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Pearl Fishers

Julia Martinez and Adrian Vickers, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labour and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2015; 227 pages, US\$50.00 (hbk); ISBN 978-0-8248-4002-0.

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Asians were once the majority populations in Northern Australian towns like Broome and Darwin, as Julia Martinez and Adrian Vickers show in their award-winning book *The Pearl Frontier*. Traces of this remain today in the multiracial populations of these towns and in the rich histories of families formed from the late nineteenth century onwards across the racial divide of Asians and Aborigines. In this book, the two historians analyse Australia's importation of workers from Indonesia (known until 1949 as the Dutch East Indies). Over a period of a hundred years, from the 1870s to the 1970s, Indonesians were employed as indentured labourers in the northern Australian pearling industry. Thursday Island, Broome and Darwin were the centres of this industry, service hubs for the trade and business activities occurring in the maritime zones to their north. In 1925 as many as one in four people living in Broome (population 2,000) was Indonesian. The story of the 'pearl frontier' is one of labour mobility, of the undermining of colonial boundaries, usually by necessity due to shortages of labour and employment, and of the construction of interracial communities in Northern Australia (and to a lesser extent, in Eastern Indonesia), where the pearling operations were located.

The first 'commercial event' in the industry occurred in 1861 in the Broome-Roebuck Bay area, when explorer Francis Gregory collected 300 pounds sterling worth of pearl shells. This elicited interest in the large-scale collection of pearl shells, valuable for their lining of mother of pearl (nacre), which was used for buttons and other decoration. This led to 'a virtual slave trade in Aboriginal labour' (p. 31). The pearl masters demanded that Aboriginal men, with no protective clothing or breathing apparatus, dive down repeatedly for pearl shells. If they did not pick up any shells on a dive, then they were required to bring back handfuls of sand to show that they had at least been to the bottom of the ocean.

The regulation of Aboriginal labour in Western Australia and the expansion of the industry from the 1870s onwards led to the search for new cheap labour. Asian men then took up the worst and most dangerous aspects of pearling. Diving with poor equipment led to a high injury and fatality rate among them. In 1911, the death rate among divers was eleven percent, with causes of death listed as paralysis, asphyxiation and heart attacks (p. 87). ‘Malay’ divers earned between two and three pounds a month, as well as bonuses of twenty-five pounds per four tonnes of shell that they gathered. It was only in the 1970s that a lightweight diving suit was invented. Until then, the men wore a heavy helmet and metal weights to keep them underwater and relied on oxygen supplied by a ‘tender’ – an attendant on the boat – all of which made them vulnerable to the actions and sentiments of men higher than them in the pecking order of the industry.

Large Australian companies, such as the Celebes Trading Company, controlled the pearling trade from the 1870s onwards. The companies operated across several sites in the north of Australia, as well as in the Dutch East Indies, for example in Aru in the Maluku Islands. Australians James Clark and Frank Jardine, along with London jeweller Edwin Streeter, established operations around Aru to take advantage of the rich pearl-shell beds there. The pearling industry was by nature transnational, given that mother-of-pearl shells can be located across countries. Clark, Jardine and Streeter accordingly set up joint ventures with Indies businessmen, such as Said Baadilla, an Indonesian entrepreneur of Arab descent in the Maluku Islands.

The industry sought and recruited workers from Asia, predominantly from Japan and the Dutch East Indies, as it needed plenty of cheap, non-white labour. From 1901, however, such a recruitment policy contravened Australia’s own Immigration Restriction Act (‘White Australia policy’), which mandated only white entry into Australia. The government made exceptions so as to maintain access to non-white labour in certain industries such as pearling, and the pearling masters continued to make a profit. Concerns about competition against white labour and miscegenation seemed secondary when considered against the imperatives of growth and competition in the pearling industry.

After 1901, thousands of Indonesian men, often from impoverished Eastern Indonesia, continued to work for Australian companies, often for nine months at a time, on pearling boats in the northern Australian and eastern Indonesian maritime zones. Between 1902 and 1910, almost 8,000 Javanese were employed in Western Australia (p. 82), and they remained

on indentured contracts until 1960. For the West Timorese and Aru workers, many of them seafarers, going on board pearling ships was one way to access the rich 'fields' of the sea. To them, borders and the restrictions on mobility imposed by both Dutch and Australian colonial regimes made little sense. The industry was badly affected by the First World War and disruptions to freight services. As the use of mother of pearl declined the industry shifted towards the more valuable trade in pearls.

In the book's final four chapters issues of race and social segregation are explored in more detail. By their very activities, the pearl workers and their masters undermined the attempts by governments, even unions, to restrict the flow of 'coloured labour' into Australia. Yet prevalent theories of race maintained the appalling conditions in the industry and the cheap wages for decades. Anxieties about competition from cheap labour influenced the position of Australian trade unions towards supporting the White Australia Policy. The Northern Australian Workers' Union in Darwin had an ambivalent attitude to pearling workers. When the pearling fleets moved to Darwin in the 1920s, there was still a colour bar denying membership to non-European workers (p. 91). But as Martinez and Vickers show, unions in the Northern Territory, unable to ignore the labour disputes taking place in Darwin, were eventually forced to support pearling workers and their courageous campaign for better wages and conditions,

Though attempts were made to segregate the non-European workers, restricting their movements away from the ship and establishing separate places for them to frequent, with informal communities of 'Malaytowns' springing up in Darwin, Thursday Island and Broome, relationships nevertheless developed between Asian men and Aboriginal women. The resultant families, unable to gain state recognition, were vulnerable to poverty and social marginalization. The places where they could live, for example, were restricted by the underclass status of both parents. The men were at threat of deportation, once their work contracts finished. When contracts expired and husbands had to leave Australia, families were forcibly broken up.

