

Stefanie Affeldt, *Consuming Whiteness. Australian Racism and the 'White Sugar' Campaign*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014. 608 pp. ISBN 978-3-643-90569-7. EUR 64,90. Reviewed by Anna von Rath, University of Potsdam.



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CONSUMING WHITENESS

AUSTRALIAN RACISM AND THE 'WHITE SUGAR' CAMPAIGN

LIT

RACISM ANALYSIS STUDIES 4

The 'white Australia policy' has been discussed extensively in academia and beyond, with most discussions focusing mainly on the political and legal implementation of this problematic ideology. Stefanie Affeldt's *Consuming Whiteness. Australian Racism and the 'White Sugar' Campaign* contributes an analysis of the concurrent cultural, economic and individual dimensions of the continuity of racist thinking and acting in Australia initiated by the early European settlers. Affeldt reconstructs the history of Australia's sugar production and consumption which,

according to the author, played a major part in the purposeful construction of an all-'white' ideal of Australian national identity sustaining the successful realization of an all encompassing structural (i.e. institutional, cultural and individual) racism. Her analysis moves chronologically from the inception of sugar cane cultivation to the early 20th century. Along with sugar, racism was transplanted by the Europeans to other parts of the world. Affeldt hints at the fact that racism is a kind of thinking pattern that reappears in different eras in different shapes to legitimize a ruling position. In the case of Australia, the racist nation building process had the effect that whiteness even contributed to the overcoming of other tension areas such as 'class', 'gender' and 'nation'.

After an extensive introduction, which already provides a detailed overview of the issues at stake and the book's straightforward structure, the study starts with the journey of sugar cane around the

world and its growing significance. Sugar was not only important for nutrition and the economy, it was also a symbol of power. To Affeldt, its symbolic character reflecting social hierarchies is most interesting; she identifies strong ties between sugar consumption and a person's social status shifting over time from classism to racism. Initially, in Britain sugar was a marker of class, the color of the purchased sugar which determined its quality (the whiter the better), also defined the consumer's position within the socio-economic hierarchy. Only mass production of sugar, enabled through plantation economies and slave labor, blurred the class-lines, making it an accessible commodity for all 'white' people. This change allowed even the 'white' lower classes access to a certain lifestyle and, consequently, to experience some sort of self-elevation by consuming sugar produced by people deemed even lower in social hierarchy than themselves according to the dominant discourse of the time. Affeldt refers to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction based on taste and, thus, establishes the idea that sugar became a medium to signify whiteness as power. She implies that sugar can be read as the epitome of racism.

From a general introduction to the sugar phenomenon, Affeldt turns to the specifics of the Australian context where sugar became not only a symbol of a superior social status but also of an exclusive nationalism. Already the first European fleets arriving in Australia brought sugar along with the first settlers. Soon, a debate erupted on who should work on the sugar plantations fueled by a racist ideology and based on the idea of creating an entirely 'white' Australian nation. In the early years, Australia still mostly relied on Pacific Islanders to work under exploitative conditions on the plantations. A movement against the cheap 'Black' labor emerged. It was, however, not a movement calling on peoples' morals to refrain from slavery or indentured labor but a campaign for whiteness. After abolition,

'[w]hite' sugar was not only supposed to be produced by free labour but also in due consideration of nationalist ideology. In short: the 'whiter' the producer, the 'whiter' the sugar – but, once again, the 'whiter' the sugar the dearer the sugar. (Affeldt 108)

Interestingly, the European working class in Australia strongly supported the notion of whiteness as superior social position. They were able to claim whiteness by distinguishing themselves firstly from Chinese gold miners, later from Pacific Islanders by demanding better treatment on the sugar cane fields and, at all times, from Indigenous Australians. Family background, skin color and an assumed cultural superiority buttressed the whiteness claim. Affeldt states that whiteness established itself as “symbolic capital” which a person needed for making demands and convincingly describes that it secured privileges.

But not only producers of sugar, also its consumers played an important role in furthering the national project of whiteness, Affeldt argues. The consumption of sugar became the consumption of whiteness. It allowed ‘white’ consumers from all classes to assure themselves to be members of the ‘white race’ and to show their willingness to pay the price for the creation of a homogeneous, ‘white’ nation. Affeldt describes this process – which supported the exclusion of everybody deemed ‘other’ than ‘white’ – as individual responsibility without directly referring to the political extent of individual choices. The author only implies that individual action in the form of consumption became politicized.

