

Box 6.2 “Cynthia’s⁷⁵” Story

Cynthia was born in Cue where her parents had been working on a nearby station. Her parents had met when her father arrived at her mother’s station seeking work. Cynthia’s mother, like her Grandmother, was born and raised on Belele Station. Her father had been born in New Norcia, in the States’s southwest, where his mother had been sent to the local Catholic mission after giving birth to two children outside of marriage. At New Norcia she had met and married another man and Cynthia’s father was one of their children. When he was released from the New Norcia Mission in his mid teens, he returned his mother’s country, Yamatji country, looking for his extended family. On his journey, he got a job at Belele Station where he met Cynthia’s mother.

“Mum never left the station until she was married. They didn’t believe in that the old people ... Kids growing up, and leaving home, from what I can gather, you weren’t allowed to leave and all that until you were actually married or in a relationship. Then you could move from the station. But if you weren’t, no, you stayed there.”

Once married, Cynthia’s parents left Belele. Shortly afterwards her father joined the army so they had to move to Northam to the army camp. When her father was shipped out to war, her mother returned to Belele. When he returned from the war, Cynthia’s parents moved down to Austin Downs Station to work because one of her father’s army friends was the property manager there. In 1946, whilst her parents were working at Austin Downs, her mother fell pregnant and since Cue hospital was the closest to Austin Downs, Cynthia was born there.

“And by that time Mum had three kids. So, three of us. So, for a bit of stability and, more of a home life, Dad moved back to the station. Back to Belele. My Grandmother was still there see. Mum (?) like home. And they worked there for quite a few years.”

Cynthia grew up on Belele Station. Whilst she remained on the station with her mother, grandmother, and sisters, her father worked on Belele and several surrounding stations. Because Belele was such an expansive station⁷⁶ with a large Aboriginal workforce,⁷⁷ they began a school for the children on the station. Cynthia and her sisters attended the school which was taught by the station accountant on the front veranda of the main station house. Eventually, Cynthia’s parents moved her family to Meekatharra and her father took up work on the railway lines. Her parents separated not long afterward and her mother moved back to Belele whilst Cynthia and her sisters remained in Meekatharra with her father. One weekend, they accompanied their father to his football game in Cue. Cynthia then remained in Cue with another family and began school there.

75 The name “Cynthia” is an alias for the actual research participant whose preferred title for identification throughout the thesis was “Field Officer.” An alias has been used in preference to this job title for the purposes of clarity in telling this part of her story.

76 Belele Station remains the largest station in the Murchison Region.

77 Cynthia estimates that there were perhaps 20 Aboriginal workers and their families, as well as a number of single workers living on the station.

"Until – Mum was on another station and she found out and she came down and picked us up and brought us down to Meeka. And, we didn't stay with Dad after that ...must have reckoned he wasn't responsible enough I suppose. Because we stayed with the cousins. An older cousin and her husband. We stayed with them because Mum was working on the station. Mum used to send money in for our board and that. We lived on the station, but lived in town ... my Dad used to pick us up on the weekends and take us out to the station, on the weekends, to where Mum was, but they weren't a couple, they was already separated. And we'd just go out to the station (?) with her. Granny was on the station while Mum was still at work. So we could just stay with her. Go back into town Sunday afternoon for school. Back to the (?) we was staying with."

Eventually Cynthia's father left Meekatharra and moved to Perth. She would not see him again for some 24 years. Cynthia's mother moved to Meekatharra where she met another man. They bought a house on the edge of the Meekatharra reserve and Cynthia and her sisters lived there with them.

"And about that time, they were just building the hospital now. You know that one that's there now? They were building that at the time. And I remember Mum worked at the hospital, and so did my step-father. He did the building part of it. Mum was - they had to do out their wards and that. Cleaning and all that type of thing. She did all that. We was going to school. And then when that was over I suppose, like the old man, being at the station first, he just went out bush again. And the hospital was opened and Mum got a job behind the Meekatharra Hotel in the laundry"

By this time, Karalundi – an Aboriginal boarding school – had been opened 60km north of Meekatharra. Two of Cynthia's cousins worked in the kitchen there and one weekend Cynthia and her sisters went out to visit them. They enjoyed it there and wanted to go back, not realising that their visit had been during the holidays and during school, they wouldn't be able to leave whenever they wanted to. Sending the children to Karalundi was convenient for Cynthia's mother and step-father because they were re-united working at Buttah Station which was very close to Karalundi. There was no accommodation there for the children, but it was close to the school and allowed Cynthia and her sisters to spend their weekends together as a family. The Buttah station job was only supposed to last for a month, but they ended up staying for several years. Cynthia remained at Karalundi from the time she was eight years old until she was 16. She then planned to go to Carmel College in Perth to finish her studies and get away from home for a while. When she arrived however, she found it too overwhelming.

" C: And I went for a week, and I went home. I didn't like it. School hadn't started ... my sister came with me to help me settle in. And when she packed her bag, I packed mine too. She was going back to the station see, back to Belele. SP: What was it that you found so hard about being down there?

C: Well first I was sick. I couldn't stand the water. Every time I had a glass of water I was crook. I didn't like that. And then I wasn't too sure would I be able to handle the schooling. I was never great at school anyway. The environment; far away from home."

