

and inquiries (Gordon et al., 2002; HREOC, 1997a; Commonwealth Government Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). These stories tell of deep brokenness and despair, as well as unwavering resilience and restoration. In a similar fashion, the legacies of disconnection in Yamatji country are many and complex. This section explores the influence of historical government policies on the contemporary context of belonging and security in Yamatji country. In particular it focuses on the changed and adapted nature of connections to country and how these associations influence Aboriginal spatialisation in the fieldwork region. It begins a discussion carried over into the next two chapters which explores Aboriginal adaptations to the colonial project and how contemporary processes of procuring, contesting and cultivating security and belonging inform complex and dynamic spatial practices and mobilities.

5.3.1 Artificial Home

One of the most significant ways in which the colonial project has influenced Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country is by the re-definition of spaces of belonging and security that are not necessarily rooted in connections to country. The following interview excerpt provides some examples of these re-negotiations:

Because see in the old days when they had the railway, a lot of Aboriginal people worked on the line, and they were going up and back on the train. But the interesting thing there was there was also a lot of people moving up from out of their country into someone else's country because they got a job with the railways and they were sort of promoted or transferred or shuffled, or shunted (maybe is the right term for the railways) up to other country. And there's things like, if you look at Meekatharra, you've got the Curley family, they're not from Meekatharra, they're from Geraldton. Their traditional links are down this way on the beach. They don't have, they're not traditional Meekatharra people. And everyone's 'oh, Curley family in Meekatharra' well when they come down [to Geraldton], they're not actually leaving, they're going home. This is where their paternal family links and land ties and all that should be, is Geraldton. They've got links, other forms, I suppose they've got community and social links in Meekatharra, but not traditional links. I think who - Meekatharra mob are Mippys and Walleys ... Not everyone from Meeka's from Meeka. Not everyone from Magnet's from Magnet. There are artificial groupings (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).

In this excerpt the speaker described new processes, such as employment opportunities, by which Aboriginal people living in Yamatji country have procured and cultivated spaces of belonging in country with which they perhaps have no 'traditional' association. Here, relationships of security and belonging have been re-negotiated through an engagement with the mainstream economy rather than association with traditional country. The interviewee consequently referred to these new socio-spatial arrangements as 'artificial groupings.' He went on to explain that many Aboriginal people have moved to particular places for employment and education opportunities or as a result of government policy, and they end up staying there for most, if not all of their lives. He explained: *It's an artificial, it's a non-real way they got brought here, and sometimes they don't go back* (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).

Consequently, the Aboriginal population in Meekatharra today is diverse in cultural and geographical heritage although many have now lived in the town for consecutive generations. There are Aboriginal people now established in Meekatharra whose family origins can be traced back to all parts of Yamatji country and indeed other parts of the State entirely. For many Aboriginal people in Meekatharra, the town has become a home-base which is not necessarily formed from connections to country. Several Aboriginal families have established themselves in Meekatharra because they lost their historical connections to family and/or country through government policies. In other cases people have established themselves away from their 'traditional country' because of individual choices to pursue employment and other opportunities. The result is a more subtle and complex contemporary relationship between country and belonging and security for Yamatji people. This complexity is reflected in spatial practices.

5.3.2 Contemporary Relationships to Country

In some areas of Western Australia, Aboriginal people still primarily cultivate a sense of belonging through their connection to country. For example, in the town of Wiluna, 200km east of Meekatharra on the border of the Western Desert, many local Aboriginal people derive their belonging from custodianship of their ancestral homelands. It is the place to which they continually return. One interviewee explains:

It's all about ownership. As far as they're concerned, this area over here [the Wiluna area], this land, this town, and I'm not talking the pubs, the shops, just the location, is ownership. That's what they own, and that's why they keep coming back. No matter where they go, or how often they go, they come back. That's always home, that's their tribal area. They always come home to it (Deborah Robinson, 9 September 2004).

Indeed for some Yamatji people, connections to country also remain strong and have been maintained by continual access to and occupation of the land, as well as education about the importance of the cultural practices which sustain it. Michelle Riley is a custodian of her mother's country and founder of the Yulga Jinna community, about 260km north of Meekatharra. She explains the role of her connection to country in providing a sense of belonging:

MR: Home on country. It's the tribal, it's just there, home. It's the home base. It's where you're brought up. The type of atmosphere, the type of environment around.

SP: Is it the people that make that or is it the place or is it both?

MR: It's both. It's both.

SP: Like, if all your family moved away from the bush, would that place still be home for you or would it be where they were?

MR: That place would still be home. No matter what. [pause] And that's for all my family. We all say that ... Even though I live in town now, that's not my home. I never claimed this as my home, Meeka. Never ever was. Only lived here part time. That's my home, out there. Where my tribal country is. Where I been brought up. That's my home. I didn't - even though you can live somewhere for years, it's not home. Because you haven't got that land connection. You need that spiritual connection. You move to another place, they got someone else's spirits there, old spirits, and that land is unfamiliar. So you're not comfortable are you. Unless you're not aware of those things, and you haven't got those sense. I think that's a thing that's very hard for people to understand on how deep our connection is to the land. Whether - regardless of whether it's just that dirt or not. That's more precious than money. And people can't see that (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

For Michelle, there is a clear sense of home and belonging to country. Other Yamatji people do not articulate such a deep connection to country but still have a clear sense of a particular place of belonging within the region. Ashley Taylor, for example, lives in Geraldton because of the employment opportunities there, but he explains that he has no right or claim over Geraldton. He is from Mt Magnet and identifies

strongly with that area. It is his 'home region' and the place where he has the right to speak.

