

Box 7.2 The Meeka Muster

19/11/04

The Meeka Muster, an annual basketball tournament begins here this evening with games continuing until Sunday afternoon. Buses have been rolling into town all day and the coordinators are in the final stages of readiness.

Apparently there are about 13 men's teams and 8 women's teams, with one being from Meekatharra. There are apparently teams coming from Perth, Mt Magnet, Cue, Geraldton, Burringurrah, Warnamboo, Port Hedland, Newman, Yandeyarra, Carnarvon and the Western Desert. Teams are staying at the Youth Centre, Rec Centre, Paddy's Flats, The Auski Motel and with relatives. Some people who have come for the event have reportedly been in town for 2 or 3 weeks already.

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I made my way down to the Rec Centre early anticipating that light showers and cold wind would clear up and make way for the hot dry day that had been forecast. I was met at the gates by [a local elder] who was checking every vehicle for alcohol. As I pulled up at the basketball courts under the grey skies, teams were warming up for the first game and buses and cars edged the complex. Inside, team managers were signing their codes of conduct and familiarising themselves with the fixtures. The first game kicked off under a sheet of light rain and some time-tabling confusion ... By the afternoon, I had become increasingly aware of my status as an outsider. I chatted here and there with some of the friends and acquaintances I have made in my time here, but clearly, I was not part of the family. Although people had gathered here from far flung parts of the State, most seemed related. The closeness of the connection seemed irrelevant to the closeness of the bond. It felt like a home-coming or a family reunion. People came from the Western Desert, Perth and Meekatharra to form one team made up almost entirely of relatives. I watched as little children were fussed over and handed from Aunty to Aunty and although in most cases I at least knew of the people, I had not been aware of the connection. As the rain poured down, many spectators remained in their cars, windscreen wipers on and hand ready on the headlights of horn for when their team scored. Cars became shelters where family and friends gathered. It is difficult to describe the sense of family and community that was almost tangible there ... In the evening I headed to the hall where the organised evenings entertainment was set to take place. Walking down the Main St I noticed that the pool table had been packed up for the weekend in one pub and the Woolworths Liquor store had a sign on the door saying that this weekend, no full strength beer, spirits or wine would be sold. Liquor stores in Cue and Mt Magnet had also been closed. Only a few people had in fact gathered at the hall. Presumably most had gathered together with family or friends.

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... It had rained and thunder-stormed intensely all night and as I made my way down to the basketball court in the morning I expected that the tournament might have to be called off. It wasn't. There were more rain delays and less spectators but the tournament proceeded. Again I watched as family laughed and talked and hugged and played. There was a deep sense of belonging that I

was not connected to and would probably never be able to fully appreciate or understand ... At one point, sitting beside an acquaintance looking down at the courts full of players, spectators and officials, I asked her if she had family here this weekend. She turned to me with a quizzical look and then returned her gaze to the games in progress nodding slightly and saying 'all them mob down there.' Silly question ... The tournament ran over time because of all the rain delays and some teams only began their trips home late in the evening meaning they would drive most of the night and be home by Monday morning. Others stayed in town overnight and some people remained in town for longer.

Like practices of visiting, attending funerals, and gathering together for various celebrations, attending the Meeka Muster was a practice of reinforcing spaces of security and belonging within family networks, as well as an expression of their existence.

7.2.2 Safety Nets: Shaping the Bounds of Spatial Mobility

And that's the only way I've ever known people to travel. You know, known my family to travel. We always had someone at the end of this journey. We wouldn't go off into nowhere (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).

In addition to being a primary facilitator of Aboriginal mobilities, family networks also play a significant role in determining the spatial bounds within which most Aboriginal movements take place. Chapter Three alluded to this relationship between family networks and the spatial dimensions of Aboriginal mobility practices. Mobility networks, whether defined as beats, runs, or lines, are all predicated principally upon connections to kin. The extent of family associations defines the network and therefore determines the region within which spontaneous mobilities may safely and willingly take place. It is therefore instructive and elucidating to build upon the foundational discussion of mobility regions established in Chapter Three by drawing out the nuanced and dynamic ways in which familial associations shape these regions. The following discussion reflects upon the ways in which mobility networks are and have been fashioned by historical policies, contemporary aspirations, and family dynamics.

7.2.2.1 Historical Policies

Family networks for Aboriginal people have been adapted and in most cases significantly spatially expanded from their traditional structure as a result of a

number of historical forces and individual Aboriginal aspirations. Chapter Five described how protectionist policies and the practice of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families dramatically altered the sources from which Aboriginal people were able to actively derive security and belonging. Many Aboriginal people were alienated from their country and kin and forced into new 'artificial' communities of people with whom they may otherwise have never interacted. In addition, many of these displaced children were later sent out from the institutions which had been their homes for many years, to work on country which was not their own. They were forced to establish new spaces of belonging and security. The result was that family networks are now far more expansive than they would traditionally have been:

You see increased transiency related to funerals and that can be tracked back to what's called the Stolen Generation because as a lot of people were moved from stations and that when voting rights came in, and they ended up down on Moore River Reserve and places like that, that actually, because those people all lived together, they actually became family. So in fact, you ended up with significant numbers of displaced people who then had to take on the role of family members. So you might have had for instance at Moore River, you had Pilbara people mixing in with Murchison people who traditionally would not have mixed at all. They would have moved in their small cultural area. But because of that they were all moved together, then it actually expanded the areas over which it was then seen as required to attend - like if a funeral happened or something. So there's really a strong requirement on Aboriginal people to attend. So in fact, they are travelling much greater distances than what they would have traditionally. And you know, today, it's just 'Well, that's what we have to do because they're our family.' You know some of the things that have happened to them in the past have affected their ability (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).

