

‘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 ‘yellow peril’ found expression in science and politics as well as in innumerable invasion novels which depicted the swamping of the European outpost in the Pacific by Asiatic hordes. The programme of a white society was reasoned scientifically and found political supporters not least in the labour movement. Moreover, it found expression in a medium which was even more popular than pulp fiction: commodity racism which 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 gaining of intra-continental acceptance through subsidies. Both invasion novels and sugar consumption aimed at the whole 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 text body. 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: ‘The Rising Tide of Colour’. The text printed beneath contains further information 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 Asian surplus 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, depicts the supposedly growing interest of Asian countries

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for 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' way 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 with a populated north Australia was able to fend off invaders.³

After so raising the awareness about the 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 '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 protecting 'white Australia'.

Let us take it at its word and 'Think the matter out!' I do this by initially analysing the Australian perception 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 to both maintain and affirm the 'whiteness' of Australia. I conclude by assessing the way in which consumption of the invasion novels as well as the Australian sugar interacted in the dynamics of commodity racism.

2. 'White Sugar' against 'Yellow Peril'

The advertisement soliciting the moral and financial support of 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 in the public awareness well through the first half of the twentieth century: 'yellow peril' and 'white sugar'.

A. '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 inner tensions and the unity of whites against a 'coloured' enemy. Furthermore, they were the expression of the special position the Australians found themselves to be in: geographically they were surrounded by and in close

proximity to Asian countries, population-politically half of the Australian country was considered unpopulated.

The phrase ‘yellow peril’ was coined in the late nineteenth century and expressed the supposed detrimental effects that a mass migration of Asians to western countries had on wages and living conditions of white labourers as well as on Australia’s racial purity. Again the 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 which emphasised this fragility of ‘white Australia’ by putting emphasis on the large stretches of land in the north where settlement was still small, became an increasing concern in the public Australian mind at the time of Federation. The problem in the underpopulation and the subsequent delay in the opening-up of the northern territories lay in the fact that it stood against the ideology that a title to the land could be lawfully held only when the land was being cultivated.

This anxiety of losing the land to foreign intruders was taken up in a literary genre which, in Australia, emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century – the ‘invasion novels’.⁴ In the ‘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 the newspapers or the papers of the labour movement and thus reached a broad audience. Rather than mere public entertainment they were ‘dramatic construction of the new world on the base of the old’,⁶ written as social critiques to the present situation and envisioning the ensuing consequences as a tocsin for the white, mainly British, population.

In general the novels can be structured into three parts of narration. 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, the Australian society as a whole was able to offer, more often than not successful, resistance to a foe coming from without.

Race is the most obvious discursive element in the invasion novels. The invading Asians endanger the white workers’ economic conditions based on the formers’ 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 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 gender aspects finds expression in the alleged fragility of the 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 the white women and white Australia was the duty of the white men.

Class features on the one hand in the contradistinction between the politicians who are stuck in never-ending discussions about the invasion scenario and the dwellers of the bush who are rather practical and take Australia's fate in their hands. On the other hand, 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', the 'high-priests of capital', who were as 'blind ... as bats' and for whom 'business was business and money was money',¹⁰ only had in mind their financial profit and were ready to do expand their business relations to 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.¹¹

The only chance 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'.¹² The invasion by foreign foes as the cataclysmic battle becomes the touchstone for the internal social cohesion. Eventually, class and gender boundaries were overcome based on the shared whiteness and a racialised national identity, and 'Australia was true to her destiny ... she stayed white'.¹³

Of course, Queensland was anything but empty – as the reader of invasion novels knew. The crux of the matter was that it was not filled 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 moreover for cane sugar that was cultivated and produced by white labour. But before this was accomplished and the sugar industry could proudly call itself the 'white man's industry',¹⁴ it had to undergo major changes in demography and organisation.

The story of sugar in Australia starts with the beginning of white settlement in Australia 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 prior. The planters reverted to a labour resource that had hardly been tapped before: the Pacific Islands.

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

Despite an attempt in the 1890s to end the labour trade altogether, it was not until the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 that permanent steps for an extensive demographic change in the sugar industry could be made. The Federation brought with it the fixation of whiteness as a major part of the national identity. The White Australia policy, which was decisively carried by the Australian labour movement,¹⁵ 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', these 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. The Australian consumers now had to pay dearly for their national consciousness. They, however, not only tolerated this extra payment 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.¹⁶

Despite the sugar industry now being socially 'white',¹⁷ tensions were far from over. The on-going subsidies attracted the critic 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.¹⁸ To maintain the support by the Australian consumers the sugar industry used the newspaper advertisement to call upon their national pride and their plight to invest into the defence of their country against external enemies.

3. Consuming for National Identity and Racial Purity

In combing the 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.¹⁹ 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, excessively benefited from the low production costs based on the system of plantation slavery. Sugar, in early nineteenth-century Britain, was a commodity increasingly to be 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. The crux of this sugar was explicitly not the desire for a low cost commodity but 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 that, 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 the information to all milieus of society. Far from being mere fiction the novels reflected contemporary 'scientific' findings as well as current political processes. By their emphasis on a 'white Australian' unity despite internal tensions, they supplied the reasoning that only as a nation with undisputable identity and racial purity Australia could bid defiance to a hostile takeover attempt.

The populating of the north played the crucial role in the defence of Australia. This was to be accomplished by enhancing the 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 the parts which were deemed unsatisfactorily populated. More than their mere physical presence, the workers of the sugar industry would so 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 racial purity of 'white Australia'.

