

‘White Sugar’ against ‘Yellow Peril’: Consuming for National Identity and Racial Purity

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Australians were possessed by two obsessions - the fear of the ‘yellow peril’ and the desire for a white society. The fear of the so-called yellow peril found expression in science and politics as well as in innumerable invasion novels depicting the swamping of the self-proclaimed European outpost in the Pacific by imagined Asiatic hordes. The programme of a white society was reasoned scientifically and found political supporters, not least in the labour movement. Moreover, it was conveyed by a medium that was even more popular than pulp fiction: the commodity racism that propagated the consumption of white sugar. White sugar was a very special commodity. Refined white and produced white, it comprised white labourers, dearer sweetness, protection from the world market and the gaining of intra-continental acceptance through subsidies. Both invasion novels and sugar consumption were aimed at the entire society.

Key Words: Australia, commodity racism, empty north, invasion novels, Queensland, sugar, whiteness.

1. ‘The Rising Tide of Colour’

In late October 1930 the major Australian newspapers published an (occasionally full-page) advertisement on behalf of the Queensland Sugar Defence Industry Committee. It warns that ‘The Tide Rises while Australia Sleeps’ and proclaims that its ‘only bulwark is provided by the stalwart Sugar Workers in Queensland.’¹ The advertisement consists of two elements: a drawing and a body of text. The drawing shows an outline of Australia lying in the ripples of a dark ocean. At the horizon, the moon is ascending. A slogan in capitalised letters floats in the water between Australia and Asia, reading ‘The Rising Tide of Colour.’ The text printed beneath contains further hints as to how to decode the graphic. It gives its readers information on the alleged menace the unpopulated areas of north Australia posed in the context of surplus Asian population, and then relates the populating of Queensland to the production and consumption of Australian sugar. The ‘color menace is a very real danger to Australia.’ This leaves hardly any doubt that the rising moon, which bears Asian features and has its eyes set firmly on the north coast of Australia, is representative of the supposedly growing interest of Asian countries in the appropriation of land in Australia. By reminding its readers of the ‘vast half-empty continent’ and adducing figures comparing the number and

density of chosen Asian countries to those of Australia, the advertisement then dramatises the alleged threat of invasion by 'Asiatic hordes.'

This 'scientific' method of accessing the supposed danger in which Australia found itself is furthered by the invocation of contemporary 'scientific racism.' The slogan floating in the water takes its cue from Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*.² His findings underpinned the statement that only a populated north Australia would be able to fend off invaders.³

After raising awareness about this apparent threat to the Australia continent, the advertisement presents the solution to the problem. 'Effective occupation is the only valid title by which any nation can hope to keep its territories intact.' The sugar industry of Queensland was the pivotal player in this gamble for settlement in the northern parts of the Australian continent. Maintaining its production power meant furthering the settlement of white workers and planters in the north. This apparently white industry was the stronghold against the yellow peril, and supporting this industry through the consumption of its produce meant not only providing the means to financially uphold the industry but, furthermore, to help protect 'white Australia.'

Let us take the advertisement at its word and 'Think the matter out!' I do this by initially analysing the Australian perceptions of the yellow peril and the 'empty north,' in particular in the context of the invasion novels. Subsequently, I take a look at the social dimensions of white sugar and the role it played as a means of both maintaining and affirming the 'whiteness' of Australia. I conclude by assessing the way in which consumption of invasion novels and Australian sugar interacted within the dynamics of commodity racism.

2. White Sugar against the Yellow Peril

The advertisement soliciting moral and financial support for the sugar growers of Queensland brought together two lines of discourse which both emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continued to be brought to public attention well through the first half of the twentieth century: the yellow peril and white sugar.

A. The Yellow Peril

Invasion novels were a literary genre for a mass audience that envisioned hostile takeovers and urged the populating of the 'empty north.' Read as critiques of the prevailing social and political situation, the novels pressed for the overcoming of internal tensions and the unity of whites against a 'coloured' enemy. Furthermore, they were an expression of the special position the people of Australia found themselves in: in terms of geography, they were surrounded by and in close proximity to Asian countries, while in terms of population politics, half of the Australian landmass was considered unpopulated.

