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THE ABORIGINAL FLAG

By

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons are respectfully advised that this thesis contains names and images of deceased persons, and culturally sensitive material.

The Aboriginal Flag

Table of contents		4
Acknowledgements and Thanks		7
List of Figures		9
Introduction		
	Abstract	17
	Introduction	18
 Part A: <i>The Aboriginal Flag</i> as activist art		
1.	<i>The Aboriginal Flag</i> as a work of art Genesis and readings ‘The flag is me’ Aboriginal cultural practice <i>The Aboriginal Flag</i> as Aboriginal art <i>The Aboriginal Flag</i> as Western art	36
2.	<i>The Aboriginal Flag</i> as activist art Activist art The theory and ideology of Western social and political art Social and political art relative to activist art Indigenous social and political art Richard Bell The role of culture in Indigenous activism Deadly	67
 Part B: Origins: the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>’s historical, social and political contexts		

3.	The international Black Power movement and the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	102
	The Tent Embassy	
	A black minstrel song	
	Sonny Charles and the Checkmates	
	The Nowra flag	
	Black	
4.	Land rights, <i>terra nullius</i> and sovereignty	121
	Land rights	
	<i>Terra nullius</i>	
	Sovereignty	
	One nation, four flags	
5.	The interpersonal context and form of the <i>Aboriginal Flag's</i> activism	145
	Assimilation of our Aborigines	
	The precepts of assimilation	
	The end of assimilation as government policy	
	The legacies of assimilation	
	Assimilation and the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	
Part C:	Social change and the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	
6.	Social Change and the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	170
	1972, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and the Aboriginal flag	
	1982, Shoalhaven Mayor burns the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	
	Multiculturalism and the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i> , the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations	
	1994, Commonwealth Games, Victoria, Canada	
Part D:	An appraisal of race relations	

7.	Carved and Scar Trees and the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	194
	Wellington	
	Dendroglyphs	
8.	Who owns the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>?	213
	The making of an official flag of Australia	
	Copyright Registration of the <i>Aboriginal Flag</i>	
	Ownership	
Part E:	Conclusion	236
	Referencing / Bibliography	238
	Appendix:	
	a. University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee approval letter.	249
	b. Interview with Harold Thomas. Koori Radio, Blackchat. Presenter Lola Forester. 10 August 2015.	251
	c. Interview between Matthieu Gallois & Michael Anderson. 3 November 2014.	263
	d. Panel Discussion, Nicole Watson, Djon Mundine and Maurice Ryan panel. Koori Radio, Blackchat. Presenter Lola Forester. 8 February 2017.	286
	e. Email from Balranald Shire Council.	301
	f. Email from Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.	302
	g. Email from Megan Rocke Victorian Premier's office.	303

Abstract

Is the *Aboriginal Flag* art? And, if it is, to what end does that claim serve? ‘Art’ is not a helpful noun, and certainly a risky one on which to base an argument. Yet, to fail to read the *Aboriginal Flag* as art – or, more precisely, to fail to read it as Indigenous activist art – is to fail to understand the *Aboriginal Flag*, and more broadly the role of culture in Indigenous activism, post European settlement. The *Aboriginal Flag*’s Indigenous and Western art epistemologies are instrumental in shaping its form and semantics. As Aboriginal art, the flag represents a continuum with traditional Aboriginal themes and aesthetic values. In a Western context, it is read as a flag, and it exists as a mass-produced object. In all its guises the *Aboriginal Flag* has melded itself into many aspects of popular imagination and become one of Australia’s significant symbols. The contested history of the *Aboriginal Flag* – evident in the passion it evokes on both sides of Australia’s race-based cultural divide – demonstrates that both white and black Australians understand the *Aboriginal Flag* to be a powerful political symbol. The *Aboriginal Flag* is therefore two things simultaneously: a work of art and an activist symbol. As a successful pairing, this alliance is rare because each entity or discipline has different values and agendas: activism seeks to bring about social change, art-making is concerned with the subject of art. To confuse matters further, as a work of social and political art the *Aboriginal Flag* achieves something very rare: it brings about social change. Understood in this way, the *Aboriginal Flag* has three conceptualising foundations: art, activism and social change. In its totality, the *Aboriginal Flag* represents evidence of a particular type of art – of which it is exemplary – that remains largely unrecognised as an artistic genre. In light of these factors, it is necessary to define the *Aboriginal Flag* as distinct from other social and political contemporary works of art that have emerged in recent decades. These art-based interpretations of the *Aboriginal Flag* constitute the architecture or, more precisely, the armature of this thesis. They give form and structure to the flag’s histories and meanings that in their totality form a cohesive reading of the *Aboriginal Flag* that is whole and distinctly Indigenous.

