Displaced persons in Queensland: Stuart migrant camp

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Abstract

This article examines the lived experience and recent commemorative efforts relating to the experience of displaced prsons who were sent to Queensland in the post-war period. 170,000 displaced persons — predominantly Central and Eastern Europeans — arrived in Australia between 1947 and 1952. They were sent to reception and training centres upon their arrival before commencing a two-year indentured labour contract. Memorialisation of these camps tends to present them as the founding places of the migrant experience in Australia; however, there has been very little historical work on displaced persons in Queensland, or on the Queensland migrant camps — Wacol, Enoggera, Stuart and Cairns. This article focuses on recent commemorative attempts surrounding the Stuart migrant camp in order to argue that, in relation to displaced persons, family and community memories drive commemorative activities.

Introduction

Julie Johnston's recent play, *Displaced*, opens upon a scene of an elderly Queenslander, Tobiasz, rummaging through photographs, unable to find the ones for which he is looking. Frustrated, he exclaims: 'I be here somewhere. I will find myself in here one day'.[1] Tobiasz was a Polish post-war displaced person, and he is searching for traces of his old life: in Poland, in European displaced persons camps and in Queensland, where he was sent to Stuart migrant camp in Townsville before working on the railways. His cry is echoed by many now elderly displaced persons and their descendants, who struggle to find traces of their past in stories and in material culture.

Some 170,000 displaced persons arrived in Australia as International Refugee Organisation (IRO) sponsored refugees between 1947 and 1952. They were Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Yugoslav, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Czech and Russian: former voluntary and forced labourers of the Reich, Axis (but non-German) soldiers in military units who had withdrawn westwards and civilian evacuees who had also fled west from the oncoming Russian Army. Some were young, single men who had attempted to outrun the encroaching Iron Curtain after the war ended.

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Most were anti-communist and refused, in the post-war period, to repatriate from Germany back to Soviet bloc countries.[2]

Australia's decision to embark upon this radical new immigration program — the first involving a mass intake of non-British migrants — was part of an unparalleled post-war reconstruction effort. The risk for the government was that the migrant intake scheme would backfire, exacerbating the housing crisis and causing nationwide unemployment. Australia's first Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, thus decided to provide directed employment on similar lines to that enforced on Italian prisoners of war. All displaced persons between the ages of sixteen and fifty, except for mothers with young children, were assigned work placements; upon arrival, men were categorised as 'labourers' and women as 'domestics'. Accommodation (the cost of which was charged to the migrant) was arranged by gender. After the initial stay in a reception and training centre, breadwinners were housed in workers' hostels, concrete barracks and tents, although they sometimes returned to the main camp during times of industrial unrest or temporary unemployment. Meanwhile, mothers and children moved to dependants holding centres, often with great distances between breadwinners and dependants. For breadwinners, visits back to holding camps were time-consuming and expensive. For female dependants, this family separation could feel as though they were being 'held as hostages' for the breadwinner's 'parole'.[3]

Bonegilla was the largest and longest-running migrant camp. Its central location, equidistant between Sydney and Melbourne, allowed it to serve as a labour distribution point to several states. Other sites used were in Bathurst in New South Wales, Woodside in South Australia and Northam in Western Australia. Greta, near Newcastle, primarily channelled refugees to Queensland. Smaller camps included Benalla, Mildura, Rushworth, West Sale and Somers in Victoria; Cowra, Parkes, Scheyville and Uranquinty in New South Wales; Cairns, Enoggera, Stuart and Wacol in Queensland; Finsbury, Glenelg and Mallala in South Australia; Brighton and Burnie in Tasmania; Cunderin and Graylands in Western Australia; and Hillside in the Australian Capital Territory. There has been very little historical work on the displaced persons in Queensland, or the Queensland migrant camps: Wacol and Enoggera in Brisbane, Stuart in Townsville and Cairns. This article focuses on recent commemorative attempts surrounding the Stuart migrant camp, which served mainly as a dependants holding centre, in order to argue that in relation to displaced persons, family and community memories drive commemorative activities.