Notes

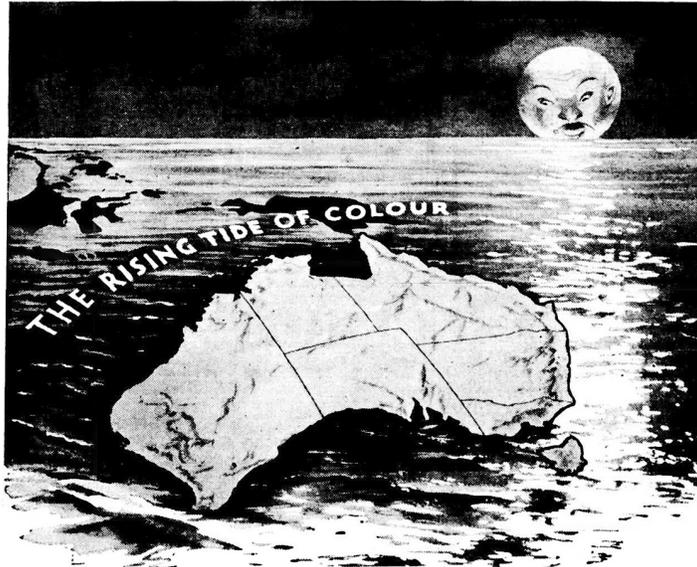
- ¹ For this and the following quotations see *The Argus* (Melbourne), 15 Oct 1930, 11; *The Mercury* (Hobart), 18 Oct 1930, 15; *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 18 Oct 1930, 6; *The Register News-Pictorial* (Adelaide), 20 Oct 1930, 17; *The West Australian* (Perth), 21 Oct 1930, 4; *The Argus*, 23 Oct 1930, 10; *The Western Mail* (Perth), 23 Oct 1930, 18; *Sunday Times* (Perth), 26 Oct 1930, 32. Also see the appendix for the advertisement.
- ² Stoddard claimed that the ‘natural outlet’ for Japan’s surplus population was to be found nowhere else than in the United States of America and in Australia. Cf. 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 thirty years prior by an Australian scientist. In ‘National Life and Character’, Charles H. Pearson depicted the alleged menace posed by a ‘rising’ of the ‘coloured’ peoples which led to a ‘globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races’. This in particular concerned Australia which he believed to be ‘the last part in the world, in which the higher races can live and increase freely, for the higher civilisation’. Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character. A Forecast* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1894), 89, 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*, edited by 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. id. (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 Prophesying 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’, in *Australian Literary Studies*, 13 (1987) 1, 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’, in *The Boomerang*, 10.3.1888; 18.2.1888.
- ⁹ J. A. Kenneth Mackay, *The Yellow Wave. A Romance of the Asiatic Invasion of Australia*, eds. Andrew Enstice, Janeen Webb (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 2003 [1895]), 257; William Lane, ‘White or Yellow’, 23, 21.4.1888.
- ¹⁰ Mackay, *Yellow Wave*, 130 (‘high-priests’, ‘bats’); George Ranken, *The Invasion* (Sydney: Turner & Henderson, 1877), 86.
- ¹¹ Mackay, *Yellow Wave*, 81.
- ¹² Lane, ‘White or Yellow’, 31.3.1888; 14.4.1888; 24.3.1888.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.5.1888.
- ¹⁴ Thomas D. Chataway, ‘The Australian Sugar Industry. Economic Expansion and White Australia’, in *International Sugar Journal*, 1 (1921), 140.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Verity Burgmann, ‘Racism, Socialism, and the Labour Movement, 1887-1917’, in *Labour History*, 47 (1984), 41, 46.
- ¹⁶ Peter Griggs, ‘A Natural Part of Life’. The Australian Sugar Industry’s Campaign to Reverse Declining Australian Sugar Consumption, 1980-1995’, in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 30 (2006) 87, 125.
- ¹⁷ Struggles in the sugar industry between the employers and the labour movement continued. When in 1911 the Queensland sugar workers went on strike for higher wages and improved working conditions, they were signalling their employers that they were not tolerating to be treated like ‘Kanakas’ (derog. for Pacific Islander), no more ‘nigger work for a dog’s pay’ (Kay Saunders, *Workers in Bondage. The Origins and Bases of Unfree Labour in Queensland, 1824-1916* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982), 63). After the legislation had made way for the employment of whites, the employed whites now demanded their share in the ‘wages of whiteness’– (David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007). The final step for the transition of the sugar industry to the ‘white man’s industry’ was accomplished with the Sugar Cultivation Act of 1913, which introduced a mandatory certificate of passing a dictation test but exempted Australians of European descent. It made it virtually impossible for anyone but white European-Australians to be employed anywhere in the sugar industry (Cf. Saunders, *Workers in Bondage*, 182-183.).
- ¹⁸ Chataway, ‘Australian Sugar Industry’, 140.
- ¹⁹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 209.

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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 Australia, we have slightly over 2 persons to the square mile. In Asia, they have, in parts, over 300 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 realise how almost impossible it would be for us to resist a concerted Asiatic invasion:—

COUNTRY.	POPULATION	Persons per Square Mile
China	467,787,000	
Indo-China	12,000,000	
Japan and Dependencies	83,448,000	
Asiatic Russia	28,800,000	
India	247,000,000	Average 164.22
Siam	11,000,000	
East Indies	51,981,000	
Philippines	11,748,000	
	814,670,000	
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—as 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
271 COLLINS STREET, MELBOURNE