The phrase yellow peril was coined in the late nineteenth century and expressed the supposedly detrimental effects that a mass migration of Asians to western countries had on the wages and living conditions of white labourers, as well as on Australia's racial purity. Again, Australia's seemingly exposed position in the southern hemisphere led to a heightened perception of vulnerability due to the numerical differences in populations.

In particular the empty north, a figure of speech that emphasised this fragility of white Australia by stressing the large stretches of land in the north where settlement was still minimal, became an increasing concern in the public Australian mind at the time of Federation. (White) underpopulation and the subsequent delay in the opening-up of the northern territories became problematic due to the fact that a title to the land could only be lawfully held when it was being cultivated.

This anxiety of losing land to foreign intruders was taken up in a literary genre which, in Australia, emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century and was known as the invasion novel.⁴ In this 'isolated outpost of western civilisation,' the perceived geographical remoteness from Europe and the cultural otherness of the surrounding countries added to the interest in this genre.⁵ The novels were a medium of mass consumption - some of them were published as dime novels, others as serials in newspapers or in the papers of the labour movement, and they thus reached a broad audience. Rather than mere public entertainment, they were a 'dramatic construction of the new world on the base of the old.'⁶ They were written as social critiques of the present situation, envisioning the ensuing consequences as a toxin for the white, mainly British, population.

In general the novels are structured in three narrative parts. In the first part, internal tensions in Australia are depicted. The second part describes the invasion by foreign enemies and Australian reactions to it. The concluding part reports a closing of ranks by the whites who then stand united against the non-white invaders. By doing this the novels tell stories of how, despite internal struggles, Australian society as a whole was able to offer more often than not successful resistance to a foe coming from outside.

Race is the most obvious discursive element in the invasion novels. The invading Asians endanger white workers' economic conditions with their allegedly low living standards, as well as Australian racial purity by attempting to seduce white women with the help of opium. Numerical superiority plays the decisive role in the description of the Asian invader. William Lane, a front figure of the Australian labour movement who also founded the *Boomerang* (a paper of the labour movement) and was the first editor of the *Worker*,⁷ gave an account in his novel *White or Yellow* of how the 'vast horde' of Chinese simply 'over-ran everything' and 'monopolized a score of important industries' in the north.⁸

A problematisation of aspects of gender finds expression in the alleged fragility of white women's integrity. White women are considered prone to seduction by Asian invaders. As the keepers of racial purity they are the most vulnerable part of

the white Australian society. In the 'sacred cause of womanly purity' they have to be kept 'from a fate worse than death.'⁹ Of course, the defence of white women and white Australia is the duty of the white men.

Class features in the contradistinction between politicians who are stuck in never-ending discussions about the invasion scenario and dwellers of the bush who are more practical and take Australia's fate in their own hands. Concurrently, the capitalist class of the north is depicted as the stepping stone for the Asian takeover. Instead of sticking to the ideal of White Australia, these 'high priests of capital,' who were as 'blind ... as bats'¹⁰ and for whom 'business was business and money was money,'¹¹ had only their financial profit in mind and were ready to expand their business relations with the Chinese and Japanese. With their willingness to employ only the cheapest labour, the capitalists in the novels systematically emptied Queensland of white workers until the 'white population' had completely 'vanished,' leaving no one to defend the north.¹²

The only way to fend off external foes and hostile invasions was, in the narration of the invasion stories, to overcome these intra-Australian tensions and foster the uniting of all (white) Australians. Correspondingly, in direct face-to-face confrontation those whites who initially fought in the name of the Chinese soon grasp their disloyalty. They remember to 'act as well as be white' and the struggle with the anti-Chinese turns into a 'race-fight' of 'white against yellow.'¹³ The invasion by foreign foes as the cataclysmic battle becomes the touchstone for internal social cohesion. Eventually, class and gender boundaries are overcome based on shared whiteness and a racialised national identity, and 'Australia was true to her destiny ... she stayed white.'¹⁴

Of course, Queensland was anything but empty - as the reader of invasion novels knew. The crux of the matter was that it was filled not with white but with 'coloured' workers introduced by the sugar industry (and with Aborigines who did not count at all).

