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## Plural Australia: Aboriginal and Asian labour in tropical white Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940

Julia Martínez  
*University of Wollongong*

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# Plural Australia:

Aboriginal and Asian Labour  
in  
Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy  
from  
University of Wollongong

by

Julia Martínez, BA Dip Ed (Melb), BA Hons (Woll)

History and Politics Program

1999

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original, except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted in whole or in part for a degree at this or any other university.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Abstract	
Acknowledgments	
Abbreviations	
List of maps and photographs	
<b>PART ONE:</b>	
Introduction	1
Chapter one	Constructing White Australia 9
Chapter two	Colonial labour policy in the tropics 38
Chapter three	White Australians 68
Chapter four	Internationalism and the 'colour bar' 94
Chapter five	A colonial view 125
<b>PART TWO:</b>	149
Chapter six	Aboriginal servants 152
Chapter seven	'Local coloured lads' 188
Chapter eight	'Pearly' coolies? 210
Chapter nine	Chinese workers 248
Conclusion	275
Bibliography	282

## ABSTRACT

This thesis questions the dominance of White Australia as a narrative of Australian history by highlighting opposition to the policy and its vision of a pure white nation. It considers the need for a new paradigm, that of Plural Australia, to more adequately frame the experiences of Australia's past and to acknowledge continued ethnic heterogeneity within the nation. A northern, tropical perspective on Australian history undermines the traditional narrative of British colonisation and the supposedly unanimous desire to maintain a White Australia. Darwin was established as a mixed tropical colony and maintained its multi-ethnic society right throughout the White Australia period.

White Australia as a political and ideological principle has always been problematic. During the period up until 1940, the debate continued over the inclusion or exclusion of Australia's 'coloured' population within the nation, particularly in regard to Aboriginal and Asian workers. White Australia may have viewed these groups as potential competition to white workers, and as a threat to 'racial' purity, but this remained a contested issue. Colonial attitudes, which favoured 'cheap coloured' labour were retained. Internationalists, in contrast, preferred to include 'coloured' workers within the workforce and the community as equal members. Even staunch advocates of White Australia came to question the exclusion of 'coloured' residents from their community. This thesis argues that the primary issue for Australian nationalists was to create a unified and harmonious nation. It had been imagined that this would be achieved only with a 'racially' homogeneous population. But the experience of Darwin suggests that it was possible for a new kind of plural society to develop even under White Australia. The degree to which various ethnic groups were incorporated into the white working-class community differed, as is demonstrated in the case studies of Aboriginal servants and waterside workers, Japanese and 'Malay' pearling crews and Chinese workers. The character of Plural Australia was shaped, not simply by political, ideological or even economic considerations, but by the evolving responses of white Australians to their experience of living within a multi-ethnic community.

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There are countless librarians and archivists to whom I am indebted. In particular I thank the staff at the Australian Archives in Canberra and Darwin; the archivists at the Noel Butlin Archives at ANU; and at the manuscript section of the Australian National Library for their patience and help during my visits. I also thank Andrew Pitt from the Northern Territory Archives Services for his help on many occasions. Robyn Trentham and Judith Beach at the Northern Territory Library were helpful in providing photographs, as was Margaret Walters, Editorial Assistant of *Labour History*.

Finally to family, friends and fellow post-graduate students — and in particular my sister Elena — who encouraged me and endured the long process without complaint, I am grateful.



## ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Australian Archives
AACTU	All-Australian Congress of Trade Unions
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANU	Australian National University
ASSLH	Australian Society for the Study of Labour History
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CPD	Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates
CPP	Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KMT	Kuomintang
ML	Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NAIU	North Australian Industrial Union
NAWU	North Australian Workers' Union
NBAC, ANU	Noel Butlin Archives Centre, ANU
NLA	National Library of Australia
NT	Northern Territory
NTFL	Northern Territory Football League
NTU	Northern Territory University
NTWU	Northern Territory Workers' Union
NTAS	Northern Territory Archives Service
OBU	One Big Union
PPTU	Pan-Pacific Trade Union
VSP	Victorian Socialist Party
WWF	Waterside Workers' Federation