This same sense of belonging stemming from a 'connection to country' is less clearly articulated amongst many Aboriginal people who call Meekatharra home. There is a connection to country which contributes to a sense of belonging for some Aboriginal people there, but the depth of this connection varies and is usually in reference to the region generally rather than the place specifically. Environmental Health Officer Bill Atyeo, who previously worked extensively in the Kimberley region in the far Northwest of Western Australia, reflected on this ambiguity:

I think more here [Meekatharra] it's - there seems to be (and I could be completely wrong) but there seems to be here a not belonging ... There's just a feeling that I get that no-one really seems to belong to Meekatharra. Even though you know families have been here for a long time, there's almost a sense of - ... you don't get the sense that people have actually been born here. Whereas anywhere in the Kimberley, you know where people are born because they tell you. That's the first thing they tell you when you talk to them. They'll say 'where you been born?' ... Whereas here you have to just about drag it out of them. And when you - not drag it out of them, but you have to ask a lot of questions. And it doesn't seem to be a sense of wanting to belong as well as not belonging ... Here, they'll say the 'Pilbara' or the 'Murchison' or whatever. They don't seem to say 'Meekatharra' (Bill Atyeo, Environmental Health Officer, 10 September 2004).

Bill refers to birthplace as being inextricably linked to a sense of belonging to country for Aboriginal people in the Kimberley and contrasts this to his perception of Aboriginal people in Meekatharra. Indeed the concept of birthplace is of varying significance for Aboriginal people in Yamatji Country. In a sense, this variation reflects the multiplicity of connectedness to country within the region. For some interviewees, birthplace played little or no role in determining their sense of belonging. For example, Meekatharra had become home to many Aboriginal residents despite being born in other places. For others, the birthplace of one parent or grandparent was central to their sense of belonging. One interviewee explained that she did not associate her belonging with her own birthplace because she had merely been born there by coincidence and circumstance. Rather, she identified with the birthplace of her mother because that was where her ancestral spirits were, her blood connections. She was raised in that area and it was a place from which her

mother's family had never experienced wholesale displacement. They had had continued access to their country. Similarly, another interviewee, despite being born at the Cue Hospital, describes 'moving back home' to Belele Station because that was where her mother and her grandmother had both been born. In circumstances where Aboriginal couples took station work where it was available, their children were often born in the nearest hospital, not necessarily 'on country.' As health services became more accessible to Aboriginal people, there was an authoritative push towards ensuring that all babies were born in hospitals. This is an early example of service provision which disrupted connections to sources of security and belonging. The above examples however demonstrate the ability of these families to adapt and maintain connections whilst still accessing available health services.

Perhaps equally indicative of the multi-faceted connectedness to country are the perspectives of Aboriginal people in Yamatji country about appropriate burial or resting places. Again, interviewees expressed a vast range of perspectives about where they wanted to be buried. These perspectives were often inextricably linked to their sense of belonging:

SP: So where do you call home now?

CAE: That's really funny actually. When we go spend a weekend in Meekatharra, pack the car Sunday morning 'let's go home.' Home is where our things are. Wherever we live. I still consider Meekatharra to be home. I was born there. Sort of grew up there from 17 onwards. Still contemplating whether I'll be buried there. My Dad's there, my grandfather. Sort of weighing up the options. When my friends go out there on my birthday or my anniversary. Because it could be a ghost town by the time I die. Or do I get buried here? I don't know. But home is where we've set up home. But still, you can't take the red dirt out people (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

Many interviewees described situations where Aboriginal people who may have lived away from the country where they felt a sense of belonging, such as Ashley Taylor, wanted to return to that place later in life:

... people that I know that have resided here for 20 years or more, will at some point say 'I want to go home to Northampton because I'm of this age. I want to go home.' So even if they haven't lived there for 40 years, 50 years, if their familial history

is there, then, they have ties, still links (Anonymous Service Provider 2,11 November 2004).

Others are returned to the country of their belonging after they pass away. Of such practices interviewee Russell Simpson explains:

It's just a cultural thing that happens. People want to go home to be buried. And it's country, it's country. It's not the same as being buried in the Pilbara (Russell Simpson, 13 September 2004).

Interviewees suggested that it was a regular occurrence for an individual to live in one place for more than 20 years and then be returned to their place of belonging for burial.

5.3.2.1 Meekatharra Belonging

Clearly for some Yamatji people, there is a sense of a particular place within the region to which they belong and for which they have the authority to speak about, despite the fact that they may not physically reside there. In these cases, a connection to country stirs a sense of belonging but does not necessitate continued and permanent residence there. In Meekatharra however, whilst there are several people who identify a specific connection to country as being a significant 'tie' for them, there is more commonly a prevailing sense of the Yamatji region as holding a sense of belonging:

SP: So, is there any sense in which say the Yamatji region is a person's country ... Or is it more just that by just the nature of it, their family and their connections are within the region?

P2: Certainly a sense of country. Where you belong. Where you have a right to speak, where you have a right to belong. Yeh. I mean it is interesting. The people who have been away and come back who feel they have a right to the area, have a much different perspective to say a relocated Noongar who doesn't have the right to the area. And it's how the community perceive them too. Like, you have a right to be there or you don't. It's not - it is, it's probably a country thing, it's a land thing. It's a familiarity with the land. But it's also just a fundamental belief. You know: 'This is my home. I am allowed to do what I damn well please here because it is my home.' I - you've got things like your language is the same here. Like Aboriginal words that people use. They understand here. You use the same words

somewhere else, and you feel a bit silly because 1) they might not understand you but 2) it might be the wrong word. They'll think you're pretending to be a black man when you're not (Anonymous Interview 2, 18 September 2004).

This familiarity with Yamatji country and the sense of belonging it offers was echoed by a number of Meekatharra residents. Several interviewees described the region as being familiar and safe. One interviewee referred to the region surrounding Meekatharra as where she felt free. These connections to the region were most tangibly expressed in statements of respect, love, concern, and familiarity with the land. Some local people, for example, spoke of their concern about open cut mining and the lax regulations which don't force mining companies to refill and revegetate their mining sites. Others expressed their connection to country through knowledge of local bush foods, their pride in the excellent quality of local Kangaroo meat, and their intimate knowledge of the landscape.

