of Aboriginal mobility is much flatter than that of the non-Aboriginal population. In other words, the mobility of Aboriginal Australians at ages outside of the highest age range (20-35), is much closer to that range than they are in the non-Aboriginal population.

3.2.2.4 Yvette's Story

Yvette's story (Box 3.1) exemplifies many of the attributes associated with the more mobile or transient portion of the Aboriginal population in the fieldwork region.

Box 3.1 Yvette's Spatial Story

Yvette's mother was born in Mt Magnet. She believes her father may have been born in Quairading, but the Shackleton / Bruce Rock area is home for her father's family. Her parents met in Perth and that is where Yvette was born. Her family lived in Shackleton when she was young and then moved up to Mullewa and then to Geraldton, and then to Carnarvon. At the time, her parents were having marital problems and so Yvette lived with her mother and sisters at her Aunt's house. The Welfare Department intervened because they felt there were too many people living in one house. They took Yvette and two of her sisters and one of their cousins and placed them at the Carnarvon Mission. When she was in Grade One, Yvette remembers moving to Port Hedland. Her father picked her and her other sisters up from the Mission and took them to the reserve in Port Hedland. Her mother followed later with their three other children. Her parents had more troubles and her father consequently moved to Darwin.

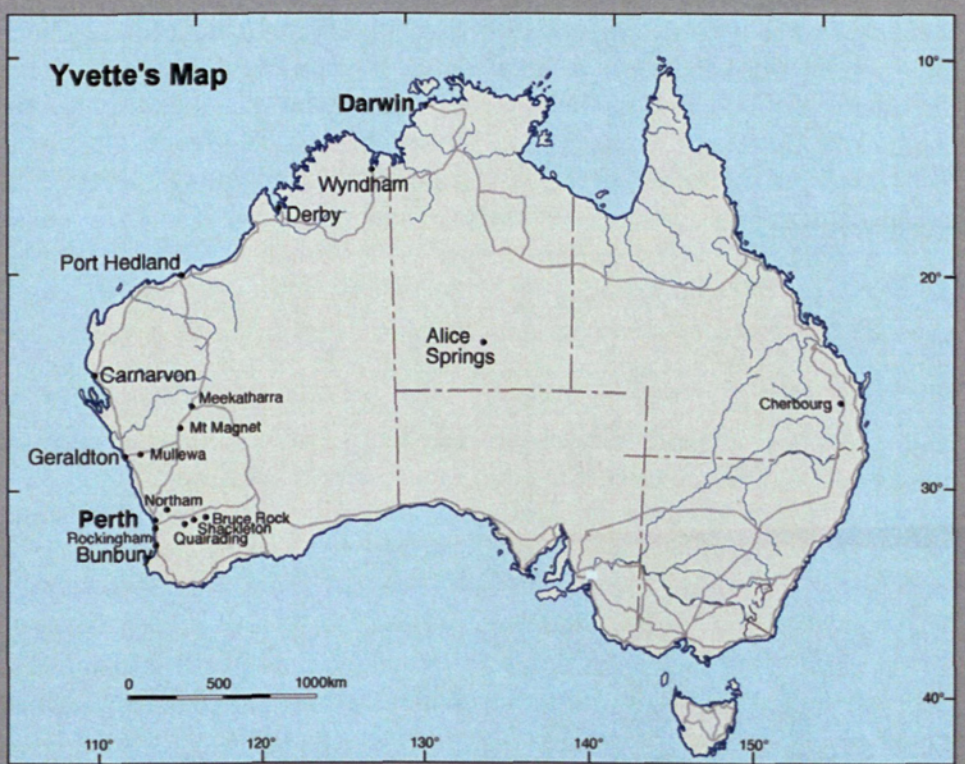

Figure 3.2 Yvette's Map

Yvette lived with her mother in Port Hedland for a number of years. She went to school there, made friends, and Port Hedland became home. At about the age of 13 or 14, just after starting High School in South Hedland, Yvette's mother passed away and that was a catalyst for her family spreading out and moving to other places. Yvette's brother went to Darwin to live with their father, and two of her sisters went to Perth to live with an Aunt. Yvette decided to stay in Port Hedland so she lived in the Hostel for boarding children whose families lived all over the Kimberley and Pilbara. Her younger sister then returned to Port Hedland and started going to High School there. At this point, Yvette decided to go to Perth to live, even though her family there were strangers to her. Her older sister was in Perth though and had gotten to know the family, so she lived with them and went to Scarborough High School. She joined the swimming team at the school and enjoyed the kinds of opportunities that she doesn't believe she would ever have had in Port Hedland. Her older sister eventually left Perth but Yvette had to stay because she was finishing her schooling. After about two or three years however, she felt the pull of 'home' and moved back up to Port Hedland:

"I think to me in my heart, Port Hedland is home. And I think that happened because we done most of our schooling there. I think when you start having your schooling in one place, it tends to be like home. Because you meet the locals and you become friends and then you know having our mother buried there as well and sister, it's like, it's home ... even today if I'm having a crisis with my husband or I'm feeling stressed or disappointment, I'll go back to Port Hedland because my family are there, my sisters and brother, and my Dad's there now. But it was just always go back to Port Hedland, touch home base, starting getting, feeling better ..."