In settlements such as Moore River, people became family to each other in difficult circumstances, forging bonds that were not necessarily linked by associations to country. The above excerpt focuses on the ways in which historical policies expanded contemporary obligations associated with funeral attendance. Previous sections have established, however, that these widely spread networks are called upon for a variety of additional reasons. The geographical extent of these outstretched family networks can be considerable. Indeed, these expansive webs of connectedness are one of the primary attributes for which Aboriginal mobilities are

often constructed within service provision frameworks as problematic. If Australia, or even Western Australia, was closer in size to Great Britain, for example, then the frequent movement between even the furthest possible extensions of family associations would present far fewer logistical challenges for service providers. However, as a result of the impacts of government policy, some Aboriginal people in Meekatharra now have family as far North as Wyndham, as far south as Esperance, and as far east as Wingellina (see Figure 3.1).

7.2.2.2 Contemporary Aspirations

Historical government policy is not the only factor that shapes the bounds of family networks in Yamatji country. As Chapters Four and Five noted, the pursuit of employment opportunities or access to a more comprehensive range of health services and education opportunities has sometimes required individuals or families to relocate to larger urban centres where they may have tenuous family connections. Movement to these places then extends the mobility network of their family members. The long-term migration to a larger centre of one family member or unit may have the effect of expanding networks or support and reciprocity for other relatives, thus enhancing their capacity for more spontaneous movements in a larger geographical setting.

7.2.2.3 Relational Dynamics

The changing nature of family structures also has a significant impact on the geographical extent of kinship networks and the consequent spatial limits of mobility practices for Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. The traditional kinship systems and marriage customs in the region have deteriorated dramatically since colonisation began (Fink, 1960). However, many Aboriginal people retain a detailed knowledge of their relatedness to extended family. Even in townships with large Aboriginal populations, such as Meekatharra, local community members possess a comprehensive understanding of their degree of relatedness, often dating back several generations. Since many closely related family groups often live in the same town, finding an appropriate partner usually involves searching further outside of the local area. Once these partnerships are forged, new familial associations and obligations are established. One partner may therefore have to permanently leave (or spend considerable amounts of time away from) their family and community in order to be with their partner. These arrangements can unsettle established networks of

belonging and security and increase mobilities as partners negotiate their mutual responsibilities and desires to 'be around family'⁸⁵:

I know ... of a young couple, I used to work with her, she actually got with this young guy, he's a Noongar boy. And she'd been [in Geraldton] all her life with her family (she's Daddy's girl) beautiful girl and all of a sudden she just said 'I'm going to Perth to work and live.' And Dad nearly died and I think Mum did too. So they moved to Perth and they set up a flat there. And in between Perth they'd come to Geraldton and then they'd go down to Narrogin. So she moved away from her safe environment so that he could be closer to his family. But after a couple of years because he's spending so much time, because Narrogin is just there not far from Perth ... she came back and just said to him 'you either come or you stay.' And he stayed there for a little while and then he realised he missed her and he came back because she was pregnant at the time as well. And now they've set up house here. I'm not sure if there'll ever be a day where they move down to Narrogin or back to Perth, I have no idea. But it depends on the situation and what it calls for (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

In determining where they live and for how long, couples from different areas may also have to contend with issues of acceptance:

But I know if a person from Mt Magnet should get into a de facto relationship with a person from Cue, it will most probably be allowed. But if you get into a de facto relationship with someone from a completely different place, it's going to depend where you're going to live, which group is going to accept you. They are extremely reliant on acceptance of people around them. And that sort of dictates where they live (Dr Jac de Bruyn, 14 September 2004).

In a number of instances, in-laws may move to live in the town where their son or daughter has settled with their new partner. Sometimes though, this can cause friction which may eventually lead to those in-laws leaving. In other cases, the strain of disconnection from family for one partner and the considerable amount of time spent travelling between the two family groups can lead to the breakdown of the relationship:

⁸⁵ Musharbash (2003) made similar observations of the Aboriginal population at Yuendumu in the Northern Territory. She noted, for example, that the break down of traditional marriage structures is both a cause and effect of increased residential mobility.

He wanted to be around his family too, and I wanted to be around mine so, that didn't work. It didn't work out because you either got to go with one or the other. Alright if I married a neighbouring tribe, or someone from this town. Like I'm right now, I'm with a neighbouring tribe so I'm right. I don't have to travel too far, the family's all around us here (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

Each of these scenarios illustrates the ways in which relational dynamics create and shape family networks of belonging, and inform mobility practices. They also suggest that the very existence of family networks can simultaneously serve to both reaffirm spaces of belonging for some and exclusion for others.

