An Ambivalent Hospitality:

Aboriginal Senior Public Servants And The Representation Of Others In Australia’s Self-Governing Northern Territory

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July 2010
This thesis is an account of research undertaken between February 2006 and July 2010 at the Australian National University in Canberra and Darwin.

Unless otherwise indicated, the work presented herein is my own. To the best of my knowledge, none of the work presented here has ever been submitted for any degree at this or any other institution of learning.

Elizabeth Ganter

July 2010
I dedicate this work to those who consented to be interviewed, to those who did not and to those I did not have the opportunity to ask, who live with the idea that, as the late Stuart Baird put it, they are 'less than'.

I portray you as people with self-knowledge and a marvellous sense of theatre.

Thanks for trusting me with your stories.
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Abstract

‘How can you make decisions about Aboriginal people when you can’t even talk to the people you’ve got here that are blackfellas?’ This question was posed by an Aboriginal senior public servant whom I interviewed for this research in 2007. She was imagining a conversation with the Northern Territory Public Service, whose invitation for Aborigines to join its departments provides the backdrop to my study. Counterposing the absent Aboriginal policy subject with the ever-present, idiomatic ‘blackfella’ public servant, the question aptly reframes the government expectation that an Aboriginal presence within the public service will represent the absent through Aborigines’ numeric sufficiency, their location in the corridors of power and their contribution to Aboriginal policies and programs. This interviewee was insisting that she be heard, if her people were to be taken into account.

This thesis begins with a history of Aboriginal employment in the Northern Territory administration which concludes that the unplanned accretion of a substantial number of Aboriginal public servants, in 1978, became the new Northern Territory Government’s opportunity to legitimize itself as a representative bureaucracy.

After reviewing empirical studies of representative bureaucracy and theories of political representation, I argue that all public servants discretionarily represent others in their advice to government. I go on to explore the extent to which Aboriginal senior public servants understand themselves to represent other Aborigines in their work. Analyzing data from 76 interviewees, I ask: how compelling to Aboriginal senior officials is the Northern Territory Government’s self-account as a representative bureaucracy? I argue that these officials work to a social imaginary in which they are present for those Aborigines whom they regard as absent only by circumstance. Aboriginal senior public servants see themselves as neither the naïve tokens nor misguided advocates that the literature has largely made them out to be. Rather, they see themselves as exemplary representatives of others, for whom they model mindful professionalism, and with whom they share fates as Aboriginal Territorians.
Early in my candidature, Tim Rowse, my supervisor and the original chair of my panel, disarmed me with the assurance: ‘I’m paid to find you interesting.’ For your risky frankness with a self-doubting adult learner and for continuing my supervision from your new post at the University of Western Sydney: from the bottom of my heart, thank you Tim. I will miss our coffees and, believe it or not, I will miss your meticulous attention to my detail.

Thank you to the rest of my panel: Richard Mulgan for sound advice, Diane Austin-Broos for memorable conversations and Dennis Bree for championing my research in the Northern Territory Government. Thank you very much Ann McGrath for chairing my panel in the latter period. And thank you to all the academic staff of the Australian National University’s Research School of Social Sciences History Program and to Karen Smith for your warm and constructive support.

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Thank you to my colleagues in the Coombs corridor, particularly those who have been my immediate neighbours at various times: Doris Kordes, Georgina Fitzpatrick, Karen Fox, Christine Hansen and Susanmary Withycombe. Mentioning you all will send my acknowledgements over the page! For life at NARU – thank you Chris O’Brien, Kim Johnstone, Bentley James and Nicole Everett. Thank you Penelope Marshall, Katie Curchin and Melissa Lovell for my lessons in political theory.

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## Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APS</td>
<td>Australian Public Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLP</td>
<td>Country Liberal Party of the Northern Territory</td>
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<td>CPP</td>
<td>Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAA</td>
<td>Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth Government)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCM</td>
<td>Department of Chief Minister (Northern Territory Government)</td>
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<td>DONT</td>
<td>Department of the Northern Territory (Commonwealth Government)</td>
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<td>EEO</td>
<td>Equal Employment Opportunity</td>
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<td>IECDS</td>
<td>Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy</td>
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<td>IS</td>
<td>Indigenous sector</td>
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<td>NACC</td>
<td>National Aboriginal Consultative Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NESA</td>
<td>National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organization</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT 'a'</td>
<td>Northern Territory administration 1911-1940</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTA</td>
<td>Northern Territory Administration 1941-1972</td>
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<td>NTG</td>
<td>Northern Territory Government</td>
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<td>NTPS</td>
<td>Northern Territory Public Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAL</td>
<td>Office of Aboriginal Liaison, Northern Territory Department of Chief Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCPE</td>
<td>Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, Northern Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSCNT</td>
<td>Public Service Commissioner of the Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCAGA</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration</td>
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