B. White Sugar

The term 'white sugar' in the Australian context at the time of the newspaper advertisement stood not only for chemically white, meaning refined, sugar, but also for cane sugar that was wholly produced by white labour. But before this could be accomplished and the sugar industry could proudly call itself the 'white man's industry,'¹⁵ it had to undergo major changes in demography and organisation.

The story of sugar in Australia starts with the beginning of white settlement in 1788. But attempts to cultivate the sugar cane brought to the Sydney settlement with the First Fleet were futile. It took another eighty years and a relocation of cultivation about 750 kilometres northwards before the first commercially cultivated cane sugar entered the Australian market. At the time when sugar cane was successfully cultivated, however, cheap labour in the form of convicts was no longer available since transportation had ended about twenty years before. The

planters resorted to a labour resource that had hardly been tapped before: the Pacific Islands.

Whilst the planters were surely satisfied with the possibility of inexpensive and tractable labour, other groups warily observed the initially private and later institutionalised introduction of these labourers. Besides suspicions of the re-introduction of slavery coming from parts of the Australian public and from critical British minds, the presence of the Pacific Islanders was thought to undermine employment possibilities for white workers in Queensland. The Australian labour movement's involvement in particular fostered subsequent legislation confining Pacific Islanders first to tropical agriculture and then to work in the sugar cane fields.

Despite an attempt in the 1890s to end the labour trade altogether, it was not until the Federation of the Australian colonies was established in 1901 that permanent steps for an extensive demographic change in the sugar industry could be taken. The Federation brought with it the fixation of whiteness as a major part of national identity. The White Australia policy, which was decisively carried by the Australian labour movement,¹⁶ comprised two pillars of legislation which were to the satisfaction of all those who conjured up threats of hostile invasion and the displacement of white workers' interests: the Immigration Restriction Act and the Pacific Island Labourers Act. The former meant the exclusion of immigrants deemed 'undesirable,' who were in the majority Chinese and Japanese. The latter was the ignition spark of the eventual transformation from a 'black' to a 'white' sugar industry and prompted the end of the Pacific Island labour trade as well as the deportation of the remaining Islanders.

With the end of Pacific Islanders' employment, the planters were forced to look for other sources of labour. The transition to white labour was further fostered by the payment of a bonus for white-grown sugar. The funds for this payment came from a special tax levied on all refined sugar. Australian consumers now had to pay dearly for their national consciousness. They not only tolerated this extra payment, however, but willingly did their share in the support of the sugar industry. Australia remained one of the top per capita users of sugar in the world.¹⁷

Despite the sugar industry now being socially 'white,'¹⁸ tensions were far from over. The on-going subsidies attracted the criticism of housewives' associations as well as other sugar-processing industries outside of Queensland. The allegedly spoon-fed sugar industry was accused of receiving unnecessary support from the government.¹⁹ To maintain Australian consumers' support, the sugar industry used the newspaper advertisement in question to call upon national pride and fear to invest in the defence of the country against external enemies.

3. Consuming for National Identity and Racial Purity

In combining discourses on the yellow peril and white sugar, the advertisement tells a story about commodity racism which is decidedly different from traditional

patterns of racist consumption. Commodity racism emerged as a class-spanning access to 'racial difference' in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ It constructed a community of (white) consumers based on the exploitation of (black) labourers. The career of tea, coffee and chocolate as mass products, for instance, benefited excessively from the low production costs based on the system of plantation slavery. Sugar, in early nineteenth-century Britain, was a commodity increasingly consumed by all strata of society. By its use, the factory worker could distinguish himself, as a sugar consumer, from the plantation worker, as a sugar producer.

The campaign for white sugar in Australia functioned differently.²¹ The crux of this sugar consumption was explicitly not the desire for a low cost commodity but rather for an ideologically enriched product, not only of national importance but also of importance to white supremacy. In the course of the legitimisation of high-priced white Australian sugar, the importance of white solidarity against a common external enemy was evoked.

