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“The White Experiment”: Racism and the Broome Pearl-Shelling Industry

Abstract

With the Federation of Australia, aspiration for racial homogeneity was firmly established as being fundamental to national identity. Therefore, increasing criticism was directed against Asian employment in the pearl-shelling industry of Broome. It was not least against the backdrop of population politics, that several efforts were implemented to disestablish the purportedly ‘multiracial enclave’ in ‘White Australia.’ These culminated in “the white experiment,” i.e. the introduction of a dozen British men to evince European fitness as pearl divers and initiate the replacement of Asian pearling crews. Embedded in these endeavours were reflections of broader discourses on ‘white supremacy’ and racist discrimination.

“Broome is, in fact, as far removed from Australia as if it were at the other end of the China Sea,” stated a Victorian newspaper in 1901. In the year of the Federation, the settlement on the north-eastern coast was “in all respects an Eastern town.” It was, however, not its geographical distance to the Australian metropolises but its inhabitants from various countries that triggered this assertion. The vast majority of the population came from Asian nations to work in and around the local pearl-shelling industry. That it was at the same time “one of the most prosperous places in the Commonwealth” (*Geelong Advertiser* 4) only aggravated the chagrin of all those who endorsed a ‘White Australia.’

During the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, nation-building in Australia had been decisively shaped by societal and political processes that aimed at securing racial homogeneity and upholding the ideal of white supremacy. In this context, the ‘multiracial enclave’ Broome occupied a prominent position in the discourse on the national development, not least, because it was one of two industries that deviated from the continent-wide racist exclusionism.

To this day, the secondary literature considers the historical case of the pearl-shelling industry a “rare exemption from the White Australia policy” (Martínez 231).

The Australian Government's official website even locates this special status geographically and states that "Broome was made an exception to the White Australia Policy" (Australian Government 2007). However, the notion that Broome and its social landscape were, in fact, an outright "hole in 'white' Australia" (McQueen 2004, 69) seems to be a too simplistic assumption and understates the complexity of the processes which defined and affected the everyday relations of the people and the relationship between Broome and the rest of Australia.

The racist mechanisms that shaped the national mood did by no means spare the north-western town. Most of the local politicians and master pearlers – more often than not the same person – were professed advocates of white supremacy and endorsed the broad anti-Asian attitude. These circumstances beg for a closer exploration of the social, political and cultural processes that shaped the pearl-shelling industry and the interactive constructionism on the local and national level that informed and influenced the industry. This investigation is, in fact, an extensive project, comprising a historico-sociological analysis of racism as a social relation, which uses as a historical example the pearl-shelling industry in Broome.¹

As a part thereof, this article investigates a temporary episode in the long history of racisms in the north-western town: the (failed) attempt to 'whiten' the most important industry at Broome by replacing the Japanese pearl divers with professional divers recruited in England. In doing so, it employs discourse and process analysis by looking at the existent body of secondary literature and complementing it with primary sources for original tone. In the following, the article will initially set the scene by contextualising the particular situation in which Broome found itself at the end of the nineteenth century in the light of 'White Australia,' outline the history of and labour situation in the town, and, lastly, depict the rise and fall of the 'white divers' and the racist dimensions inherent in this endeavour.

1. 'White Australia'

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, national identity in Australia was firmly associated with 'whiteness' as the predominant feature. Through the course of the eighteenth century, it had become the marker of civilization and progress. With the establishment of race theories, and their popularization in the nineteenth century, the hierarchization of humans "generated a space of whiteness, open to different classes," especially in settler colonies (Hund 70).

Hence, from the perspective of historical racism research, the societal processes in Australia are of utmost interest. They express the continuation of a firm belief in white supremacy. Nevertheless, they also represent the acknowledgement of a challenge to the purported peak position of Western cultures. Uproars in the colonies around the world compelled the recognition that, at the

beginning of the twentieth century, white supremacy had to be defended against what seemed to be "crises of whiteness" (Bonnett 18), brought about by the "rising tide of colour" (Stoddard 1920).

The Federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 was the culmination of a development that had gained momentum in the late nineteenth century. For years, a "conflict of interest" with the British mother country, not least regarding the defence of the continent, had been smouldering (Meaney 1976, 6). With the broad support of the working class, which strongly emphasized its 'whiteness' (Faulkner and Macintyre 15), the call for isolationist principles resulted in legislation which reduced, if not completely suppressed, 'undesirable,' i.e. primarily Asian, immigration and super-elevated the continent as a possession of European settlers: the 'White Australia policy' with its Immigration Restriction Act.

This was not a mere political construct but was additionally backed up by an institutional embeddedness in the social reality of its citizens. Racism "expresses itself in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates"; it "directly sustains or proposes to establish a racial order" (Frederickson 6). On the southern-most continent, it also took the form of a 'White Australia culture' which found entrance into the everyday life of its population: amongst other things, theatrical pieces, poems, and songs propagated the ideal of white supremacy and the desire for racial homogeneity. In terms of literature, there existed a whole genre of invasion literature which proved especially popular in Australia (Affeldt 2011, 223). It was dedicated to the notion that the size of the population was not sufficient to claim the whole Australian continent and developed possible scenarios of hostile take-overs by foreign powers and dire notions of an "Asian future" (Walker 325). The alleged threat – a factual discourse mirrored in the literary genre – was in particular seen in the surplus population of the neighbouring Asian countries in the north. These were predicted to avail themselves of the purportedly under-populated landscapes of the northern coasts: the so-called 'empty North.' Chinese and Japanese immigrants, based on their alleged numerical superiority, would 'swamp' the country and jeopardize racial purity through miscegenation (Aly and Walker 204). Even worse for the proponents of 'White Australia,' the intruders would certainly join forces with the Indigenous Australians and lay claim to the continent the European settlers deemed their rightful possession.

It was, therefore, more than mere economic fears that spoke against the employment of Japanese and other Asians in northern industries. Against the backdrop of Western anxieties regarding the 'yellow peril,' Australia found itself in a special situation. With its cultural closeness to Britain and its geographical closeness to Asia, Australia was seen as the "last resort" of the "white race" (Pearson 17) and was thus considered to be at special risk. Not only was, to Australian minds, the military power of Japan worrisome. Its victory over Russia at Tsushima in 1905, and the later claim to racial equality in the negotiations on the Peace Treaty

in 1919, caused a stir in the Western societies and challenged (once more) the idea of white supremacy in the world. In addition, with the relocation of the imperial navy, Australia felt that its relation to the British Empire was challenged and the continent's security was decisively compromised (Meaney 2009, 10).

At this time, for the outpost of European civilization the Far East had become the "Near East" (Miles 366). With the constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia, the reduction of Asian immigration and the fostering of the 'British element' were adopted as national aims. While the Immigration Restriction Act regulated, or rather virtually abolished, the arrival of Asian migrants, the Pacific Island Labourers Act, as the second pillar of 'White Australia,' solved the 'black labour' problem in the other northern industry.

The employment of workers from the South Sea Islands – the so-called Pacific Islanders – in the sugar cane field of Queensland had provoked intensified debates during the pre-Federation proceedings and almost impeded the colony's admission to the new Commonwealth. The latter act, mandating the repatriation of the Islanders, constituted the first step to a much demanded 'whitening' of the sugar industry (Affeldt 2014, 357–424). The transformation of the sugar industry was crucially pushed forward by the labour movement, which was applying notions of cross-class 'whiteness' to insist on the employment of European workers under suitable living and work conditions for the benefit of 'White Australia' (Affeldt 2010, 119).

These processes decisively affected the arguments for a similar reconstruction of the pearl-shelling industry. Broome, with its population consisting of ten times more coloured than 'white' inhabitants, posed a special problem for a nation that aspired to racial homogeneity and claimed the whole continent "for the White Man," as one of the journalistic mouthpieces of 'White Australia,' *The Bulletin*, did after 1908 (London 153). Under its former masthead, "Australia for the Australians," the paper had already defined whom it considered Australians: while the "term Australian" was by no means exclusive to those "who have been merely born in Australia" but – with reservations regarding, not least, class, religion, political views, and mental condition – related to "all white men who come to these shores"; it was certain that "[n]o nigger, no Chinaman, no lascar, no kanaka, no purveyor of cheap labour is an Australian" (*Bulletin* 2.7.1887, 4). The paper thus not only demonstrated an aversion to non-'white' labour but also explicitly criticized those who were the employers of such workers and challenged their being 'true' Australians.

