

## Opening credits

LIZ: Underfoot: the Facility is a history of the lives and afterlives of Melbourne's Yarra Bend Insane Asylum, and all the institutions of social control that have stood on this site.

That means you'll hear some harrowing stories of institutional abuse, many kinds of violence, and suicide. There's offensive language from historical sources, and also we swear a lot.

QJH: Underfoot: The Facility was made on what is, always was, and forever will be Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land.

It's mostly about the bit of Wurundjeri land where the Yarra River meets Merri Creek.

If you want the full immersive experience at the actual places we mention, you'll find maps, photos, transcripts and other material at [3cr.org.au/underfoot](https://3cr.org.au/underfoot).

QJH: I'm Jinghua Qian.

LIZ: I'm Liz Crash.

QJH: And you're listening to Underfoot: The Facility.

**[AUDIO: an audio montage followed by some music from "Let's take a trip to Melbourne", a jaunty 1934 tune written by Jack O'Hagan and sung by Clement Q Williams.]<sup>1</sup>**

## Track 3: Importing Insanity

QJH: In the 1870s, Victoria ostensibly had the highest rate of insanity in Australia, maybe even the world, and there was some pretty wild speculation as to the cause. Pundits claimed it was excessive tea-drinking, masturbation, or the antipodean sun. Some even wondered if it was Salvation Army meetings being too exciting.

That's the focus of Jill Giese's book, *The Maddest Place on Earth*, which looks at how Victorians dealt with what we might now call a mental health crisis. That's Victorians as in both the place, and the time. More plausible theories attributed the crisis to the heady pace of modern life, with its high highs and low lows. The gold rush, especially, offered opportunity, disappointment, and massive disruptions to the existing social order. Plus, life in the colony was a culture shock for pretty much everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/96131-lets-take-trip-melbourne-clement-q-williams>

But another factor was what contemporary newspapers called 'imported insanity'. British families often shipped their inconvenient kin off to Australia: girls who were unmarried and pregnant, listless young men prone to erratic moods, anyone who didn't fit in nicely – or to put a positive spin on it, anyone who might benefit from a fresh start.

LIZ: Australia, a prison and an open-air sanatorium.

QJH: Yeah, the natural environment was noted – the Vagabond remarks that some asylum inmates were sent over with “the vague idea that the air of Australia is particularly soothing to the brain.”<sup>2</sup>

But in the mid 19th century, “imported insanity” was enough of a concern that soon after Victoria became a separate colony, it started charging shipmasters a bond of 75 pounds if any of the passengers they carried were found to be – in the language of the time – “lunatic, idiotic, deaf, dumb, blind or infirm and likely ... to become a charge upon the public”.<sup>3</sup>

I mean, this rhetoric sounds familiar, right?

LIZ: Yeah, it's very much like the language used about migrants and refugees now, how they're evaluated in terms of whether they're a burden on the public purse.

QJH: Yeah, what's interesting to me is that in the mid 19th century, the panic over imported insanity was mainly in relation to white settlers. And actually, commentators at the time explicitly compared that to racial restrictions, pitting one against the other.

For instance, there's an article from 1890 complaining that NSW didn't hold shipowners liable for any passengers needing psychiatric care, unlike Victoria and South Australia. The writer says:

“It is a crying scandal that New South Wales should be the only colony of Australia that thus invites the relatives of lunatics all over the world to cast their burden on her.”<sup>4</sup>

And then the writer goes on to compare this to protectionism against Chinese labour, saying that “if protection against healthy Chinese has become the law of this land” there should immediately be restrictions against the mentally ill.

LIZ: Wow. But it wasn't like there were no mentally ill Chinese people, right? Because we know there were people of colour in the Yarra Bend insane asylum.