At the same time, the invasion novels provided a fictitious theoretical and empirical embedding for the urgency of fostering settlement in the north. As a medium of mass consumption, the invasion novels were able to disseminate information to all milieus of society. Far from being mere fiction, the novels reflected contemporary 'scientific' findings as well as current political processes. With their emphasis on a white Australian unity despite internal tensions, they supplied the reasoning that Australia could only defy a hostile takeover attempt as a nation with an undisputable identity and racial purity.

The populating of the north played the crucial role in the defence of Australia. This was to be accomplished by enhancing Australian sugar production. The settlement of white farmers and the recruiting of white workers were supposed to further the cultivation and thus the occupation of areas that were deemed unsatisfactorily populated. More than their mere physical presence, the workers of the sugar industry would also embody the ideological bulwark against the threat of Asian invasion.

In this manner, consuming invasion novels and Australian-made sugar meant supporting the defence of the national identity and the continued racial purity of 'white Australia.'²²

Notes

¹ The advertisement was printed in *The Argus* (Melbourne), 15 October 1930, 11; *The Mercury* (Hobart), 18 October 1930, 15; *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 18 October 1930, 6; *The Register News-Pictorial* (Adelaide), 20 October 1930, 17; *The West Australian* (Perth), 21 October 1930, 4; *The Argus*, 23 October 1930, 10; *The Western Mail* (Perth), 23 October 1930, 18; *Sunday Times* (Perth), 26 October 1930, 32. Also see the appendix for the advertisement.

² Stoddard claimed that the 'natural outlet' for Japan's surplus population would be found in the United States of America and Australia. T. Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920).

³ The basic considerations for this had been developed by an Australian scientist who believed Australia to be 'the last part in the world, in which the higher races can live and increase freely.' Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character. A Forecast* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1894), 89. Also *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ For a reading of invasion novels with regard to racism and whiteness discourses see Stefanie Affeldt, "'White" Nation - "White" Angst', in *Racism and Modernity*, eds. Sabine Ritter and Iris Wigger (Berlin: Lit, forthcoming 2011). For a general survey of Australian invasion novels, see, for example, Robert Dixon, 'Imagined Invasions', in *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender, and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914*, ed. Robert Dixon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 135-154; Neville Meaney, "'The Yellow Peril': Invasion Scare Novels and Australian Political Culture', in *The 1890s. Australian Literature and Literary Culture*, ed. Ken Stewart (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), 228-263. For invasion novels from Britain and Anglo-America see, amongst others, Ignatius F. Clarke, *Voices Propheying War, 1763-1984* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁵ Andrew Markus, 'Of Continuities and Discontinuities. Reflections on a Century of Australian Immigration Control', in *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation*, eds. Laksiri Jayasuriya, David Walker, Jan Gothard, (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press 2003), 178.

⁶ Nan Bowman Albinski, 'A Survey of Australian Utopian and Dystopian Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies* 13 (1987): 16.

⁷ Wulf D. Hund, 'Negative Societalisation: Racism and the Constitution of Race', in *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital*, eds. id., Jeremy Krikler, David Roediger (Berlin: Lit, 2010), 58.

⁸ William Lane, 'White or Yellow', *The Boomerang*, 10 March 1888, 9; 18 February 1888, 9.

⁹ J. A. Kenneth Mackay, *The Yellow Wave. A Romance of the Asiatic Invasion of Australia*, eds. Andrew Enstice and Janeen Webb (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 2003 [1895]), 257; Lane, 'White or Yellow', 21 April 1888, 9.

¹⁰ Mackay, *Yellow Wave*, 130.

¹¹ George Ranken, *The Invasion* (Sydney: Turner & Henderson, 1877), 86.

¹² Mackay, *Yellow Wave*, 81.

¹³ Lane, 'White or Yellow', 31 March 1888, 9; 14 April 1888, 9; 24 March 1888, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 May 1888, 6.

¹⁵ Thomas D. Chataway, 'The Australian Sugar Industry: Economic Expansion and White Australia', *International Sugar Journal* 1 (1921): 140.

¹⁶ Verity Burgmann, 'Racism, Socialism, and the Labour Movement, 1887-1917', *Labour History* 47 (1984): 41-46.

¹⁷ Peter Griggs, "'A Natural Part of Life': The Australian Sugar Industry's Campaign to Reverse Declining Australian Sugar Consumption, 1980-1995", *Journal of Australian Studies* 30 (2006): 87-125.