7.2.2.4 Demarcating Network Limits

In part, kinship networks define mobility limitations because family know that within these networks, they will be accepted and looked after. Beyond them, however, the same hospitality and security may not, and in some cases definitely does not exist. Being reliant on the acceptance of others within family networks is actually indicative of a kind of parochialism which simultaneously characterises and demarcates Aboriginal spheres of belonging. Within the fieldwork region, there is a sense of territorial protectiveness over spaces, either physical or relational, which particular Aboriginal people perceive to be their sphere of belonging. It is precisely because family networks generate a sense of ownership that those who exist outside of these 'territories' can feel excluded or shunned:

DR: I think it all goes back to when there were different skin groups and tribes and this was your area, this was where you belonged, this was where you stayed. You can't override those boundaries. You can through invitation. I mean we get quite upset if people come and live in our town who actually have got no family connections. 'Why are you coming up here.' It's all about ownership. And having family connections. If you haven't got any, why the hell are you coming up here?

SP: Are there a lot of people that seem to do that?

DR: You get your odd ones now and again. But you find they don't stay too long because of that family connection. If they haven't got the support, and they keep on going home to visit family, they end up moving back in the long run anyway. So you might get them stay 6 months, 12 months, 'nah, we're out of here.' Or if say if three or four of them came up for a different change or a different lifestyle or for work, and then one goes back, well you'll find the others will follow. So I

think it's all got to do with family and blood ties, is why the movement is (Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004).

This interview excerpt highlights the significance of family ties in defining spaces of belonging, or ownership. Here, social structures serve to influence peoples' mobility practices, constricting or expanding them accordingly.

The preceding analysis suggests that family is paramount in both procuring and cultivating spaces of belonging and security for Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region. Recent research in the Canadian context suggests that perhaps frequent aboriginal mobilities between reserves and cities are detrimental to community cohesion, and produce social isolation (Norris and Clatworthy, 2003, 2006). In Yamatji country however, acts of mobility are often acts of social and cultural maintenance. Many spontaneous movements are facilitated by the existence of family networks of reciprocity and care, and in a cyclical fashion, are perpetuated by the need or desire to maintain these networks. In this sense, by reinforcing spaces of belonging and security, mobilities serve paradoxically as a practice of 'putting down roots.' Additionally, because these networks are often central sources from which security and belonging are derived, they are also chiefly responsible for defining and shaping the spatial bounds of Aboriginal mobilities in the region. Consequently, mobility regions change and develop as family networks are negotiated and developed according to a number of historical and contemporary circumstances and conditions.

7.3 Troubled Mobilities: Contesting Belonging

One of the central themes of this thesis is that contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices are chiefly expressions of the procurement, cultivation and contestation of security and belonging. Thus far, discussion has emphasised the ways in which security and belonging are procured and cultivated, whether that be through employment status, access to mainstream services, family structures, or some combination of these. Previous discussion has also discursively identified some of the ways in which security and belonging are contested by Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region; through fractious interactions with mainstream services, passive relationships to the mainstream economy, and territorial protectiveness. Perhaps the most prominent way in which belonging and security are contested, however, is

through conflict within family structures. So, whilst Aboriginal mobilities are chiefly prompted by a need and desire to cultivate and safeguard crucial family networks, they can also be a response to conflicts arising from within those networks. Indeed many specific movements affect both modalities.

7.3.1 Feuding and Domestic Violence

Almost as frequently as they mentioned 'family' as being a primary motivator of Aboriginal mobilities, interviewees described feuding and domestic violence as contributing significantly to Aboriginal itinerancy in the region. The collective nature of contemporary Aboriginal socio-cultural norms and their practical expression can actually produce a number of 'troubled mobilities.' A common scenario of this ilk is for two or more family groups (which may consist of a number of extended family members) in a particular town, to begin a feud over a particular event or issue. The feud culminates in one family eventually leaving or being driven out of town, and seeking refuge in a nearby town. When an appropriate period of time has passed, be that several months or several years, that family may return to the town. In 2004/2005, several families from Mt Magnet were living in Meekatharra having escaped feuds⁸⁶. This relocation caused its own set of grievances in Meekatharra, particularly amongst the non-Aboriginal population who believed that the arrival of these families had coincided with increased incidents of crime and unrest in Meekatharra.

Two explanations were proposed by separate interviewees about what triggers feuding. The first was that large gatherings and the overcrowded conditions they produce create an environment which is particularly susceptible to the eruption of simmering tensions.

... when they do go from A to B, they've got to live somewhere, and they normally live with relations. And I've spoken to a lot of Aboriginal people about this, they will never refuse like someone to stay with them, but they do understand that it puts a lot of pressure on that particular family, and they normally end up with a bloody big blue ... Or conflict is probably a better word. Because of, oh I don't know, it's probably a cultural thing too but (?) there's this overcrowding, too much alcohol, old scores to settle. I just think that a lot of Aboriginal people do carry a lot of

⁸⁶ Incidents of family feuding seemed to be portrayed as more common in Cue and Magnet than in Meekatharra.

grudges between each other, and this is within family too sometimes. And that's why the authorities get very concerned when a funeral does happen and they expect a fairly large influx of people. Their main concern is the after the funeral, especially if there's alcohol involved. Some of these feudings and whatever that date right back, and this is what happens, they just sort of mix it up. So that does cause huge problems as I see it within the family structure. Most of the arguments or whatever that you've probably heard around town at night are caused by that. You'll find it's caused by an influx of people that arrive and overstay and the next minute there's a barney (Meekatharra Shire CEO, 19 August 2004).