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<sup>2</sup> A Vagabond, 'A month in Kew asylum and Yarra Bend No VI', *The Argus*, 26 August 1876.  
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5900265>

<sup>3</sup> Passengers Act 1852.  
[http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/vic/hist\\_act/aatrtcoptcov656/](http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/vic/hist_act/aatrtcoptcov656/)

<sup>4</sup> 'Imported insanity', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 15 May 1890.  
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/138935508>

QJH: Yeah, there were quite a few, mainly Aboriginal and Chinese, but we don't have that many first-hand accounts. A lot of what we know about life inside Yarra Bend comes from a white guy called The Vagabond who went undercover into lots of different institutions and then published anonymous exposés.

LIZ: Alright so this is what he writes from Yarra Bend:

“There were several Chinese in this ward, all comparing as regards personal cleanliness most favourably with the European patients. One of them was the best-looking Mongolian I have seen in Victoria [...] His bright eyes twinkled with intelligence and animation, and it was hard to believe that he was insane.”

Ah, this Vagabond guy keeps coming up, because he would go undercover for one corn chip.

QJH: Yeah, we love him. He's like our third co-creator. You visited his grave, right?

LIZ: Yup. His friends raised money for a memorial at Melbourne's General Cemetery. There's a big obelisk with one of the several names he went by in everyday life – Julian Thomas – and also a little decorative urn that just says VAG, in lieu of initials. Which I think is a bold and sexy choice. The notorious V.A.G.

What else did the notorious VAG have to say about good-looking Mongolians?

QJH: Yeah, he comes across as a bit of a rice queen to be honest – he later spent a few months in Shanghai and he just gushes about it.

But, I think the reason he wanted to point out the personal hygiene of the Chinese inmates was because that went against the common stereotypes of the time. In the 1880s there was a Royal Commission on Asylums for the Insane and Inebriates and one Yarra Bend attendant testified that the Chinese and Asiatics should be separated into another ward because of their “dirty habits, especially at table, in eating their food, which must be revolting to Europeans”.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the Vagabond was a bit more like hey, maybe there's some gaps in our knowledge here. So he writes<sup>6</sup>:

“I don't thoroughly understand how colonial physicians can testify to the insanity of Celestials. [...] there were several cases I saw at Kew and Yarra Bend in which no outward sign could be discovered, and the mental delusions could not be tested without knowledge of the language.”

LIZ: Did they have interpreters at Yarra Bend?

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<sup>5</sup> Via Jill Giese, p 103.

<sup>6</sup> A Vagabond, 'A month in Kew asylum and Yarra Bend No VI', *The Argus*, 26 August 1876. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5900265>

QJH: Not until the late 19th century. But in any case, beyond language, there's this question of whether the definition of insanity relies on a shared cultural context, right?

LIZ: Of course, what is insanity, what is neurotypical, what is normal? What's a sane response to catastrophe? Because if you look at the case notes, that's what people had been through, real apocalyptic shit – especially the Aboriginal patients actually.

QJH: Yeah, Jill Giese's book tells the story of a couple of Koorie men at Yarra Bend. They were both in their 50s, both widowers. So just imagine losing your partner and being forced off your country and committed to an asylum, like what would colonial authorities consider a sane response to that?

Grief is a throughline in so many of the stories from Yarra Bend – a lot of the residents were committed after the death of someone close to them. And the case notes suggest maybe they've taken their grief too far, they've broken the unspoken norm of how you're supposed to respond to loss.

LIZ: Who among us has not been so dramatically heartbroken that you feel kind of crazy. And especially being queer, I feel like you're more likely to be seen as crazy?

QJH: We've been there, eh? Like out of your mind, fling your life out the window and flee the country heartbroken. And you know, if say, your relationship isn't recognised, isn't legitimate, it follows that your grief appears hysterical. And that intersects with every other social bias as well, like everything we've talked about around sex work and race and class, all of that informs what sort of loss is grievable.

LIZ: Yeah Sara Ahmed writes about this in *The Promise of Happiness*, the demand on migrants to be happy and grateful, and alongside that, how by pathologising grief, we assume that what was lost or dispossessed has no value.