Physical remnants of most camps, including those in Queensland, are now slight or non-existent. However, since the 1980s, multiculturalism has created a more receptive environment for the commemoration of migrant sites, particularly with regard to Bonegilla, which is now hailed by migrants and community leaders as a founding place of multicultural identity: Australia's 'Ellis Island'. Historian Alexandra Dellios has described official and heritage narratives surrounding Bonegilla as describing 'a place of ethnic and migrant significance, a symbol of the successful post-war migration programme, of national progress and multicultural success'.[4] Nationality-specific histories and exhibitions, usually incorporating oral testimony and photographs – both at Bonegilla and elsewhere – are now commonplace. Sometimes these accounts can be simplistic and somewhat anachronistic celebrations of multiculturalism. State agencies have used the mythology

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surrounding migrant reception camps to construct their own images of a 'successful immigration program', and later a successful multicultural society, while some migrant groups and cultural workers have sought to include the camp system in a national narrative of inclusive multiculturalism. More recently, historian Sara Wills has suggested a further reimagining of migrant camp sites as offering a 'pre-history' of contemporary refugee detention centres, a place to 'reconfigure the nation's pain and shame' in relation to Australia's current refugee regime.[5]

Glenda Sluga was the first historian to identify a competing, or perhaps parallel, narrative: that of a vernacular 'migrant dreaming'.[6] This foundation myth has been driven by ex-residents and their families, and by ethnic communities. As historian and Bonegilla heritage worker Bruce Pennay notes, 'for former residents, a specific centre is an "originary" place: it still appears to be high on the emotional register of those who once were newcomers'.[7] For contemporary visitors, 'above all else, Bonegilla is about family history': migrant camps are staging posts in their own personal migration experiences.[8] In this sense, these sites attract individual memories, which together reveal complex themes of transnational identities, intergenerational conflict, historical agency and identity, war trauma and mental illness, unmitigated sorrow and also familial happiness. For displaced persons and their families, the liminal spaces of the migrant camps may contain lots of disparate and personal experience, while still being temporary spaces that have little (relative) importance in their own histories. This article examines how such individual and family memories have worked to commemorate the 'indefinite and occasional nature' of the small migrant holding centre at Stuart.[9]

Displaced persons in Queensland: Work

Integral to the displaced persons' labour scheme was the requirement that the DPs 'should not be placed in employment for which suitable Australian workers are available or under circumstances leading to the displacement of Australian workers'.[10] Displaced persons were not to be free market workers, but rather government-directed 'language-deficient unskilled labourers', who were brought to Australia to 'do the donkey work in the programme of expansion'.[11] As historian Catherine Panich notes, the displaced persons were a 'trapped labour force'.[12] The Australian Sugar Producers' Association, which struggled with attracting enough labour to the Queensland cane fields, quickly sent a letter to the Department of Immigration, which stated: 'Not to try those Balts as canecutters would rather be looking a gift horse in the mouth.'[13] The displaced persons were soon lauded by the industry as 'saviours' of the sugar crop.[14]

Around 14,000 displaced persons were directed from Bonegilla to Queensland. This was about 8 per cent of the national total. As historian Raymond Evans notes, the post-war immigration waves 'washed only feebly against Queensland shores'.[15] It does seem, though, that perhaps displaced persons were initially 'accepted readily' and received a warmer welcome in Queensland than in other states, particularly in a far north suffering from labour shortages and accustomed to migrant workers.[16] Two thousand DPs were directed to cut cane (and thus made up around one-third of cutters in North Queensland in this period), and the rest were sent to work for various employers, including sawmills, stone quarries, hospitals, factories and various government departments: Defence, Main Roads, the Railways, Irrigation

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and Water Supply, and the Mineral Department.[17] Accommodation outside the main camps of Wacol, Enoggera, Stuart and Cairns was varied, with some men living in camps in the bush for years.[18]

