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**‘INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE’ AND
ABORIGINAL POLITICAL PRACTICE:**

**THE GULF BETWEEN IN TWO
ORGANISATIONS IN THE FITZROY
VALLEY, WEST KIMBERLEY**

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This thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. All work contained within this document is original, unless otherwise acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Thorburn', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Kathryn Ellen Thorburn

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to explore the gulf between prescriptions relating to Indigenous organisations as articulated in the Indigenous governance discourse in Australia, and the actual political practice of Aboriginal people. It is based on fieldwork carried out in two organisations, one in the Kimberley town of Fitzroy Crossing, and one based around five communities some 100kms to the town's east.

The study crosses three disciplines, anthropology, history and politics, in its attempt to describe and analyse the political and personal dynamics at play in the two organisations. By examining two organisations, the thesis is able to show the difference that can exist between different Aboriginal groups and their forms of political expression. To make sense of such diversity, it argues that, in the first instance, due consideration must be given to post-colonial histories. These histories are concerned with the nature of first contact with non-Indigenous 'settlers', and the subsequent violence and dispersal that followed. They track the decades of Aboriginal groups working on pastoral stations of the Fitzroy Valley, and the way in which some groups were able to stay on their traditional country during this time, while others were not. The dynamics around the Pastoral Award decision of 1968, which saw the vast majority of Aboriginal people in the area move off the stations and into town, are also crucial.

The years that followed saw a big push for a return to country for many Aboriginal groups across the Kimberley, and the establishment of Aboriginal organisations. The thesis argues that in order to understand contemporary political practice in the organisations of 2005, it is necessary to read them in terms of their historical narrative, in which particular groups were able to consolidate certain elements of common identity. The thesis gives considerable attention to the ethnographic underpinnings of these commonalities, and draws out both similarities and differences between how the constituents of the two organisations were in some contexts connected, in others separated. Connections to country, and kin relationships, are shown to have the potential to be both inclusive and exclusive, depending on broader contexts.

Rather than demonstrating chaos and dysfunctionality, the thesis argues that these elements combine to produce a particular political rationality that is sensible and necessary. To argue this point, a series of vignettes is relayed for each organisation which serve to reveal how the dynamics of Aboriginal history and group identity play out. They also demonstrate how the impact of contemporary Australian government policies that overlay and interact with these dynamics are very destabilising. This however has not always been the case, as is evidenced by the very positive relationship between government agents and Aboriginal people in the Valley in the 80s, the era when many local organisations were being established.

The main body of the thesis then is given over to making sense of contemporary political practice in the two organisations. However it also questions the value of the Indigenous governance discourse in Australia as an analytical or descriptive tool, and concludes that it is not especially good for either. Rather, it is argued that the

Indigenous governance discourse needs to be read as part of broader shifts to the right in Australian political economy, and ideology. It adopts Rose's ideas of governmentality in investigating how the Indigenous governance discourse operates as a technology for social and political reform, and relates how Indigenous groups continue to resist in novel ways these external forces of assimilation. It also suggests that the Indigenous governance discourse has contributed significantly to the erosion of the Aboriginal institutional landscape across Australia. It concludes that as a discourse that emerged from a policy environment recoiling from the value of social difference, it is doomed to managerial dullness and apolitical inaccuracy.

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Acronyms

AAPA	Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACDP	Aboriginal Community Development Program
ADC	Aboriginal Development Commission
AIATSIS	Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ALFC	Aboriginal Land Fund Commission
ALS	Aboriginal Legal Service
ALT	Aboriginal Lands Trust
ANU	Australian National University
ARC	Australian Research Council
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ATSIS	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services
BAC	Bunuba Aboriginal Corporation
BCC	Bunuba Cattle Company
BTEC	Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Development
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
CNW	Commissioner of Native Welfare (WA)
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth)
DCW	Department of Community Welfare (WA)
DEWR	Department of Education and Workplace Relations (WA)
DHW	Department of Housing and Works (WA)
DIMIA	Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (WA)
DLGHS	Department of Local Government and Housing Services (NT)
EXIM	WA EXIM Corporation Ltd
FaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (Commonwealth)

HACC	Home and Community Care (WA)
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
IBA	Indigenous Business Australia
ICC	Indigenous Coordination Centre
ICGP	Indigenous Community Governance Project
KALACC	Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre
KLC	Kimberley Land Council
KLRC	Kimberley Languages Resource Centre
KRSP	Kimberley Regional Service Providers
MWW	Marra Worra Worra
NAC	National Aboriginal Conference
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
NARU	North Australian Research Unit
NGO	Non-government organisation
NNTT	National Native Title Tribunal
NT	Northern Territory
OIPC	Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination
REASP	Remote Area Essential Services Program
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
SRA	Shared Responsibility Agreement
UAM	United Aborigines Mission
WA	Western Australia
YCC	Yarrangi Cattle Company