5.3.3 Country and Spatiality

Clearly, Aboriginal people in Yamatji country have responded in different ways to colonising processes and have adapted their relationships to country accordingly. Some, like Michelle Riley, have never experienced wholesale displacement from their country and continue to derive significant amounts of security and belonging from this association. Here, relationships to country directly inform mobility practices which continue to draw individuals back to their 'homelands' and provide them with a very tangible and grounded sense of home-base. Others, like Ashley, have maintained a different, perhaps more symbolic association to a specific place within the region that, whilst still integral to their sense of identity and belonging, has less of a bearing on their spatiality. For these individuals, their symbolic association to place may prompt at least some return mobilities during the course of a life, but their sense of connectedness does not compel them to have continuous residence there.

For others still, like many of the residents of Meekatharra, their experience of colonisation has radically altered their connections to traditional country. They were forced to re-negotiate new spaces and places of security and belonging in Yamatji country. Whilst some of these new spaces of belonging may have been within the same general region as the specific locations of their ancestral homelands, they were

not necessarily physically proximate. In some cases, they were considerably distant. One consequent adaptation to colonising processes has been the emergence of a resilient and broad Yamatji identity and Yamatji belonging. Many Aboriginal people who continue to reside in the region identify strongly as Yamatji people, rather than to a specific group within the region, and their spatiality is expressed in this broader connectedness to country. For example, many of the 'transient' mobilities described in Chapter Three are spatially contained within Yamatji country. This spatiality is in part a reflection of the sense of security, belonging, and familiarity that a number of interviewees felt did not extend for them beyond Yamatji country. For these individuals though, the specific spatial characteristics of their mobilities are primarily determined by factors other than their sense of relationship to country.

5.4 Conclusion

The concepts of security and belonging have historically been and continue to be fundamental to Aboriginal mobility processes. This chapter has emphasised the significance of colonial history in mediating contemporary relationships between spatiality, security and belonging. In Yamatji country, government policies have generally worked to fracture connections to the traditional sources from which Aboriginal people in the region derived their security and belonging, and in the process, to 'remake' Aboriginal spatiality. Taylor and Bell (2004a) suggested that the notion of diaspora is a fitting characterisation of indigenous population redistribution and subsequent mobility processes in settler-states such as Australia. Certainly this concept of diaspora, which emphasises forced exile from traditional homelands, describes the experience of many Aboriginal people in Western Australia and Yamatji country specifically. As a result of historical policies of protection, removal, spatial censorship and assimilation, many Aboriginal people were forced away from their homelands and, after having been placed in institutions for education or exile, were released onto stations throughout the State. Diaspora also emphasises group adaptations to forced spatial redistributions and again, adaptation has been integral to the experience of many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. Many have been forced to re-negotiate complex and individual relationships to kin and country, and these processes directly affect contemporary mobility practices. The final sections of this chapter emphasised re-negotiated relationships to country in the Yamatji region and how these impact spatial practices. Subsequent chapters explore other re-

negotiated sources of security and belonging and how their procurement, cultivation, and contestation shape contemporary Aboriginal mobility practices in the fieldwork region. Inevitably, the discussion returns to the challenge of servicing the diverse range of Aboriginal mobility practices that result from these multi-faceted and dynamic processes of adaptation and re-negotiation.

CHAPTER 6 – SECURITY AND BELONGING AND THE MAINSTREAM ECONOMY

6.1 Introduction: Lessons from the Lottery

On the 17th of June 2004, two weeks before fieldwork for this study was scheduled to commence in Meekatharra, an unlikely tale unfolded in the small outback town. Iris Curley, local grandmother in one of the larger Aboriginal families in Meekatharra, won \$15 million in a Powerball lottery jackpot draw (see Figure 6.1).

Queen of the desert



Meekatharra matriarch scoops \$15 million — a month after buying her first house

ROBERT TAYLOR

A month ago, 64-year-old Iris Curley paid \$30,000 for her first home — a neat three-bedroom asbestos place on a corner block next to the Anglican Church in Meekatharra.

Yesterday, she was due to make her first payment which now will also be her last payment because on Thursday night Mrs Curley won \$15 million on a Powerball Lotto ticket.

When *The West Australian* arrived at the Curley household, a collection of Iris' seven children, 25 grandchildren and 36 great-grandchildren were helping the family matriarch come to grips with her windfall.

From the start they made it clear

that the money wouldn't change things much for this staunch Murchison family.

"They might get things they couldn't afford before but they'll still be the same," said Iris' lifelong friend Irene Allison.

"This is where our tucker is," said Iris' nephew Matthew. Mrs Curley favours kangaroo tail brown or kangaroo leg stuffed with garlic, herbs and breadcrumbs.

Declaring that the money would not see her moving to a salubrious riverside suburb in the city, Mrs Curley said: "I always dreamt of buying a house and I bought a house and I'm satisfied with what I've got."

Mrs Curley said she bought her

house so she could have peace and quiet away from the grandchildren.

"You get to that stage where you need to be on your own," said Mrs Curley, as assorted friends and family nodded in agreement.

"I'll help my children first and I've got a couple of brothers and sisters so I'll help them.

"Then I'll just think what I'm going to do with it."

Mrs Curley does have a driver's licence but doesn't own a car and might consider buying one, but you get the impression she won't be rushed.

She definitely will be getting a new dining suite for the house.

"I only just bought a lounge

maybe a fortnight ago but I need a table and chairs and one of the bedrooms needs a bed," she said.

Mrs Curley has bought Lotto tickets on her fortnightly pension day for years. Her previous best win was \$6000 in Super 66.

Generally, she buys a 25-game Slakpik for weekend Lotto and a 12-game Powerball ticket.

On Thursday, when the local newsgang gave her a 25-game Powerball ticket by mistake she declined to take it and insisted on her usual 12 games. The last line of that ticket came up with the winning numbers.

The Carleys are a hugely respected family in the Murchison. Mrs Curley arrived in Meeka-

tharra from Mullewa in 1956 with her husband, Les, who was killed in a car crash in 1972 leaving Iris to raise their seven children.

Mrs Curley said she expected her eldest son Philip to help her invest her winnings.