After some time in Port Hedland, Yvette went to Northam and did Teachers Aide training. She worked there for a couple of years and then one Christmas when she went home to Port Hedland, she decided that she didn't want to go back down to Northam so she just stayed in Port Hedland. She studied there for some time but there were few jobs available in Port Hedland so she went up to visit her father in Darwin and stayed there for about three months.

"Came back home and then straight to Port Hedland for – it was just <u>always</u> on the go. Being single, I had no ties attached to anyone. So I just like go home, see the family and then cruise on to Perth. And then go and visit you know."

Yvette felt comfortable moving around like this because she was a single person and wouldn't be too much of an imposition on whoever she stayed with. She moved constantly between family members. However, there were some places that she didn't visit, even though she had family there, because she didn't feel as though she knew them well enough.

At some point later, Yvette moved to Perth and worked at Edith Cowan University and attended an Aboriginal church. She felt called to go to Bible College and so she moved to Cherbourg in Queensland and attended the Bible College there. Yvette had then planned to go to Derby to work with a Pastor there at a small Bible College. On her way back to Western Australia, she

travelled to Adelaide and from there up through Alice Springs to Darwin to see her Dad. She then returned to Port Hedland, and, instead of going to Derby, she stayed in Port Hedland, where she met her future husband, Gavin.

"It was like, I ran away from Port Hedland ... tryin to find a husband in different places because there was just none in Port Hedland and I come back after Bible College ... And then I met Gav then."

She did eventually go up to Derby to do her work with the church and she kept in touch with Gavin. After a while, she returned to Port Hedland for a festival, and he came back up with her and stayed with a friend in Derby. Yvette and Gavin then got married and moved up to Wyndham because Gavin's family was moving back up there. He also had a child from a previous relationship whose mother was in Wyndham so he wanted them to be closer to her. After about a year, Yvette became pregnant. After a trip down to Port Hedland for her nephew's 18th birthday, she called her husband to come down and pick her up to go to Perth and have the baby monitored. But they were having problems and he didn't come. Upset, Yvette left for Perth anyway:

"... there's only once where I just got on the bus and took off. That's when I was pregnant for [her son]. *That would be the only once. And I was feeling guilty because I never put a rug on the bus, I never put my case on the bus. I just left with the clothes on my back and it was like 'what are you doing? What are you doing?'... I got on the bus thinking 'well I'm going to Perth. If he's not going to come down here I'm just gonna go.' I didn't want to be – if we weren't going to get back together, I didn't want to have anything to do with him. So I just wanted to just go."*

She got on a bus for Perth, but on the way down, decided to go further to Bunbury and stay with a Christian friend. Yvette had wanted to go back over to Cherbourg and stay with her friends over there but didn't have enough money to get there. After some time with her friend in Bunbury, Yvette went back up to Perth so her pregnancy could be monitored. During this time Gavin had moved with his family from Wyndham to Carnarvon. He called Yvette and eventually he came down to Perth to be with her. They moved into a house in Rockingham where Gavin had some family, and their son was born there.

About eight or 10 months later, Gavin was talking to one of his sisters who lived in Meekatharra with her family. She said there was an Environmental Health Officer's position available in Meekatharra so they moved up to Meekatharra to take the position. After three years in Meekatharra, with at least one visit to Port Hedland in between, it felt like time to move on:

"Oh I think we feel as though we've overstayed our, overstayed the welcome or overstayed. That's one of the reasons. The other reason is that we've been trying to get our 13 year old boy down at one of the Hostels in Geraldton ... he's a bright kid. A couple of years ago he won the top award for science ... And sport! No sport, it's pathetic here. And then when we did have a really good youth worker, one of the community fathers went up and punched him up. So, you know. Wont stay around in a town/city like this. And also the shop. No decent shop to go in and bloomin well buy some brand new clothes. They cost

an arm and a leg here. And sometimes there's no sizes for your kids so you either have your kids running around in the same old ragged up clothes or you [laughs]. *So there's either employment, overstayed the welcome, educational and sporting reasons to move, and the shop here is just not, it costs too much and sometimes there's nothing in the shop."*

No more than three months after this interview was recorded, Yvette and her family did leave Meekatharra. They had planned to go to Geraldton because Yvette had an Aunt there she wanted to catch up with, but I'm unsure of whether that is where they actually went.