Cynthia also had a frightening experience in her first week at Carmel College which firmed her resolve to leave. She was accidentally locked in the Colleges' orchard cool-room where she had been packing fruit crates. This event, compounded by the fact that there were no other friends or family there that had come down at the same time as her, confirmed her decision to leave and return home:

"There was a couple non-Aboriginal kids from the same, Karalundi. Superintendent's family, his son, he was there. And, there were a couple there ... But they'd already been there for a couple years. And to me, they were city. They weren't bush. Because they'd been in the city of a couple of years and to me, they were city. They weren't bush. So it was, I was walking into an area that I didn't know. And I made up my mind I wanted to go home. And that was it, nothing changed it. And they were saying 'do you want to go home and be the next(?) stockman?' But I wanted to go home. And that was it. When [my sister] pulled her case out from under the bed and started packing I said, 'what are you doing?' She said 'I'm going home tomorrow.' And I said 'I'm coming with you.' ... That was it. I came home. And went to work on the station ... So then it was just me and [my sister]. And we were like waitresses. Worked in the kitchen, house, work to be done, you done it, you done the lot. Started about six in the morning I suppose and as I said at different times, it all depends what was happening at night. And you only had Sunday off. But to us, it was home."

Cynthia and her sister also began to teach the children at the station via correspondence, as they had been taught when they were younger. She stayed there teaching for about four years and, when she was 21 and in a relationship, she left Belele. Her partner was an Englishman who had been working on stations but there were few employment options for him in Meekatharra. He and Cynthia travelled to Perth, where Elders, a large agricultural company, had a main office with listings of vacant positions throughout the State. There were positions vacant in Kalgoorlie so they moved to there. They hadn't been in Kalgoorlie long when Cynthia became sick and they moved back to Perth, finding work in the city. Soon, Cynthia fell pregnant and wanted to go home.

"I had enough ... Because we never travelled that much when we were kids anyway. And like being raised on the station ... We came into town maybe three times a year. So you can imagine getting 'oh god' just wanted to get back home just by coming to Meekatharra. So you can imagine what Perth was like. Shocking? It's just a (?). It was too fast too bright(?). All I wanted to do was go bush. Just come home ... So from Perth we came to, just out of Yalgoo. There was a station there we worked on just out of Yalgoo. And I came up to Meekatharra a couple times for my check-up because I was pregnant, and I decided I wanted to come back home. So I came back to Meeka. [My partner] was still in Yalgoo. He stayed there on the station until they finished the shearing ... [My son] was born in Meeka after that. And I used to go out to the station, I'd get a ride out with the mail, I'd jump off at the station, spend the night with Mum and get a ride out on the mail truck the next day."

Four of Cynthia's five children were born in Meekatharra. They all started and finished school in Meekatharra. When the children had been younger, Cynthia and her partner moved around as employment opportunities were available. They lived in Nullagine for a couple of years and then returned to Meekatharra. They went to Perth for two or three years and that's where her youngest child was born. Cynthia and her partner separated in Perth and she returned to Meekatharra with the children.

Today, Cynthia continues to live in Meekatharra. She owns a home there and, although now retired, was a Field Officer for the Department of Community Development in Meekatharra for a number of years. One of her children lives in Meekatharra and her sister lives and works for a major health service in Alice Springs.

The beginning of Cynthia's story illustrates the effects on Aboriginal families of marginalisation from the mainstream economy during the 'assimilation' era. Her family was often separated as her father travelled frequently from station to station while the rest of her family remained on Belele Station, and later, in Meekatharra. When Cynthia finished school, she had to choose whether to leave the people and places from which she derived her security and belonging to pursue further studies and opportunities in Perth, or to remain close to them, and become 'just another stockman.' In essence, this was a pivotal life decision for Cynthia which dramatically affected the course of her life.

Further, just as Chapter Three unsettled the notion of 'core' and 'transient' as static categories into which all Aboriginal peoples spatial practices can be decisively divided, Cynthia's story also unsettles the notion that any one Aboriginal person has either an active or passive engagement with the mainstream economy. Cynthia's engagement with the mainstream economy has varied significantly according to her life-stage and circumstances and these various engagements have influenced her mobility practices in a range of ways. In her 20s and 30s, pursuing employment opportunities saw her leave her family and country. Like many other Aboriginal people in her situation however, pivotal events such as the birth of her children reoriented her toward her home environment. In these periods, more security and belonging was derived from family and familiarity than from economic engagement. She was content to take up employment opportunities available to her within her 'home' environment rather than pursue those available outside of it. Today, she is enjoying retirement in Meekatharra. Cynthia's story thus illustrates the ways in

which Aboriginal spatial practices transcend the notions of 'core' and 'transient' as security and belonging are iteratively derived from a number of sources according to particular circumstances and events over the course of an individual's life.

6.6 Conclusion

Like relationships to country and mainstream services, engagement with the mainstream economy, and the spatial practices associated with it, are mediated by the extent to which Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region derive security and belonging from these economic interactions. Conditioning into a welfare or employment culture is not simply a matter of trade-offs between having spatial freedom and having material possessions. And, when degree of economic engagement is placed within the framework of procuring, cultivating, and contesting security and belonging, the rationality of the resulting proliferation of mobility practices becomes apparent.

For some, an emphasis on economic engagement has prompted increased movement as they 'chase' employment opportunities. For others, it has precipitated long-term migrations. Indeed while employment might generally be conceived as a factor which would constrain spatial practices and reform mobility practices, clearly in these cases, it has demanded it. In other instances, economic engagement has been active and yet not a central consideration in the procurement and cultivation of security and belonging. These determinations are expressed in the resolve to accept available employment within the spaces and places where security and belonging are already primarily derived. Other Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region derive very little security and belonging from engaging with the mainstream economy and conform to what Deborah has referred to as a 'welfare culture.' Undoubtedly, these individuals are less spatially constrained than those whose employment 'anchors' them to a particular locale. However, even their limited engagement with the mainstream economy impacts their spatiality.