

The Eclipse of Whiteness

A Political Colour in Australia

Abstract: The proclamation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 marked the high point of a development that had its roots even before the First Fleet left Portsmouth for its initial voyage to the prospective colonies more than a hundred years prior.

Unfolding during the 19th century in a seemingly ever-intensifying self-identification with ›whiteness‹ as a crucial characteristic of Australianness, the striving for racial homogeneity culminated in a veritable *triumph of ›whiteness‹*. At the same time, however, ›whiteness‹ was experiencing a *global crisis*. Dire predictions phrased by academics in the late 19th and early 20th century prophesized the demise of the ›white race‹ and the rise to power of the ›coloured races‹ – in particular, those labelled as ›yellow‹. All over the globe, Anglophone countries responded to this alleged threat not only with political means but also incorporated their stubborn bargaining with the decaying ›white supremacy‹ in their everyday social and cultural life.

In turn-of-the-century Australia, *triumph* and *crisis* of ›whiteness‹ were closely related. This, however, was not a spontaneous development out of nothingness. In the initial decades of British occupation, being ›white‹ was a dynamic and socially contested matter.

When the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay carrying the ideological baggage of ›whiteness‹ as a hegemonic relationship. This did not impede, however, that in the early days of colonial Australia, skin colour receded behind a juxtaposition of ›us‹ (the new arrivals, who also comprised ›black‹ convicts) versus ›them‹ (the Indigenous Australians).

In the course of the next (roughly) one hundred years, it was, first and foremost, the ›white‹ working class as descendants of the transported convicts who accomplished to implement ›whiteness‹ as the state doctrine. In this process, ›whiteness‹ was established and had to be continuously enforced as a class-spanning and gender-bridging

characteristic. From the outset, this was conveyed through and actively associated with an element of external threat that found expression in the ›yellow peril‹.

Throughout the historical course of White Australia, ›eruptions of whiteness‹ were expressed in episodes of social and racial clashes that evidenced the central role ›whiteness‹ played as a social bonding agent, which overwrote otherwise crucial social distinctions.

Australia lends itself particularly well for an analysis of ›white‹ as a social category because it demonstrates how ›whiteness‹, ideologically established in the 18th century, had to be socially and politically implemented and culturally anchored as a manifestation of a race-theoretical power relation that did by no means originate from natural perception.

In an Australia that considered itself a European outpost on the edge of an encroaching Asia, this ›*crisis of whiteness*‹ was of particular importance. With Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war, long-standing concerns of ›white‹ Australians about their vulnerable situation and the possibility of hostile invasions (which were not least recorded in the dystopian novels of the time) seemed confirmed by the rise of a close-by martial power. When, in the aftermath of the First World War, Japan's military superiority was complemented by a claim for racial equality, Australia's prime minister was the one to stand up to such ›presumptions‹ at the Versailles Peace Conference.

This was countered by an implementation of ›whiteness‹ as the core characteristic of Australianness in the last decade of the 19th century and saw the emphasis of the ›white‹ ideal in an extensive ›White Australia‹ culture that found expression not least in poems and prose, theatrical pieces and social events but also in consumer behaviour and eventually even in the national anthem.