Yvette has engaged in large scale movements beyond the State borders and small scale frequent movements within it. She has lived in many different places for short periods of time; her childhood years in Port Hedland being the most extensive period of time she has lived in one place. Yvette has engaged in many mobilities with varying motivations, from calling to bible college, to monitoring her children's health, to alleviating pain in hurtful domestic situations, to simply visiting family and friends. Yvette's story is also illustrative of extensive mobility networks. Yvette describes calling upon family networks in Perth, Northam, Geraldton, Carnarvon, Port Hedland, Darwin and other towns in Western Australia's south and Midwest. When she married, she gained a new set of family ties and obligations with her husband's family in places such as Wyndham, Carnarvon, Meekatharra and Perth. It is also interesting to note Yvette's perspective of what constitutes 'home.' In addition to Port Hedland, she also had associations with both her parents' place of origin, particularly her father's, and to some extent, her birthplace. Yvette's spatial story illustrates the characteristically complex, overlapping, and often contingent nature of many Aboriginal mobility processes in the fieldwork region.

3.2.3 'Core' and 'Transients'?

On one level, the identification of a 'core' and 'transient' Aboriginal population helps to unsettle the notion that all Aboriginal spatialities conform to a singular, perhaps mysteriously nomadic tendency to 'wander[43].' Accordingly, a number of interviewees simply identified these groups to acknowledge a greater complexity in Aboriginal spatial practices than merely that all Aboriginal people are highly mobile. However, moving beyond this general identification of diversity to construct the

[43] In their analyses of Aboriginal mobility practices in Kuranda, Queensland, Finlayson (1991) and Finlayson, Daly and Smith (2000) also identified a 'core' and 'transient' population. They too found that each 'household' contained 'core' and 'transient' members.

'core' and 'transients' as discrete and absolute categories is problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, it can mask the fluidity and contingency of Aboriginal spatialities, consigning them to one form when in fact, through the course of a life, many Aboriginal people move a number of times between being part of the 'core' and being highly transient. Section 3.2.2.3, for example, explained that life-stage plays a significant role in determining whether a person engages in frequent movements or remains settled in a particular locale. For example, some community members, who may have been highly transient in their youth, tend to become more entrenched in a particular local community and remain there in old age. Individual circumstances also contribute to the determination of a person's conformity to the categorisations of either 'core' or 'transient.' Chapter Seven, for example, describes circumstances where a person who might be considered part of the 'core' shifts to become highly transient for a period of time following a personal or family crisis.

The second danger in conceptualising Aboriginal spatiality in terms of discrete categorisations of 'core' and 'transients' is that it perpetuates a discourse which reinforces an oppressive ordering of various spatial practices within the social fabric of society. According to this discourse, the 'core' are privileged and centralised in their normality, and the 'transients' are relegated to a peripheral status; operating outside of normalised spatial practices and for one reason or another, on the margins of mainstream society. As the following section will suggest, such a perspective is in many ways deeply embedded in narrow conceptualisations of 'authentic Aboriginality.'

3.3 Spatiality and 'Authentic Aboriginality'

The ambiguous notion of an 'authentic Aboriginality,' which has infiltrated many aspects of the Australian psyche, has been the subject of considerable scholarly critique. Smith and Ward (2000) and Sackett (1978), for example, have suggested that the notion of a particular 'authentic Aboriginality' fails to acknowledge processes of cultural change and the influence of a globalising world on Aboriginal culture, identity, and expression. One powerful and yet circuitously articulated conceptualisation that laced a number of interview conversations was a judgement of what spatial practices could be deemed 'authentically Aboriginal.' This sub-surface discourse assigned sedentarisation as a marker of assimilation into non-Aboriginal

society. It also assigned certain types of mobility carried out by certain types of people as a marker of authentic Aboriginality, rendering those outside of these parameters as problematic.