## LIST OF MAPS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Map of tropical Australia and its northern neighbours.  
(Alan Powell, *Far Country, A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, p. 4)
2. Loading wool bales onto S.S. Montoro, Darwin Stokes Hill Wharf  
(PH0412/0151, J. A. Austin Collection, Northern Territory Library)
3. Harbour foreshore, Stokes Hill Wharf, M.V. 'Merkur'.  
(PH0082/0074, D. Purdon Collection, Northern Territory Library)
4. Vice-regal group, 1905.  
(PH0002/0164, Roger Nott Collection, Northern Territory Library)
5. Group of servants.  
(PH0412/0020, J. A. Austin Collection, Northern Territory Library)
6. Admiring their own photos, Darwin.  
(E. D. Donnison, Darwin, 1914-1920, MSS/890/3, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)
7. Working the wharf, SS 'Montoro', 15 July 1920.  
(A659/1, 1939/1/10766, Wharfage facilities, Darwin, N.T., National Archives of Australia, ACT)
8. Football Team — Buffaloes.  
(Val McGinness Collection, NTRS 234 PP 128 Item 2, Northern Territory Archives Service)
9. Japanese arrive at Darwin with pearl-shell from N. of Australia.  
(Gilruth Family Collection, 1912-1919, NTRS 234 CP 881-886, Item 24, Northern Territory Archives Service)
10. Japanese captain of a pearling lugger — Darwin 1937.  
(M119/1 Item 6, National Archives of Australia, ACT)
11. Mr. Nakashiba and adopted European son, Peter - Darwin 1937.  
(M119 Item 74, National Archives of Australia, ACT)
12. Wedding Group, 1930 — Including members of KMT.  
(PH0238/2055, Spillet Collection, Northern Territory Library)

## Introduction

In this thesis, I examine the construction of 'White Australia' as an expression of national identity, problematising its dominant status in historical narratives. In order to revise accepted notions of White Australia, I have re-examined the national debate, firstly in the light of broader political ideology, and secondly in its application at a local community level, focusing on the tropical town of Darwin in the Northern Territory. In using the term 'White Australia', I am not simply referring to the White Australia policy as it was enacted in the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901. Immigration policy and international relations are often taken to be at the heart of contemporary debate over White Australia. I would argue that questions of internal social organisation, and the administration of Australia's remaining 'coloured' population, were by far the most contentious issues.

Public debate from 1901 to 1940 continued to focus on 'cheap coloured' labour versus white union labour, and on questions of segregation and integration of the 'coloured' population. In the case of Darwin, that debate centred on the employment of 'coloured' labour, a term which referred primarily to workers of Aboriginal and Asian descent.<sup>1</sup>

It is too often assumed that the exclusionary policy of White Australia and its corresponding image of the Australian nation were unproblematic during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Australia was imagined as a democratic nation, whose citizens were drawn from a white homogeneous population. There was no place for 'coloured' citizens, whether they be Aboriginal or Asian, in the new nation. But White Australia was not the unanimous expression of Australia's white population. Given that we now speak not of a single, essentialised national identity, but of multiple, fluid, identities, we cannot continue to represent White Australia as monolithic, assuming a unified voice of the white nation.

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'coloured', like the terms 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' are no longer acceptable, having derogatory connotations and being based on an outdated belief in 'race' as a scientific form of categorisation. I have kept these terms, only because they represent key organising concepts in the framing of White Australian policy.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Huttenback, for example, refers to 'White Australia' as 'The Classic Example' in his survey of all the British self-governing colonies in regards to 'immigration policy and the treatment of colored, non-indigenous inhabitants', in *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Colored Immigrants in the British Self-Governing Colonies, 1830-1910*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1976, p. 279.

Historians of the nineteenth century, for whom White Australia marks the end of their period, simply assume that 1900 signals a uniform acceptance of White Australia. For sociologists of contemporary Australia, for whom White Australia provides a backdrop, the period is simply stereotyped and forgotten. Stephen Castles and Ellie Vasta, in discussing present day discourses of 'tolerance and diversity' describe present policies as 'a great step forward compared with our racist past.'<sup>3</sup> This thesis concentrates on the period from 1900 to 1940 with the intention of disrupting this generalised image of a 'racist' past by demonstrating that discourses of 'tolerance and diversity' are not recent developments.