Introduction

The *Aboriginal Flag* has influenced and shaped race relations, and changed Australian society. Its power in part derives from its particular, acute resolution, which has afforded it a multiplicity of meanings and associations. The symbolism of the flag describes the relationship of people to land, land to culture and culture to identity: concepts of great profundity for Indigenous Australians. By association, the *Aboriginal Flag* is an affirmation of pride. It claims and asserts Aboriginal land rights, advocates Indigenous self-determination, repudiates the insidious policies and culture of assimilation and has come to symbolise the complex notion and claim of Indigenous sovereignty. In both everyday interpersonal interactions, and complex social cultural political forums, the flag is not a passive symbol. Rather it is a catalyst that sets the agenda, argues the point and brings about social change. Worn on the self in the form of a T-shirt or tattoo, the flag represents a deeply personal refutation of assimilation. Flown after winning Olympic gold in front of a TV audience of over a billion people, the flag affirms Aboriginal Australians' rightful place as Australia's first nations people; it affirms Aboriginal land rights, sovereignty, power and pride. More broadly, the *Aboriginal Flag* has transcended race relations and acted as both a symbol and catalyst for change in attitudes towards multiculturalism in mainstream Australian society. The latter is perhaps the flag's greatest legacy. The contemporary practice of flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags in the public domain represents the fracturing of Anglo-Celtic cultural hegemony in Australia society. Or as phrased by the flag's designer, Luritja/Wombai custodian Harold Thomas, it has contributed to 'a shift to Australians being more accepting of different people' (Thomas, 2009 p. 39). As described, the *Aboriginal Flag* has three concurrent and interdependent themes: art, activism and social change. The flag's definition as art reveals its indigeneity. Activist art offers a conceptual framework for understanding the *Aboriginal Flag*, and, in turn, the flag acts as proof of the validity and need for an activist category of art. The *Aboriginal Flag* has brought about social change.

Thomas designed the *Aboriginal Flag* in 1971. Its history falls into two distinct periods. The flag's first 25 years witness its seemingly effortless conception and dissemination across the Australian physical and political landscape, Indigenous Australia's immediate and unanimous claim of ownership of *their* flag, and the flag's

incremental but seemingly inevitable eventual triumph over institutionalised bigotry and racism. By contrast, the proclamation of the *Aboriginal Flag* as an official flag of Australia in 1995, and Thomas's assertion of his copyright ownership of the flag in 1996 mark a divisive crossroads in its history. The flag that once symbolised all causes Aboriginal has become the flag of multiculturalism, reconciliation (most notably at the Olympics), copyright ownership disputes, state appropriation and symbolic colonisation.

As the first long-form academic study of the Aboriginal Flag, this thesis documents the key facts and historical events that establish the flag's evolution from idea to national symbol. This task finds itself at the crossroad of Indigenous oral histories and ways of thinking and European inscribed academic traditions. Historically, European perspectives and interpretations of Indigenous issues have dominated Australia's official histories. In recognition of this historical bias, and my position as a non-Indigenous researcher, this thesis gives sustained precedence to the statements of Aboriginal activists and scholars. Their statements have been studied to identify and establish key Indigenous perspectives and views on the social, political and cultural context of the *Aboriginal Flag's* conception, meaning and distribution. Their words, often quoted at length, serve as testimonials to Indigenous histories. Their inclusion has the added benefit of affording the reader a sense of the syntax of Indigenous activism in Australia.

A central contention of this thesis is that the *Aboriginal Flag* is a work of art. As such, throughout 'Aboriginal Flag' is given in italics, in accordance with the standard practice for the titles of works of art. For most non-Aboriginal people, this argument is counter-intuitive. When they see the *Aboriginal Flag*, they only see a flag within Western vexillological (the study of flags) points of reference. In this sense, the flag represents a shared cross-cultural object that is understood differently by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Counter-intuitively, Western art historical and theatrical frameworks can also be used to substantiate an emerging consensus among art professionals that the *Aboriginal Flag* is indeed art. Thomas's views, within these frameworks, are the most substantive opinion on the flag's status. As an artist, Thomas has jurisdiction over the classification of the things he makes. He has consistently and emphatically stated that he conceived the flag as art. His claim is substantiated by Indigenous academic, activist and artist, Brenda Croft, and Indigenous activist, lawyer and senior initiated

Indigenous man Michael Anderson, both of whom have a deep understanding of the role of art in Indigenous activism.

The acceptance of the flag as art has second- and third-tier repercussions for our understanding and reading of the flag. Understood and accepted as a powerful activist ensign, the flag, by extension, also has to be accepted as activist art. In this study, activist art is identified as a distinct category of art-making within the larger set of social and political contemporary art practices that have emerged in recent decades. This idea of activist art serves to inform our understanding of the *Aboriginal Flag* in ways that differentiate it from other social and political works of art, and it is a means of highlighting the flag's very considerable achievements as a dynamic symbol. For the purposes of this thesis, activist art combines the values and agendas of both art and activism.

The alliance of activism and art is not common, in part because the practice of activism and the discipline of art have different values and agendas: whereas activism seeks to bring about social change, art-making is concerned with the subject of art. In contrast to social and political artists, activist artists seek to go beyond being cultural producers and commentators on society – agents who are satisfied by the effects of their work – to become active forces of change in society. Just as activists launch campaigns with clear quantifiable goals, activist art has similarly quantifiable objectives. As an extension of this rationale, as a genre of art-making, activist art can only be identified retrospectively, when a clear link between a work of art and social change in society can be identified. This can take decades to determine, as shown by the example of the *Aboriginal Flag*. Activist art that tries but fails to bring about change exists simply as social and political art, a far larger grouping of practices. In Australia, very few works of art can be said to have brought about social change. Two prominent examples of activist art are David McDiarmid's gay and AIDS-activist art posters and Peter Dombrovskis's environmental art photograph *Morning mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, South-West Tasmania, Australia* (1979).