Initially, this did not interfere with the master pearlers' recruitment of Japanese and other Asian workers. Despite the restrictions on immigration into the Commonwealth, which posed a potential problem for the employment of Asians in the pearl-shelling industry, for the first decade of the twentieth century, the pearlers' lobbying was effective enough to successfully press for exemptions and special regulations regarding their divers and pearl-shelling crews.

2. Broome

When, shortly before Federation, a journalist with the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* visited Broome, he was taken aback by its apparent cosmopolitanism. In a nation that actively pursued racial homogeneity, the distant town on the north-western shores of the continent must have seemed like a 'multiracial enclave,' thronged with people from Japan, Malaysia, Manilla and other neighbouring islands and countries.

"Willy Willy" – tellingly, the journalist took his pen name from the tropical whirlwind that was common to the region and permanently threatened to annihilate the town – described Broome as a "mixing of nationalities and hybrids" that would "utterly puzzle the cleverest ethnologist" (*The Age* 16.8.1899, 7). The journalist was especially concerned with what he considered the racially detrimental power of the high number of Japanese and Chinese living and working in Broome. In his view, Japanese divers closed off the labour market to European workers; since the foreign workers transferred their earned money to their respective countries of origin, no profit in any form could be reaped for Australia from their employment (*The Age* 26.8.1899, 4). Asserting that continuing the employment of Asian workers in the pearl-shelling industry meant prolonging a "suicidal" system which constituted a "menace to the future of the continent" and "national progress" (*The Age* 26.8.1899, 4), he made a strong case for the 'whitening' of the Broome pearl-shelling industry. To him, replacing the encroaching and race-adulterating Asian labourers with European, preferably British-Australian crews seemed the only sensible move.

Fear of a Japanese 'seizure' was neither exclusive to the Broome situation, nor was it limited to the few years after Federation. Thursday Island, too, had long been under the suspicion of "becoming a Japanese colony" (Frei 80–81); the "complete control of the pearling industry will pass into Japanese hands shortly" (*Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs* 18.5.1899, 4). This warning was heated in Western Australia and repeated at least until 1920, when it was stated that "Thursday Island is practically run by Japanese" and "pearling is largely monopolised by Japanese" (*Western Argus* 22.6.1920, 25). But Thursday Island was not part of Australia's mainland nor did the number of Japanese come near that of Broome.

Historically, pearl-shelling had begun in the north-west of Australia in 1868 as a venture of European pastoralists who had newly arrived on the northern shores (Streeter 144–145, 156–157). The first shells were collected during low water without diving. As soon as these easily harvestable deposits became exhausted, groups of Indigenous Australians were (forcibly) recruited to dive for shell in depths from two to four meters. After they had acquired the necessary swimming and diving skills (Bartlett 83), they did not use any special diving equipment and sought for shells by sight. In the mid-1880s, legislation in Western

Australia limited the arbitrariness with which the local Indigenous groups were deployed by the European graziers and pearlery; in particular, it prohibited the employment of pregnant Indigenous Australians as divers. Pearl-shell diving was further professionalized when the search turned to deeper waters and diving suits were introduced to the industry in the 1880s. With this, the 'skin diving' of the Indigenous Australians was ended and the era of 'helmet diving,' with its turn to Asian men as divers, began (Bain 26–29).

Broome was founded in 1883. Already by the late 1880s, it had become the pearl capital of the world, providing more than three-quarters of the global amount of pearl-shell produced (Bailey 102) – which was then used for buttons and buckles, hair combs and for the decoration of furniture. By then, its population was already highly diverse, with Japanese pearl divers, ship crews with Malays and other foreign workers in local shops and institutions.

