



To the Letter: Contemporary Perspectives on Epistolarity

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“Dear Sir, Honourable Sir and the Karnana letter”.

The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 established the White Australia policy. It was intended to establish Australia as a white nation and to exclude people described, as “aboriginal natives of Asia, Africa and the Pacific”. There were however around 50,000 of these people, now deemed as undesirable, in the country. Many of these were sojourners, who would return to their home countries, generally China and India from time to time. During the first decade of the twentieth century the numbers of these men decreased as policies were implemented to prohibit their re-entry to Australia.

However from around 1905 it became easier for those who had been resident in Australia for some years and who were deemed of good character to gain certificates exempting them from the Dictation Test (CEDT) and thus the right to re-enter Australia. Indeed they could, in fact, claim domicile and leave Australia and re-enter, virtually at will.

The administration of their applications for CEDTs and of their movements generated a large archive, in which are preserved scores of letters from these men, as well as from those who provided their character references. These provide interesting insights into the politics of ‘race’ in Australian society and show the applicants negotiating their life chances with a powerful bureaucracy. With a focus upon men from India, the letters also show how many of these men lived transnational lives, moving often from villages in the Punjab to Australian cities and the outback.

This paper will consider a series of letters from former residents who had been denied re-entry to Australia in the first years of the policy and who subsequently sought to claim re-entry. Many of these men were illiterate in English and sometimes in their own languages. Their letters show them seeking to legitimate their claims by develop semi-official letter forms – which I term ‘the Karnana letter’.