Both Richard Bell's *Pay the rent* and the *Aboriginal Flag* share land rights themes, however, a great gulf separates these work's efficacy as activism. *Pay the rent*'s political agency is absorbed and nullified within its institutional 'home' and art discourses. There is no expectation that *Pay the rent* has any agency in the recompense of stolen Aboriginal land. There is, however, an unfortunate sense that Western institutions or individuals who purchase Bell's art are purchasing something

akin to Catholic indulgences for past colonial sins. Bell's work highlights many of the shortcomings of social and political art, from an art-activist perspective. By contrast, the identification of the *Aboriginal Flag* as a catalyst for social change, its description as activist art and the identification of other similar works all serve to illustrate a powerful alternative set of expectations and parameters of what a genre of social and political art can achieve.

This study's focus on activist art bears out the role of Aboriginal culture in Indigenous activism. This idea is partly indebted to Michael Anderson, who asserts that Indigenous artefacts are 'Certificate of Title' to land. Whereas many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art practitioners, theorists and historians have commented on the relationship of art and politics in Aboriginal cultural practice, their statements are characterised by their brevity. The role of Aboriginal culture in Indigenous activism, and the meaning and potential political power of Indigenous artefacts, deserves sustained research and discussion.

Art's relationship to politics has called forth a wide body of literature in Western academia that dates back to the late eighteenth century (when Australia was first colonised). That literature, however, does not consider Australian Aboriginal social and political cultural practice. Jacques Rancière, for example, affirms that 'there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics' (Rancière, 2004 p. 64). The *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962–63), the *Bark Petition* (1963), the *Aboriginal Flag* (1971), the *Tent Embassy* (1972), the *Ngurrara Canvas* (1997) and *Karlamilyi* (2010) are works that contradict this view. In these Indigenous works, art and politics, in their colonial contexts, fold in on themselves and become one and the same entity.

Between January and July 1972, three flags, each articulating quite different interpretations and visions of the Aboriginal cause were flown at the *Tent Embassy* in Canberra. One was a version of the Pan African flag created in 1920 by the Universal Negro Improvement Association led by Marcus Garvey; the other was a flag created by an activist from Nowra, New South Wales. And the third was the iteration here titled the *Aboriginal Flag*. The *Aboriginal Flag's* emergence as the Aboriginal flag reveals much about the premises, values and goals of Indigenous activism in the early 1970s. Through the Pan African flag, the *Aboriginal Flag*, and more broadly Australian Indigenous activism, is contextualised within the international Black Power movement. That history affirms that Australian Indigenous activism did not

emerge in isolation. It was responsive to, and influenced by, international social and political movements that recast the politics of race relations the world over in the twentieth century. Despite their shared experiences, goals and friendship, great social, cultural and historical differences differentiate the Black Power movements of the United States and those in Australia. Significantly, African Americans, not Indigenous American Indians, dominated the civil rights movement in the United States. Henceforth, civil rights, not land rights, dominated the agendas of American protest movements.

Land rights, sovereignty and self-determination frame the central platforms of Indigenous political struggles of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In its symbolism, the *Aboriginal Flag* relates to and references these themes. These platforms are introduced through the concept of *terra nullius* as it relates to Australia's colonisation. The idea of *terra nullius* transcended its legal context and permeated social relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The colonialists, through passive and active means, conscious and unconscious acts, attempted to will the fiction of *terra nullius* into reality. For much of Australia's colonial history, Aboriginal people were the continent's invisible constituents. The *Aboriginal Flag* affirmed in the 1970s and 1980s, in the first instance, the survival and non-invisibility of Aboriginal people.

The *Aboriginal Flag*'s composition represents, as Thomas puts it, 'black people's connection to the red land' (Thomas, 2002). In and of itself, the flag's symbolism is a powerful argument for land rights, and it has been used as a rallying call since it was adopted as the pan-Aboriginal flag at the Tent Embassy in 1972. The *Aboriginal Flag* and the Tent Embassy colluded thematically. Both symbolically affirmed what was then the central platform of Indigenous activism: land rights. In 1974, just a few years after the initial Tent Embassy action, land rights went from being a political demand to being a reality when Gough Whitlam's Labor government returned land to the Gurindji people of the Northern Territory. Over the ensuing decades, all Australian states and territories passed land rights acts (Commission, 2013). With the benefit of hindsight, however, the genesis of these victories is more firmly rooted in the groundbreaking actions and campaigns that predate both the Tent Embassy and flag. The *Bark Petition*, the Wave Hill strike (1966) and general Indigenous political mobilisation of the 1960s and early 1970s all share a claim in the ensuing land rights victories. By the time the flag was launched into the public

domain at the Tent Embassy, land rights activism already had considerable momentum.