Other children work as teachers or conveners of the local Aboriginal community. Son Darryl is a Pacific Masters dart champion.

The family watched the Powerball draw on Thursday night so knew straight away that Iris had won division one.

They celebrated with a few drinks until about 2.30am when someone was able to tap in to the Lotto

Continued on page 16

Figure 6.1 One of the many newspaper clippings that reported the lottery win
(Source: *The West Australian*, 19 June 2004 p. 1.)

News of the win spread across the country and indeed across the world with even London newspapers reporting the events. As the following research reflections explain, initial assumptions about the effects that the win would have on the fieldwork process were surprisingly unsubstantiated.

Box 6.1 Reflections on the Lotto Win

8 June 2006

It was a beautiful Saturday morning in Sydney, the 19th of June 2004. I had rented a big truck and stuffed it full of all my belongings. I was on my way to pick up a friend to help me move it into storage. I would be flying out to Western Australia in a few short days and driving up to Meekatharra to begin my fieldwork.

At Surry Hills I pulled over to the side of the road and my friend climbed up into the cab with a big smile on her face.

"Have you seen the Sydney Morning Herald this morning?" she asked.

"Nah. Why?" I could tell she was fishing.

"There's a story on the front page about an Aboriginal grandmother from Meekatharra who just won \$15 million in Powerball on Thursday night."

"You're joking." I seriously thought she was.

"Nah. It's on the front page. Iris Curley. Do you know her?"

"Not personally. I know who her family are." I let it sink in for a moment. "That's crazy!"

I couldn't believe it. What were the chances of one person winning the entire jackpot? What were the chances of that person being an Aboriginal grandmother in regional Western Australia? What were the chances that on the day I was packing up my life to move to a small outback town on the other side of the country, I would get the news that someone from that town had won \$15 million in the lottery? Part of me was thrilled for Mrs Curley. To be honest though, my mind was mostly awash with questions. How was this going to affect my research? Surely, this would change everything. Surely it would radically alter people's mobility practices. Would they all leave the town? Would they all buy cars they would otherwise never have had? Would other people move to the town?

I tried to push these questions to the back of my mind as I focussed on the task at hand but over the next few days, the concerns escalated. Would I need to change focus and relocate my fieldwork elsewhere, to a place less affected by such a freak event?

By the time I arrived in Meekatharra, it was two weeks after the lottery win. I had decided with my supervisor that I should not make any decisions about the possibility of relocating my fieldwork until I had at least spent some time in the town and been able to get some sense of the impact that the win had actually had. I was surprised by what I found. I had assumed that because the money had been won by a member of one of the larger Aboriginal families in Meekatharra, that it would affect

all aspects of the Aboriginal community and that mobility processes would significantly alter – the money would change the way people moved.

In fact, the degree to which the lottery win impacted the fieldwork process was minimal. It appeared that several members of the winning family spent considerable time in Perth, celebrating and planning what to do with the winnings. As the fieldwork process unfolded, information that came to me about the winnings was primarily speculative and third-hand, mostly in the form of occasional comments, casual observations, and informal conversations. From what I gathered, Mrs Curley had chosen to remain in Meekatharra where she had recently purchased a house. She had given her children and some other relatives financial gifts from her win. One of her children had moved to Perth. At least two others had taken time off work and another had resigned from her job. A number of sizable donations had been made to different town events and projects, as well as charitable organisations. Several new cars also appeared in the town shortly after the win which some local residents attributed to the lottery win. However, the massive influx of economic capital hadn't appeared to radically alter mobility practices or affect long-term migrations on a large scale amongst the Aboriginal community within the town. It was not even the primary topic of local conversations or whisperings for very long. Life seemed to resume a sense of normality within a very short space of time.

Although the lottery win and its impact on the town was not the focus of the present study, it raised two important questions which the research would certainly need to address. Firstly, how and for what reasons do Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region engage with the mainstream economy? And secondly, how do these engagement influence Aboriginal mobility processes?

6.1.1 Continuums of Engagement

Previous chapters have identified several of the sources from which Aboriginal people in Yamatji country derive security and belonging. Discussion has emphasised how these 'sources' significantly influence Aboriginal spatial practices. In describing the dialectical relationship between Aboriginal mobility practices and the provision of basic government services, Chapter Four explained that the degree to which Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region engage housing, health and education services is, at least to some extent, a reflection of the degree of security and belonging they derive from such engagements. It clearly identified Aboriginal people for whom access to basic government services is important to their sense of security and belonging. Sometimes, this leads families to make difficult decisions to leave home communities and townships to relocate to larger urban centres where their children will have greater educational opportunities, or to be closer to a more comprehensive range of health services or to access suitable housing. The emphasis

these individuals place on accessing services informs their spatial practices, often confining them to more sedentary lifestyles in close proximity to service infrastructure, or prompting long-term migrations to larger towns and cities.

Chapter Four also described Aboriginal people who have more sporadic and often contested interactions with these mainstream services and often derive very little security or belonging from these exchanges. These interactions are commonly characterised by particular experiences of and perspectives about these services as either alienating and marginalising or simply of less significance to their wellbeing. Importantly though, Chapter Four concluded that Aboriginal interactions with mainstream services cannot be neatly dissected into two groups: those who actively engage with mainstream services and those who don't. Rather, engagements with government-provided services in the fieldwork region exist along a continuum from which varying levels of security and belonging are derived.

Chapter Five explained that the role of country as a source of security and belonging has changed dramatically for many Aboriginal people in the Yamatji region as the colonial story has unfolded. Various responses to physical displacement from homelands, and more recently, an almost exclusive dependence on cash incomes as a mechanism of economic security have been largely responsible for a significant stratification of ways in which relationships to country inform mobility practices throughout the region. These various responses to the colonial project have also resulted in Aboriginal people deriving varying levels of belonging and security from engagement with the mainstream economy. And, these interactions have significant implications for mobility practice. This chapter explores the nature of both historical and contemporary Aboriginal engagements with the mainstream economy in the fieldwork region, and how these engagements influence mobility practices.

