

The Intervention and its Consequences – 9-10 October 2015 (Bonn)

Conference Report by Miriam Gertzen and Carolin Hoffmann

An international and interdisciplinary conference on “The Intervention and its Consequences” was held at Bonn University from 9 to 10 October 2015. It was organized by two members of the Association of Australian Studies (Gesellschaft für Australienstudien – GASt), Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp of Bonn University’s English Department, and Elisabeth Bähr, curator of Australian Indigenous art from Speyer.

The term “Intervention” is commonly used to refer to the “Northern Territory National Emergency Response” (NTER), which was issued just before the Australian election in 2007 by the federal government led by John Howard. Officially in reaction to a report by the local Northern Territory government about the supposed sexual abuse and neglect of Indigenous children, these emergency laws authorised the Australian government to drastically intervene in the self-determination of Indigenous communities. Among the measures taken were a massive influx of police and military in the respective communities, a suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975, a cancellation of the right to prohibit access by non-community members to areas given to Indigenous communities via the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976, the abolition of the consideration of Indigenous customary law, the mandatory allocation of social security contributions, the prohibition of alcohol and pornographic material and a compulsory medical examination of all children in the areas concerned.

Even though the Intervention and the political measures subsequently taken have led to heated controversies and continue to divide the Australian nation until the present day, so far this issue has not been the focus of an academic conference, neither in Australia nor abroad. Therefore, this conference sought to provide a starting point both for the interdisciplinary and the international discussion of this controversial piece of legislation. It triggered much interest in advance, for example by Australian media and human rights organizations, and among the attendants and speakers were participants from several countries, institutions and organizations. This wide range of participants underlined the necessity of providing a platform for such an exchange on a topic that for years has put a strain on the relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population as well as on the relationship between some urban Aborigines and remote Indigenous communities, and that has revived the trauma of the past and substantially damaged the process of reconciliation.

Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, Elisabeth Bähr and Amelie Bernzen, chair of GAST, welcomed the speakers and participants on Friday morning in the Universitätsforum, setting the aim for this conference to examine the Intervention from the perspectives of a diverse range of academic disciplines.

The first session, chaired by Inge Erhardt (Bonn) was dedicated to the bureaucratic framework of the legislation. It was opened by Lindsay Frost (Speyer) with his paper on “The Intervention: The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth?”, a title that already points out the controversial nature of apparently objective certainties. His presentation provided a timeline of the events as well as information about key individuals, statements and statistics. Katrin Althans (Cologne) followed with her paper on “Stories of the NT Intervention: The Narrative Power of the Law”, examining how legal documents shaped the narrative of the Intervention and how other narratives might challenge that story. Her analysis looked into questions of voice and voicelessness before the law and the interpretation of human rights.

The second session of the conference, chaired by Katrin Althans, consisted of three talks by speakers from both Australia and Germany. Stefanie Affeldt (Lüneburg) followed the question of “‘Who are the Aborigines?’ The Western Image of Indigenous Australians” and pointed out that European notions of Aborigines underwent decisive changes in the course of history, but that discriminating images still determine various answers to this question. Victoria Grieves (Sydney) focused on “Aboriginal Australians and the State of Exception: Camps, Refugees, Biopolitics and the Northern Territory Emergency Response”. In her paper, she analysed the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal Australians by employing analytical concepts by Agamben and Mbembe, arguing that they exist in a state of exception to the modern Australian settler-colonial democracy. Regina Ganter (Brisbane) closed this session with “A Brief Transnational History of Northern Australia, 1421-1976”, shedding light on non-European cultural contacts with Northern Australia, for example through long-standing traditional trading routes between Australia and the Asian continent.

The first day of the conference closed with a session discussing how the Intervention echoes colonial discourses and power dynamics, chaired by Carolin Hoffmann (Bonn). Alexander Bräuer’s (Rostock) paper titled “The Protector of Aborigines: Origins of the Intervention in pre-convict Western Australia” showed how the Intervention could rely on established discourses of intervening dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, in particular the implementation of the “Protector of Natives” in the Swan River colony. Sabrina Vetter (Frankfurt) talked about “Sexualities in Aboriginal Australian Cultures and the Ban on

Pornography”, comparing the Intervention laws to the invasion of Aboriginal Australian cultures regarding sexuality, violence and land abuse upon First Contact. The first day of the conference ended with an informal conference dinner.

On Saturday morning the participants reconvened for two further sessions. The first of these was chaired by Miriam Gertzen (Bonn) and examined examples of literary engagement with the Intervention. In her paper on “Negotiating the Intervention: First Australian Stories of Reconciliation”, Hanne Birk (Bonn) attempted to answer the question of how far culture-specific narrative strategies can potentially contribute to the negotiation of cultural identities or transcultural reconciliation processes. She focused on pre-Intervention texts by Bruce Pascoe and examples taken from *The Intervention: An Anthology*, edited by Rosie Scott and Anita Heiss. In the second paper in this session, “The Intervention in Indigenous Literature – Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*”, Dorothee Klein (Freiburg) analysed how literary representation can question dominant discourses of normalcy and the pathologisation of individuals as well as entire communities.

The final session of the conference, dedicated to visual culture, was chaired by Hanne Birk (Bonn). Victoria Herche (Cologne) talked about “Reassessing Aboriginal Self-determination in Rolf de Heer’s *Charlie’s Country*”. By means of short excerpts from the film she demonstrated how the circular structure of the film challenges both the negative consequences of the Intervention in remote communities and the failure to return to a traditional way of life and thereby addresses the universal human right of self-autonomy in its ambivalence and complexity. Last but not least, Elisabeth Bähr spoke about “‘An Australian Government Initiative: Criminal’ – The Intervention in Australian Art” and showed several works of art by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists as examples. These can be read as political commentary on the Intervention but, from a curatorial point of view, also show similarities to works made in another context and thus emphasise the Intervention as a continuation of previous government repression.

The conference was concluded by a lively closing discussion in which several overarching topics raised in the two days were brought together, such as human rights and Aboriginal self-determination, treaty vs. sovereignty and the power of narratives. Discussing the Intervention in Germany might contribute to raising international awareness of a national story somehow stuck. Such international and interdisciplinary exchange proved particularly fruitful, not only in this closing discussion but also in the more informal conversations. For these, the conference provided much opportunity during the coffee and lunch breaks as well as at the conference dinner where participants were able to share experiences and to network.

Further reading material and other relevant information was provided in the foyer of the Universitätsforum, for example a book table by the organisation Concerned Australians. The publication of selected conference papers and further articles is in preparation, due to be published in 2016.