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Book Review: "And There'll Be NO Dancing". Perspectives on Policies Impacting Indigenous Australia Since 2007

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"Sexual abuse of children is inexcusable. So why is there such a fuss about a state intervention? Should we shut up and do nothing just because there is racism? No child or woman must be molested, irrespective of who the perpetrator is!" Thus my recollection of what one of my Scottish colleagues said in an informal conversation about the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention, a set of legal and political measures intended to curtail domestic violence in Indigenous Australian communities. "Yes", I replied, "race should not be an issue when talking about crime". Not least because domestic violence happens everywhere, including Scotland. I would not have heard anyone talking about a specifically *Scottish*, *White* or *European* propensity for domestic violence. Yet there is abundant talk about *Black* violence. Generalisation is the hallmark of racialisation. Blackness is scripted as inherently violent—a tenacious trope deriving from colonial concepts of ferocious animalism (e.g. Eze 2000; Nederveen-Pieterse 1990). Blackness is juxtaposed with Whiteness, the latter being normalised as non-violent and civilised, thus becoming the final arbiter of Indigenous destinies. Perceptions of racialised violence justify intervening not merely in matters of domestic violence but also in Indigenous life and sovereignty—hence to take far-reaching measures for the sake of securing a seemingly non-violent whitened social order; or put succinctly, to save Indigenous children in order to erode Indigenous sovereignty. "You should read *And There'll Be NO Dancing*," I told my colleague. It discusses such readings of Indigenous sovereignty and the various forms of racialisation ensuing from the Intervention.

The edited collection of essays has its basis in results of the workshop, "The Intervention and its Consequences", held at the University of Bonn, Germany, in 2015. The focus is on the Intervention, formally termed "Northern Territory National Emergency Response", and its consequences for interracial relationships in Australia. The book offers a wide range of cross-disciplinary analyses—including legal studies, history, literary and whiteness studies. For all their diverse approaches, the chapters hang together very well, with major threads discernible.

The chapters differentiate cogently between the Intervention policies and their actual incentive, the *Little Children Are Sacred Report* (2007) that was concerned with sexual abuse of Indigenous children in Northern Territory communities. While the report served as the basis for subsequent political measures, its findings and recommendations were, from the outset, misrepresented and placed in a falsified context. Michelle Dunne Breen, for instance, shows that none of the report's recommendations were implemented in the course of the Intervention. Instead,



many restrictions were imposed on Indigenous communities—such as rigorous alcohol bans—that were initially not advised. Scrutinising newspaper articles, the author argues that the language and findings of the report were generalised, almost fabricated, in subsequent media coverage. Terms such as “rampant” and “every community” remained undifferentiated, estranged from context and referenced excessively, evoking the impression that sexual violence would have been ubiquitous in Indigenous communities. The thus-construed image of Indigenous cultures as fundamentally violent formed a ready argument to legitimise legal and political sanctions.

Another common finding is that the measures designed to benefit Indigenous communities largely failed or proved detrimental. Providing an extensive overview of racial disadvantage in the Territory, Lindsay Frost’s chapter illustrates that—in stark contrast to what was intended—Indigenous unemployment rates increased after the Intervention, while Indigenous communities in general became socioeconomically more disempowered. Moreover, the book shows that the Intervention was also legally problematic. As Shelley Bielefeld argues, the legal foundation of the Intervention not only suspended extant antidiscrimination laws but also violated basic human rights; for example, through imposing exorbitantly high fines for minor offences that led to higher Indigenous incarceration rates: “The alcohol penalties [in Indigenous communities] ... are grossly disproportionate to penalties for possession of alcohol in alcohol restricted areas in places populated predominately by non-Indigenous people where there are also social problems associated with excessive alcohol consumption” (159). Leon Terrill’s legal analysis shows that the Intervention did not strengthen Indigenous rights but corroded Indigenous self-determination and control over land, as with the erosion of housing: “This was not the introduction of individual ownership or private property, as had been suggested by the Australian Government. It was a shift to government ownership of housing and control of housing management, through long-term leases and subleases” (141).

Most chapters highlight the historical continuities in state interventions for humanitarian ends, as with Alexander Bräuer’s analysis of “protection” measures in Western Australia in the first half of the 20th century. Stefanie Affeldt’s contribution to imperial images of Indigenous Australians also argues that the Intervention should be considered a contemporary element of historic policies. Critical analyses of imperial policies often run the risk of sidelining the activities of those governed by the very policies. Fortunately, the chapters do not portray Indigenous people as passive victims, but try to bring in their agency and protests against the Intervention—for example, in Elisabeth Baehr’s analysis of Aboriginal art and Dorothee Klein’s study of Alexis Wright’s writings. Retracing the manifold and far-reaching effects of the Intervention, Barry Judd’s contribution outlines the increase in racial prejudice against Indigenous football players as an effect of stigmatising views emanating from the Intervention. Judd understands the Intervention not as a solitary event but one out of many steps towards abolishing the post-1967 policy of self-determination.

Victoria Grieves’ contribution is perhaps the profoundest venture to decipher the efforts of the Intervention as curtailing Indigenous sovereignty. Applying the concept of *Homo sacer*, the author understands the underlying purpose of the Intervention as an effort to position Aboriginal people further into an exceptional role of belonging to the state as objects yet not as citizen subjects. The Intervention, the argument runs, excludes and thus recreates notions of *white* citizenship: “Citizens have rights only because those in the state of exception have no rights. *Homo sacer* has no citizenship rights, no human rights, as the law is suspended in this “external” sphere” (92).

And There Is NO Dancing comprises theoretically nuanced and well-researched contributions that do not fall into the trap of moralising and considering the Intervention an isolated incident. Instead, they interpret it as a whitened effort to restrain Indigenous sovereignty. In this, the book itself makes an intervention by moving far beyond the narrow event of the year 2007 and by rigorously examining the intersections between race, gender, whiteness and Indigeneity. The Intervention was indeed less unique than symptomatic for an age-old practice of securing whitened hegemony—it conjured up colonial tropes of savage animalism that is seen as a danger to women and children as well as tropes of savage childlikeness that presupposes the need of protection (Eze 2000; Jahoda 1999).

The transnational components of the discourses framing the Intervention could have been taken up in the Introduction, especially in a theoretically deeper discussion of the intersections between gender and race. Tellingly, the editors mention the geographical distance of the initial workshop to be of relevance but, alas, do not take this presumption any further: “We expect that the bitter irony of a workshop in Germany analysing racism in Australia will raise hackles, but we also hope it will raise the alarm concerning the interventions” (4). Notwithstanding the fact that German (or American, British and French) manifestations of racism have been studied extensively from abroad, the authors seem to fear a parochial attitude that forbids foreigners to meddle with Australian policies. This somehow suggests that whiteness and nationalism would not intersect in international contexts. As Moreton-Robinson, Casey and Nicoll (2008, ix) argue, whiteness is a transnational construct that can overcome national divisions in order to secure its hegemony. Particularly, a workshop based in Germany could have referred to similar discourses of racialised violence in German history. The so-called Rhineland debate against the stationing of black French soldiers after World War One, for one, paralleled some of the fears of black violence and the corrosion of whitened hegemony in the Australian debates. A deeper discussion of the transnational and transhistorical entanglements of whiteness may have provided broader contexts and revealed the manifold mechanisms of whiteness implicit in the discourses around the Intervention. It would have perhaps lessened the seeming irony of a critique of racism from overseas.

But, quite apart from this concern, *And There Is NO Dancing* is a very engaging and analytically sharp study that can be highly recommended to students and scholars alike.

References

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