3.3.1 Sedentarisation and 'authentic Aboriginality'

The 'core' were often described as more 'settled' and 'integrated' into their communities. They were perceived as the more responsible, reliable and stable members of the Aboriginal population within their towns:

> *... there'd be a few in town that have stayed and some of them are quite responsible and they do hold positions in town. So, the rest of them are pretty much, they'll take it or leave it. They'll move where they feel like moving to, and when they feel like moving (Officer in Charge, Meekatharra Police Station, 26 February 2005).*

Few interviewees, however, offered any explanation as to why this portion of the Aboriginal population remained permanently in one town or community, compared to the more transient population. In some instances, 'the core' were erased completely in interview conversation with participants only acknowledging the existence of such a group when directly questioned about them. One interpretation of such a silence is that the spatial practices of this group were perceived as 'normal' and therefore assumingly understood and unproblematic. A second interpretation is that more settled existences were not perceived as authentically 'Aboriginal' and therefore not relevant to the discussion:

> *... some Aboriginal people they live exactly like non-Aboriginal people of course but, as a consequence they don't move around a lot. But others, they keep on moving around. Some of them are incredible how they move around all the time. They can never stay anywhere long (Jan van der Schaar, July[44] 2004).*

Acknowledging his Eurocentric orientation, on two other occasions, this interviewee clarified that his general comments about Aboriginal lifestyles were not inclusive of Aboriginal people who had 'assimilated' or 'lived European-style' lives. According to this perspective, sedentary existences reflect an adoption of non-Aboriginal values

44 The exact date in July when Mr. van der Schaar's interview took place was not recorded.

and lifestyles. Here, 'authentic Aboriginality' is assigned to an essentially nomadic or highly mobile existence, outside of 'settled' spaces.

Mesnage (1998) explored a similar notion of 'authentic' Aboriginal spaces. She described a 'colonial-centric' thought paradigm that designates untamed wilderness and natural landscapes as Aboriginal spaces, and cultivated fields, buildings, and landmarks such as fences and windmills as European landscapes. Mesnage deconstructed this epistemological divide suggesting that Aboriginal heritage did not cease upon European arrival, but is active and ongoing. Comparable assignments of indigeneity have been noted in the context of urban Canadian First Nations populations (Peters, 1998; 2004; 2006). Peters, whose work has focussed primarily on the experiences of First Nations women in urban contexts, highlights the persistent binary that renders Indian reserves as 'First Nations spaces' and all other spaces, particular urban areas, as 'settler spaces.' She notes that:

> ... the ways Aboriginal people have been defined in Western thought have set up a fundamental tension between the idea of Aboriginal culture and the idea of modern civilisation (Beckhoffer 1979, Francis 1992, Goldie 1989). Goldie (1989:16-17, 165) points out that, in non-Aboriginal writing authentic Aboriginal culture is seen to belong either to history or to places distant from urban centres. This conceptualisation of Aboriginal culture in relation to the city helps to reproduce a framework that defines Aboriginal cultures as problematic and potentially disruptive of city life (Peters 2004, p.8).

As a consequence of this binary, the assumption surrounding the migration of First Nations people from reserves to cities has often been an abandonment or surrender of their aboriginal culture and identity and an adoption of non-aboriginal values and lifestyles. It should be noted that no interviewees in the present study claimed that sedentarisation occurred at the cost of an individuals' Aboriginal identity, values and culture. However, various explanations of the spatial practices of 'transients' provided greater insight into the potential adoption of such a binary.

3.3.2 Mobility and 'authentic Aboriginality'

For some interviewees, the legitimacy of frequent, short-term mobilities through Meekatharra and in the fieldwork region more generally was also evaluated based upon particular constructions of authentic Aboriginality. Accordingly, forms of

movement which were not associated with traditional lifestyles (which presumably included ceremonial attendance, hunting, and seasonal migrations) or undertaken by 'traditional people' or 'full-bloods' were not viewed as being culturally motivated and therefore considered illegitimate and problematic. Many such transient individuals were disapprovingly viewed as being 'in between'; not conforming to either a traditional lifestyle, or mainstream cultural and lifestyle values. According to this perspective, Aboriginality is relegated to some natural, traditional existence and any mobility which deviates from this conceptualisation is inauthentic. Watt and Watt (2000) note the strange duality of such a position in relation to 'traditional' European lifestyles:

> We feel no obligation to drive horse-drawn carts because that was the limit of transport technology in the time of our great-grandparents. We don't feel a duty (or even an inclination) to wear kilts, eat haggis and listen to bagpipe music, because we have Scottish forbearers. This conviction that people ought to keep to their 'natural' traditional lifestyle is usually aimed at other people. Especially Aborigines, in spite of the fact that the traditional Aboriginal way of life was made impossible in most areas generations ago (p.20).

In a somewhat ironic modification of historical Eurocentric conceptualisations, this discourse of 'real Aboriginality' privileges mobilities as natural practices for Aboriginal people but only those which adhere to the interpreters' perspective of authentic or traditional Aboriginal movements. While traditional Aboriginal spatial practices were interpreted within the colonial imaginary as indulgent, irresponsible and without purpose, here, it is Aboriginal mobilities which are *not* considered 'traditional' that are deemed to fit this description.