For most contemporary non-Indigenous Australians, the term ‘sovereignty’ does not have the day-to-day meaning and significance that it holds for Indigenous Australians. The term has come to represent, as noted by Larissa Behrendt, self-determination, recognition of culture, and a recalibrated relationship with the Australian state. Increasingly, as land rights were incrementally granted across Australia, the *Aboriginal Flag*’s meaning shifted and, for many Aboriginal Australian people, it came to symbolise their claims for sovereignty. Implicit in the display by Aboriginal Australians of their flag is the statement to the wider community that Indigenous ‘Australians’ have never relinquished their sovereignty either to the British Crown or to the Australian state.

For much of the nation’s history, Australian race relations have been dominated by policies of assimilation. In the form it has taken in Australia, assimilation represents an attack on Aboriginal identity and culture that many Aboriginal people describe in terms of cultural genocide. It was successful in its aims in part because it was enforced, one to one, by Anglo-Celtic citizens who supported the government’s assimilationist objectives. Harold Thomas has stated that the policy and culture of assimilation had the effect of making Aboriginal people feel ashamed of their Aboriginal identity (Thomas, 2002). The *Aboriginal Flag*, particularly when Aboriginal people wear it (as badge, T-shirt or tattoo), is a deeply personal rejection of assimilation and an affirmation of black identity. It has played a significant role in rupturing the culture of assimilation in Australian society and instilling pride in Aboriginal identity.

A number of case studies demonstrate the argument that the *Aboriginal Flag* has brought about social change. Principal among these case studies are the burning of the *Aboriginal Flag* by the mayor of Shoalhaven, New South Wales, in 1982 and Cathy Freeman’s flag-waving activism at the 1994 Commonwealth Games. The latter culminated in the flag – and the issues it represents (sovereign Aboriginal culture and identity, land rights, a defiance of the culture and policies of assimilation) – achieving greater acceptance by the wider non-Aboriginal community. The flag’s contemporary power as an activist symbol can also be demonstrated through a comparative study of the *Aboriginal Flag* and the dendroglyphs located in the small urban rural community of Wellington in central New South Wales. Both the *Aboriginal Flag* and the carved

trees mark and claim Indigenous custodianship of land in Wiradjuri country. These trees constitute the focus and flashpoint of race-based tensions relating to land ownership between the local Wiradjuri people and the settler farmers of the region. Relative to the dendroglyphs, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the *Aboriginal Flag* is shown to have little legal or symbolic power in Wiradjuri country.

The proclamation of the *Aboriginal Flag* as an official flag of Australia in 1995, and Thomas's assertion of his copyright ownership of the flag in 1996, mark significant crossroads in its status and reading. As it now stands, the *Aboriginal Flag* is perhaps the only flag in the world that is owned by an individual, but which represents a whole people. Western laws have made Thomas the flag's sole gatekeeper. The values of copyright law – as they relate to notions of ownership – are diametrically opposed to Indigenous community values emphasising group ownership and the sharing of resources. Yet, were it not for Thomas's copyright claim, the *Aboriginal Flag* would be an official flag of Australia, but with no Aboriginal organisation or individual having jurisdiction over its use or meanings: this could only be a disastrous outcome for Indigenous Australians. As a work of art, and as a flag that represents Indigenous Australians, the *Aboriginal Flag* has come to sit in an awkward and lonely place that traverses seemingly irreconcilable sets of values and cultures.

Local, state and federal governments have earned cheap symbolic mileage from the use of the *Aboriginal Flag* since 1995. In turn, they have dramatically raised the flag's visibility and profile and thereby placed themselves in a vulnerable position. The flag now inhabits a space created and determined by Australian governments and Western copyright laws, over which Thomas has ultimate control. Thomas has the power to lower the *Aboriginal Flag* to half-mast to memorialise over 220 years of brutal colonisation. He could elect to withdraw the flag's use altogether from all Australian government buildings and public spaces, until such a time that Australia's first nations people have constitutional representation, a treaty and meaningful land rights. The *Aboriginal Flag* has, arguably, more power now than at any other point in its history to shape Australia's race relations. In identifying the flag's dormant potential, this final argument completes the narrative arc of this thesis, so that it ends where it started, exploring the *Aboriginal Flag*'s reading and power as activist art.