The purportedly romantic life of the pearlery continues to be a subject of (fictitious) writing until today. Broome has “more novels written about it than any other town in the Commonwealth” (Cowan 76).² Given the number of books that have been written on its history and inhabitants, Broome “must remain an integral part of the Australian legend” (Drake-Brockman 32). The impression of a close-knit community had been created already early on in the history of the town. One of the earliest accounts on pearl-shelling at the north-western coast talked about the “‘Pearlers’ or ‘Nor-Westerners’ [...] hard and dangerous but healthy life,” regulated by an “unwritten code of honour that is seldom broken.” The remoteness from the rest of Australia functioned as a social cohesive for a community that was shaped by an absence of the “amenities and restraints of more civilised life” (Streeter 147). Thus, from the start, life in Broome has been deemed rather different from that in other Australian cities: ostensibly a rougher and tougher but also a more pure life.

At first glance, Broome seems to have been a racially inclusive settlement that stood in contradiction to the exclusivist political movements in the rest of the nation. Compared with the nationwide aspiration for racial homogeneity, the atmosphere could be interpreted as rather anti-discriminatory. Consequently, some of the secondary literature sees in Broome an “exciting pocket of humanity in the drab textures of ‘white’ Australia” (Bartlett 25). The employment of high numbers of Japanese and Asian crews far into the twentieth century seem so in contradiction with the racist sentiment against Asian immigration that Broome was even declared “the exception that proved the rule” or considered to be the “antithesis of a ‘white’ Australia” (Ganter 66, 70).

However, the population of Broome, in general, was highly segregated. ‘Whites’ were shunned if they were seen in the Japanese, Chinese or Malayan parts of the town. The jobs were based on the racial hierarchy in the town, with those identified as ‘Koepangers’ or ‘Manillamen’ and Indigenous Australians having to do menial tasks. As divers, Japanese men could acquire a high reputation – at sea,

they were also entrusted with the command over the pearl luggers and were largely responsible for picking their crew. It was, however, the 'white' master pearlers – called 'veranda pearlers' because most of them refrained from personally sailing out with the luggers – who reaped the profit and behaved "in a manner close to that of white expatriates in the tropical colonies of the British empire" with "aboriginal boys and girls for rough, unskilled work, Chinese gardeners, Malay housekeepers, Japanese cooks" (Reynolds 124).

At the heyday of pearling – which coincided with the years of the strongest nationalism and racism in Australia – skin colour was still the identifier of those deemed members of the 'superior race' in Broome. But this was not the only signifier. A reporter witnessed that the "white" in Broome are the "lord dictators and the rich men," they were united in their dress, the "white duck suit," which was worn by both the cart driver and the wealthy pearl-buyer and which "covered up outward differences of social status" (*The Sun* 10.7.1910, 7). This societal pyramid not only mirrored assertions of white supremacy and the unifying aspect of racism directed against the racialized 'Other' (Allen 32) but also evidenced that Asian labour was the crucial fundament of the pearl-shelling industry in Broome.

Nevertheless, in the decade after Federation, the master pearlers' emphasis on the need for an amendment of the Immigration Restriction Bill in favour of their industry began to clash with the Labor Party's long-term opposition to 'coloured labour.' The latter argued not only in terms of the socioeconomic effects – an undercutting of 'white' workers' wages and a substratification of the working class – but also brought in biologicistic and culturalist arguments (McQueen 1975, 36). They, too, argued on grounds of "racial contamination" and eugenics – as one Labor politician did in the negotiations on the Immigration Restriction Bill (Watson 1901).

The first national Labor Party entertained as their foremost goal the retaining of 'White Australia' (Burgmann 1980; McMullin 46–47). Likewise, the mouthpiece of the labour movement, *The Worker*, proclaimed that a "colored population is, as civilisation goes, always a menace and a positive injury to any white community." The often-voiced claim that "[t]here is no more in the cry that white men can't dive than there was in the statement that they couldn't cut cane" (*The Worker* 16.2.1911, 15), is a significant interjection in the debate about the reluctance to employ European pearling crews, because "the best patriotism for Australia is the maintenance of this continent as a heritage of a purely European people" (*The Worker* 31.12.1914, 11).

This, of course, meant the cessation of Asian employment in favour of 'White Australia,' even against the objections and will of the master pearlers. Added to this were the increase of Japanese agency in Broome and the consequent emergence of 'racial conflicts' between several foreign groups. At least three times during the first half of the twentieth century social tension in the settlement erupted into 'race riots,' which saw Japanese attacking other Asian workers (Choo 466). These

disparities further contributed to the pressure on the master pearl-ers to employ European workers in their industry. The intensification of prolonged debates on the ‘whitening’ of the Broome pearl-shelling industry eventually resulted in the implementation of “the white experiment” (*The Age* 10.6.1916, 17).