Historian and second-generation Yugoslavian displaced person Bianka Vidonja Balazategui has described how those selected for cane-cutting were usually grouped together in 'gangs' of eight men and a cook, who travelled by train to the various sugar towns. They were met by a farmer-employer and by representatives of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), the Queensland Cane Growers' Association and the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), and were then taken to buy work clothes and food, the cost of which would be taken from their first pay. At farms, accommodation was in barracks.[19] The hard manual labour was paid contract style, with no set hours; the justification was that 'the more you worked, the more you got'.[20] Employers talked the work up: 'You young fellows will all be millionaires in 12 months!'[21] Lithuanian DP Ignas later recalled, 'I was told by the recruitment officer that if I worked there for about one season I could buy a block of land and a house and everything: it was a lot of money,'[22] The government advised that 'Queensland is tropical or semi-tropical and the work is hard if the earnings are to be high'.[23] Others were warned, 'You won't die, but you'll almost die.'[24]

Most displaced persons were nonplussed upon their arrival in North Queensland. Many had not done any hard physical work for years, if ever. Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui notes that one of the new 'gangs' was made up of a teacher, an opera singer, a chef and an architectural student; another included a barber and a saxophone player.[25] One North Queensland cane farmer at Ingham railway station, apparently unimpressed by the physiques of the displaced persons, began to squeeze some men's biceps. One of the men shouted, 'Have a look at my teeth too!' and 'growled at him'.[26] They were all unprepared for the hard labour in the tropical heat. A gang of Polish ex-soldiers, who had been supplied with surplus army dress at Bonegilla, started their first day wearing 'Canadian tank unit battle dress made out of heavy wool, long boots of dark brown colour — laced, long gloves — light cream colour, woollen shoes' and a 'battle dress top'.[27]

One displaced person reported that the work was tough, harder 'than working one mile underground in a coalmine in Russia'.[28] Gudrun Geissler later recalled that, 'My father was with a group of European men sent to work on a sugar cane farm where they worked all day without food, drink or a break then not paid.'[29] Estonian displaced person Paul Öpik remembered, 'After the first day, my hands had so many blisters. After the second day, they were bleeding. So I wrapped rags around my palms and continued working.' He spent a year working in the cane fields, suffering from a serious cut to his knee and severe burns on his arm and shoulder.[30] Ignas ran away back to Victoria after a month in the cane fields, 'half-crippled' with back pain, 'and there was no house and no nothing. All my dreams had shattered.'[31]

There were instances of not only men, but of 'cultured European girls of seventeen or eighteen, sent to cook for cane-cutting gangs in North Queensland'.[32] These women were usually wives or daughters of a member of the gang. Concerned social worker Hazel Dobson alerted the government to the fact that in the cane cutting gangs, 'at least four women are pregnant ... the work is very arduous and in the frailer type of woman, could result in the loss of the child'.[33] The Commonwealth Employment Service (CES)'s informal response in handwritten notes on the

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report chillingly states that, 'The CES did not knowingly send pregnant women and can't be responsible for pregnancy. Miss Dobson does not appreciate the problem we had to get enough labour in May.'[34] However, the award did not actually permit female cooks, and this practice was stopped in 1949.[35]

By April 1948, the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* was reporting: 'Balts sour over sugar'. The displaced persons didn't 'want to cut cane' and were complaining that 'Australia was wasting their talents by directing them to work in North Queensland sugar fields and as factory labourers'.[36] In that year it was announced that displaced persons working in the sugar industry would be released after completing two seasons in the industry, rather than two calendar years. Such compassion was an exception to the rule — and indeed this announcement was repealed in early 1951.[37] Between sugar seasons, DPs were moved around to other places of temporary employment, some as far as a sugar refinery in Melbourne. Others worked driving trucks, ringbarking, constructing dams, fixing roads, labouring on power lines, and in meatworks and factories.[38] They were then expected to return for the subsequent cane-cutting season, although many refused or otherwise dodged this expectation.[39]