3.4 Explaining Frequent Mobilities

In some contrast to the singular explanation offered to understand the spatiality of 'the core,' interviewees offered a host of explanations regarding the ongoing highly mobile practices of the more transient Aboriginal population within the fieldwork region. The dominant explanations are described below[45]. With varying effectiveness, these explanations either reinforce or challenge both the peripheral

[45] Although many interviewees referred to more than one of these explanations during interviews, they are described individually here to maintain clarity.

status of 'transient' people and narrow conceptualisations of 'authentically Aboriginal' spatial practices.

3.4.1 Nomadic Pre-disposition

Although some interviewees felt that Aboriginal mobilities were not 'traditional,' many research participants still explained frequent mobility as being the product of a nomadic pre-disposition. The notion of 'walkabout' as a pejorative explanation of complex Aboriginal spatialities was evoked in the language of nomadism or wandering used by several interviewees to explain the spatial practice of the more transient Aboriginal population in the fieldwork region.

> *Like they only come through for a few month or two months, sometimes even less, and they go again. They don't stick around for very long. They come and they interrupt all the other families and eat all their food and everything and just wander off like nomads (Dot Lauritsen, 24th July 2004).*

Without invoking the same host of associated negative connotations, a number of Aboriginal interviewees also discussed the influence of a nomadic tradition on the contemporary spatial practices of highly mobile Aboriginal people, sometimes referring to 'blackfella' or 'travelling' blood.

3.4.2 Reflection of Values and Priorities

Another common explanation of frequent Aboriginal mobilities was that such lifestyles could be understood as a reflection of priorities or values. For example, many interviewees suggested that family was a chief priority for most Aboriginal people, transcending other commitments and circumstances. Consequently, the willingness to 'drop everything' to attend a funeral or visit a sick family member, or to simply call in on their kin was in many cases more important than owning their own home or having stable employment. Some interviewees admired the lifestyles of the transient population, especially where they believed this group gave priority to family and adventure above material accumulation. Others framed the same discussion in the more negative way, suggesting that highly transient Aboriginal people did not value a work ethic, or value their health or their children's education, perhaps indicative of their laziness or irresponsibility.

3.4.3 No 'Ties'

Following on from this notion of reflected values and priorities, a number of interviewees suggested that because some Aboriginal people did not value things that would anchor them to a particular place, a transient lifestyle was more easily facilitated:

> *The other thing is that a lot of these people probably don't (and I say these people, I'm talking about our people, my people) don't actually (how's a good way of putting it?) don't value what we would call assets and things like that. So therefore, they don't aspire to buying their own home. There are lots of people who are caught up in a cycle of alcohol and substance misuse, and therefore have a tendency to just go with the flow. And if people are going to the next town, the likelihood is that they'll go with their friends that they drink with. And I suppose if you actually don't have assets that you have to look after then you don't have a worry in the world. You know, you just swhippp, off you go basically (Russell Simpson, 13 September 2004).*

Not having mainstream employment, children of school age, accumulated material possessions, or a property to maintain (either through rental or ownership) were common observations to which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants attributed the capacity of highly mobile Aboriginal people to engage in such lifestyles:

> *The lack of employment obviously makes it more possible for people to be more transient. So if someone's unemployed and they've got no kids, they can virtually appear anywhere the following day because they're at a loose end. And home is where you hang your hat rather than anywhere specific (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18th September 2004).*

The concept of life-cycle was often linked to this notion of spatial anchors in interview contexts, as dependent children were considered a 'tie' which often bound parent(s) to a particular place through the pressure or desire to remain in one place for access to consistent health and educational services. Those without children therefore were often considered to have more spatial freedom.

3.4.4 Trouble

Another common explanation of the highly mobile population in Meekatharra, and the fieldwork region more generally, was that their movements were motivated by

trouble or conflict of some kind. Family feuds, escaping the law (both traditional and mainstream), and outstaying one's welcome were common examples associating transiency with 'turbulent lifestyles.' In Meekatharra, as in Mt Magnet, it was most commonly transient people who were considered to be responsible for most criminal activity taking place in those towns. Some interviewees even suggested that Meekatharra attracted trouble because of its reputation as a 'lawless town.' According to this perspective, Meekatharra provided a refuge for individuals who led troubled lives as neither the mainstream police service or traditional Aboriginal law were considered particularly active in the town. Consequently, individuals may travel to Meekatharra to seek refuge from either 'whitefella' or 'blackfella' law and/or punishment, or feel at ease to create trouble in the town without fear of consequences.