The Second World War disrupted the industry and drew attention to the uncertain status of its workers in Australian society. The government relocated many Indonesian men from northern Australia to the south and interned them. Several from Indonesia and Malaysia helped Allied forces fight the Japanese, including in their home countries, for instance in the Australian army Z Force and the United States Army's transport section. Abu Kassim from

Beraung Ulu, now Malaysia, and The Soen Hin from Rote Island (West Timor), acted as field operatives for the Australian Z Force in the 1940s fighting in Sabah and Sarawak. Recorded as 'Malay boys', many were not recognized individually for their contribution to the Allied war effort. Since at the time Indonesia itself was not in existence, Indonesian pearling workers existed in a political no-man's land and their contribution was entirely forgotten.

The end of the war created new, at times disputed, borders and nation-states, and Dutch colonialism in Indonesia was over. Australian pearling companies now had to deal with a new government in Indonesia that initially was hostile to the idea of labour migration, though tough living conditions in the aftermath of the war led to an about-face and Indonesian workers began returning to the pearl industry on work contracts. The postwar period also gave more confidence to the workers, and labour disputes intensified as a result. In one case, Abu Bin Jacob persuaded nine new arrivals not to sign contracts at the pre-war rate of four pounds per month in Broome in 1948, for which he was jailed (p. 139). Samsudin Bin Katib, a former Z Force member, called a strike among pearling workers in response to his arrest, for which Bin Katib was deported under accusations of engaging in 'communistic' activities.

In the final chapter, the book returns to the themes of race, family and social segregation, exploring stories of families under threat of fracture, as fathers were forced to return to Indonesia. At the same time, their fight to remain together as families highlights how the border-crossing and multiracial workforce of the pearling industry challenged the White Australia Policy. The government eventually allowed indentured pearling workers to be naturalized and to remain in Australia.

Methodologically, the book makes use of a range of sources. The limitations of the available archival data required the authors to engage closely with the personal and labour records available on as many of the Indonesian men as they could identify and to reconstruct life histories wherever they could. Since all men from the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, as well as those from British Malaya, were classified as Malay, identifying their origins poses a challenge. Even making clear estimates of numbers of labourers is problematic. Australian annual employment figures counted the workers only once, upon signing a new contract, and did not consider the fact that Indonesian indentured workers were employed on two-year contracts.

By focusing, out of necessity, on life histories, Martinez and Vickers have created a remarkable account, advancing the general study of Indonesian workers by presenting them as individuals. Through the life stories of these men and their families in Australia, as well as from statistical material on employment in the pearling industry, the authors demonstrate how work affected the men's whole lives and shaped their identities. The life stories also show us their agency and the vigour with which they seized opportunities to improve their lives. In Indonesia, the men's adventurous employment on pearling boats away from their homelands was understood within the tradition of *merantau*, of seeking further education and employment opportunities. With poor job prospects in the small fishing communities of Eastern Indonesia, the men coming usually from West Timor and Aru Islands viewed employment on pearling boats as a lucrative option. Martinez and Vickers position the Indonesian workers as transnational agents engaging in the 'globalization' of labour well before the term was invented. This book historicizes the phenomenon of Indonesian labour migration in a geographic location that remains very much underresearched: Australia and the waters of the pearl frontier, the zone between northern Australia and eastern Indonesia.

Martinez and Vickers show that historical case studies can encourage us to reflect on the meanings and significance of national boundaries and who gets to control the flow and movement of people and capital. In this book, they argue that border crossings are not illegal incursions that threaten national identity, but instead create, build and strengthen communities. This is a very powerful argument in a time of increased security measures, and feelings of insecurity, against 'outsiders'. They present stories of persistence, courage and determination, for example in challenges labourers made to oppressive working conditions that were imposed on them on the basis of their race. Many mixed-race couples also fought tenaciously to keep their families together, despite the difficulties and the cruelty of Australia's residential and non-fraternization rules for indigenous people and indentured labourers.

Today, the thousands of Asian workers in Australia once employed by the pearling industry are memorialized in monuments and plaques in Broome town centre, dedicated to pearling workers. The town's cemeteries also pinpoint this multiracial past. But descendants of this cultural melting pot that is northern Australia provide the most significant ongoing evidence of this past. One man whose story is discussed in the book, Abdul Gafoer, for example, was an indentured labourer from Alor in Eastern Indonesia, and his family still lives in the

Broome area. In Darwin too, where the pearling fleets were based in the 1920s, Indonesian indentured labourers intermarried with local Aboriginal women. Famous Australian singer and actor, Jessica Mauboy, is of mixed Aboriginal and Indonesian heritage (p. 165). Her West Timorese grandfather came to Darwin to work in the pearling industry and later settled in the town, and with his Aboriginal wife raised a family and subsequent generations in Darwin. Indonesian workers from the east continue to leave their villages and migrate overseas for short-term work contracts. The precarity of life in Eastern Indonesia that first propelled the search for work and a better life in Australia, the search documented by Martinez and Vickers, has not disappeared.