The Australian Sugar Industry reported that using displaced persons in the cane fields was a great success:

> Within the sugar industry their contribution was warmly acknowledged. The work they have gone to has frequently been difficult. In every case it has been heavy work for which Australian labour was not offering or was in short supply. In the case of the sugar cane cutters, the work was something quite new to the migrants. But they entered the cane fields with enthusiasm, and reports from the cane-growers attest to the fine work they have performed.[40]

Likewise, W.G. Lyons, secretary of the Gladstone (Queensland) branch of the Australian Labor Party, a former critic of the displaced persons scheme, reported in 1953:

> My fellow workers on the railways jobs were new Australians. Big men, all over six feet, I found them excellent workers, good mates and great sportsmen ... Never idle, they grew their own vegetables, carting water from nearby creeks in kerosene tins and drums. They caught and cured their own fish and were well to the fore in any function to entertain the gang ... The surprising thing was that none of them came from the land in Europe. They included a medical student, a ballet dancer, a jeweller and a musician.[41]

Perhaps not so surprisingly, most displaced workers left the cane fields and other work sites in Queensland as soon as their two-year contract was completed, if not before. However, some remained, feeling that they had little other option. One Polish DP cut cane for twenty-three years, but complained that 'he could have achieved more if he had started teaching or entered the army. He would have been more benefit to the country than working as a slave cutting cane.'[42]

Displaced persons in Queensland: Stuart

Initially, no migrant and reception camps were set up in Queensland. Greta, near Newcastle, served as the primary channel of displaced person labour to Queensland. Holding centres for workers' dependants were then established at Wacol and Enoggera in Brisbane, in Cairns and at Stuart (Townsville). The use of such holding

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centres was an attempt by the government to 'bring New Australian families nearer to where their breadwinners are working'. It should be noted that accommodation for all families in Queensland wasn't possible, so some wives and children remained in holding centres in New South Wales and Victoria.[43]

Polish displaced person Eugene Stuliglowa later described his group's arrival in Queensland:

> The red hot Queensland sun had already disappeared behind the dark hills — when puffing black smoke 'Billy', a little outdated locomotive, stopped at the long red brick building after twelve hours' slow motion from Sydney. A large, dimly lit sign announced the end of our long trip. We arrived in Brisbane, the capital of tropical Queensland, the land of bananas and mangoes. It was January 1950.
>
> Our young guide (we called him Skippy), who must have been from the Department of Immigration … announced with a smile on his face — 'This is the end of your long journey. In forty-five minutes you will arrive at Wacol, your new home.' No one in the wagon was talking. The faces of men were serious. Here we were, after months of ocean travelling, meeting face to face in the new world with the people who spoke a different language, a different climate of unbearable heat, strange flowers and the home of the never-before-seen kangaroo![44]

Others endured up to a four-day train ride to the camps at Townsville and Cairns.[45] The camp at Cairns, to house 450 dependants, was converted from two American army sheds; workers had to put in overtime to finish the renovations in time for the 1950 sugar-crushing season.[46] Yugoslav displaced person Anton Binder later remembered:

> We arrived at Flinders Street Station in Townsville and I remember that the street was lined with fully grown palm trees. My stepdad and step grandad did not get off at the station. They were told they were going to Ingham to commence work on the cane fields — cutting cane. We had no contact with them until some weeks later when they had their first leave. The rest of us boarded some buses and headed for our new home at the Stuart migrant centre.[47]

Stuart accommodated over 600 dependant wives and children during the two years of its operation from 1951, including about twelve births per month.[48] The accommodation was spartan: the buildings contained dormitories with single beds, separate toilet, shower and laundry blocks, and a mess hall for communal meals.[49] Those who could work were encouraged 'to get a job immediately'.[50] Anton Binder's mother and fourteen-year-old sister obtained employment at a local laundry; at the end of the cane-cutting season, his step-father worked in the camp as a janitor.[51]