For some interviewees, 'troubled mobilities' reinforced negative perceptions of more itinerant individuals. The movements of 'transients' were deemed 'non-traditional,' and associated with anti-social behaviours, irresponsibility, laziness and free-loading. However, a select few research participants positioned this 'turbulence' as primarily the product of socio-economic status rather than ethnicity. Similarities were drawn with non-Aboriginal people of low-socio-economic status who led similarly troubled and transient existences because of their peripheral status in mainstream society:

> ... in my experience, most people who move around a lot are troubled in some way. They may have outworn their welcome in one place so they move on to the next until they outwear their welcome there too and then they move on again. They may continue this pattern for years, or find somewhere where they can settle and not repeat the pattern. Some movement is motivated by a desire to do better. This is often hard in the Aboriginal community because many Aboriginal people live in low socio-economic conditions and one characteristic of these groups is that they often try to pull those who want to break the cycle back down into it. This is more a reflection of poor society rather than Aboriginal society. Often stereotypes are placed on Aboriginal society that don't belong there but exist simply because there is often this correlation between Aboriginal society and low-socio economic status. Lots of Aboriginal people don't fit these stereotypes but unfortunately most of the people who perpetuate them don't bother to really get to know any Aboriginal people (Ron Bradfield, 13 October 2004).

3.4.5 Socialisation

The concept of socialisation was also an explanatory theme in several interviews. A number of service providers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, suggested that, like most people, Aboriginal people were generally a reflection of their experiences. According to this perspective, for those raised in an environment of frequent spatial mobility, whether such movements fulfilled important social or cultural obligations, or because of a troubled existence, these practices would become normalised and such individuals would usually continue to live accordingly. Aboriginal parents who remained permanent residents in a particular place and only travelled during school or work holidays instilled similar values in their children. Many interviewees who now form part of the 'core' describe being raised by parents who prioritised their own employment and their children's education. One such Aboriginal interviewee shares part of her story:

> *And it comes back to how you were brought up too. Like my Mum and Dad were stable people. We went to Carnarvon for a holiday but broke down when I was two so we ended up living there for fourteen years ... Mum and Dad knew not to take their holidays when school was on. They knew that, OK, the best time to take holidays was during the two week break, or four week break or whatever. But that's the way that they've been brought up. It comes back to that parental, you know, what's happening in the family (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 14 September 2004).*

This concept of socialisation was also used by a number of interviewees to explain the regionally-contained mobilities of many transient individuals: a person will tend to travel within the region because it's what they know. If their parents travelled and worked within the region, then they're likely to also. If their parents travelled and worked outside of the region, they're more likely to develop ties outside of the region and feel more comfortable following that pattern. Socialisation was also used to explain spontaneity in short-term mobilities:

> *... I actually believe it's a form of socialisation in terms of - I'm not trying to generalise here - but some Aboriginal people that I have met and worked with through Family and Children's Services, I formed an opinion that there's no plan in place. For example, I'll use me as an example. I like to plan my life in terms of OK, I find employment so I can pay my bills to look after my child. And that's socialised to me. Whereas some Aboriginal*

people don't, their lives are lived on a day to day basis and it's very reflective in their operation of things. And again, that's not a bad thing, that's a purely observation. There's no planning process in terms of movement (Nicole Adams, 15 July 2004).

3.4.6 Accessing Services

Finally, several interviewees described access to mainstream government services as a factor that significantly influenced Aboriginal spatial practices. Chapman and Prothero (1985a) and more recently Taylor and Bell (2004c) have described the ways in which circular networks have been reconfigured from their traditional forms as Aboriginal people have incorporated 'modern' conveniences into their spheres of existence. Chapter Four develops this proposition further.

3.5 The Influence of Interpretation: Funeral Attendance

The previous section argued that interpretations and explanations of Aboriginal spatial practices either re-enforce or challenge the peripheral status of 'transient' Aboriginal people within mainstream social, economic and political structures. In other words, public and institutional constructions of Aboriginal mobilities can perpetuate or diminish and redress marginalising discourse and practices. This section uses the example of funeral attendance to highlight the influence of social construction and interpretation on discourse and spatial practice.

In the fieldwork region, funeral attendance was identified as one of the primary factors motivating and facilitating Aboriginal mobilities. It is a practice in which most Aboriginal people engage. Those involved in mainstream employment, living distantly from their home community and who may form part of the 'core' often still place a high priority on funeral attendance, even when other aspects of their cultural identity might not find such tangible expression. Returning to home communities for funerals represents an opportunity to re-affirm positioning within a social field from which a person may be physically distant. Such individuals may fit funeral attendance into weekends, or take a day's leave from work. For one interviewee, funeral attendance was so important that it caused her to resign from her job in South Australia and move back to Western Australia. She had been living and working far from 'home,' but was travelling back at least 10 times a year for funerals. Soon, she

could not sustain the financial burden or employment strain of these travels and eventually returned to Western Australia permanently.