¹⁸ Struggles in the sugar industry between the employers and the labour movement continued with the Queensland sugar workers' strike in 1911, when workers successfully fought for their ability to 'cash in' their 'wages of whiteness.' See Kay Saunders, *Workers in Bondage: The Origins and Bases of Unfree Labour in Queensland, 1824-1916* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982) and David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁹ Chataway, 'Australian Sugar Industry', 140.

²⁰ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 209.

²¹ For a more complex nexus see Stefanie Affeldt, 'A Paroxysm of Whiteness. "White" Labour, "White" Nation and "White" Sugar in Australia', in *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital*, eds. Wulf D. Hund, Jeremy Krikler and David Roediger (Berlin: Lit, 2010), 99-131.

²² I wish to thank Kayleigh Page for her precise reading of the text.

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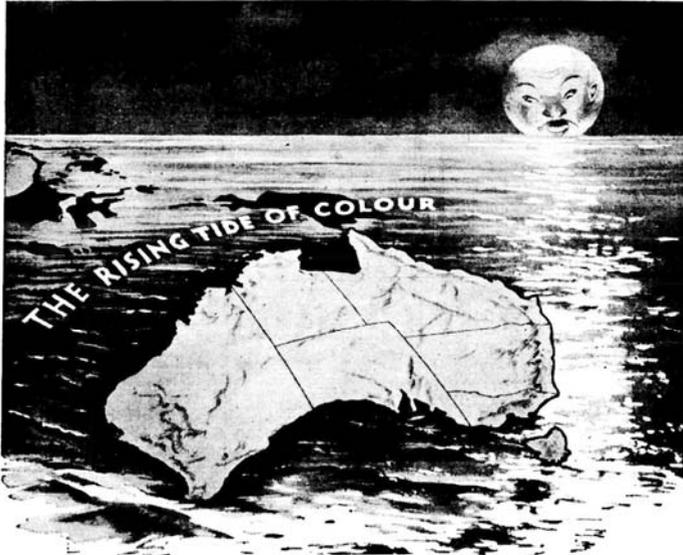
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Appendix



The Tide Rises while Australia Sleeps

THE color menace is a very real danger to Australia. Asia, our nearest Continental neighbor, has a dense and rapidly increasing population. In Asia, they have, in parts, over 2 persons to the square mile. All history shows that Asia must, from time to time, seek an outlet for its surplus population. In the past, the Asiatic invasion has been to the west. From time to time, Europe has been overrun by Asiatic hordes, and in this way the pressure on Asiatic living space has been relieved.

To-day the position is different. The European nations are ready and prepared to resist any invasion from the East. Where, then, is Asia to turn? To the South, she sees millions of square miles of unoccupied land, some of it within a few days' sail. Is it not inevitable that, when the pressure on Asia reaches breaking point, the overflow must be in our direction?

Read these population figures and try to realize how almost impossible it would be for us to resist a concerted Asiatic invasion:—

COUNTRY	POPULATION	Persons per Square Mile
China	457,787,000	
Indo-China	12,000,000	
Japan and Dependencies	53,438,000	
Asiatic Russia	38,500,000	
India	347,000,000	Average 184.22
Siam	11,000,000	
East Indies	51,881,000	
Philippines	11,744,000	
	814,870,000	
Australia	6,430,000	2.15

In view of the above contrasting figures, a demand might be made at any moment—possibly supported by the League of Nations—that some portion of our vast half-empty continent should be yielded up for settlement by Asia's surplus hordes. Effective occupation is the only valid title by which any nation can hope to keep its territories intact.

At present our only bulwark is provided by the stalwart Sugar Workers in Queensland.

If this bulwark were to be demolished—so would inevitably happen should any retrograde movement on our part defeat Queensland's developmental progress—would overcrowded Asia miss an opportunity to denounce our White Australia policy and assert a claim to occupy a field by us abandoned.

THINK THE MATTER OUT!

AUTHORISED BY THE QUEENSLAND SUGAR INDUSTRY DEFENCE COMMITTEE 211 COLLINS STREET, MELBOURNE.