6.2 'Conditioned' Engagement

DR: Yeh, you have to suppress – every now and again I just want to, I don't want to go to work. I just want to get up and I just want to go for a drive out the bush, or I just want to go visit rellies wherever. But, because you work in mainstream and you want to work, you got to work, you can't do those things until your holidays come along you know. So it is, it's

conditioning and it's the way you've lived and the way – where as the mob in Wiluna haven't been conditioned. The only thing that they're conditioned on is alcohol and the welfare system. There's no such thing as time to these people. The only day that's important for them is the day they put their dole form in...And pay day. Otherwise every other day becomes one big day. You know, all together. There's only a couple days of significance in the week or the fortnight.

SP: And is that the way you'd like to live as well?

DR: *Not now. I mean I've got used to living this way that I'm living now. And the wants and the needs. And to have those things, I have to work. Where over here in Wiluna, these people aren't into material possessions. It doesn't bother them. The only thing that they really want is a vehicle. And that just enables them to move when they want to move. And if it breaks down half way, they walk away and abandon it, they don't give a damn. Possession is nothing, it's just a means of getting them from A to B. Their houses haven't got furniture in them. Why do you need a bed when you've got the floor that you can chuck your mattress on? Who says you have to sleep inside off the floor? Why do you have table and chairs when you can sit around the fire and eat? The simplicity of it - to them it's simple, they can deal with it. For us, we don't understand that. I mean I understand it, I acknowledge it, I accept it as their way of life and I know where they're coming from because that's how they've always been (Deborah Robinson, 9 September 2004).*

In this interview excerpt, Deborah describes and contrasts a 'conditioning' into an employment culture and a 'conditioning' into a welfare culture. Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region who have been 'conditioned' into an employment culture engage with the mainstream economy in a number of ways, from full-time employment, to trades contracting, to seasonal labour, and the CDEP program. Employment status serves as part of an ongoing process of procuring and cultivating spaces of security and in some ways, belonging. There are individuals for whom the income and social status (whatever it might be) that their employment affords are paramount to their sense of security and belonging. At the other end of the continuum are individuals for whom these inventions of employment are only minor considerations. In the fieldwork region, Aboriginal people not employed within the mainstream economy or involved in the CDEP program engage more passively with the mainstream economy through receipt of social welfare payments. As Deborah

suggests, both cultures reflect degrees of reliance on particular sources of security, and both have significant implications for mobility practices.

Like many other interviewees, Deborah suggests that those Aboriginal people who have been 'conditioned' into an employment culture have more restricted spatialities than those who have been 'conditioned' into a welfare culture. Indeed many interviewees expressed a belief that employment status mediates an Aboriginal person's spatial status as either 'core' or 'transient.'

Aboriginal people, they live completely from day to day - at least the ones that haven't assimilated into European type jobs. And as a result they seem to be free to stay or to move wherever the wind takes them at a particular time. And that's a real difference I think between non-Aborigines and Aboriginal people. Because they have no real economic - well some of course many have, but many have no real economic reasons to stay in one particular place ... that would be extremely unusual to move somewhere just for a job. You don't do that. That's someone else's country (Jan van de Schaar, July 2004).

According to this rationale, Aboriginal people who are actively engaged in the mainstream economy are less mobile because their work anchors them to a particular place. Conversely, those who are passively engaged in the mainstream economy – who have been 'conditioned' into a welfare culture – are in a sense, 'un-shackled,' and are therefore far more likely to be highly transient. In fact, a number of interviewees suggested that passive economic engagement was the primary explanation for the vast extent of Aboriginal itinerancy throughout the region:

It's - there's a huge movement. I haven't got the percentages to give you but my sense is that very few Aboriginal people are employed. Lots of them are on pensions. So they haven't really got something to keep them in one place (Dr Jac de Bruyn, 14 September 2004).

Adding another dimension to this argument, some Aboriginal interviewees were quick to contrast the current economic climate with the situation 30 years ago when social welfare payments were not available to Aboriginal people. They explained that back then, Aboriginal people had to work if they wanted to survive financially and, although the pursuit of work did create a more mobile Aboriginal workforce, the

advent of the dole has fostered a generation who have no commitments and are able to be far more spatially mobile than they used to be.

According to many interviewees, the primary consideration which determined a person's position within either an employment or welfare culture was their response to a trade-off between the accumulation of material possessions and the desire to be spatially unconstrained. By this rationale, actively engaging with the mainstream economy requires sedentarisation but facilitates the acquisition of desired possessions. In contrast, welfare dependence enables greater mobility. The following interview excerpt describes the experiences and thinking of those who have been 'conditioned' into an employment culture:

P12: They find they have to work because they've got to pay that car off. So they stay put. But you've got this family over here, they're not working, they're getting pension or social security or something, they've got no reason to stay put. They've got no commitments. See, now-a-days people say 'oh, we can't go anywhere, we've got to work. I can't take a long weekend, I've got to work.' That's now. But one time ago, it wasn't so much like that.

SP: Why do you think it's become more that way?

P12: Why I suppose is because they want things. And they know if they want it, they've got to work for it. That's the only thing I can think of. You want something, you've got to work for it. So you've got to be committed to work (Anonymous Interviewee 12, 1 March 2005).

According to this interviewee, employment choices are directed by material desires. Those who work, value 'things' and are therefore less mobile. Their work is a weight that binds them to a physical locale.

However, just as historical context is central to understanding contemporary Aboriginal relationships to country, it is also foundational to understanding contemporary relationships to the mainstream economy as a source of security for Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. When placed within a historical context, two important characteristics of the relationship between mainstream economic engagement and Aboriginal spatiality become apparent. First, conditioning into an employment culture has not historically resulted in the constriction of Aboriginal mobility practices. In fact in many cases, it has perpetuated and re-oriented them.

Second, the degree to which Aboriginal people engage with the mainstream economy in a contemporary context is not always the product of a trade-off between the want of 'things' and the desire to be spatially self-determining. It is also the product of the sources from which Aboriginal people in the region derive their security and belonging.