At funeral times, large numbers of extended family are in such close proximity for prolonged periods of time. These ceremonial periods were consequently specifically identified by several interviewees as catalysts of feuding and fighting. One interviewee described a situation where several people he knew had travelled from Derby, Kununurra and Geraldton to attend a funeral in Mt Magnet. Although the funeral was in Mt Magnet, the group planned to stay in Meekatharra because they knew there would be too much fighting in Mt Magnet. In an ironic paradox, mobilities motivated by feuding can be a consequence of practices which are intended to shore-up and strengthen important family and social networks.

The second explanation offered for why feuds arise was that there are presently a greater number of extended family networks living in community with one another than was the case before colonisation. These family networks tend to band together and defend their rights to govern their family matters autonomously. Therefore, small conflicts between two or three people quickly escalate into large family conflicts because of the sheer number of extended family members living in close proximity. In smaller communities, such conflicts quickly dissipate because there simply aren't the numbers of people to support large-scale fighting. Michelle Riley offers a concrete example to illustrate her point:

MR: Like, in Meeka, when you drink in Meeka, sit down and have a drink when there's a party, you get everyone walking in wanting to join the party and you can't be nasty and say 'no, na, nah.' So you always get a few bad apples amongst any party. That's when the fighting starts. So they smashing and it becomes a big family feud so then it becomes bigger and the whole family's involved in town. Whereas at home, on the community, they have a drink,

they're not worried about 'oh, who's going to walk in the door. And, who's going to say what' or anything like that. They're not worried that they going to get chipped(?). They just have their drinks and do their music and go to bed. If they do have a fight, they'll have a fight and get up the next morning and it's forgotten about. It's not a big family thing because it's just between two brothers or two cousins ... It's not that there aren't enough people for it to become a big thing, it's just that there aren't any other families there for it to become a different family feud. It's just all family there it's not: you've got this person from down there living here or living there. And like a lot of communities they have, naturally you're going to have your in-laws. They marry into other families and whatever. But the in-laws, they tend to take their families back to the communities and that's where you get that family fights see. Because you've got two different tribal families in that one community. And that's when it clashes ...

SP: And is that part of the problem you see here in town? Is that there's families from other places that aren't from here that are -

MR: Yeh, that come and then. Like the locals, they go out, they enjoying themselves, some people come from other places, they come, they get smart, carry one, they get a hiding, so they ring their families up from other towns bring them all here (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

In such cases as the one described above, feuding actually draws family from other places, even from towns considerable distances away. In Meekatharra one such incident took place in early November 2004. The Sunday Times Newspaper reported that 300 Aboriginal people had been involved in a feud in Meekatharra which began on the main street and continued later on the town's reserve (The Sunday Times, 2004). Although the reported magnitude of the brawl was certainly disputed by local town residents, the feud had begun as a family matter within the town, and relatives from Cue had driven to Meekatharra to become involved. These sorts of feuds seem to develop on a cyclical basis. There may be a period of intense feuding for several months within and perhaps between towns. The fighting then subsides for months, or even years, before beginning again.

Incidents of domestic violence also prompt circular mobilities where victims (usually female) will flee the situation for a period of time, perhaps seeking refuge with family members in another town or community, and then return later. Domestic violence not only impacts the mobility behaviours of those directly involved in it but

has a flow-on effect. One interviewee described the impact of her experience of domestic violence on her living arrangements:

I knew I was Aboriginal, I knew we were Aboriginal, but this is where the alcohol came into it. Into our communities, and it's still killing our people today and drugs. Sitting outside the pub on a Friday night, me and these two other kids with our Coke and pie. And the entertainment was watching the drunks come in and out of the pub. One time it come home and it became too personal because it was at home, and it frightened me. So I rang my Dad and Mum in Carnarvon and I said 'Dad, I'll meet you in Meekatharra can you come and pick me up?' It really scared me because I'd never seen that. In the 24 years that my Mum and Dad were married, before they'd split up, I never saw my Dad hit my Mum or vice versa. So that really frightened me. So Dad did the right thing, came and picked up his baby daughter, or his big girl (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

7.3.2 Troubled Existences

The often public nature of 'troubled mobilities' is such that highly mobile Aboriginal people are commonly viewed by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as being motivated primarily by some sort of troubled existence (see also Chapter Three section 3.4.4). Their inability to settle in one place can be perceived as a product of refusal to take responsibility for personal problems by continually creating trouble and then running from it: a cycle of conflict. One interviewee believed that perhaps these conflicts actually formed part of a greater chaotic existence which was deliberately cultivated in order to counter a potentially bored existence:

Their lives are rather chaotic really compared to the lives of, well, if I take myself. I've got an extremely settled life compared to most of the Aboriginal people I know. Even people who live settled lives with jobs and all that, they even, they always talk about going somewhere else. After a little while they want to move on. Even if they don't do it. It seems to be something that, they get bored. I think Aboriginal people they love excitement. We all love excitement I suppose [laughs] but they seem to crave, they seem to really go for it and be really motivated to, or maybe a boring existence is maybe something that they suffer from more. Maybe it's wrong. Maybe it's just my European view on it all. But that's what it looks like anyway – that they can't stand boredom and things being the same. Things have to move. Things have to – the social and physical environment has to change every now and then ... part of it is because their life in the town, where they live

somewhere is very chaotic with illnesses, with people moving in, people moving out, break-ins, people going to jail, fights, all the - forever stories about how their lives are being screwed up [pause] by things that happen and towards things that happen to them all the time (Jan van de Schaar, July 2004).