The fact that this thesis is the first academic study of the *Aboriginal Flag* has meant that an important prerequisite has been to research and document the flag's history. It has also meant that the central contentions of the thesis – that the flag is art, that the flag is activist art, that the flag has brought about social change – have had to be formulated independently of an established body of literature. Concurrently, a number of other factors have also been determinant. Historically, non-Aboriginal people have dominated the literature and theory relating to Aboriginal art and Aboriginal history. International Western art theory and history relating to social and political art rarely considers the circumstances and histories of the cultural practice of Australian Aboriginal people. The role of art in Indigenous activism, despite being identified by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian scholars as being central to the meaning of Aboriginal art, has only a minor body of literature relating to its discussion. And, finally, a central argument of the thesis – that activist art brings about social change – is not an established way of thinking about art, or genre of art, in the art world. These factors, collectively, make for an unconventional literature review. Three key repositories of information/knowledge that do relate directly to the topic of the *Aboriginal Flag* are discussed. They are the interviews of Harold Thomas, Michael Anderson; and Nicole Watson, Djon Mundine and Maurice Ryan's panel discussion, which I either personally conducted or helped research; Brenda Croft's three essays discussing the *Aboriginal Flag*; and the University of New South Wales School of Sociology's 1982 first-year study and publication *The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven (NSW)*. The aforementioned interviews constitute over 25,000 words relating directly to the topic of the flag, and as such were a critical foundation of this research. They are reproduced as transcripts in the Appendix of this thesis. *Crux Australis*, a quarterly vexillological magazine produced by the Flag Society of Australia, has published articles on the *Aboriginal Flag* since 1984. Their 2009 panel interview with Thomas is quoted several times in the thesis. The remaining 280 or more individual research references listed in the thesis's bibliography encompass histories and arguments that circle and inform the topic of the flag, rather than, for the large part, comment on its subject directly. Finally, I document how my publication *Country, Spirit and Belonging, The Wiradjuri in Wellington Valley* (2013) shaped and influenced my research thinking and methodologies for this study.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, non-Aboriginal academics continue to dominate Aboriginal art criticism. This reflects the complex statuses and dynamics of race relations in Australia, as well as the traditions, norms and demographics of each culture. It is estimated when Australia was colonised in 1788, its Indigenous population comprised between 300,000 and 1 million people, representing over 300 distinct Indigenous language groups or cultures, spread across the continent and surrounding islands. These diverse peoples shared a significant trait: knowledge was shared and maintained predominately via oral traditions. Through forced assimilation over many generations, Aboriginal people have come to adopt European academic traditions. Once the continent's dominant demographic group, Aboriginal people now make up just 2.5 per cent of the Australian population. The dominance, now receding, of Aboriginal art discourse by non-Aboriginal people, continues to be a form of intellectual colonisation. This argument is endorsed by artist, writer and activist Fiona Foley. She states in her publication *The Art of Politics, the Politics of Art: The Place Of Indigenous Contemporary Art* (2016) that the lack of 'real analysis' of, and 'engagement' with, the contribution Indigenous artists make to the political discourse of the nation reflects a 'new form of colonial power' (Foley, 2006 p. 25). An increasing number of non-Aboriginal citizens and academics are now partners in pursuing de-colonising discourse that have reshaped Australia's race relations. The celebrated Freedom Riders of 1965, were led by Indigenous Australian Charles Perkins, but most of the activists were non-Aboriginal university students (Curthoys, 2002). A more recent example is non-Indigenous historian Peter Read's coining of the term 'The Stolen Generations' (Read, 1981). This shaped and transformed the way Australians talk and think about Australia's history of race relations (Ginsburg and Myers, 2006 p.36). The oral tradition in traditional Aboriginal culture, the relatively small contemporary population of Aboriginal peoples and Western colonial agendas and vestiges all go some way towards explaining Indigenous people's relatively small representation in Western academia.

Representative of much Western literature on intercultural Aboriginal cultural practice, Vivien Johnson's essay 'When Papunya Painting Becomes Art' stresses the evolution and metamorphosis of Western interpretations of Papunya painting from ethnographic material to 'high art' (Johnson, 2007 p. 29). In other words, she emphasises the biases of Western readings of Aboriginal art to the exclusion of Aboriginal readings and meanings. In her essay, Johnson only briefly acknowledges

the potential political purpose of painting as ‘title deeds’ for the Papunya painters. Despite stating that ‘title deeds perfectly sums up’ the purpose and meaning of ‘mid to late 1970s Papunya painting’, she fails to explore and expand this reading and place it at the centre of the reader’s understanding of Papunya painting (Johnson, 2007 p. 32). Over the essay’s ten pages, just a few sentences are concerned with reading the works as ‘title deeds’. As in Ian McLean’s anthology *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, Aboriginal art in Johnson’s essay is read in Western terms. Its significance and meaning as political statements by their Aboriginal authors is largely ignored, or at least not emphasised. This approach risks being another form of Western colonisation.

In their collaborative article ‘A History of Aboriginal Futures’, Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers discuss the ‘political turn’ against Indigenous Australians during the Howard era (1996–2007) (Ginsburg and Myers, 2006 p. 27). Ginsburg’s area of research is media, culture and history, while Myers’s is anthropology. Both are American academics based at New York University. The article’s tone and arguments contrasts with some of Myers’s earlier public statements, quoted in Chapter 2, regarding Aboriginal art-making dating from the 1970s, when he was posted at Yayayi outstation as an anthropologist. In his earlier statements, Myers argued that the phenomenon of Aboriginal art was perceived by remote community artists as being ‘whitefella business’ (Myers, 2007 p. 43). In ‘A History of Aboriginal Futures’, the writers state that the sale and commissioning of remote communities’ works of art convey ‘value and political potential to the Indigenous project, and their objectifications have become loci of identification for the broader Australian community’. To illustrate this point, Ginsburg and Myers describe how Michael Nelson was able to use the threat of destroying his 1988 Bicentenary mosaic to protest changes to native title in 1993 (Ginsburg and Myers, 2006 p. 40). The commissioning of Nelson’s work thus gave him a national platform to address his political concerns. The article concludes, however, that the success and acceptance of Aboriginal art in Australian society was paradoxical during a period that saw the Aboriginal arts industry grow. ‘[T]he wider conditions of their lives remain poor, and in danger of further immiseration’ (Ginsburg and Myers, 2006 p. 36). Recognition of Aboriginal art, in their views, in the form of sales and commissions, is separate from meaningful political agency and power. Ginsburg and Myers’s arguments contrast with my research in that they fail to consider non-commercial works of Aboriginal art, such as