But coming back to that point about language, I wanna talk about Jong Ah Siug for a bit.

QJH: Ah yes! Let's do this. His is probably the only first-hand account we have from a Chinese patient at Yarra Bend asylum.

LIZ: Yup, and a lot of what we know about Jong Ah Siug is thanks to the hard work of some other local historians, from the Victorian Central Goldfields, Ruth Moore and John Tully. And what we know about Ah Siug is that he was a dude from what's now Zhongshan, in southern China, who came to the central Victorian goldfields during the gold rush as a young man in the 1850s, never really made any money, lived in poverty for years, and then in 1867 he's charged with the assault of two other Chinese miners and found not guilty due to being of unsound mind at the time of the offence.

So then, he's sent to Yarra Bend Insane Asylum, and he becomes aware that inmates have the right to write a letter to the relevant authorities and say hey, I am actually not a lunatic. And so Ah Siug decides to do this, but he has to learn how to write in English first.

QJH: Right, so then he writes this extraordinary text that's quite beautiful to look at but a real challenge to decipher. It seems like he probably wasn't all that literate in Chinese either, but

he approaches English sort of like Chinese characters. He writes in all capitals, with serifs, as if he's copied letters from printed text. And he has his own syntax and vocabulary – for example here's one bit:

MY=BEEN=MY=TENT CHOOSE=GOLD CHOOSE=AFTER CHOOSE=1=OUNCES  
BUNDLE=2=BAG 1=BAG=BIG 1=BAG=SMALL )  
THAT=BAG=BIG=ONE GOLD=HEAVY 15=PENNY=WEIGHTS 5=GRAINS  
MY=I=MUST MAKE=GOLD=RING KEEP=GIRL )

LIZ: Yeah, so this is the bit Moore and Tully translate as:

I had been in my tent choosing gold, and afterwards I chose one ounce, a bundle of two bags, one big and one small. The big bag weighed 15 pennyweight 5 grains, from which I wanted to make a gold ring so that I could keep a girl.

QJH: Other scholars have different interpretations of his syntax,<sup>7</sup> but no matter how you read it, it's quite a rambling text, full of petty grievances, sexual jealousy, lots of arguments with other Chinese people. Here's another bit from Tully and Moore:

The big master looked at me and did not speak. Then he spoke in Chinese, cursing, telling me I was a dickhead with a little cock. The big master went to the table in the middle of the room and people talked to him, telling him I was keen on Sal-Ann and crazy about wanting to sleep with her.

LIZ: Well, whether he was insane or not, he wasn't able to make himself understood. We don't know if anyone ever read his account at the time, which is kinda sad I think. And in 1879, more than a decade after he's committed to Yarra Bend, he's transferred again to the Sunbury asylum where he died in 1900. He was about 63.

QJH: One of the things that's interesting though is that Ah Siug was not deported. And that wasn't even discussed as a possibility at the time, despite the rhetoric about burdensome immigrants.

LIZ: Right, as millennials we think of Vivian Solon, we're used to deportation or the threat of deportation being used against people of colour all the time, whether they're citizens or not.

QJH: Yeah that's always the Herald Sun headline and mugshot you expect to get, right? But there are a few reasons why deportation wasn't such a thing in the 19th century.

The biggest one is that Australia didn't exist as a legal entity. So Victoria, Queensland, each colony had its own racist policies but they were pretty piecemeal or industry-specific. The desire to evict and restrict Chinese and Pacific Islander people was a big part of the case for Federation in 1901, and the Immigration Restriction Act that same year.

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<sup>7</sup> Mao, Xu, 'Sanity at the mercy of language: Interpreting the "nonsense" of a Chinese miner in Australia', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 59(6), pp. 754–767, 2003. doi: 10.1080/17449855.2023.2297312

Of course, that's the legal framework that upheld the White Australia Policy. And then we really see how the border innovates and solidifies into this whole bureaucratic apparatus.