Certainly, as Hamilton (1987) noted, an integral component of contemporary mobility practices amongst Aboriginal people who place great significance on their socio-cultural position, is the desire and ability to move away from conflict when it arises and return when it has subsided. When difficult or stressful situations arise, a common coping mechanism is to call upon family networks of support in other places. Moving away from stressful or painful situations provides some relief and refuge from those circumstances whilst remaining within the familiarity of family support. This strategy of movement as a coping mechanism is exemplified in a number of stories of women who experienced relationship breakdowns, unexpected pregnancies or domestic violence (see for example Deborah's first Visiting Yarn – Box 7.1). Here, mobility is a tangible expression of a desire to distance oneself from emotional pain and stress:

But those two moves, to Perth and Darwin, they were between my divorce, and splitting, and I think I was just going as far away as I could get. They weren't planned, I just ran away. And I think that's part of it for other people too. There's just a lot of emotional and personal stuff involved in why people move (Anonymous Interviewee 7, 8 December 2004).

If movement around visiting, funerals and special events can be conceptualised primarily as a process of the procurement and cultivation of belonging by the strengthening family networks and social structures, then perhaps movement around 'troubled mobilities' is best conceptualised as contestation within and over those spaces of belonging. Feuds for example may be triggered by a number of different issues but they represent a contestation of rights and status within social structures and spaces of belonging. Experiences of 'trouble' within family networks are indicative of the contestation which both identifies these social structures as sources of security and belonging, and results from their cultivation and maintenance.

7.4 Family Obligations: Restricting Mobility

In addition to facilitating and motivating mobilities, family can also constrain both long-term migrations and short-term mobilities. For example, many Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region with sick or elderly parents feel obligated to be near to their parents and look after them, wherever they may be. This obligation usually falls on the eldest children or those with the greatest capacity to support their parents:

I think like when it all falls down to the crunch, your family is here. When you got a mum and dad and they're old, you don't move. You stay. Someone's got to look after them. As a rule, as a big rule, they don't just say 'oh, you worked all your life, you've got a pension or super or whatever. Get yourself into a nursing home.' That sort of thing doesn't really happen. It's the next whose-ever capable of doing it do it ... I stay here now because my Mum and Dad's still here. And I mean, there's my sister lives here, and a brother, but the brother's wife works and my sister's a single parent, and because I've got a de facto husband, I'm the next one who's in line to do it because I've got someone to support me. My sister got to work and she travels away a lot so she's never home. So someone has to do it (Anonymous Interviewee 12, 1 March 2005).

For some, caring for family may outweigh their own personal aspirations. It may mean moving from a place in which they may have settled and perhaps leaving their job. For others it may mean staying in a place they might otherwise leave. These obligations towards family, particularly those who are or will soon be in need of care, are a product of intergenerational socialisation: those who remained near to their elderly parents are generally the same people whose children remain near to them in old age. But, as Auntie Mavis Curley explains, the notion of 'need' is relative, multi-directional with regard to age and the provision of care, and powerfully prescriptive in relation to mobility and belonging:

MC: ... sort of got me back to thinking 'well why don't you do something you enjoy' which is wandering off. If I had no need to stay. Like now, one time it was my mother. I needed to stay near my mother. Or the kids and mum were close. So, and Albert was close to his mother. And he had brothers and sisters here so we stayed close to the family. Now all those older ones we don't care about anymore. Now the grandkids have come along now you know. So they stop you going again ... you go away and 'hope they're being looked after' and 'what if they miss me' 'will they forget me?' ... So I think you feel that you should hang around family... And that is the

main thing that has sort of kept me in one place, or coming back to one place. It's family. Where the family is. Or where they call home. You know, even if they're wanderers and they're gonna come back here some time, well you end up back here. That's one of them. I think that's a big one. Where you feel comfortable. I don't know about these people who go off and live ... My father's half-brother actually went off and he lived up in Halls Creek. In all my years that I – I knew about him, I knew where he was. He was up there. But didn't meet him until [my daughter] was at school I think. She was at school when he turned up for a visit. He came down for a visit and met everybody, went back and died ... So I don't know what makes people do that; travel away and stay away. I couldn't ... I'd always want to come back. I'd always need to see where my family was. I couldn't go off and leave ...

SP: *So if all your family were to say move to Fitzroy Crossing [see Figure 3.1] would you - would it be then that that would be where you would call home?*

MC: *That's where I'd visit them ... Because this is home by now. This is the home base so that – I wouldn't 'right, they've gone to Fitzroy Crossing so (?) me hanging around here I've got no family so I'll go to live in Albany.' I wouldn't do that. Because if they decide to come looking for me, how do they know where I'm at. That sort of thing. You feel that little sort of something that you need to be needed, or you need to be there in case you're needed. So, I think that's why Mum stayed around so long. But I don't think I'd move. I might move to Cue or Sandstone or somewhere but not some way away distance. Like the – Elaine was talking about shifting to Geraldton because the kids was gonna go to school and whatever. And I said 'Well that's fair enough. We'll have somewhere to stay when we come down.' That was my thought on it. You know. Not 'Oh no we've got to move to Geraldton.' It was just a 'That's convenient. Be nice to go there and visit and walk out again.' So yeh, Meekatharra is home I think ... And if I go away for too long, people might forget me [chuckles] (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).*

In a sense, although family obligations restrict mobility practices, they are in fact wonderfully reflective of the collective nature of socio-cultural norms which do support highly transient lifestyles. In addition, restricted movement, particularly when it might not be the first choice of the individuals involved, points to the high priority which family takes in Aboriginal lifestyle choices within the region.