6.3 Historical Trends

From the earliest period of colonial interaction in Yamatji country, Aboriginal people were 'employed' as shepherds for the advancing pastoralists (Lefroy and Nixon, 1989). Indeed, engaging Aboriginal people in some form of 'useful' employment was a primary government policy initiative in the region. Fink (1960) explained:

The settlers in the Murchison had seen the worst effects of the pauperization of the Southwest of the State, and they deliberately adopted a policy of finding employment for all the native groups in the area. They opposed the issuing of government rations at rationing centres and tried to prevent natives from congregating near the towns that were springing up throughout the district, after gold had been discovered ... By 1899 reports show that more than three quarters of the natives in the Murchison area were in service to white persons (p.84).

As the colonial frontier spread throughout Yamatji country, traditional economies quickly became unviable in most places and were replaced with a set of peripheral exchanges with the developing settler economy which required frequent movement. As Chapter Five explained, 'protectionist' government policies ensured that Aboriginal people were relegated to spaces outside rural towns and were denied access to employment within them. The pursuit of mainstream employment involved frequent circular movements, taking up work on stations or mines and continually returning to or fostering associations with particular places through familial links. In an ironic parallel to Aboriginal socio-spatial organisation prior to colonisation, the procurement and cultivation of economic security continued to prompt considerable mobility. This practice dominated the economic landscape for Aboriginal people for many decades. The following excerpt, in which the interviewee describes part of her father's story, was a common experience for many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country between 1900 and 1960:

*His mum was Carnarvon, Dad was out Meekatharra way.
Meekatharra, Belele Station out there working. So he spent a bit*

of time working in between Carnarvon and Meekatharra and stations around there. And then he went up to Wickham or Roebourne and - because in those days they couldn't loiter on the streets. If they were seen to be doing nothing, the police used to pick them up and lock them up. And for no reason at all, just lock them up because they were just loitering. So he had to find a job. He was with one of his Uncles. So he found a job working with asbestos. And those days they didn't realise how lethal it was. And I think he worked in Wittenoom, Roebourne, and Point Samson there. A lot of his mates have passed on with Asbestosis as well as himself. Which is really sad but they did it because they had to work. So he worked up there for a while, a number of years I think and then moved back to Meekatharra working and that, and that's where he met Mum. In Cue I think they met one another, and they just worked on - Mum was a station girl, housemaid. Dad was shearers and whatever. Worked right around the stations, right around that Murchison District. And then they ended up down at Buntine ... That's down, up from New Norcia there somewhere. Worked on a farm there. I would have been two I think I was, and brother would have been four (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

This story exemplifies both the exclusion from urban spaces that Aboriginal people experienced and the development of an itinerant Aboriginal working class which it precipitated. Aboriginal people could not simply live and work in towns. Services and employment prospects were not available to them. There was therefore little opportunity, much less incentive, to settle in townships. For some, this arrangement suited their preferred lifestyle and facilitated increased investment in family structures of support and security. Below, one interviewee describes some of her fond childhood memories of travelling around the region as her father worked on different stations:

... [my father] travelled around, partly because he was a shearer, another part because I think he had blackfella blood you know, the travelling blood. Where we used to go from place to place. We'd go from here to Leonora - or from here to Wiluna, to Leonora and back again, Sandstone, and back down, down to Cue ... We didn't live a lot in Meekatharra. We lived in place, where the work was. Dad worked at, around Leonora, so we lived in Leonora. Worked out of Wiluna, so we lived there. He worked out of Cue so we lived there for a while. Never Mt Magnet or Yalgoo or any of them daggy places. [chuckles] Or Mullewa God! Thank God. So in between those (Aunty Mavis Curley 18 August 2004).

For others, the fragility of their economic arrangements and social status ignited agitation for increased rights and recognition within the mainstream economy and indeed within mainstream society generally. As Chapter One explained, prior to the extension of the Federal Pastoral Industry Award wage to Aboriginal workers in 1968, property owners had been under no obligation to pay their highly skilled Aboriginal workforce. In some cases, Aboriginal stockmen were provided with basic clothing, bedding, and rations. In other cases, a small additional wage was paid. Payment was at the discretion of the station owner. Those who didn't pay a wage often justified their refusal to do so by suggesting that Aboriginal labour was unreliable and inconsistent, unlike their non-Aboriginal workers. Fink (1960, p. 44) suggests that perceptions of Aboriginal laziness and unreliability, which were attributed to their 'nomadic tendencies,' were circulated by non-Aboriginal workers who resented Aboriginal labour taking their jobs, and by station owners who resented external pressures to pay Aboriginal workers a wage. And, when legislation was finally passed in the late 1960s to mandate the payment of equal wages to Aboriginal station workers, many Aboriginal workers were displaced from their already fragile positions within the new economic order.

Despite the removal of government restrictions regarding where Aboriginal people could live and pursue work during the 'assimilation' era, the economic experiences of many Aboriginal people were still marked by marginalisation and censorship. Some labour positions such as gardening and working in the kitchen or laundry at hospitals or hotels, could be found in rural towns. However, many of these positions were quickly filled and the majority of the Aboriginal population remained relegated to the status of a transient labour force. The lack of locally-based employment prospects available to Aboriginal people mitigated against their permanent residence in rural towns, and perpetuated the economic necessity of constant movement. This perpetual state of movement placed considerable pressure on families who either desired, or felt pressure to 'settle.' Some families were separated for considerable periods as one partner took on mining, pastoral, or transport related work away from town to support the family living there. Often, Aboriginal parents sent their children to live with relatives in towns while they continued to move from station to station, pursuing employment where it was available.