3. White Divers

In early February 1912, eleven British men landed in Broome. They were hoped to be ‘living evidence’ to refute the long-held axiom of Japanese uniqueness in the craft of pearl diving. Eight of the new arrivals – William Webber, Frederick W. Beesley, Ernest S. Freight, Fred Harvey, Stephen Elphick, Stanley J. Sanders, John Noury, and James Rolland – were highly skilled former British Navy divers, the other three men – William Reid, Harry Hanson, and Charles Andrews – were tenders, who, as experienced mechanics, were responsible for the diving equipment and monitored the dive by regulating the air feed and communicating with the divers via the life-line. They were joined in the following month by a twelfth British man, Reginald V. Heckliss, who was also employed as a deep-sea diver.³

Their employment was an attestation to the racist aspirations of the time; the men themselves were meant to be signifiers of the superiority of European superiority over Asian divers. Nevertheless, the eventual recruitment of these British men for the work in the pearl-shelling industry had been preceded by much debate in parliaments on local and national levels (Bailey 9). As early as 1905, Labor politicians had emphasised the urgency to restructure the pearl-shelling industry as a ‘white’ industry. But it was not until 1911 that the Fisher government passed a statutory regulation to foster such transformation, ruling that, after December 31, 1913, Asian crews were only permitted if both the diver and the tender were European (Layman 41).

The labour movement had lauded this decision taken under Labor prime minister Andrew Fisher, as it seemed like the first step in their continuous fight against ‘coloured labour.’ In the year preceding the ‘white experiment,’ the labour movement’s mouthpieces regularly called out renowned pearl-ers for their reluctance to employ Europeans. It claimed that “the antipathy of the Broome pearl-ing firms to unionists, and white labour in general, is well known” (*The Worker* 14.6.1911, 2) and that it was “better the pearl shell industry go under than be carried on as it now is” (*The Worker* 16.2.1911, 15). Locally, this view was quite disputed, as one of the pearl-ers disclosed that “[t]here is really no foundation for what is said that some of the pearl-ers have an objection to work with white divers.” They were “ready to give the white man a chance” but found that, due to the climatic and work conditions, Europeans refrained from applying for jobs in the pearl-shelling industry (*The Northern Times* 18.3.1911, 5).

Broadly, even amongst the pearlers, the debate was split between those who were willing to approve at least of a temporary recruitment and those who uncompromisingly denied the possibility of 'white labour' in the pearl-shelling industry. Generally, the master pearlers were rather convinced of the non-feasibility of this endeavour (Bailey 130–131). Not only because, as they argued, the pearl-shelling industry would be ruined if wages adequate for European workers had to be paid, but also because the Japanese divers were very experienced and proficient in discovering and collecting shell from the ocean floor. Nonetheless, in return for a further deferral of the phasing out of Japanese divers and tenders, the local Pearlers' Association agreed to employ the British men on one-year contracts, pay them wages deemed adequate for European ship crews, and assign them pearl luggers and crews.

Disputes about the employability of 'white divers' continued during their employment. Outside of Broome, it seemed almost a self-evident fact that with the taking effect of the 'White Australia policy' the gathering of shells and pearls was to be done by 'white' men only. With the pearl-shelling industry as the last industry to still employ non-Europeans in such a high number, its unusual position became even more urgent. Expectations were thus high that this vanguard of 'white divers' would be able to pave the way for an industry reliant only on European divers and tenders (with Asian crews, if inevitable). In addition, the firm sponsoring the divers' equipment continued to assure that the British divers would "prove quite equal to the strain" given their "intelligence, indomitable pluck and endurance" (*The Daily Post* 1.2.1912, 4).

The subsequent months made clear that the recruitment of the 'white divers' had been a spectacular failure. Despite the explicit professionalism gained whilst doing underwater engineering work in Britain, "diving for shell was way beyond the previous experience and training of the English divers" (Bailey 95). Because of a lack of the two-year period seasoning and training, the Japanese divers commonly had and due to different underwater techniques, the British men failed to produce the tons of shell the pearlers were customarily expecting.