During the 1901 White Australia debate, it appeared that the implementation of immigration restriction had attracted widespread support from the voting public. One cannot, however, simply assume a uniform white population all thinking and acting in unison. In order to acknowledge the many perspectives within the white population, we would require access to more detailed studies than are currently available. As Sean Brawley pointed out, although the origins of White Australia have been debated, the actual period from 1901 to 1958, while the policy was in operation has been scarcely touched by historians. His own work, *White Peril*, focuses exclusively on the international relations aspect of the White Australia policy.<sup>4</sup> Others, concentrating purely on immigration restriction, have tended to assume that the policy remained largely unquestioned during the pre-war period. Kenneth Rivett, for example, argued: 'The effectiveness with which the 'White Australia' policy was enforced can be seen in the decline in the number of Chinese in Australia from 1901 to 1947'.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on immigration figures, however, tells us little about the actual experiences of non-white residents, nor of white responses to their presence.

Markus acknowledges, however, that without further local studies, important issues of segregation and integration cannot be addressed.<sup>6</sup> He highlights the difference between northern and southern Australia, arguing

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<sup>3</sup>Stephen Castles and Ellie Vasta, 'Introduction: Multicultural or Multi-racist Australia?', in *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles (eds.), Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Sean Brawley, *The White Peril, Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America 1919-1978*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth Rivett (ed.), *Australia and the Non-White Migrant*, for the Immigration Reform Group, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1975.

<sup>6</sup>The same point is made in Raelene Frances, Bruce Scates & Ann McGrath, 'Broken Silences? Labour History and Aboriginal Workers', in Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994, p. 203.

that 'in the north white Australia was a myth'.<sup>7</sup> In choosing to focus on 'race' relations in Darwin, I hope to address these issues in a local context. The choice of a northern town is deliberate, in order to emphasise the inherent flaws in the White Australian vision of the nation.

White Australia is not a 'well-documented' subject, but a subject in need of more discussion. The idea of White Australia as a constructed ideal of national identity has not been considered in anything more than stereotypical terms. Where Richard White considers its construction, he reiterates the line that it 'attracted almost unanimous approval'.<sup>8</sup> The experiences of Australia's 'coloured' residents during the period of White Australia have not been considered in sufficient detail — it is not even possible to discuss their relative acceptance or rejection during this period. Most studies have implied unanimous acceptance of the policy, alluding to protests only to dismiss them as insignificant. But as Frank Bongiorno has pointed out, 'for all the supposed agreement about the White Australia Policy, the question of race was on the agenda in this period'.<sup>9</sup> There is much here to be considered and questioned.

As a means of undermining the hegemony of White Australia, in this thesis, I consider the contemporary voices of opposition to the policy. On the right were conservative liberals, whose ideology was linked to British colonial policy. They supported a 'racially' plural society on the grounds that it would provide cheap labour. This presupposed an inherent inequality of the 'races'. On the left, were internationalists whose anti-nationalist and anti-racist ideology placed them in opposition to nationalist White Australia. They supported a plural society in which all residents, regardless of 'race' would be treated equally. White Australia, therefore, was not a given, but a dialectic of 'race' relations, debated between opposing political parties and their adherents.<sup>10</sup>

If White Australia is considered to be an ideological position, based on a notion of 'racially' pure nationalism, then the opposing position might be described as that of Plural Australia. The fact that Plural Australia was imagined quite differently by the left and right-wings means that the term is necessarily ambiguous, but it will serve in this thesis to highlight an

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1981, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Bongiorno, 'Bernard O'Dowd and the 'Problem' of Race', in Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds.), *Labour and Community, Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the ASSLH*, ASSLH, Illawarra Branch, Department of Economics, University of Wollongong, 1999, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> The historical construction of 'race' was intended to legitimise the notion of discrete categories of people thereby sustaining discriminatory laws and social practices. See Christopher Fyfe, 'Using Race as an Instrument of Policy: A Historical View', *Race and Class*, Volume 36, October-December 1994, no. 2, pp. 69-78.

important, and often overlooked, debate in Australian history. While I consider questions of national identity, I have primarily examined this debate as a labour historian, focusing on the inclusion and exclusion of 'coloured' workers within Darwin's working-class community.

