturalized and established *Freeleagus Bros.*, in Brisbane. The business flourished and through the processes of chain-migration he was able to support the settlement of numerous family members and friends. See, Andonis Piperoglou, "Envisioning Greek Refugees as 'Farmers for Australia': Christy Freeleagus, Land Settlement and Immigration Restriction in White Australia," *Australian Historical Studies*, 52/1, 2021, 106-122.

⁴³ See, David Dutton, *One of Us?: A Century of Australian Citizenship*, 42.

assessments, the *Nationality Act 1920* required government officials to ask applicants a series of questions in an effort to gain a more fulsome picture of an alien's fitness for naturalisation. From 1921 onwards, another six of Freeleagus' brothers applied for naturalisation and their responses to the new interrogative procedure reveal a particular pattern in how the Freeleagus family positioned themselves as worthy of naturalised British subjecthood.

In 1921, Manuel Freeleagus and Charles Freeleagus applied. Manuel's application noted he was a 'shop assistant' at *Samios Bros.* in Tamworth and had been 'living in Australia 12 years' since his arrival from Greece in 1909. As added proof of his credibility, his application consisted of letters of recommendation by local members of the Tamworth community. A letter from the proprietor of the auction house, *Nathan Cohen and Co.* noted that he spoke 'English rather fluently', while another letter from a local hairdresser asserted that he was 'a well behaved young man' with 'a good grip of English language and habits. I have no hesitation', the hairdresser concluded, 'in recommending that he is a fit and proper person to become a naturalised subject'.⁴⁴ Charles Freeleagus' application, however, was submitted with a letter from his brother Christy Freeleagus. Christy was the Greek Consul in Brisbane, arrived in Australia in 1901, and was naturalised in 1907.⁴⁵ His letter noted that his brother was 'personally known' to him and that 'he is a of good character and repute'.⁴⁶ When each applicant was asked why they were applying for naturalisation their answers suggested a not immaterial embrace of a particular aspect of settler culture. Manuel noted, for example,

⁴⁴ M. (Manuel) Freeleagus Naturalization, NAA: A1, 1921/19740 (ACT)

⁴⁵ For more on Christy Freeleagus' role as Greek Consul in Brisbane see, Andonis Piperoglou, 'Memorialisation of Hector Vasyli: Civilisational Prestige, Imperial Association and Greek Migrant Performance,' in Philip Payton and Andrekos Varnava, *Australia, Migration and Empire* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 253-276.

⁴⁶ Report on Application for Nationalisation by Charles Kosma Freeleagus, NAA: A1, 1921/2877 (ACT).

that he ‘wishes to settle permanently in this country’, while Charles declared that ‘he is in business and wishes to reside in Australia permanently’.⁴⁷

Such claims were also evident when a further four Freeleagus brothers applied. In 1923, Nicholas Freeleagus declared that his reason for applying was because he ‘is buying a home and desires to hold the Title Deeds when payments completed and also to secure the usual rights and privileges of Australian citizenship’.⁴⁸ Also applying in 1923, Demetrios Freeleagus application similarly declared that he wished to ‘to secure the usual privileges of citizenship as he had no intentions of going abroad’.⁴⁹ In 1924 and 1926, John Freeleagus and Denes Freeleagus also declared that property ownership and permanent settlement were the key reasons for seeking naturalisation. John Freeleagus noted that he wished ‘to obtain the usual privileges as he intends remaining in Australia permanently’.⁵⁰ In an similar vein, Denes Freeleagus stated that he intended ‘to secure the usual privileges and to acquire property’, adding that the wished to ‘reside here permanently’.⁵¹ In making such claims all the Freeleagus brothers revealed that they had given up their allegiances to Greece and perceived themselves as acculturated.

By outwardly claiming that they ‘came to stay’ the assimilatory capacity of the Freeleagus brothers was put on show.⁵² As property rights were contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with racist naturalisation law, applying for naturalised British subjecthood

⁴⁷ M. (Manuel) Freeleagus Naturalization, NAA: A1, 1921/19740 (ACT); Report on Application for Nationalisation by Charles Kosma Freeleagus, NAA: A1, 1921/2877 (ACT).

⁴⁸ Report on Application for Naturalisation by Nicholas K. Freeleagus (Greek), NAA: A1, 1923/18636 (ACT).