Breadwinners attempted to visit their families every weekend, or every fortnight, although some worked so far away that they were away for months at a time. In 1952, massive floods hit northern Queensland and men were sacked. When they arrived back at Stuart, there was an episode of what Dellios calls 'controversy and family containment', inherent in the official migrant camp system: The men were not supposed to stay in the holding centre, even on a temporary basis, and arguments ensued.[52]

The holding centre for dependants at Stuart was closed down in 1953, with residents sent to Bundaberg and Brisbane, and only a few stayed in the Townsville

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area. The buildings were later used to house Greek and Italian migrants, and were then taken over by James Cook University for use as residential accommodation. The site was sold in 1971, and nothing remains today.[53] The former Polish displaced person, Mal Staweno, attempted to buy a building at the time of sale but was unsuccessful; he says, 'from that day, the Centre dissolved completely and stopped existing'.[54]

Commemoration: Stuart

For the most part, the migrant centres were old military camps. The decision to use these camps for migrant accommodation was celebrated by Minister of Immigration Arthur Calwell as 'revolutionary', but was in fact merely pragmatic because of the post-war housing shortage and the sheer size of the migrant intake.[55] When the centres were no longer needed by the Department of Immigration, they were either given back to the army or sold off. Historian Catherine Panich, writing in the mid-1980s, lamented the loss of the physical remnants of most of the migrant camps, noting that 'much has been irrevocably lost to posterity through carelessness, a lack of official interest, ignorance and deliberate destruction'.[56]

In Queensland, the holding centre sites of Wacol, Enoggera, Cairns and Stuart no longer hold any remnants of material culture. The land on which the Wacol camp stood now hosts Wacol prison, although the centre itself was commemorated in a book published by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs in 2003. This book contains numerous oral testimonies from former residents, workers and volunteers at Wacol between its beginning as a migrant centre in 1949 and the cessation of these activities in 1987.[57] The State Library of Queensland has also digitised fifteen oral history interviews carried out by Donna Kleiss in the early 1990s with migrant women who were ex-residents of Wacol. This wonderful resource compares an 'official governmental history' of Wacol with 'personal' histories of 'women whose introduction to Australia was at the Wacol Immigration Centre'.[58]

The main commemorative site at Bonegilla has received various levels of official support. In 2007, after a long campaign initiated by former ex-residents and other interested parties (including heritage professionals), it was placed on the National Heritage List. The site currently hosts an extensive Bonegilla Migration Experience, including a panoply of cultural and historical artefacts, as well as artistic interpretations. The material remnants and contemporary rememberings of the migrant reception and training centre site now make up a celebrated, and well-publicised, 'public memory place'.[59] Bonegilla, though, is unique in being able to attract this type of support. As second-generation Latvian displaced person Andra Kins has questioned:

> [W]here are the many, many other stories that existed and exist and have been excluded from our written history and cultural heritage? . . . How many artworks in our state galleries, and exhibits in our museums, speak of these times and experiences? Where can my children find the stories about how and why their grandparents and great grandparents came to this country of Australia and how they lived here?[60]

Memoirists of other former migrant camp sites have had to be proactive and imaginative in their commemorative efforts.

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Greta migrant and reception centre, for instance, was memorialised in the 1984 film *Silver City*, co-written by Sophie Turkiewicz, whose mother was a Polish displaced person. Following successful reunions held at Greta, the local Ethnic Communities Council attempted to collect as much information about Greta as possible. The current site owner, Mr Uri Windt, has taken an extraordinary interest in the heritage value of the old migrant centre site,[61] providing funding, along with the New South Wales Department of Urban Affairs and Planning and the Australian Heritage Commission, for Christopher Keating's 1997 book, *Greta: A History of the Army Camp and Migrant Camp at Greta, New South Wales, 1939–1960*. Windt's website also hosted a Greta Camp Photo Gallery, a 'permanent photographic record of life at the camp' which 'can be accessed by the community at large'.[62] Unfortunately, Windt's large property holding is now up for sale and the future for commemorative efforts at Greta is uncertain. Similarly at Benalla, a large dependants holding centre in Victoria, varying forms of commemoration have been promoted by one individual, a recent German migrant. Sabine Smyth's extraordinary initiative in forming the Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. group in 2013 resulted in material remnants of the site, now to be found on the grounds of Benalla Airport, being placed on the Victorian State Heritage Register in 2016.[63]