Because educational and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people remained scarce in towns such as Meekatharra, many of these children, when they reached adolescence and young-adulthood had to leave their home communities to pursue a higher education or a broader spectrum of employment prospects than had been available to their parents. Michelle Riley secured a job in Meekatharra working in a store for her Aunty, but describes how she eventually left the town, seeking greater opportunities:

But that wasn't good enough. I wanted to do something with my life so, I had to go. So, went around travelling and ended up in Kalgoorlie where they weren't so strict about what races was working regardless. So I went ... travelling around looking for work and, like some places I went to the type of work that was available didn't suit me. But, I'd go where the family was, making sure there's family where I went...They moved to those towns because of work. You know, back then they couldn't get jobs like I said in Meeka. They had to move out. Went Kalgoorlie, worked there. It was just work then, chasing work. I was moving around and felt more acceptable. (Michelle Riley 29 November 2004).

Even as late as the 1970s and 80s, many Aboriginal families in Yamatji country were still engaged in frequent migrations to pursue available employment opportunities. One interviewee for example described the various circular movements between Meekatharra that she and her husband had made to support their young family during the 1970s. They initially moved to Port Hedland where more mining jobs were available but after having their first baby, they returned to Meekatharra. Following the birth of their second child, they pursued work on a station outside of Carnarvon. After about three years there, they had another baby and returned to Meekatharra. However, the only work her husband could get in Meekatharra was with Main Roads. With this job, he was away from home for three weeks at a time. Neither she nor he thought that was a sustainable arrangement. So, they moved to Jigalong where she worked at the bank and shop. Next, they moved back up to Port Hedland. All their children were school aged by that time and they stayed in Port Hedland for 13 years. This story exemplifies the sustained mobility required of many Aboriginal people with trade or labour experience, who wish to remain actively engaged in the mainstream economy.

6.4 Contemporary Economic Interactions and Aboriginal Spatiality

In small towns such as Meekatharra, there remain limited employment opportunities. As the mining and pastoral industries suffer, employment options within those industries and the supporting service sector dwindle⁷⁴. In this challenging economic environment, the Yullela Corporation works to foster active Aboriginal engagement with the mainstream economy. Yullela has two operational 'arms' through which they seek to improve economic outcomes for Aboriginal people in Meekatharra and the surrounding region. The first is administration of the CDEP program. As part of this program, Yullela finds 17 hours of work per week for 191 program participants in Meekatharra, Yalgoo, Sandstone, Yulga Jinna, and at Belele and Coglar Stations. The CDEP program in Meekatharra has received a national award for its successful execution, and has become an essential source of enterprise within the town. It is a flexible scheme which allows workers to be paid for whatever period of time they choose to remain involved - be that two weeks, two months, or two years. The CDEP program in Meekatharra has also incorporated training options for young workers to become skilled in various trades. The second operational 'arm' of the Yullela Corporation is the ownership and management of four businesses including a general store on Main Street, a mechanics workshop, a building company, and a sheep station. Combined, these businesses employ 12 individuals on a full-time basis.

One of the inevitable outcomes of employment and training initiatives is an out-migration of Aboriginal people seeking further employment opportunities. Whilst a lucky few are able to find employment within the town that provides them with a suitable professional opportunity, most Aboriginal residents of the town who wish to pursue a range of employment options must leave Meekatharra to do so. For some people, this pursuit spatially mirrors that of their parents' experience: continual movement to accommodate short-term labour contracts, usually on mines or stations:

⁷⁴ It is difficult to quantify the labour force in Meekatharra, or Aboriginal participation in it. Census statistics (ABS, 2006) suggest that of the 697 persons over the age of 15 counted in Meekatharra on Census night in 2001, 398 (57%) were employed, 48 (7%) were unemployed and actively looking for work, and 184 (26%) persons were neither employed nor actively seeking employment. However, given the significant slump in mining activities – the primary industry of employment at the time of the Census – since 2001, these statistics are rendered largely obsolete.

But we've got a family member, they're living in Paraburdoo because her husband's following work. He operates mine equipment. But she's trying to make a decision now, does she follow him? Because her boy is in year six so she wants the stability for year seven but she's trying to make a decision, 'do I follow my partner or not?' (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 14 September 2004).

However, as Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region increasingly occupy a wider variety of professional appointments, there has been a shift in the dominant spatial implications of economic engagement. In a contemporary context, the pursuit of employment opportunities commonly involves long-term migrations toward secure professional appointments, usually in larger urban centres such as Geraldton and Perth:

I mean if you do go away and do a degree, or do go away and get qualified, there isn't much to bring you back home. A couple of the guys who have gone off, boarding schools and that, it's very hard to see them come home ... there's no work at the level they want. I mean, the promotion structure means that if they do come back, they only come back for a couple of years ... That's the reason we abandoned, well my wife wanted to leave just for the kids. My wife couldn't get work in Meekatharra at all. She got a job straight away in Geraldton. Not that she couldn't get work, but there was nothing that appealed. No broader range. Nothing more suitable (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).

Some people might be away for long periods. Like, we've been here 10 years. We're in no hurry to get back to Meekatharra. There's really job wise and family wise, there's nothing there for us. John's parents aren't there, my parent's aren't there (other than my Dad in the graveyard) but there's nothing there for us (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

I haven't lived in my region for 30 odd years. When I say my region: Mt Magnet. There's no way in the wide world I'm going back there to live, there's nothing there for me (Ashley Taylor 14 September 2004).

In each of these excerpts, interviewees describe the need and desire to leave their home places to pursue employment opportunities. Here, engagement with the mainstream economy assumes a substantial role in the procurement and cultivation of security and belonging, and such engagements have not been possible within the borders of their home towns.

While for some, these employment pursuits may be motivated by the desire for 'things' and a significant investment in them as sources of security and belonging (as suggested in section 6.2), others are motivated by the genuine sense of enjoyment that their work brings and the great value they find in their professional contributions:

EK: ... Even a move from [Meekatharra] to Geraldton, I'd have to have a job to go to. I could not go there and not work. I'd have to have a job ... I would not go there expecting to one day find a job. No way. I've worked ever since I left school there is no way I could not have a job.

SP: Because you like it, or because it brings you security or -

EK: Because I enjoy doing what I'm doing.

SP: You like working?

EK: I do (Elaine King, 27 October 2004).