For many others who may not have employment obligations, journeys to funerals, which may be up to 2000 or 3000 kilometres, can begin at least a week prior to the funeral and extend afterward for varying lengths of time. The amount of time mourners remain after the funeral depends on a number of factors. They may need to wait two or three weeks until their next social security check arrives and they are able to pay for petrol to return. They may need to wait for a suitable ride to take them back or elsewhere. In instances where a funeral facilitates the return of a person to their region or country after having been away some time, they may remain for several months after the funeral has taken place.

Aboriginal interviewees offered a range of perspectives about funeral attendance. A sample of these is outlined in Box 3.2. For some people, funeral attendance is considered an important traditional obligation. For others, it represents a social opportunity to gather as family. For others, funerals are attended on the basis of required and respectful family representation. And for others still, funeral attendance holds very little significance.

There were equally diverse perspectives amongst non-Aboriginal interviewees about the significance and practice of funeral attendance by Aboriginal people. Many, however, were cynical and dismissive. Two chief perspectives underpinned these disapproving gazes; that funeral attendance provided an avenue for welfare exploitation, and that funerals imposed difficult and unwelcomed dynamics to host communities and towns. According to the first perspective, the nature of relationship to the deceased person had become superfluous in light of the government funding specifically allocated to assist funeral travel. This grant system was being abused:

> *I think, and I'm quite sure, that a lot of them just go to a funeral for the sake of receiving the money that they get to go to the funeral. They say 'oh, my aunty died.' And they might not even know - they just heard that somebody died in Meekatharra so or wherever. They go down, they get cashed up, and it's party time (Tom Hutchison,4 September 2004).*

One interviewee explained that the government had begun providing 'allowances' to funeral attendances because of concern that children were not being fed during funeral times because there was not enough money. She believed larger numbers of more distantly related people were now attending funerals because of the monetary assistance which was available to them from the government[46].

According to the second more widely held perspective, funerals cause serious strain on host communities and are accompanied by anti-social behaviours on a communal scale. The argument goes that town infrastructure and resource capacities are often insufficient for servicing the sudden and significant population increase (often between 150 and 300 people), and associated social dynamics. In many cases, the convergence and congregation of extended family networks can create agitation and fighting. The further introduction of alcohol into this environment is then potentially quite volatile. Such perspectives are fuelled by popular discourse and media representation. For example, at the time of writing, the town of Meekatharra had received considerable media attention when a brawl in one of the local hotels resulted in the assault of two police officers. News reports suggested that the brawl began when between 100 and 200[47] people who had been in town for a funeral refused to leave the hotel at closing time (Sadler, 2006). The owner of the Meekatharra Hotel, where the brawl took place, expressed his concern over these issues:

> Violence escalates because there are government-funded Aboriginal funerals in town. People come in from everywhere and they don't put any extra resources in place for them (Sadler, 2006 p. 5).

Other perspectives position particular types of funeral attendance as problematic. For example, some interviewees acknowledge that some Aboriginal people only travel to attend funerals for the funeral itself and then return. Others travel beforehand and stay for indefinite periods afterward and this second practice is more commonly considered problematic. Interestingly, as Box 3.2 shows, for Aunty Mavis Curley it is the pressure of returning quickly which undermines the significance and purpose of funeral attendance.

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[46] Whilst anecdotal evidence suggests that funding for funeral attendance was, at one time, supplied to assist some Aboriginal people with the costs of funeral attendance, numerous attempts to confirm which government department (if any) oversaw the administration of such a policy, were unsuccessful.

[47] Newspaper reports of previous 'riots' in Meekatharra during the fieldwork period greatly exaggerated both the number of individuals involved, and the severity of the fighting.

Box 3.2 Reflections on Funeral Attendance

But, we meet, funeral times. Just recently, John's [her husband] *family in Wiluna, that's 7, 8 hours away. We don't see travel as an issue to get somewhere, to meet people for funerals, whatever. We get there. Because it's important for us. And that's a time when all the family gets together (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education, 12 November 2004).*

It's important to pay your respects to the person and their family (Anonymous Interviewee 7, 8 December 2004).

It's a traditional tribal thing. That's the way we are. It's tribal (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

It's important that I go to funerals in Magnet because I am only three hours away so I can get there quite easily, but my family live in Port Hedland so it's harder for them to get there and therefore it's important that I be there to represent my family ... It's important for especially the eldest children to go to funerals as well so they meet family and can realise what their role is (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education, 14 September 2004).