Affeldt adds yet another dimension to the already complex entanglement of sugar production and consumption with racism and nationalism in Australia. To assure that consumers would choose sugar produced by more expensive ‘white’ laborers and to legitimize the establishment of an institutionalized preference of particular social groups, racist images (e.g. in the form of exoticization or infantilization) were reproduced in literature, newspapers and advertisements. At the same time, a public discourse spurred an undefined fear of being invaded by dangerous ‘others’ willfully threatening ‘white’ people. These ideological underpinnings contributed to the political project of creating a ‘white’ Australia which was deliberately and overtly promoted. *Consuming Whiteness* clearly demonstrates that racist discrimination became a complete

and flawless structure, its various levels mutually stimulated each other and manifested the prevalence of the idea of 'white' supremacy. Although she describes a structural implementation of racism, Affeldt does not directly address it as such. Rather, she outlines the process as a shift from biological racism to commodity racism. Capitalism is identified as its driving force whereas the cultural dimension of racism is said to have merely served as supporter of the project. Affeldt's thorough illustration of the overwhelming amount of written and visual outputs shows that this made racism real and right in the eyes of those profiting from it.

One of the book's strengths is Affeldt's obvious awareness of the messiness of the concept of whiteness. There are no clear-cut, static 'racial' categories. On the contrary, Affeldt emphasizes that even though 'race' appeared to be the central category in the process of creating an Australian national identity, the boundaries of the imagined 'races' were still to a certain extent negotiable. By analyzing the sugar industry, the author shows that these constructions always served a purpose and were strategically employed.

In spite of the messy definitions of so called human 'races', the mechanisms of justification were always similar. Affeldt suggests that their invention began with a distinction of phenotypes based on skin colors and physical appearance, but "racism is also a form of cultural discrimination" (16). Now, whether racism is based on biology or culture, its basic idea is the creation of a binarism. A self-defined 'we' group excludes other people by assigning them to another group or other groups which are said to be essentially different. Therefore, those who claim to be the norm feel that they can legitimately restrict the 'other's' access to resources or equal, social participation which Affeldt illustrates based on Australia's sugar production and consumption.

In the settler-colonial context of Australia, the access to the powerful status of whiteness became widened: former British convicts, southern Europeans, European working class people, etc.

who would have been regarded as suspicious in Europe, were allowed to claim whiteness in Australia by emphasizing their difference to Indigenous Australians, Pacific Islanders and Chinese. According to Affeldt, the sugar industry played an essential role in staging these presumptuous claims which developed into a strategy for securing advantages in a competitive society. One had to stay 'white' to be allowed to belong and one way to reinforce that, was to support 'othering' on all levels. The vast amount of examples, which Affeldt gathered to prove Australian racism, clearly suggests that this artificial creation of an exclusive unity called 'Australianness' based on the invented category of 'race' is a complete absurdity. It is important to, again and again, emphasize the power which this construction still obtains and in how many different areas it operates.

Consuming Whiteness provides a meticulous and highly complex picture of the various expressions of racism in Australia until the early 20th century. It sharply conveys the overwhelming extent of such an ill-advised and dividing ideology. The author's intention is obviously to create awareness among the readers for the offensive explicitness of Australian racism and to impart – especially to its 'white' readers – a detailed deconstruction of the pseudo-natural category of whiteness. Although Affeldt constantly hints at the fact that the holistically applied project to establish the normalizing powers of whiteness has a lasting effect on people's thinking patterns, she does not invite 'white' people to critically deal with their own privileges. When grappling with the issues of whiteness and racism, one relevant question is always: what does it have to do with me? For just as the individual's choice of sugar used to matter for Australian nationalism – which Affeldt identified – the individual's action still has political relevance today.

Furthermore, Affeldt seems to only talk about the past. While she mentions that discriminatory patterns tend to repeat themselves, she does not draw attention to the drastic effects that the formation of an all-white 'Australianness' still has for contemporary politics, especially immigration politics, and people's interactions with each

other. Describing the enormity of the white Australia policy, she does not mention the social, economic, political and psychological consequences which people who belong to groups that have been 'othered' and continue to be 'othered' experience until today.

Nevertheless, *Consuming Whiteness* is an interesting read, with much detail, to gain a greater understanding of the development and deliberate application of racism within politics, the economy and cultural products for the purposes of domination. It sheds a different light on historical processes. The readers themselves may be able to make the connections to current political trends which could be interpreted as a continuation of a project that started with the early settlers and their consumption of sugar.