LIZ: So most of us are kinda familiar with the White Australia Policy in terms of things like the Dictation Test – where they'd just run through every European language until they came to one you didn't know – being used as a way to vet people at the border. But we don't hear as much about what life was like for immigrants of colour who were already in Australia.

The Nakashiba family is an interesting example.

QJH: Yes! Okay I am still staggered that we came across this family because they somehow experienced every single thing we wanted to talk about in this episode.

LIZ: Yup it's wild. And there is a Yarra Bend connection, but before we get there, we have a little detour up north.

So in 1889, "John" Iwamatsu Nakashiba arrived in Melbourne as a teenage cabin boy, then he went up north and worked in pearling and all those industries we associate with Japanese Australians in that era. And he was doing alright.

In 1908, John adopts a baby called Peter. The circumstances of the adoption aren't super clear, but a few years later, he tries to take this kid to Japan, and then that becomes a drama.

QJH: Yeah Pam Oliver writes about this situation in her book, *Empty North*. It's honestly a pretty weird story on every level. So John claims that the baby's biological father is Japanese, that's the name on the adoption papers anyway, and there's rumours that the mother is part Aboriginal maybe but she's not named.

But the customs officer in Cairns is suspicious, he's like, nah, that looks like a white baby. This is what he says to the attorney-general about Peter:

"I have taken particular notice of its eyes and their conspicuous blueness and the total absence of the slit-like, half closed appearance which is a sure indication of the presence of oriental blood and which is the peculiar characteristic of that race"<sup>8</sup>

LIZ: Full on.

QJH: It's really something else to see biopolitics operating at this level where all these state officials, even the prime minister at one point, are just like, analysing this one baby's eyelids.

But actually Peter is kind of a digression because who we really want to talk about is John Nakashiba's daughter, Mary.

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver, Pam, *Empty north : the Japanese presence and Australian reactions 1860s to 1942*, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, 2006. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/799281>

LIZ: So Mary Nakashiba was born in 1926 on Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait. By then John had married a white woman, Anna, they had three kids including Mary and they moved around the north a bit. Mary has happy memories of growing up in Darwin, which was very multiracial at the time.

QJH: It's actually very helpful that there aren't a tonne of people called Nakashiba because it's very easy to find Mary on Trove. As a teenager she gets a scholarship and there's a real snarky newspaper article about it. This is under the headline "White Australia" with "white" in sarcastic quote marks.<sup>9</sup>

"AT Darwin, in the Queensland Scholarship examinations, the winners were three Chinese girls (Connie Hassan, Mavis Moo, and Noreen Wong), one Japanese girl (Mary Nakashiba), and one White Australian boy (John Ward)."

I just thought it was funny because apparently white Australians have been mad about Asians getting scholarships since 1940.

LIZ: Well soon after that, things get a bit worse. When Mary is 15, everything changes because her family gets arrested as enemy aliens in 1941 and interned at Tatura, in rural Victoria.<sup>10</sup> Thousands of Australians of Japanese, German and Italian ancestry were interned during World War II.

QJH: Yeah weirdly I only learned about this very recently even though I knew about the internment of Japanese Americans from *The Babysitters Club*.

LIZ: Yeah the internment history of Japanese Australians isn't as well known because it was a much smaller group and most of them were deported after the war. But the Nakashibas weren't deported, partly because they were mixed race so they were seen as more assimilated.

So they were released after the war, and Mary and her sister Rhoda become nurses and their brother Sam joins the army. And I wonder whether these career choices were because they felt pressure to show that they were loyal, patriotic Australians – because that comes up in their applications that they wrote to leave the camps, just stuff like, we don't even speak Japanese, we want to be part of the war effort, etc etc. This is also around the time that Australian citizenship is introduced as a legal category. That didn't exist until after WWII.<sup>11</sup>

In 1948, Mary Nakashiba became a nurse at Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital in Yarra Bend Park!