The term White Australia refers not only to a national ideology, but to an imagined national population. For those who believed in the myth of Australia as 98 per cent British, the population of the Australian nation was imagined as white. The presence of 'coloured' residents was conveniently overlooked in the construction of national histories. But the goal of a pure white Australian population was never achieved. As Beverley Kingston has noted, at the turn of the century, even though the south-east corner of the continent appeared to be British, the north of Australia was clearly polyglot.<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps a sign of southern blindness that national histories tended to reflect the whiteness of the south, rather than the pluralism of the north? This thesis rejects that myth and asks how white Australians responded to the continued presence of 'coloured' residents within their imagined white nation.

The second part of this thesis is a history of Plural Australia, taking the multi-ethnic town of Darwin as a case study. In using the term 'Plural' I am merely emphasising the fact that White Australia, far from being homogeneous, was in fact multi-ethnic. The term Plural carries with it other connotations, which I do not necessarily wish to invoke, especially the suggestion that a plural society is a divided society. This was the formulation as presented by Furnivall in relation to the Dutch East Indies, but we cannot assume a direct correlation with the Australian experience. In this thesis I have attempted to outline something of the character of Plural Australia, describing it not so much as a site of 'racial' conflict and separation, as a site of negotiation and tentative integration.

Contrary to the pessimistic predictions of the White Australian advocates, the presence of a multi-ethnic population did not provoke 'racial' violence nor civil unrest. Taking the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU) and their interactions with 'coloured' workers as the primary focus, I have considered how their relationships altered during the period from 1911 to 1940. Instead of ongoing antagonism, I found a nuanced debate over what constituted White Australian nationalism, and who might be included in the national community. The quality of pure 'whiteness' was

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<sup>11</sup>Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 3, 1860-1900, Glad Confident Morning*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 141.

not an assumed prerequisite for citizenship, nor for union membership, though it remained central to the discussion of inclusion and exclusion.

The subject of 'race' relations in Darwin has been examined by several authors. Tony Austin and Andrew Markus have written on Aboriginal history, while Diana Giese, Timothy Jones and others have focused on Chinese history.<sup>12</sup> However, there has been no academic study of Darwin as a multi-ethnic community. In this thesis, therefore, I attempt to include all ethnic groups within the discussion, rather than singling out one or two. In previous studies, little attention has been paid to the question of 'coloured' workers in Darwin. The history of unionism in the Territory is fragmentary at best.<sup>13</sup> Andrew Markus, writing in *Who Are our Enemies?* in 1978, alluded to communist, anti-racist influences in 1930s Darwin, but his important comments have not been further explored.<sup>14</sup> By taking a labour history perspective on 'race' relations I hope to offer a more nuanced version of Darwin's 'race' relations, and one which will consider the dynamics of both race and class in determining the construction of community solidarity.

The majority of Northern Territory histories consider the implications of Darwin's unusual 'race' relations as nothing more than a curious anomaly within White Australian history or perhaps as a remnant of colonial times. I would argue, that a Darwin perspective on 'race' relations facilitates a re-examination of the construction of White Australia, questioning the basic assumptions of our national histories. It is only by taking the so-called periphery seriously that we can begin to question previous assumptions made in national histories. The story of the Australian tropics since colonial times does not fit into standard histories of Australia as a colony of British 'settlement', having had more in common with histories of South-East Asian tropical colonies. These contradictions

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<sup>12</sup>Tony Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home So Clearly, The Commonwealth and 'Half-caste' Youth in the Northern Territory, 1911-1939*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1993; Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1990; Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown, Changing Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1995; Timothy Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990.

<sup>13</sup>F. A. Alcorta, 'The Origins of Trade Unionism in the Northern Territory', *Labour History*, no. 43, November 1982, pp. 32-5; Frank Alcorta, *Darwin Rebellion 1911-1919*, NT History Unit, Darwin, 1984; Julia Martinez, 'Racism' in the Northern Territory: The attitudes of Administrators, Pastoralists and Unionists to Aborigines employed in the Cattle Industry, during the Depression, 1928-1934, B.A. Honours thesis, Department of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, 1995. P. Donovan's history gives some details of unionist activity but his overt anti-unionist stance makes his work of little use for this thesis. See *At the Other End of Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1984. Bernie Brian is currently writing his PhD thesis on unionism in the Northern Territory.