To date, commemorative efforts surrounding the dependants holding centre site at Stuart have been predominantly literary and performative. Because the physical history is largely lost, migrants are drawing on other mediums for commemoration. Memories of Stuart migrant camp have been collected and interrogated through a history incorporating oral testimony, plays, a (predominantly photographic) exhibition and an active social media page.

Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui's historical work on the displaced person cane-cutters was produced from a North Queensland Sugar Industry Material Aspects thesis undertaken at James Cook University in the mid-1990s. Balanzategui's father was a Slovenian DP cane-cutter who remained in the area after the completion of his two-year work contract. The motivation for writing the book was simple: 'I thought one day all these barracks will be gone, and no one will know what happened here.'[64] The book, *Gentleman of the Flashing Blade*, was published by James Cook University in 1990 and reprinted in 2015. It remains the only history of the displaced persons' time working in the cane fields of North Queensland, and is a fitting tribute to both the men and the work.

Published in 1991, Janis Balodis's play *Too Young for Ghosts* (the first play in his *Ghosts Trilogy*) references the author's background as the son of Latvian displaced persons, sent to the North Queensland town of Tully to work in the cane fields.[65] While the play itself could perhaps be characterised as magic realist, Balodis's description of the landscape and labour required of the DPs rings true. One character, Lydia, complains upon arriving in northern Queensland, 'If this is peace, I'd rather be shot. I don't want to get used to it. Maybe it's all right for peasants.'[66] Otto describes his work as a cane cutter as wrestling with 'twisted cane and stones as big as a man's head. It's murder. My hands are numb and I've got blisters again.'[67] The Australian farmer replies, 'Yeah. Nice set of blisters. You hold cane knife too tight.'[68] North Queensland is depicted as a space apart from the rest of Australia. One married DP couple escapes to Sydney, while Ilse and Karl finally decide to stay. The play ends with Ilse advising Karl, 'Don't drink too much and save your money. You have a daughter to take care of. I will work too.'[69]

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Johnston's play *Displaced* (2016) centres around the stories of Tobiasz and Zofia, who live in the same town in pre-war Poland. When the Germans invade Poland, Zofia is rounded up and taken to a forced labour camp in Munich. Tobiasz serves in the Polish Army and is then captured by the Germans and detained at Dachau Concentration Camp for five years until liberated by American forces. Not wanting to return to a post-war communist Poland, and both mourning lost loves, they find themselves in a displaced persons camp in Germany, marry and have a baby. After receiving their papers from the International Refugee Organisation, they set sail for Australia under the displaced persons scheme. The stage direction depicts Tobiasz as 'guiding Zofia with his hand on her back, he strides forward with determination as the music fades', towards a new Act: 'Finding a Place'. Upon arriving in Australia, they are sent to Stuart and immediately start work: Tobiasz on the railways and Zofia as a cook. Eventually, they settle down to become 'very good bloody new Australian[s]'.[70]

Tobiasz and Zofia are characters inspired by Julie Johnston's grandparents-in-law, Tadeusz and Jozefa Gomulka, who travelled to Australia on the *Dundalk Bay*, departing Bremerhaven in May 1950. In writing the play, Johnston wished to 'give a new perspective of the love and loss that war can bring, and the ability to create a new dream together'. This type of story relies on Western literary conventions that include tales of action and triumph for men and, for women, a passive romantic notion of love and family. Kateryna Longley has argued in relation to migrant memory that 'the *genre* [can provide] a welcome shield between the memory and the telling, with the memory itself already a protective fiction'.[71] I attended the play's opening night, when the small theatre in Townsville was filled with family members and friends, and there were many cheers (and tears) as the curtain fell.

