

Cropping it sweet

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*Consuming Whiteness. Australian Racism
and the 'White Sugar' Campaign*

by Stefanie Affledt

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White Australia was an elaborate and glowering edifice. It should, to all accounts, take centre-stage in any concerted investigation of Australian society and culture from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. It was, after all, the stark foundation slab of national life. Yet it is only occasionally studied in requisite depth in its own right and then, often by historians of both leftward and rightward leanings – from Willard to Windschuttle – reducing it down and boxing it in to a mere

consideration of industrial economics: cheap labour excluded to protect domestic workplace fairness and Western living standards. Such a thesis is more exculpatory than explanatory, arising from a reflex of either nationalistic or class defence. Any researcher who has put in the hours and the years, combing through hundreds of contemporary newspapers and journals, reading the racist versifiers, songsters, novelists, dramatists and film-makers, deconstructing the hundreds of fear and hate-filled cartoons and examining the official correspondence of politicians and bureaucrats who formulated the Dictation Test, the Defence Policy, the detailed migratory processes of exclusion and expulsion, of segregation, deportation, disfranchisement as well as citizenship denial, the sequestration of naturalisation, health, employment, land-holding and welfare rights and so on, knows that this blinkered reductionism has got to be a crock.

As German historian Stefanie Affeldt shows in this enormous study of the bleaching of the Queensland sugar industry as it moved from an enterprise based on non-white indentured labour to one employing a whites-only wage-labour workforce:

The explanation of the White Australia policy as a result of sheer economic considerations is definitely too short-sighted. It edits out historical, social and cultural conjectures, leaves underexposed the spheres into which whiteness spread ... and reduces a 'racist' strategy of national unification to a purely political endeavour. (305)

White Australia embraced a discourse embedded with dark expectations of contagion, biological and cultural degeneration as well as dystopian swamping, encumbered with sexual degradation and pollution: 'Gender, nation and race were never actually out of the picture when it comes to representing the position of the male "white" worker in Australia' (305). Affeldt doggedly traces this proposition through all the 'narrative assurances of white supremacy and [the] legitimacy of British land-occupation' (307): whiteness, in short, spreading to the far cultural horizons. For, far from being 'unmarked and invisible' (307), she demonstrates that whiteness was celebrated in song and poem, in travel stories, scientific texts, sermons, newspapers and fiction (especially the plethora of invasion scare novels), stage productions, movies, advertisements and commerce. The corollary of the exclusion and expulsion of the non-white 'other' ensured that whiteness was everywhere and continually

trumpeted as the epitome of communal virtue and achievement. It was simultaneously suffusive and effusive.

The Queensland sugar industry was pivotal in this enterprise. Australians were the largest consumers of sugar products per capita in the world. But their composite sweet tooth delivered with it a series of conundrums. Centrally, it was all about how to furnish an essentially tropical industry exclusively with white workers – something that had not been done anywhere else in the world. Indeed, the settlement of tropical Australia with white migrants in British-run towns was in itself an audacious consideration. Then the problem became one of foregoing an exploited Melanesian and Asian labour force, selected over generations for tough and enervating fieldwork, in the interests of scouring Australia ‘clean white’. For white workers, the farm or plantation crop-base was an economic destination of last resort – ‘nigger work’ among, or at least in the wake of, ‘nigger workers’ (154, 382–3) in contexts of excessive heat, moisture and disease. It was transitioned via the intermediaries of the ‘almost-white’ Southern Europeans – Italians, Spaniards, Maltese (229) – and engineered by embargoes, tariffs, excise duties and bounties to raise employment standards to white levels of acceptability, curb the pressures of white workplace discontent, and contain necessary price increases for white consumers. It was fuelled by a rising desperation for jobs in difficult economic times. White consumers of ‘doubly-white’ (512) sugar paid more for their product in obeisance to the national enterprise of race purity: a pure white product aiding a pure white continent to hold out, like a glowing bastion, against an anticipated coloured surge. Thus, the British/European peopling of its North was not simply an economic imperative but also a racialised and military one – demographically manning the tropical outreaches against perhaps a Chinese or Japanese onslaught that might happen at any time.

Affeldt makes her case with substantial authority, based on exhaustive research: her bibliography covers almost 50 pages of this hefty text. She spends considerable space deconstructing dozens of racist cartoons from the *Bulletin*, the *Boomerang*, the *Worker*, the *Melbourne Punch*, the *Queensland Figaro* and other journals – ‘a shared archive of visual knowledge’ (308). Her research is most revealing in tracing the trajectories of the Great White Train across south-eastern Australia in the mid-1920s, touring almost 100 towns to the enormous acclaim of more than 700,000 visitors. It was, as Affeldt ably shows, ‘a thousand feet of whiteness’ (472), with an on-board radio station, broadcasting the gospel of racial purity

and fear of Japanese incursion across almost 1000 miles of New South Wales and Victoria; its long line of white enamelled cars, glistening by day in the sunlight and illuminated by night with searchlights, appealing to patriotic consumers to buy only white-made Australian products: a syndrome of white producers, white consumers and white goods fortifying a white nation, full of white fears and ideals. It was the first I had learned of this massive, year-long enterprise. Home-grown historians seem to have entirely missed a phenomenon that might well be thematically connected to McPherson Robertson's huge chocolate factory, the Great White City and the tumultuous visit of the Great White Fleet.

Consuming Whiteness is an important new contribution to the Australian history of race. It is certainly thorough and comprehensive – at times, perhaps, too much so. It could have profited from a more diligent editing process, focusing upon its essential arguments. There is also a need here to curb a range of textual infelicities that appear to be an outcome of a scholar struggling with the vocabulary of a second language. It still has too much of the appearance of a doctorate consigned holus-bolus into print. But it definitely repays the application of readerly patience with its interpretive scholarship in order to understand white sugar's almost messianic quest to sweeten, uphold and defend White Australia. It exposes anew the tight hold that white racism maintained upon the entire history of Australian development and self-regard.