SP: *So in more recent times, here, what sorts of things do you travel around for?*

MC: *... Usually, we used to travel a lot for funerals, until I got sick of that. I just don't want to go anymore. Because it's – you get there, the day before, the night before or whatever, attend the funeral, go and see everybody for half and hour, and get in the motorcar and come home again. It's too, nothing ... To my own people I think I've attended 3, 5 in the last 10 years. You know the Leonora or Wiluna mob. And any funeral in town I usually attend if they're friends or rellies or acquaintances or you know, or in-laws or whatever they are. But I don't feel obliged to go to any funeral. The only time that I really feel that I should go is if I did have contact with them, I knew them if they were sick and died and I'd been to see them while they were sick and cared. If I cared before they died, I went to their funeral. I didn't wait till they dropped dead and say 'oh I better go show my last respects' because I didn't show any before. So different ideas I suppose people have. Whereas Albert* [her husband] *used to travel to 'oh poor old uncle I haven't seen him for 40 years. I gotta go to his funeral.' 'Why?' Ya know. His kids don't know you if you haven't seen anybody in the last 40 years and his grandkids got no idea who you are so. And how are you gonna meet everybody in that 2 days that you're there or day and a night? And everyone's cryin and howlin and nobody knows who's there anyway.*

SP: *So did you find that going to funerals was more to pay your last respects to the person, or to catch up with family, or both or?*

MC: [pause] *I went just to go. I didn't like funerals. I didn't like going to them. I liked meeting the people. I suppose it was a people thing.*

SP: *So you don't do that so much anymore.*

MC: *Nah ... Partly because we're getting older and we can't be bothered. You know. It's too much of a hassle to pack up and go to Hedland for a funeral or Geraldton or Leonora unless it's a really important one you know, that you feel you have to attend. Too much hassle. (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).*

Regardless of its origins, the disapproving gaze which so commonly surrounds the practice of funeral attendance falls heavy on many Aboriginal people:

> *There used to be a lady in the office who would question why I was going to 'another funeral' and instead of becoming angry, I just turned around and explained why this was important. To constantly have to defend this - they really have no right to ask (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 14 September 2004).*

> *I'm not one to jump on the bandwagon and say, 'I'm Aboriginal, I want my culture back.' I just want some aspects of our culture to be respected. And I want people to look at me and say 'OK, Debbie's got itchy feet, Debbie's gone walkabout.' Don't say it in a derogatory manner. Or, 'Debbie's gone to a funeral, because you know, all the blackfellas are related.' Debbie's gone to a funeral because she has an obligation to be there. To understand it and respect it. They don't have to accept it. We don't ask people to accept it. But just to understand it, and respect it (Deborah Robinson, 9 September 2004).*

For both of these women, funeral attendance has become a practice for which, though socially and/or culturally significant, they face noticeable opposition and censorship. What becomes apparent in this example is that discourses surrounding particular mobility practices can have significant marginalising or restorative effects.

3.6 Conclusion

Complexity, multiplicity and overlap – all three adjectives serve as apt descriptions of both the spatial practices of Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region and the discourses that circulate to explain them. At a basic level, the language of 'core' and 'transients' alludes to a diversity of mobility practices amongst the regions' Indigenous population. Even within these categorisations however, there were deeper levels of variation. The movements of 'transients,' for example, were described as spatially and temporally diverse and highly contingent. Just as complex and overlapping as these mobilities were the overarching discourses and specific interpretations employed to explain them. As illustrated in the example of funeral attendance, specific explanations of the movements of the more mobile portion of the population either challenged or reinforced discourses that positioned them as either peripheral and marginal or in-authentic.

In a sense, the somewhat ambiguous notion of 'walkabout' as a descriptor of an innately Aboriginal propensity to 'wander' persists. Here, the recognition that not all Aboriginal people seem to exhibit this characteristic is tempered by an assumption that these individuals have become more assimilated into non-Indigenous society. In other ways though, the notion of 'walkabout' has been challenged. Many of the explanations offered regarding the often spontaneous and short-term nature of frequent mobilities suggest a divergence from simplistic or reductionist conceptualisations. Instead, they demonstrate a level of understanding of the complex motivations and characteristics that underpin these movements. What remains at the end of this analysis however, despite the insights provided in the example of funeral attendance, is the lingering question of how these various mobilities and interpretations play out in reality. In particular, how do these spatial practices and the ways they are conceptualised influence the provision of basic government services. Chapter Four addresses these questions.