Considering the high mortality rate amongst the pearl divers – before 1914 one of ten divers a year succumbed to diver's paralysis or met with a subsea accident (Bartlett 210) – it is not surprising that such a fate also befell the British divers. It is, however, a bitter irony that William Webber of all people was the first fatality of "the white experiment." The sparse information made public the unfolding of the accident suggested that it was the non-observance of the concerning Admiralty Tables that had led to the occurrence of the decompression sickness to which he succumbed (Norman 1912). These preventive measures to ensure a secure ascent had been developed only a decade before in Scotland (Bailey 143) and it was Webber who, as an experimental diver, had made decisive contributions to the development of the guidelines (Burke 1999, 108). He died on board of the pearl lugger in the early hours of June 7, 1912.

All of the European divers had experienced slight bouts of paralysis during their employment in the pearl-shelling industry; besides Webber, for two more these were eventually lethal. The second fatality was Frederick Beesley who, despite attempts of resuscitation, also died from paralysis in the morning of February 18, 1913 (Department of External Affairs 21). He was followed by Stanley J. Sanders who, as the “last white diver” substituted for a sick colleague and died from the decompression sickness (presumably) on August 20, 1913 (*The Register* 26.8.1913, 6).

By the end of August 1913 – a mere eighteen months after the arrival of the ‘white divers’ – a governmental memo provided the sobering realisation that the attempts to prove the Europeans’ fitness for pearl-diving had failed completely (Customs and Excise Office Broome 30.8.1913, 6–7). It reported that out of all participants only the former tender William Reid had remained in the industry and was then working as a shell-opener. Two of the surviving divers and one former tender put on record that though “they had been given every opportunity while engaged in the industry, and were quite satisfied with the pay [...] the risks were far too great, space cramped and life monotonous” (30.8.1913, 6–7).

It is difficult to pinpoint why exactly the ‘white experiment’ had failed. The master pearl-ers continued to claim that European divers did not have the necessary instinct for discovering shell on the ocean floor.⁴ This had resulted in a curious incident that was circulated in the national papers: in an attempt to confirm these allegations, one master pearler attempted to press a British diver to make an admission of failure. Stanley J. Sanders was forced by pearler Sydney Pigott to “sign a paper declaring that white men were not suitable for pearl diving” (*The Argus* 9.8.1913, 19). Upon learning that Pigott planned to publish this acknowledgement, Sanders attempted to forcibly retrieve the piece of paper. This led to his arrest and the conclusion that, in a town led by pearl-ers, the British divers “challenged the rule of the master pearl-ers at their peril” (Bailey 192).

Others – in particular members of the labour movement – claimed that the efforts of the ‘white divers’ had been sabotaged by the master pearl-ers (Bailey 286–287). Such assertions were further substantiated by the report of a committee. After an investigation into the details of the trial employment, it concluded that the Pearl-ers’ Association had not encouraged the introduction of European workers and that “many obstacles were placed in the way of the white divers, as they were given unsuitable boats and gear, and were not allowed the same freedom of choice as the Japanese divers, nor were they properly tendered”; “given the same opportunities and facilities as the aliens, there was no reason why they should not be equally successful as divers” (*The Brisbane Courier* 10.2.1913, 5).

The practical implementation of the ‘white experiment’ in Broome was accompanied by a broader investigation in the pearl-shelling industry. It also determined the situation in the two other, yet less prominent, pearl-shelling locations: Thursday Island in Queensland and Darwin in the Northern Territory. All

of these “highly multi-cultural” centres were “in stark contrast to most other Australian communities of the time” (Saenger and Stubbs 4), but it was in particular Broome with its disproportional number of Asian workers that incurred criticism from the agents of racial homogeneity.