QJH: This is actually how I first came across her, not through all the many interviews she'd done about the internment camp, but when I was researching Asian nurses in Australia.

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<sup>9</sup> 'GOSSIP', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, NSW: 1919-1950), 17 February 1940, p. 13.  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article234578054>

<sup>10</sup> You can hear Mary talk about it herself in this interview with ABC Earshot in 2015.  
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/earshot/mary-nakashiba-story/6593580>

<sup>11</sup> <https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/australian-citizenship-established>

There was a real shortage of nurses in Australia during the postwar baby boom years,<sup>12</sup> and that became one of the ways that you could gain entry and residency to Australia – a lot of Mary's colleagues at Fairfield Hospital would've been skilled migrants who were able to migrate here because they were nurses.

And then in the 1950s the Colombo Plan was launched, which was a multinational agreement for economic exchange and skills development, and that brought lots of Asian nurses to train in Australia. And there was a lot of PR coverage of this in the Australian press, as I'm sure you can imagine – young women in beautiful saris or prim nurses' uniforms, very photogenic.<sup>13</sup> Basically this was one of the first very visible waves of nonwhite migrants coming to Australia after World War II, that was part of the gradual dissolution of the White Australia Policy. By 1957, 2,000 Asians had studied in Australia under the Colombo Plan.<sup>14</sup>

But of course Mary Nakashiba was born in Australia, she didn't *come* via the Colombo Plan – she actually went *to* Malaysia, alongside a few other Australian nurses, while three Chinese women from Penang came to train at Fairfield Hospital.

LIZ: Right, so in 1955 Mary heads off to Malaysia, then Malaya, and that's how she meets her husband: Zdzislaw Piotr "Peter" Jarzabkowski.<sup>15</sup> He was one of the Australian soldiers deployed to fight in the Malayan emergency, which was framed as a small communist insurgency, internal security operation, but was really a war of independence.

And Peter was actually a Polish immigrant, a DP – displaced person. He was strongly anti-communist, which was an important part of the screening process for postwar European immigrants to Australia.

QJH: Yeah both Mary and her husband's stories are revealing of how the border kind of bends and transforms in the postwar period.

On the one hand Australia has a labour shortage in lots of areas, it needs immigrants, on the other there's racism and xenophobia, there's anxiety about what that immigration will mean, and what kind of neuroses and conflict and trauma these postwar refugees and immigrants will bring with them. So you know, same old, same old, importing insanity.

And Peter is one of about 170,000 displaced persons who came to Australia after WWII, in the first mass wave of non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants. Jayne Persian writes about this group in her book *Beautiful Balts*.

The way they're racialised is very full on, it's really heavily emphasised that they're blond, they're blue-eyed, they're hardworking and assimilable. They're talked about in a really gross way as basically ideal breeding material for Australia's populate or perish policy.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Argus*, 4 November 1948. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/22695321>

<sup>13</sup> "Colombo Plan Student", *The Mercury*, 9 June 1952. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article27092983>

<sup>14</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 13 June 1957, p. 1. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article91590944>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/198749776/person/322590044958>



So for instance you've got Arthur Calwell, minister for immigration, saying: "Aged and queerly cut clothes and European styles of haircut could not disguise the quality of human material."

LIZ: "Material" is not... is not a nice way to be described, I feel.

QJH: It's really incredible to me that Calwell has this sort of reputation as the father of multiculturalism, but so many of his comments are full out eugenics.

Anyway, eventually more and more waves of migrants come, and ostensibly the White Australia Policy ends in the mid 1970s, but I always think of it dissolving rather than ending. And dissolving the way a clump of Milo does, into a sort of sludge. It doesn't just disappear.

LIZ: I think there's lots of continuities to all the stuff we've been talking about. There's the points system for migration, there's the constantly changing list of skills shortage professions, there are many restrictions against immigrants with disabilities.