⁴⁹ Report on Application for Nationalisation by Demetrios Kosma Freeleagus, NAA: A1, 1923/18635 (ACT).

⁵⁰ Report on Application for Nationalisation by John Kosma Freeleagus, NAA: A1, 1924/13528 (ACT).

⁵¹ Report on Application for Nationalisation by Denes Freeleagus, NAA: A1, 1926/7019 (ACT).

⁵² Patrick Wolfe, ‘Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race,’ *The American Historical Review*, 106:3 (2001), 868.

conferred upon applicants a way in which to outwardly claim belonging as settler colonisers. In this context, how questionable migrants applied for naturalisation was not just a means to access certain privileges but also a powerful mode in which to officially claim a desire for private property ownership and therefore mark out themselves as committed settlers – as individuals who desired to be permanent inclusions. Along with their desire to own property and learn the English language and habits, this shade of their performative behaviour, seemed to hold strong favour in the minds of naturalisation officials. Demonstrating a cultural affinity with the dynamics of Anglo settler culture and originating from an acceptable European country, all the Freeleagus brothers were granted naturalisation certificates.

While administration over naturalisation often grew absurd, with administrative and political overseers delving into the literal meaning of the exclusionary limitation of the law and adopting sweeping, amalgamating racial terms like ‘coloured’ to make and justify their assessments, the reification of naturalisation clearly had a profound impact on shaping how the Freeleagus brothers understood their assimilability in Australia. Moreover, because naturalisation was transformed into a material concept imbued with right and privileges, attesting to one’s desire to permanently settle and own property went a long way in verifying and eventually enacting a view of Greeks as desirable and reputable migrants who were deserving of British subjecthood and therefore belonged. In a different vein to Syrians, a particular performance standard evolved in which Greeks, via chain-migration, social conduct, and language choice, could work the ambiguous inclusivity of naturalisation to their advantage. Ultimately, racial determination became more than a scientific or popular understating of the limitation of the law. Instead, an incentive arose in which the Freeleagus family began to learn how to demonstrate their assimilative behaviour through a performance criterion which adhered to racial limitations that were inherent in the specificity of the law. The performative criterion of declaring a desire to own property and permanently settle was of great importance.

It played a primary role in upholding an Anglo settler culture in which migrants from the eastern Mediterranean co-contributed to establishing and maintaining a racial economic order of subordination – an economic order which ensured naturalised non-Anglo migrants held significant economic and political rights over non-naturalised Indigenous, Pasifika, and Asian populations.

Conclusion: Acculturation via Naturalisation

In recent years scholars of migration, British subjecthood, and citizenship have started paying more serious attention to issues concerning the meaning and experience of naturalisation. In addition, historical scholarship has maintained that the social construction of race should always be understood as relational, and in process. In the case of Syrian and Greek experiences of naturalisation, however, scholarship has examined, with few exceptions, the operation of naturalisation as a facet of legal exclusion. A focus on racial undesirability has resulted in ethnically focused singular narratives, which, while accounting for changes in racial classification over the time, have paid only cursory attention to the cultural performances that applying for naturalisation could invoke. The focus adopted here reveals that exploring the contested meaning and processes of naturalisation can provide a picture of how two distinct (un)desirable migrant groups performatively applied for naturalisation in similar, yet separate, ways.

The extent to which some Syrian and Greek migrants could prove their acculturation was dependent on a system whereby performance of Europeanness (and thereby compatibility with settler colonial expectations of White Australia) became the key criterion for racial determination. Applicants demonstrated evidence of settler conformity and racial suitability through the performance of character, civilisational origins, religious practices and beliefs, class orientation, language use, family structure, and desire to permanently settle. The pre-

requisites of naturalisation thereby sent a clear message to migrants: the rights enjoyed by British subjects could only be obtained through assimilatory behaviour. Becoming a naturalised British subject in Australia was, in other words, a *quid pro quo* for performing acculturation into an Anglo settler culture.