the *Yirrkala Church Panels*, the *Bark Petition*, the *Aboriginal Flag*, the *Ngurrara Canvas* and *Karlamilyi*, and the potential use of Aboriginal artefacts in Indigenous activism. In the first instance, these works serve the pressing political agendas of Indigenous Australians. Ginsburg and Myers, like many other commenters on Indigenous Australia art, do not take into account Indigenous cultural practice that operates outside Western art frameworks.

Like the *Aboriginal Flag* itself, the relationship between Indigenous art and politics does not have a wide body of literature. Exhaustive anthologies and reference books, such as *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (Kleinert and Neale, 2000) and *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (2011), have only small sections – a few short essays each – that cover this important relationship. This pertains despite both publications containing essays by Indigenous authors that stress the importance of Indigenous art's relationship to politics. Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn make a forceful point: 'The function of art as an agent for social change is embodied in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. It is this collectively implied or stated position that is probably the only instance where a homogeneity of cultural expression can be suggested' (Perkins and Lynn, 1993 p. x). However, this argument comes in an article that is only two pages long and mainly deals with the labels 'traditional' and 'urban' (Perkins and Lynn, 1993 p. x-xii). The section titled 'Politics' in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* is foregrounded by two 'reflective statements' on seminal essays written over 25 years ago by Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry ('Art as Ethnocide: The Case of Australia' and 'Aboriginal Art: Symptom or success', 1988–89). This editorial decision leaves the reader speculating over whether or not the editor believes anything of any significance has since been written on the subject in the intervening years.

Prominent Indigenous art critics include academics, anthropologists and curators such as Djon Mundine, Marcia Langton, Margo Neale and Hetti Perkins. These Aboriginal theorists and critics have been instrumental in shifting the discourse away from modern and postmodern readings of Aboriginal art towards a focus on the work's 'indigeneity' (McLean, 2011 p. 61). They have not, however, discussed the *Aboriginal Flag* as a primary topic in long-form essays or articles. In light of this deficit, the interviews with Thomas, Anderson and the panel discussion between Watson, Mundine and Ryan included in the appendix, Croft's essays, and *The*

Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven played a critical role in setting the historical and theoretical parameters of this thesis.

Thomas, Anderson, Watson, Mundine and Ryan's transcripts related to the topic of the *Aboriginal Flag*. I interviewed Anderson, Korrie Radio presenter Lola Forester, interviewed Thomas, Watson, Mundine and Ryan with my research assistance. These interviews document much of the flag's history for the first time, and they contain many key statements upon which the arguments of this thesis are based. Thomas categorically states that he conceives the *Aboriginal Flag* to be art. Anderson asserts one of the central ideas of the thesis: that the products of Aboriginal culture have the potential to act as title deeds to land. Watson, Mundine and Ryan discuss issues relating to the flag's ownership. These interviews, however, constitute a series of insightful statements, rather than long-form critical or academic analysis.

The most sustained analysis of the *Aboriginal Flag* is by Brenda Croft. In the following articles/government records, she discusses the *Aboriginal Flag* and makes a number of repeated claims: 'Revolutionize me (and you, and you, and you)' (2012), 'Eora Journey International Review: International Review of Contemporary Interpretation Practice' (2010) and 'The intervention: an anthology' (2015). Croft states that the flag is of great significance, that the flag is a successful work of public art (by inference the flag is a work of art) and that the flag is a significant work of activist art. However, these articles are all relatively short (just a few hundred words each, or consist of quoted statements within articles), and they are concerned principally with other topics (public art, the intervention, the history of Aboriginal activism). Croft writes:

I already considered the Aboriginal Flag to be the most successful piece of public art ever created in Australia – John's [Croft's activist nephew] actions convinced me of this position. Art as cultural activism, no matter how small the steps may seem at the time, compounds, widening and strengthening the pathways we all travel in our countries and traditional lands.

(Croft, 2012)¹

¹ I was unable to view the published article, Revolutionize me (and you, and you, and you) published in the exhibition catalogue *Decolonize me*. Croft kindly forwarded me her draft copy of the essay. Hence the absence of a page number in the citation.

Croft's claims, though significant and fully supported by the findings of this study, are not substantiated by long-form arguments that locate her claims within histories and theories relating to Aboriginal art, political and social art or to Indigenous practice.

The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven (1982) is the only academic study of the *Aboriginal Flag* on which this thesis has been able to draw. That study, by a student group led by Dr Alex Kondos, involved an extensive 'systematic stratified random sampling' survey in which 10 per cent of the Shoalhaven and Nowra community were sent a one-page questionnaire containing six questions and four demographic questions. The 'scientific' methodology of the survey offers a relatively objective, historic record of community attitudes towards the flag and Indigenous affairs in New South Wales during the early 1980s. In the early 1970s and 1980s, the key platform for Indigenous activism was land rights. The symbolic focus of that contest in Nowra was the *Aboriginal Flag*. *The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag* is a sociological study of racism – by default, it provides insight into Indigenous peoples' struggle for land rights at a critical juncture in the history of Indigenous activism.