Others take a more dutiful perspective about employment and explain the importance of the security that a stable income provides:

... I can't really just take leave without pay because I've got a mortgage, I've got a motorbike to pay. There's those sort of financial commitments. Because I'm the bread winner so I just about pay for everything but we share all our stuff. For us to move, there'd have to be a job for us to move. For one of us. Because one of us would stay here until the other one gets settled and then the other one would move up. Well that's what I would like to see happen (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

However, Yullela management mentor Ron Bradfield believes that although the pursuit of employment opportunities facilitates considerable out-migration amongst the Aboriginal population in Meekatharra, economic engagement could influence Aboriginal spatiality far more than it currently does. Ron suggests that most Aboriginal people in Meekatharra have a limited knowledge of what employment opportunities exist in the wider community and their relative attainability. He was also unsure whether people would have the desire to pursue those opportunities even if they were fully aware of them, and conceded that such a pursuit would generally require leaving Meekatharra with an uncertain prospect of return in the near future or indeed at all:

RB: Most of the opportunities, should people desire to pursue them, cannot be pursued in town. It would require that people leave town. 80% of people who do leave town to pursue employment would want to come back at some point but most would have to wait considerable years until they were properly trained and had then established a good reputation ... Losing their young people has been a frightening thing for Aboriginal communities for a long time. The Yulella Board are less fearful than other places and are exploring opportunities to a greater degree. In the last 10 years, about 60% of the CDEP participants have gone on to pursue full time employment and at least half of them have had to leave town to do so.

SP: Is having to leave town something that would discourage certain people from seeking employment?

RB: It probably influences about 30% of people. Quite a few people also just do nothing at all (Ron Bradfield, 13 October 2004).

Ron suggested that in a number of cases apprehension about engagement with the mainstream economy amongst the Aboriginal population in Meekatharra stems from the fear of necessitated displacement from the spaces and places from which security and belonging are derived. These considerations often make decisions to leave town very difficult. They can also lead some people to settle for whatever employment is available within the town, regardless of whether it is challenging or stimulating. The trade-offs between pursuing economic opportunities and being displaced from family and community lead others to adopt a more passive engagement with the mainstream economy and remain 'at home.'

However, these trade-offs are not the only reason why some Aboriginal people remain dependent on social welfare. For some, it may be the result of a generational cyclical disengagement from the mainstream economy. Many Aboriginal people who are currently active participants in the mainstream workforce had parents who were as well. The reverse is also true. Several interviewees suggested that family modelling is highly determinative of future behaviours and practices:

See people are only what they live. If the case be that a kid grows up in a family of alcohol abuse, the likelihood is that that kid will be doing the same sorts of things when they grow up. So and if they see that there are people in the family that put family first before any other priorities then the likelihood is that they'll actually do that too when they grow up. So it's actually a life skill that they learn (Russell Simpson, 13 September 2004).

For others, a passive economic engagement is born out of a lack of interest in, or understanding of, the mainstream economy. Those who feel generally alienated from mainstream society may see little advantage in taking up active employment when they can be financially supported by the dole. For these individuals, there are very few incentives to actively engaging with the mainstream economy, except perhaps the capital it provides for accumulating desirable material possessions. As Deborah suggested in section 6.2 however, many Aboriginal people who do not actively engage with the mainstream economy seem to place less value on the accumulation of possessions than they do on their freedom to be self-determining of their spatial practices.

Importantly though, passive engagement with the mainstream economy does not automatically translate to 'spatial freedom.' Welfare dependency has the capacity to restrict mobility practices, albeit temporarily. Indeed when asked what, if anything, might constrain Aboriginal mobility practices, many research participants suggested that financial cost was perhaps the most prohibitive factor. Interviewees described the common scenario of a carload of Aboriginal people travelling to another town or community to visit family, shop, or attend a funeral or ceremony. They would spend their fortnightly stipend on travel expenses, food and / or alcohol and thus become financially stranded at their destination or some interim locale until their next social security cheque was deposited into their account:

There's some people here who will do that. Travel for Law business and meeting times. And nobody supplies them with travelling money. They have to go so they'll just go. They wait for pension day and they'll go. Or money day. And then come back on the next money day. If they're gonna come back that day. Or they might wait until the next time or something. And those people usually get stranded. They usually get stuck there for a while (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).

Several interviewees however suggested that Aboriginal people were extremely resourceful and their financial situation rarely stopped them from travelling as they desired or needed. One research participant suggested that Aboriginal people knew how to exploit the welfare and service systems and were masters of it:

People who are transient will find the resources they need to get about. For example, a person left from Broome recently without enough supplies to get to their destination and they had a three-month-old baby. So, along their way, they came in to Meekatharra to seek financial assistance. It's just too easy for people to get handouts. Giving is not the answer. Over the past two years, all [particular service] clients have been the same. They expect to keep being supported and so don't take on the skills of financial management offered to them. [Particular service] should be closed up after two years if no new clients present themselves so that people will learn to be more independent. While services like [particular service] exist, there will always be transiency (Sue Happ, 13 August 2004).

Another interviewee told the story of a man who had recently presented to the Department of Community Development (DCD) in Meekatharra for financial assistance on his way from Port Hedland back to Perth. He had hitchhiked from Perth to Port Hedland to see his sick son. When he reached Port Hedland, he found his son was not there so he decided to hitchhike back. Such scenarios are not uncommon in Meekatharra because it is a half-way point on north / south travel routes. People who are travelling along this route will often present to the DCD office seeking fuel money or a bus ticket to complete their journey. Others stop and stay with relatives in the town until their next dole payment is deposited.

Passive engagement with the mainstream economy by Aboriginal people within the fieldwork system was interpreted by many interviewees, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, as abusive of the social welfare system. For others, it was interpreted as a logical enactment of their disregard, miscomprehension or disinterest in the mainstream economy and their focus on other aspects of life in providing a sense of security and belonging.

6.5 Cynthia's Story

Cynthia's story illustrates many of the aspects of Aboriginal engagement with the mainstream economy described in previous sections.