Such an analysis offers insight into how suspect migrant groups experienced and engaged with both the exclusionary *and* inclusionary dynamics of race and naturalisation, while also providing an awareness that racialised forms of citizenship could create firm non-Anglo performances of difference and belonging that rested on the intersecting identifications with race, labour, language, family, civilisational heritage, subjecthood, and nationality. For Syrians like Bakhash and Saleeby, being classified as coloured encouraged them to participate in the racialisation of those who remained non-white. While this may have helped Syrians attempt to assimilate more quickly, it also helped perpetuate a discourse of exclusion in which other migrant groups were marked as unwelcome, ineligible for citizenship and full membership in the settler nation. For Greeks like the Freeleagus brothers, becoming naturalised seemed to mean gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, economic survival. Acquiring British subjecthood increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination. The desire to own property illustrates the valorisation of naturalisation as a treasured entitlement in the settler colonial polity. Indeed, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status increasingly became an asset that Syrians and Greeks sought to protect and that those who thought they could pass sought to attain. Thus, one of the unfortunate, if unintended, consequences of Syrian and Greek struggles for naturalisation was that it helped refine legal arguments that repeatedly called into the question the suitability of non-Europeans to become Australian British subjects.

The bond created by acquiring naturalisation was clearly something of immense importance to Syrian and Greek migrants. According to assessments of naturalisation records, by 1921 slight under three thousand Syrian males had settled in Australia, and by 1940 slightly over ten thousand Greek males were granted naturalisation.⁵³ The Greek Consul in Queensland, Christy Freeleagus, who supported the naturalisation applications of his brothers and many other Greeks was correct in refuting anti-Greek sentiment in 1924 by noting that most Greeks were naturalised and ‘law abiding citizens, whose loyalty were unquestioned’.⁵⁴ Across the emergent and increasingly visible Syrian Australian and Greek Australian diasporas, because of the saliency of racial categories, the debate around the question ‘To what nation to we belong?’ was also a loaded one that was steeped in a possessive settler culture in which whiteness and desire for property ownership overlapped. This question would have far-reaching impact on the course of Syrian and Greek diasporation in Australia.

Although, as some studies suggest, naturalisation over time became less racially based, further research could focus more specifically on the everyday connotations of what naturalisation meant to (un)desirable migrant groups in Australia. Such research would allow us to better understand how the intersecting realms of law, policy, and bureaucratic oversight historically intersected and how non-Anglo migrants performatively adapted to and acquired a knowledge of the loaded arena of Australia’s racial politics, while permitting insight into how obtaining a naturalisation certificate could act as a status symbol or emblematic representation of cultural loss within migrant communities themselves.

To conclude then, my intent here is to move naturalisation to the foreground of historiography on migrant acculturation. The story of naturalisation for Syrians and Greeks in Australia has long been held as a saga of aliens and non-citizens, a complex interplay between

⁵³ Yarwood, *Asian Migration To Australia*, 163; and Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, 21.

⁵⁴ C. Freeleagus, ‘Encroachment of Greeks’, *Brisbane Courier*, 8 December 1924, 5.

dominions and empire, and as a story of legal exclusion and inclusion in relation to notions of racial (un)desirability. Becoming a naturalised British subject set a standard upon which becoming Australian, as an ideal, was presumed to ensure civic status and rights; becoming naturalised, at least within the confines of bureaucratic administration, was meant to officially recast Syrian and Greek allegiances. To become a naturalised British subject in Australia, in other words, was rendered desirable and necessary for migrants who wished to become settlers. Yet, this story begins to fade once one recognizes how crucial the mutable dynamics of race, and specifically whiteness, was to Greeks' and Syrians' ability to apply for naturalisation; how profoundly dependent their inclusion was on *their* exclusion of others; how intertwined their prospect of becoming a naturalised British subject was with their ability to perform their acculturation into a dominant Anglo settler culture. Race was not anomalous to the working of Australian naturalisation, but fundamental to it. Being a migrant that was a desirable racial type carried significant weight. The historical contingency of how people deemed to be ambiguously whites, like Greeks and Syrians, used the rules of naturalisation to perform their acculturation can therefore be viewed as an opportunity to reframe the story of Australian citizenship as part of a broader odyssey of how (un)desirable migrants thought of themselves as Australian.⁵⁵ In recognising that the making of Australian citizenship was interrelated to the processes of migrant acculturation, it may be possible to further understand how race was built and maintained by migrant groups who held their own culturally specific understandings of the Australian nation. Recasting the story of naturalisation as a performative process of migrant acculturation into settler culture is a single step towards recognising the variegated ways that colonialism in Australia was moulded and reworked during the first half of the twentieth century by an assortment of people who have often been sidelined.

⁵⁵ Piperoglou, 'Border Barbarisms, Albury 1904: Greeks and the Ambiguity of Whiteness,' 531.