The Royal Commission was appointed in the context of the planned suspension of Asian divers and tenders in early 1912. Amongst other things, it inquired into “the practicability of white labour being introduced” and “the means to be adopted to encourage employment of white labour” in the pearl-shelling industry (Hunt 627). The interim report – published in 1913, after the commission had visited the pearl-shelling centres in Queensland – was quite confident that pearl-shelling with ‘white labour’ was possible and made recommendations on the improvement on the industry (Bailey 197). However, when the Commission resumed their investigations after the First World War and relocated to Broome, the initial opinion was revised. In their final report, published in 1916, the commissioners discouraged making crucial changes to the pearl-shelling industry of Broome. They stated that even though they were “opposed to the continuation of coloured labour,” there was no possibility to dispense with it. The commissioners asserted that “the White Australia Policy will be neither weakened nor imperilled by allowing the pearl shelling industry to continue as at present conducted.” Even more striking regarding an analysis of the racist argumentation inherent in the social and political discourses of the day were the commissioner’s deliberations on who could (not) be expected to cope with the living and working conditions in the pearl-shelling industry. They affirmed that:

diving for shell is not an occupation which our workers should be encouraged to undertake. The life is not a desirable one, and the risks are great, as proved by the abnormal death rate amongst divers and try divers. [...] [T]he life [is] incompatible with that a European worker is entitled to live. (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 6)

This obvious recourse to the idea of the higher living standard Europeans were entitled to strongly invites further investigation of the white supremacy in the context of the pearl-shelling industry.

The employment of Japanese divers and Asian crews continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century, despite the national aspiration for racial homogeneity, the restrictionist provisions on Asian immigration, and the broader anti-Asian atmosphere of the time. Two periods of declining demand for pearls and pearl-shell during the World Wars, the fluctuating prices, and the development of artificial cultivation of oysters contributed to the eventual retreat of Australian pearl-shelling in the 1960s.

Conclusion

On their way to Federation, the Australian colonies drove a hard bargain as concerned questions of immigration and ‘alien labour.’ Nation-building was fundamentally based on a constitution that took into account the maintenance of a racially homogeneous society. Against this backdrop, it seemed certain that the pearl-shelling industry would have little chance to assert itself against the demands to replace the Japanese, Malayans and other non-white workers, including the diminishing number of Indigenous Australians, with British and other European workers. Yet, despite several attempts to transform the industry – most notably “the white experiment” – the master pearlers’ resistance, and the ostensibly empirically proven impossibility of ‘white labour’ in the industry, Broome ended up having the multicultural population, comprised of many Asians, Indigenous Australians and Europeans, it is renowned for today.

Nevertheless, the intricate negotiations surrounding the employment of European workers in the Broome pearl-shelling industry, the hardly veiled notions of racial hierarchy in the argumentations on all sides, and the need to balance the anxiety of the ‘yellow peril’ and concrete fears of invasion with the possibility of dooming the industry to failure by mandating demographic reorganisation substantiate the pearl-shelling industry’s complex history of social and political tensions on the local and national level. These circumstances urge further examination of the racisms active in this context and the relation between Broome and ‘White Australia.’

Notes

- 1 My research project “Exception or Exemption? The Broome Pearling Industry and the White Australia Policy” is a three-year, DFG-funded in-depth exploration of the north-western industry and its cultural, social, and political implications in the light of Australian racism in the late 19th and 20th century (<http://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/403220357?language=en>).
- 2 Amongst these, two accounts of the ‘white experiment’ stand out. Peter Burke’s *The Drowning Dream* (1998) retraces, unfortunately not always historically correct, the events surrounding the experiment’s first fatality as a mystery story. Hilary Bell’s *The White Divers of Broome* (2012) takes John Bailey’s historical account and, with a proper portion of artistic licence, fleshes it out as a theatrical play.
- 3 The spelling of the names varies; I follow that of the archival files, see Department of External Affairs 1913, 15.
- 4 As an aside: similar perceptions have persisted until present times. A Swedish scientist claims that “a population of sea nomads [...] have developed an underwater visual acuity that is more than twice as good as that of European

children”; nevertheless, “European children can be trained to achieve the same level of acuity underwater as the Moken children” (Gislén 2003). This conclusion, however, did not stop popular media from sensationalizing underlying investigation and, in a dichotomous tone not unlike that found with the master pearlers, claim that “[i]n the sea, most of us are half-blind – but the Moken are king” (Pilcher 2003) as well as simultaneously place them in and beyond nature by having “super-human, dolphin-like abilities” (Bush 2017).

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