7.5 Contingency within Family Networks

Chapter Three established the notions of spontaneity and unpredictable durations as characteristics of most 'transient' Aboriginal mobilities within the fieldwork region.

Chapter Four described some of the ways in which these characteristics were 'disruptive' of service delivery models, often making continuity difficult and causing resource wastage. In engaging with these concepts of spontaneity and temporal variation further, this chapter has thus far established that the spontaneity is enabled by the application of socio-cultural norms of collective responsibility within family networks:

You just go along. You always get a bed and a feed somewhere. It's not that you've got to sit down with a travel agent and make all these plans and bookings and pay upfront. You just go with what you've got (Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004).

Relationships to family also play a central role in understanding the often unpredictable duration of the mobilities of the more transient portion of the Aboriginal population in the fieldwork region. Speaking of some friends who had travelled to the region from the Kimberley for a funeral, one interviewee explained:

But these people will most probably stay for another three to four weeks after the funeral. Month, two months, could be six months, seven months, then they'll just take off again. There's no set pattern or set - see Aboriginal people, to my way of thinking travel to family. Or away from family. They don't travel to a house or a location. A house is just a house. A house is a shelter. And the people themselves will just - yeh, they want to go and see cousin so-and-so, so they get on a bus or they hitch a ride, and that can be over night. Just gone like the wind. It's amazing. Wish I could do it. At times [chuckles] Think we all wish we could do it at times (Environmental Health Officer Bill Atyeo, 10 September 2004).

This chapter has demonstrated that for many Aboriginal people, particularly those who live on the fringes of mainstream society, family is the primary source from which security and belonging are derived. Mobility practices are therefore substantially determined by relationships to and within family structures. The inherent variability which characterises frequent, circular mobilities can then best be conceptualised as a product of the contingent and fluid nature of familial associations. Unlike fixed employment contracts, family circumstances and considerations change continually. Family crises occur without pattern and sometimes without warning. They cannot be planned for. Relationships cannot be charted. They are circumstantially based and when they constitute the primary basis

upon which mobilities take place, spatial practices reflect these characteristics. Adapting to circumstances that arise within the social sphere of family networks is a key component of Aboriginal mobilities. It is therefore not uncommon for Aboriginal people in the region to set out on a trip with a particular aim, only for those plans to change as they adapt to circumstances and events that unfold along the way:

Sometimes it's just a generally nature of 'look I've run out of money and I've got to go to Geraldton to organise my social security.' And they might stay here for a couple of months. They might stop at someone's place at Yalgoo on the way through and stay there for a month or so. It really does depend (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).

There maybe someone that's - say if they went to Carnarvon to do some shopping, they rock up there and there's someone there they haven't seen for a couple of years so they decide to stay for the weekend and maybe Monday Tuesday. So there's a lot of social stuff happening (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 14 September 2004).

When family and social considerations dominate life's agenda, mobility practices are not predictable and therefore cannot necessarily be planned for within service provision models. For precisely this reason, the thesis has intentionally avoided the terminology 'Aboriginal mobility patterns.' One of the underlying themes throughout the dissertation is that because Aboriginal mobility practices are diverse and often contingent, determining 'patterns' of movement is probably an elusive, if not futile, task.

Clearly both variability and spontaneity in Aboriginal mobilities are assisted by a number of factors including a passive engagement with the mainstream economy, a lack of investment in fixed assets such as a house, and the ability to receive social welfare payments in any location. However, whilst these factors assist the spontaneity and variability of short-term Aboriginal mobilities they are not the cause or the motivation. Rather they bespeak an alternative source from which security and belonging iteratively derived and through which the nature of mobilities is determined: family.

7.6 Family and Belonging in the Mainstream

CAE: I have a house, I work, my lifestyle, my way of living is totally different to I guess to some of our family that are in remote communities. We still have some family members that live or prefer to live in humpies or little tents so I guess in that way meaning contemporary I have, as I said, I work and I have access to technology, to what's available to us in today's society compared to what would have been available in the old soci- traditional ways. We still go out kangaroo shooting, hunting, camping. My partner's Mum speaks fluent language from where she's from and I think it's Wongi or Wanmalla from Wiluna, I think it's Wongi. And he has a Grandmother and Great-Grandmother who also speak that language quite fluently. So we still have that connection to language and country but we know, like I can share it with people in here but I know when I come back in to Geraldton, I've got work, and I've got my relationships with people at other departments and -. I think it would be a bit scary if I walked around with nothing on, that traditional way [chuckling].

SP: In the office?

CAE: Yeh [laughter] (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

Many Aboriginal people who have more passive or contested relationships with mainstream social and economic institutions engage in frequent, short-term and spontaneous mobilities because of both a lack of 'anchors' to a particular locale, and dependence on family networks which both facilitate and command such mobilities. This is not to say however that family only informs the spatial practices of those who have tenuous associations with the mainstream economy or government services.

Whilst family may take on a different role for those who derive some form of security and/or belonging from their employment status or access to mainstream services, it is not inconsequential and should not be underestimated. Family remains instructive, albeit often more subtly, in the spatial decision making of those who do actively engage with mainstream institutions. This influence is evident in at least two ways. First, even Aboriginal migrations which are more long-term and employment oriented are often predicated upon the extent of kinship networks. Second, the significance of family for those actively engage in mainstream employment is evident in the negotiation between their social and cultural obligations, and individual aspirations.