As part of the wider project surrounding the play, Johnston and her team (including her mother-in-law, Lucia) received funding from Townsville City Council as part of Townsville's 150th anniversary celebrations, in order to conduct research and collect material on the Stuart dependants holding centre. Nothing at all had been collected prior to this: the local library archives held only a slim file with plans for the original centre, and internet forums record many queries from migrant families as to 'exactly where the Stuart (Townsville) migration camp was located'.[72] An exhibition, *Townsville's New Australians: Memories of Stuart Migrant Camp*, was held at Townsville City Library and at The Old Courthouse Theatre on the opening night of the play, and this (predominantly photographic) material is now held at the library. There is also a Facebook page to showcase material and to gather ex-residents and other interested parties.[73] Lucia Johnston is currently petitioning for a plaque at the now deserted site, to commemorate the migrant camp.[74]

Interestingly, commemorative activities surrounding Bonegilla also began with a play, written by second-generation Greek migrant Tess Lyssiotis. Lyssiotis, who wrote and directed *Hotel Bonegilla* (1982/83, performed at the 1987 fortieth anniversary reunion festival) and *The Journey* (1985, in which *Hotel Bonegilla* was combined with three other plays exploring migrant issues). These plays sold out, and were the inspiration behind Glenda Sluga's study of Bonegilla. Lyssiotis explained to Sluga, in a later conversation what motivated her to choose Bonegilla as a subject:

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> When people realize what Bonegilla was, they've begun to question what it also represents in terms of post-war immigration to this country. In particular, the issues raised in *Hotel Bonegilla* should ideally lead people to question their own history. Once people discovered their parents had been through the camp they questioned them not only about the camp, but also other questions, such as why did you migrate? How? What was it like? How did you feel? How did you find work not knowing the language? … Again ideally, the experience of something like Bonegilla should help migrants of my generation place their parents, as well as their own lives, into a historical context. Yes, Bonegilla is special. Perhaps not the least reason being that it has been neglected officially for so long'.[75]

Around this time, Albury-Wodonga Ethnic Communities Council, comprising former residents of the reception centre, began to petition for the remains of the site (known as Block 19) to be commemorated. One of the activists, Czech DP and historian Michael Cigler, explained the importance of the site:

> Being situated halfway between Melbourne and Sydney, the ex-camp site is often visited by people to whom Bonegilla was their first Australian home. They re-visit and re-tell their memories and experiences to their wives or husbands, their children, grandchildren and friends. Facts like these and the approaching Bicentennial Year of 1988 were considered by a few local enthusiasts who felt that the Bonegilla camp should be highlighted for posterity.[76]

Similarly, we can perhaps expect that Lucia and Julie Johnston's efforts to commemorate Stuart as the founding place of their family's lives in Australia will bear fruit at some stage in the future, as ex-residents and other interested parties pressure government officials to recognise migrant heritage in Townsville. There are no material remnants as there were at Bonegilla, but a plaque to commemorate the site (and perhaps a permanent exhibition at either Townsville Library or the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville) would be meaningful for ex-residents. It is a theme with Stuart, as it was initially with Bonegilla, Greta and Benalla, that there has been very little museum engagement in the historical landscape (which is perhaps more usually a landscape of absence) of mid-twentieth century migrant heritage. Family and community memories drive the commemoration of migrant heritage commemoration in Queensland, and in Australia.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Julie Johnston, *Displaced* (2016), 7.

2 Jayne Persian, *Beautiful Balts: From displaced persons to new Australians* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017), pp. 74, 75.

3 Inese Petersons (1947–), interviewed by Allison Murchie, 2002, South Australians Acting for Change: Welcoming Refugees Oral History Project, OH 636/2, State Library of South Australia; Persian, *Beautiful Balts*, pp. 77, 82–3.

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