

Stefanie Affeldt: Consuming Whiteness. Australian Racism and the ›White Sugar‹ Campaign

Stefanie Affeldt's *Consuming Whiteness: Australian Racism and the ›White Sugar‹ Campaign* is an ambitious and deeply researched study of how racism became embedded in everyday Australian life. Published in 2014, the 608-page book moves beyond conventional accounts of the White Australia policy as primarily a matter of legislation and political ideology. Instead, Affeldt asks a more challenging question: how was racial thinking reproduced through the ordinary practices, institutions and cultural habits of Australian society?

The book's most distinctive contribution is its focus on sugar. At first, this might appear to be an oddly narrow subject for a study of Australian racism. Affeldt, however, turns sugar into a remarkably effective lens through which to examine the construction of whiteness. The ›White Sugar‹ campaign connected the whiteness of refined sugar with the racial identity Australians sought to construct for themselves and their nation. Buying and consuming Australian-produced sugar could therefore become more than an economic choice: it could be represented as an act of racial and national loyalty.

This argument is particularly powerful because it demonstrates that racism was not confined to parliament, immigration regulations or explicitly political organisations. Affeldt examines the wider cultural environment in which ideas about race were produced and normalised. Literature, music, theatre, museums, science, advertising and

other forms of popular culture contributed to the construction of a ›white Australia‹ culture. In this sense, racism becomes something people did as well as something governments imposed.

The concept of ›consuming whiteness‹ is consequently the book's greatest strength. Affeldt shows how consumption could participate in the making of racial identity. The apparently mundane act of purchasing sugar could be associated with belonging, citizenship and the defence of a supposedly homogeneous nation. The symbolism was striking: white sugar was presented as the product of white labour and white civilisation, while the racialised labour and colonial violence behind the sugar industry could be pushed out of view.

The book is also valuable for the way it connects the history of sugar production with the broader history of Australian colonialism. The Queensland sugar industry was not simply an economic enterprise; it was deeply entangled with questions of labour, race and national identity. Affeldt's approach reveals how the desire to preserve a white workforce and a white national community was connected to wider efforts to define who belonged in Australia and who could be excluded.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is its treatment of whiteness itself. Rather than treating ›white Australians‹ as an obvious or timeless category, Affeldt demonstrates that whiteness had to be continually produced and defended. European groups whose

own racial status might have been contested elsewhere could strengthen their claim to Australian whiteness by distinguishing themselves from Indigenous Australians, Pacific Islanders, Chinese Australians and other racialised groups. Supporting the exclusion of others could therefore become a means of establishing one's own belonging.

This is an important theoretical insight because it shifts attention away from racism as simply hatred directed at an ›other‹. Racism also produces advantages and identities for those positioned inside the preferred category. Affeldt's study therefore helps explain why the White Australia project could receive support from such broad sections of society: it offered people a sense of collective identity and entitlement as well as economic and political advantages.

The major weakness of the book is also, to some extent, a consequence of its ambition. At more than 600 pages, *Consuming Whiteness* is exceptionally detailed. Its extensive discussion of cultural production, political organisations, industry, labour and consumer practices can make the argument feel dense at times. Readers looking for a straightforward narrative history of the sugar industry may find the theoretical and evidentiary breadth demanding. A contemporary review similarly praised the book's meticulous and complex treatment while noting the sheer amount of detail involved.

There is also a question about the balance of the study. The book is exceptionally effective at demonstrating how white Australian identity was constructed, but the experiences and consequences of this racial system for the people who were excluded from it receive less attention than they might. One reviewer specifically noted that the book does not fully explore the social, economic, political and psychological

consequences experienced by groups who were racialised and ›othered.‹ This is an important limitation, particularly for readers interested in Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Chinese-Australian or other minority histories.

Nevertheless, this limitation does not diminish the significance of Affeldt's central argument. If anything, it highlights the book's particular contribution: it asks us to examine not only those who experienced racism but also the social mechanisms through which racial privilege was made ordinary and desirable.

Consuming Whiteness is ultimately a compelling study because it makes an abstract concept—whiteness—visible in an everyday object. Sugar becomes a way of seeing the relationship between consumption, labour, colonialism, nationalism and race. The book demonstrates that racial ideology does not survive only through laws or overt political movements. It can also be reproduced through habits, markets, cultural representations and apparently ordinary choices.

For readers interested in Australian history, the White Australia policy, colonialism, race and racism, labour history, consumer culture or the history of sugar, this is an important and rewarding book. Its greatest achievement is to show that the history of Australian racism cannot be understood solely by looking at government policy. It must also be examined in kitchens, shops, workplaces, advertisements, cultural institutions and everyday acts of consumption.

Overall assessment: 4.5/5

An ambitious, original and meticulously researched study that transforms something as ordinary as sugar into a powerful lens for understanding the construction of whiteness and Australian racism.