7.6.1 Selective Engagement

Many Aboriginal research participants who were employed within the mainstream economy described only pursuing employment opportunities in places where they had family:

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. It wasn't chosen because of work. I had to go where I felt safe and had support. And as that was the towns I went to where my family was. (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

In this example, Michelle describes her desire to pursue opportunities beyond what had been available in Meekatharra. However, as the quotation suggests, she only pursued employment in places where she had family. Having family connections promised a kind of safety and support that no job could. Other interviewees described making similarly difficult decisions to leave their home communities, and the important role that extended family members played in easing their transition to new places:

Uprooting your family after being there 11 years, and a comfort zone. You know, you're quite happy with what you're doing. You've got that structure; get up, go to work, do this, do this. You knew what was around you. You knew who to go to for advice or resources. Then all of a sudden, made the decision to come and live in Geraldton. I knew a few people here, like all the other Aboriginal Education Workers, and I had some family members here. One of my Mum's sisters was living here. So I had support here. But it's a huge step (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

Another interviewee described the tendency of Aboriginal people from Meekatharra to pursue opportunities in Geraldton in preference to Perth because Geraldton is more like a 'side-kick'⁸⁷ than Perth. It is closer to home, and there are many familial links there. Whilst some Aboriginal mobility choices may be seemingly dictated by a desire to pursue employment opportunities, they are often ultimately still informed by associations with family and the networks or security and support which they provide.

⁸⁷ The specific words of interviewee Annette Alison, 25 October 2004.

7.6.2 Balancing Obligations and Aspirations

Nowhere is the relationship between family and security and belonging more evident for those whose spatial practices are significantly dictated by the restrictions of their employment situations, than in their struggles and strategies to uphold a balance between maintaining and cultivating their familial structures and networks within their professional contexts.

7.6.2.1 Humbugging

Some Aboriginal people who are actively engaged in the mainstream economy experience difficulties within their family context as they navigate their position in relation to the broader socio-cultural norms of collective responsibility. Several interviewees described a culture of 'humbugging' where family members in positions of income generation were 'dragged down' or expected to share a greater portion of their capital with their families. For some interviewees therefore, the procurement and cultivation of security and belonging also involves some contestation regarding expectations about the nature of their familial obligations. These contestations are invariably the product of internal negotiations between individual and collective orientations:

One of the big issues when I got this job was – we had counselling sessions: “Deb, you are going back to work in your home town where you have got family, extended family. You are going to be working, you are going to be pulling in an income. How are you going to deal with the financial side of things? Are you going to be able to say ‘no’ to your aunty, ‘no’ to your cousin, when they ask you for twenty dollars?” We had all that counselling because Aboriginal cultures share. What I’ve got belongs to my family. And that’s still in us. The sharing is still in us. But, I’ve been conditioned to the point where I’m getting materialistic. Dollars mean things to me. And if I’ve got spare, yes, I will share. But that was the big thing with going back into the workforce. ‘Oh, you’re working, you make enough money.’ They have got no concept of the amount that you’re making, just the fact that you’re working brings in an income. So therefore you should share it with everybody (Deborah Robinson, 9 September 2004).

For some Aboriginal people, the tension between fulfilling familial obligations and negotiating a position within the mainstream economy can cause considerable strain and may cause them to leave their communities as a means of alleviating the pressure. Interviewee Annette Alison explains:

AA: ... Like they're all connected all the time and they – blackfellas you have – they very family orientated and if – it's hard to pull away from it, because if you do, the rest will pull you down. Like they'll pull you back. Like if you do well, a blackfella will pull you back down. And they don't want you to do well. But you've got to break that link to do better.

SP: Break that link with your family?

AA: Yeh, where you've gotta say well 'no I don't want to be' – because it's like 'well what's yours is mine and what's mine is yours' but if you want to better yourself in living, you've got to get away from that. Like break the link and go off and be independent. Not better, but if you want to have things for yourself you know what I mean?

SP: So it's almost like you've got to sacrifice that family connection to do other things?

AA: Yeh. Whether it's better yourself or do whatever ... they're seeing there's a different world out there. But they'll always come home for funerals or celebrations or whatever. But they've moved on (Annette Alison, 25 October 2004).

Here, Annette suggests that in order to have a sense of independence, Aboriginal people often have to break the link with their family members and physically relocate to another place where they can further pursue opportunities for themselves.

For some people the obligations of hospitality, whilst understood and practiced, are burdensome and inconvenient. In the above interview excerpt, Annette describes this same collective mentality as mitigating against a sense of individual autonomy. In cases where Aboriginal people wish to pursue individual opportunities, they may resort to physical separation from those obligations. Even in these circumstances where the 'links' are broken however, there remains the sense of a struggle between negotiating security and belonging through a number of sources, including family.

7.6.2.2 Maintaining Family Networks

It would be misrepresentative to construct obligations to family as wholly oppositional to individual aspirations. Whilst many Aboriginal people in the region seek employment opportunities within the mainstream and are becoming more upwardly mobile, their cultural beacon still points them toward family (see also Gale, 1981). Therefore, although work opportunities may cause them to be more physically distant from their family networks, they engage in strategic mobilities to maintain their family networks.