We still have that discourse that sick and disabled people are a burden on the nation, and that discourse is actually more racialised now than it was in the 1870s I think. The immigration department has to comply with the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975, but it's specifically exempted from the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992.<sup>16</sup> And that's because immigrants are evaluated on how much they're expected to cost the public health system.

QJH: Yeah in Track 2 we talked about our own families – how eugenics couples with concepts of legitimacy, family planning policy, how that looks in the micro.

I often think about how my family is what it is – two siblings, with a ten-year age gap – because of the one-child policy and the Tiananmen massacre and Australia's immigration policy under Bob Hawke.

But if I had a serious disability, I wouldn't have been able to migrate, even though my dad was already in Australia and working in health. And that's still the case now, migrant families are still getting deported from Australia today just because they have a disabled kid and the state has decided they're too expensive, even when the parents are essential workers.<sup>17</sup>

LIZ: I thought about all this kind of stuff a lot when I went through the process of getting a formal diagnosis to become officially disabled, you know, get my disability licence. I needed that diagnosis to unlock the support that is available to me as an Australian citizen. But I also thought, what happens if I need to leave this country? Would I still be able to? Who would have me?

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<sup>16</sup>

<https://theconversation.com/australia-once-rejected-feeble-minded-immigrants-while-the-language-has-changed-discrimination-remains-158872>

<sup>17</sup> 14 June 2024.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/this-mother-wants-to-know-why-the-reasons-criminals-used-to-stay-in-australia-were-not-good-enough-for-her-20240612-p5jlah.html>

QJH: Yeah I think I have a funny general aversion to diagnosis anyway, like I would always rather be inscrutable to every kind of authority, I always want to articulate my gender in the way that makes the least sense to anyone, but especially to doctors. But another big factor is trying to protect my mobility.

LIZ: Yeah, there's a lot of talk in the Australian disability movement about barriers to accessing diagnosis and therefore to accessing support, but I rarely see these organisations talk about how diagnosis can be a *barrier* to support, acceptance, and freedom if you're outside the nation.

It just makes me depressed, to be honest – this movement for access and inclusion is so exclusionary. It's all eugenics, just under different terms.

QJH: Yeah, and it's similar with welfare activism. Like in 2021, the government extended the waiting period for migrants to get social security to four years<sup>18</sup> – that's not four years from when you arrive in Australia, but from when you're granted permanent residency. So you might've already been in the country for 10 years at that point. It's outrageously cruel but welfare groups didn't really campaign around it much. Sometimes I think activism just replicates the border.

LIZ: It's weird to think that in some ways, maybe things are worse for migrants now than in the Victorian era, in Jong Ah Siug's time, when these categories didn't exist in the same way or hadn't hardened as much as they have now.

QJH: Yeah it's depressing to think maybe things are getting worse. But I also find it encouraging to remember that this category of the citizen is actually pretty new. There's nothing natural or inevitable about our current definitions of who is part of our community, who we're responsible for, who do we owe care to. Those ideas have always been contentious and we can keep them contentious.

LIZ: Well, I've got a contention, which is – maybe we owe care to whoever needs care. Whether we think they're good quality human material or not.

## Closing credits

LIZ: Underfoot: The Facility was produced with support from 3CR Community Radio, the City of Yarra, and the Public Records Office Victoria, on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land. We pay our respects to their elders past and present.

You can find out more about Underfoot at [3cr.org.au/underfoot](https://3cr.org.au/underfoot).

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-21/budget-cuts-new-migrants-welfare-disabled-domestic-violence/100140596>

**[AUDIO: “Where the lazy river goes by”, recorded with Mario ‘Harp’ Lorenzi and His Rhythmics in January 1937 whilst Melbourne-born singer Marjorie Stedeford was living and working in London.<sup>19</sup>]**

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/82579-where-lazy-river-goes-marjorie-stedeford>