<sup>14</sup>Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement, 1890-1970', in A. Cuthoys & A. Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1978, pp. 149-150.

should not simply be dismissed as a product of a strange north. How can we justify retaining a southern-centric view of history, having long since rejected racial and climatic determinism. The image of the south as the centre of the nation is inextricably linked to the belief, drawn from 'racial' theory, that civilisation 'naturally' occurred in the temperate regions which were more suited to the perpetuation of European culture. The Plural Australia of the tropical north, therefore, should be told as yet another story of Australia's past, not as a curious aside.

The choice of Darwin as a case study necessarily led to certain time parameters. The year 1911 marks the beginning of the federal administration of the Territory, and with it, the implementation of new White Australia legislation. The year 1940, with the onset of war, followed by the bombing and evacuation of Darwin, acts as an unavoidable conclusion to this particular narrative. The geographic choice of Darwin is significant for several reasons. In terms of methodology, I was attracted, not only by its multi-ethnic population, but also by the multiplicity of representations of that population in the union newspaper, the *Northern Standard*. Furthermore, as an administrative centre, Darwin was the subject of a range of government reports, the majority of which dealt with 'race' issues.

As a site of 'race' relations, Darwin provides a contrast to the 'frontier' experiences described in Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle*; Darwin was quite separate from the Northern Territory's inland cattle country.<sup>15</sup> It was a tropical port with much in common with nearby South-East Asian ports. If there are Australian parallels, they are to be found in the two other pearling centres: Thursday Island in Queensland and Broome in Western Australia. These three towns represented the most ethnically diverse populations in Australia during the period of White Australia.

### **Thesis overview**

In chapter one, I have addressed in detail some of the theoretical and methodological issues which are raised in the examination of White Australia as a national, historical construct. In addition, I have discussed the way in which labour history, with its emphasis on class difference and working experiences might shape our understandings of Australia's past. Chapter two provides a nineteenth century colonial context for the

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<sup>15</sup>Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, *Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1987.



discussion of 'coloured' labour in twentieth century White Australia. The rest of the thesis is divided into two main sections.

The first deals with the three primary political and conceptual positions taken by contemporary white Australians. The first, which is often portrayed as the only position, was that of the nationalist White Australian advocates. This stance was adopted by the right-wing of the labour movement and also by more conservative groups. The two following chapters consider their opponents: the 'colonials' who retained a sense of liberal *laissez-faire* ideology, with its emphasis on imported 'coloured' labour; and the internationalists, known after 1920 as the communists. Their position was inherently opposed to that of White Australia as they claimed to regard all workers as equal, regardless of 'race'. This section of the thesis takes a broader national and international perspective on these opposing ideologies, but at the same time traces these influences within the debates centred upon Darwin itself.

The second section of the thesis is more firmly grounded in the experiences of the local community of Darwin, employing four case studies to consider the place of 'coloured' workers, both in their relation to the NAWU, and as contingent members of Darwin's working-class community. Aboriginal servants, Japanese and Malay pearling crews, so-called 'half-caste' waterside workers and the much-maligned Chinese workers are considered. Their life stories are taken from oral histories, personal biographies, and the sporting and social columns of the *Northern Standard*. These are 'histories from below', but they are necessarily placed in the context of the restrictive legislation of White Australia, which impinged to varying degrees on the lives of all 'coloured' residents. These then, are the stories of Plural Australia, which were made possible only because of the presence of dissent and difference within the supposedly homogeneous White Australian nation.

This thesis focuses on the margins of White Australia, problematising its construction as a hegemonic symbol of national identity. Despite being an apparent anomaly, a peripheral aberration, the site of Darwin remained central to the discourse of White Australia. Darwin was a multi-ethnic society and therefore a site of contention, which was to be forcibly drawn into the imagined ideal of White Australia. The very presence of difference within the boundaries of the nation, threatening its homogeneity, acted as fuel for the continued debate over White Australia. In the confrontation with Plural Australia, however, it was by no means certain that White Australia emerged as the victor. The strength of Plural Australia as a public

discourse was surprisingly powerful. This thesis attempts to demonstrate the importance of Plural Australia as a conceptual paradigm, on the presumption that in order to understand White Australia we must necessarily engage with Plural Australia.