

Stefanie Affeldt

A Japanese Galen Down Under

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Described as a ›mixing of nationalities and hybrids‹ that would ›puzzle the cleverest ethnologist‹, Broome's population in 1900 was a hotchpotch of immigrants from Asia. During the heyday of pearl-shelling, Europeans were outnumbered five to one by the indentured workers from Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, the South Sea Islands, Timor, and Macassar, but, of course, also stemmed from local Indigenous Australian groups.

This circumstance was diametrically opposed to the national self-concept of ›White Australia‹. Arguably, the northern multicultural pearling bases contributed to the emergence of ›two Australias in 1901‹ (Reynolds). At a time when the Commonwealth entered the world stage as a federation of colonies, united not least by ›whiteness‹ as the constitutive element of ›Australianness‹, the apprehension of a virtual bifurcation into a ›white south‹ and a ›multiracial north‹ created an area of tension in which strict regulations on immigration conflicted with economic deliberations. Fears of foreign invasion blended with global warnings against the ›yellow peril‹ and labourist antagonism towards the employment of ›coloured workers‹. The white entrepreneurs, in turn, presaged the demise of their industry, and the subsequent downfall of Broome, should Asian indenture be disallowed.

Amidst this tense scenario, a Japanese medical doctor arrived in Broome, commissioned by the local Japanese Club to provide his services to his compatriots. The presence of this ›newcomer Galen‹, a journalist reported, caused quite a ›howl in political circles‹, which discussed it under economic and moral perspectives. Today, this case sheds light on both the discursive and practical implementation of racist discrimination in Australia and racism as a social relation. Far from being passive subordinates, the successful assertiveness of Japanese immigrants gives account of the effective agency on the side of those whose lives were otherwise framed by an overtly racist attitude.