Part of the basis for this study was my earlier research project 'Wellington', completed over a three-year period (2010–13). It culminated in a number of interpretative works of art, and a 50,000-word publication titled *Country, Spirit and Belonging: The Wiradjuri in Wellington Valley* (2012). The project's focus was the history and community of Wellington, a small town located in that part of central New South Wales that is home to the Wiradjuri people. Ernest Moulton, my maternal grandfather, a British migrant, settled in Wellington in 1944. He purchased the local paper, the *Wellington Times*, and as its editor was a prominent conservative voice in the community for the next 21 years. The study represents an intimate history of Wellington's race relations, the processes of colonisation and the community's tentative steps towards reconciliation, highlighting some of the complexities of cross-cultural engagement as well as issues of censorship and selective historicising in the *Wellington Times* between 1944 and 1965. The publication involved interviewing close to 100 Aboriginal people living in Wellington, researching their histories, seeking to understand their experience and, most importantly, establishing sustained interpersonal relationships with them.

Before engaging the Aboriginal community in Wellington, statements such as ‘assimilation is genocide’ (Anderson, 2014 p. 15, Foley, 2014), stood as distant abstractions that reflected the still significant cultural and social divisions in understanding and knowledge – between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – in Australian society. Key to bridging those histories was the ambassadorship of senior Wiradjuri Elder (Aunty) Joyce Williams. Joyce as friend, mentor and project partner communicated the fuller meaning of myriad issues to the wider community, as recorded in *Country, Spirit and Belonging: The Wiradjuri in Wellington Valley*.

In Joyce’s youth, the laws and culture of assimilation were inherently contradictory: they were both segregationist and assimilatory. A thousand quiet gestures and actions sustained an informal and formal system of racial apartheid in Wellington well up to the mid-1960s. In the face of Indigenous marginalisation and poverty, the dominant white community in Wellington was on the whole passive and silent about Indigenous issues (Gallois, 2012 p. 23). Within that silence, the effects of land dispossession, poverty and discrimination took the lives of Joyce’s four older siblings who all died – out of sight, out of mind – on Nanima mission before they reached 12 years of age. Under that strain, Joyce’s parents separated when she was six years old and she was sent to live with her grandmother. As described by Mahatma Gandhi, poverty is the worst kind of violence.

Asked to identify who was the first Aboriginal person to own land post-colonisation in this region, Joyce stated ‘They stole our land and now we have to buy it back’. In 1957 Albert Theodore May, after a long and bitter community debate in the *Wellington Times*, was allowed to take a loan and buy a small suburban house in Wellington (Gallois, 2012 p. 31). He was the first black person to cross the race divide and move from one of the many informal Aboriginal camps around Wellington, into the town main. To repossess his land, Theodore May had to demonstrate, at least on the surface, his willingness to act white, to assimilate. His mortgage payments – as articulated by Joyce – equated to a fortnightly humiliation. The premise of Wellington colonisation, the related denial and destruction of Wiradjuri culture and the cultures of assimilation are still in place and active in that community to this day (Gallois and Macdonald, 2012 pp. 10-16). As documented in this thesis, in Wellington, Aboriginal people represent 20 per cent of the local population, but own less than 1 per cent of the total 1,016,000 acres of land that makes up the local government area (Gallois, 2012 p. 27).

The Wellington project influenced this study's focus in profound ways. It resulted in this study's focus on Aboriginal art's political and social contexts', rather than its Western art related conditions and readings. Of this thesis' eight Chapters, only the first two relate to the flag's broad art contexts and readings. This position contrasts to Ian McLean's anthology *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* and many other books and articles on Aboriginal art (Caruana, 2012, Johnson, 2007, Fisher, 2016). McLean introduces his anthology thus:

Issues addressed are typical of most writings on fine art ... there is little discussion of such vexed issues as the contradictions between the beauty of the art and the often appalling conditions in which it was made.

(McLean, 2011 p. 13)

In a broader sense, the limited literature that this thesis has had to contend with is expressive and systematic of alienated relations. As stated by Langton in her 1994 essay 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation' (Langton, 1994 p. 99), and echoed in meaning by Indigenous journalist Stan Grant in his biography published over 20 years later in 2016 (Grant, 2016 p. 4): 'Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people'. Langton asserts that although racial discrimination is a big problem in Australia, it is not 'the central problem' or hurdle for improved race relations. Rather, what is most at stake is 'the need to develop a body of knowledge and critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, whether written by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people' (Langton, 1994 p. 96). To these statements we should perhaps add the provisos that Australians do not know or understand Aboriginal culture, and that the *Aboriginal Flag's* non-status as art reflects a poor understanding of the role of culture in Indigenous activism.

This thesis is divided into four parts. Part A explores the *Aboriginal Flag* as art and activist art. Part B contextualises the flag's genesis, history and political contexts as they relate to the Tent Embassy, land rights, sovereignty and assimilation. Part C documents the history of the *Aboriginal Flag* as a catalyst for social change. Part D appraises the *Aboriginal Flag's* contemporary meanings and demonstrates how, by

inference, they form an evaluation – as viewed through the prism of the *Aboriginal Flag* – of contemporary Australian race relations.

