Conflicts in racism: Broome and White Australia

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Abstract: This study examines the character of racism as a social relation. As such, racism is continuously produced and modified, not only culturally and ideologically but also in social interaction. Understanding racism and its repercussions demands close investigation of all the processes involved. An instructive example is an incident that unfolded in the early 1910s in Broome, Western Australia. The exemption from immigration restriction of a Japanese doctor raised tempers at a time when the nationwide aspiration for a racially homogeneous society determined political and social attitudes, and ‘whiteness’ was a crucial element of Australianness. The possibility of admitting a Japanese professional to a town that was already suspected of race chaos fuelled debates about the question of ‘coloured labour’ and the ‘yellow peril’, while challenging the unambiguousness of class and race boundaries. The influence and wealth of some Japanese, the indispensable position of their compatriots in the pearling industry, and the skills and reputation of their doctor, supplemented with the distinct racial pride of the whole Japanese community, proved to massively impede and disrupt the unrestricted implementation of white supremacy.

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On 1 January 1901, when the British colonies ‘down under’ constituted the Commonwealth of Australia, racism was both culture and state doctrine. The ideal of ‘White Australia’ was grounded in the aspiration for a racially homogeneous society, and gained momentum during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This led to a focus on ‘whiteness’ as the crucial element of national identity, one that was almost never disputed, on either the sociocultural or the political level.

In the remote harbour town of Broome, a centre of pearl-fishing, the refusal of the white master pearlers to stop the practice of recruiting Japanese men as divers stood in direct contrast to nationwide aspirations to reduce the influx of Asian migrants. The Japanese population share in Broome increased sharply during the first years of the twentieth century; their numerical superiority became alarming to white Australians. But, even more worrying for them was the assertiveness of the Japanese, which reached its height with the successful demand for a Japanese doctor and the establishment of a Japanese hospital.

‘A colony of invaders’: race and space

Around 1900, Broome was significant both for the nature of its precise geographical location on the coast, and its perceived dangerousness. The former was owed to a quirk of nature; the latter was the result of on-site social relations.

Volcanic and seismic activity in the Timor Sea had led to repeated breaks in the subsea cable between Java and Darwin and, therefore, to the relocation of its route. Eventually, in 1889, it terminated at a beach which is for this reason still called Cable Beach today. At that time the area had only borne its colonial name, Broome, for six years; then it essentially consisted only of a few huts. But the construction of buildings for overseas communication added significant value to the emerging town.

At this point, local settlers had already embarked on the harvesting of local pearl oysters, which were particularly sought after for the mother-of-pearl sold in the international marketplace. While initially it was almost exclusively Indigenous Australians who were exploited in this form of pearling, the depletion of shoreline shell-stock made dives into greater depths necessary, and therefore also entailed the deployment of wetsuits with air supply. As well as the increasing restrictions on their employment, Aboriginal people refused this kind of work; thus, the pearlers increasingly resorted to importing Asian workers.

For most of the year, they stayed at sea. During the cyclone season, however, the pearling ships were laid up in Broome, and the divers, shell-openers and crews had to be housed. The concomitant and notable growth of the town and its population made Broome a dangerous place in the eyes of its European
population as well as in White Australian consciousness. It was seen, like other areas lying north of the Tropic of Capricorn, as a ‘racially dubious territory’ and was even termed a ‘hole in white Australia’.

Topographically, Broome protruded like a peninsula into Roebuck Bay. In its western part, news from the British Empire arrived at Cable Beach. It was also here that the Indigenous Australians had their preferred campgrounds; they were employed in the town as ‘seamen, cooks or general hands’, did household work, gathered firewood in chain-gangs or were assigned unskilled tasks. In the east, the local jetty jutted out into the sea, and mangroves and makeshift dwellings shared the beach area. Here, during the cyclone season from December to March, the lower ranks of the Japanese, Malay and Filipino ships’ crews lived and maintained the pearl luggers. In the north of the town a Chinese and Japanese quarter developed. Besides craftspeople, warehouses, brothels and public houses, this also harboured a couple of boarding houses. In addition, there was a Japanese Club and, after an intense dispute, eventually also a Japanese hospital.

Altogether, the 1901 Western Australian census of the population of Broome registered 1,704 people. Only 121 males and 52 females had been born in Australia, and 122 males and 10 females in European countries. Of the 1,345 Asian inhabitants, 366 had been born in Japan (one-fifth of them female), 276 in the Philippines and 170 in Java. That only 130 occupied houses inhabited by 419 people were officially registered was certainly due to the overwhelming number of temporary workers who would spend most of the year at sea and, for the rest, lived in beach huts.

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