Chapter 1, ‘The *Aboriginal Flag* as a work of art’, explores Harold Thomas’s life, Aboriginal cultural practice, and how Western art practice and theory frame and inform the *Aboriginal Flag* as art. Sitting at the intersection of two cultures and two mediums, the flag has a complicated and idiosyncratic reading. It shares few characteristics and meanings with other flags, works of art, and ‘flag-works-of-art’. The chapter concludes with a formal exploration that substantiates the argument that the design of the *Aboriginal Flag* represents the drawn-out considered process of a serious artist.

Chapter 2, ‘The *Aboriginal Flag* as activist art’, establishes the parameters and asserts the rationale for understanding the *Aboriginal Flag* as activist art. Particular attention is given to the role of art in Indigenous activism, as it exists within a contested colonial context. The latter serves the added purpose of firmly framing the *Aboriginal Flag* as characteristic of Indigenous cultural practice. Richard Bell’s social and political practice reveals the difference between social and political art and activist art. The *Aboriginal Flag* and Bell’s work *Pay the rent* share land rights themes; however, a great gulf separates the efficacy of these works as activism. The chapter reveals that Western ways of understanding activist art collapse before Indigenous works of art that, in the first instance, serve the political agendas of Indigenous Australians. In these Indigenous works, art and politics fold in on themselves and become one and the same entity. This pivotal chapter of the thesis discloses a broader idea: the role of art in Indigenous activism.

Part B contextualises the genesis, history and political contexts of the *Aboriginal Flag* as they relate to the Tent Embassy, land rights, sovereignty and assimilation. The three chapters in this section deepen the reader’s understanding of Australian race relations and of the flag’s place in that history. Chapter 3, ‘The international Black Power movement and the Aboriginal Flag’, begins with an account of how, at the Tent Embassy, three flags were flown, each of which articulated quite different interpretations and visions of the Aboriginal cause. The genealogies of these flags locate the *Aboriginal Flag*, and more broadly Indigenous activism, within the international Black Power movement and affirm that Australian Indigenous activism did not emerge in isolation – rather it was responsive to, and influenced by, international social and political movements that recast the politics of

race relations the world over in the twentieth century. The selection of Thomas's version of the Aboriginal flag as the pan-Aboriginal flag of Australia reveals much about the premises, values and goals of Indigenous activism, and the scope and limitations of the influence of the international Black Power movement on Aboriginal activism in the early 1970s. Chapter 4, 'Land rights, *terra nullius* and sovereignty', explores the doctrine of *terra nullius* as a profoundly important determining factor for Australian race relations. Conversely, the *Aboriginal Flag* is described in terms of its being a powerful counter-argument against the forces and premises of colonisation. This chapter explores the contrasting meanings of sovereignty as it relates to, and is expressed by, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Finally, Chapter 5, 'The interpersonal context and form of the *Aboriginal Flag*'s activism', explores how the policies of assimilation have dominated the culture of Australian race relations for much of Australia's history. For Thomas, the creation of the *Aboriginal Flag* was a personal act of defiance against the cultures and policies of assimilation that had so radically shaped his life. Thus contextualised, the display of the *Aboriginal Flag* has both public uses and meanings, and very personal meanings for Indigenous individuals.

In Part C, Chapter 6, 'Social change and the *Aboriginal Flag*', documents how the *Aboriginal Flag* has brought about social change. As was the case in most local government areas in the early 1980s, the *Aboriginal Flag* was not flown in the shared public domain in Shoalhaven. A statewide campaign in 1982 that sought to add political momentum to the campaign for what became the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NSW) 1983*, encouraged the state's then 177 councils to fly the *Aboriginal Flag* for a single day on National Aborigines Day. In response, the Shoalhaven mayor infamously burnt the *Aboriginal Flag*, claiming it represented a threat to social unity. A significant proportion of non-Aboriginal, land-owning Shoalhaven residents who perceived the proposed 1983 Land Rights Act and, by association, the flying of the *Aboriginal Flag*, as a threat to their land titles – supported the mayor's actions. These events are contrasted with Cathy Freeman's flag activism at the 1994 Commonwealth Games.

Part C, comprising the final two chapters of the thesis, offers an appraisal of the *Aboriginal Flag*'s contemporary meanings and, by inference, they form an appraisal – as viewed through the prism of the *Aboriginal Flag* – of contemporary Australian race relations. Chapter 7, 'Carved and Scar Trees and the *Aboriginal Flag*',

constitutes a comparative study of the meanings and statuses of dendroglyphs and the *Aboriginal Flag* in central and northern New South Wales. Central to this chapter's argument is Anderson's assertion that Aboriginal artefacts constitute title deeds to land. Finally, Chapter 8 asks the complex and revealing question 'Who owns the *Aboriginal Flag*?' In so doing, it reveals that only Thomas – as copyright owner of the flag – has the power to wrest back the *Aboriginal Flag* from the Australian government, which has commandeered its meanings since the mid-1990s.

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