Frequent, short-term and spontaneous mobilities are undoubtedly embarked upon with greater ease and frequency by those who are not restricted by shackles of mainstream employment. However, the significance of family, even for those engaged in full time employment, is exemplified by intentional adaptations of socio-cultural expression around the demands of mainstream work schedules. Weekends become moments of cultural and social cultivation and maintenance:

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...*

SP: Do you move around as much as you'd like to? Work for you is a restriction?

DR: *Work is a restriction for me. That's why I enjoy these little trips away. It breaks the monotony and boredom. And it can get that way sometimes.*

SP: I remember one time we were talking and you said to me: I don't mind work, but sometimes you just gotta go walkabout.

DR: *Oh yeh. That's when we need to fit that in on the weekends. You know, just go bush and camp (Deborah Robinson, 9 September 2004).*

In this interview excerpt, Deborah describes her paradoxically deliberate scheduling of 'walkabout' or wandering – time spent in the bush or visiting family. Like their parents before them, many Aboriginal interviewees who were employed discussed their conscious efforts to use holidays and weekends to visit with relatives in other places. As Annette suggests above, even people who have 'moved on' still return to their home communities for specific occasions such as funerals and celebrations. For some people, the desire to remain connected to family can place considerable strain on their jobs and hinder professional progression:

So you're whacking the weeks out of your work environment. Being away, because of funerals and family commitments; you're coming back for them all the time. You weren't getting anywhere (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

In many cases however, the importance of fostering these familial connections outweighs the pressures that such mobilities cause. Through mobilities such as these, family networks are maintained in the midst of other obligations. Moments of

intentional familial reconnection become part of the broader process of remaining 'around family' even when physically separated from those networks.

7.7 Conclusion

Family serves as a central source of security and belonging for many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country today. It is consequently a central consideration that undergirds their spatial practice. Networks of extended family members facilitate and command frequent, spontaneous and temporally unpredictable mobilities, particular for those who draw upon them as a primary source of support, and economic and social security. These networks also shape the geographical limits of mobility practices of many Aboriginal people. Within them, there is a normalised expectation of reciprocal exchange, and beyond them there is uncertainty. Relationships within and between family structures also include and produce considerable contestation as individuals and extended family members explore and establish, distinguish and test their social identity and cultural belonging. These contestations also prompt 'troubled mobilities.'

Family networks do not have the singular dimension, however, of only being significant to Aboriginal people who have less conformative relationships with the conventions of mainstream society. Relationships to family also serve as important sources of security and belonging for Aboriginal people who actively engage with the mainstream economy and/or place a high priority on access to basic government services such as health, housing and education. In other words, family and employment or mainstream engagement, can not be constructed as oppositional sources from which proportionate amounts of security and belonging are derived.

Certainly those who are actively engaged in the mainstream economy have the potential to draw significant security from these interactions and therefore become less dependent on family as a mechanism of economic security. And, their role within the mainstream workforce can serve to restrict their capacity for frequent mobility. In the reverse context, those who have a less active relationship with mainstream institutions may derive greater security from family networks. Their mobility practices may be considerably more frequent as a result of a need and desire to maintain those networks, and a freedom from the restrictions of conventional employment arrangements. However, no singular, uniform cultural identity exists

amongst Aboriginal people in the region. Mobility decisions are an expression of or a response to cultural values which each individual negotiates personally on the basis of their own circumstances. The significance of family networks may therefore change depending on life experiences and life stages. In general, family remains an important source of belonging and cultural identity for most Aboriginal people in Yamatji country, regardless of their employment status or degree of dependence on basic government services. Whether they serve as a source of economic and social security support, an indicator of status and standing, or a cultural beacon, family networks are deeply intertwined in the processes of procuring, contesting and cultivating security and belonging in Yamatji country. The centrality of family is reflected in the myriad forms and shapes of Aboriginal spatial practices throughout and within the region. In concluding the dissertation, the following chapter explores some of the policy challenges of delivering services to Aboriginal people within this environment of diverse spatialities.

CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSION

8.1 Experiences and Perspectives of Aboriginal Mobility

This dissertation began with the premise that Australian Aboriginal mobility processes have been poorly understood in public policy and academic discourse. In a policy context, these poor conceptualisations stemmed from colonial assumptions of ‘settled existences’ as normal and appropriate spatial practices, characteristic of civilised peoples. Underpinning the nature of co-existence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, such assumptions produced a spatial ordering where sedentarisation has been privileged and frequent movement has been rendered mysterious, irrational, or deviant. Ultimately, persistent government reinforcement of this spatial order failed to achieve the explicit policy goal of the wholesale sedentarisation and mainstream integration of Australia’s Aboriginal population. Early policy eras of Aboriginal administration entrenched a deep alienation of Aboriginal people from mainstream social and economic institutions. The resultant alienation increased the mobilisation of the Aboriginal population in an effort to ‘shore-up’ alternate sources of security and belonging. The cyclical pattern that emerges from this history of colonial interaction is one of public discourse shaping policy directions, which in turn influenced Aboriginal spatialities. These spatialities then further shaped public discourse.

The first objective of the thesis was *to examine experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal spatial practices in the case-study region of Yamatji Country, Western Australia*. In recognition of the historical cyclical relationship between discourse, policy and mobilities, this first aim was posited to explore the contemporary discourses and expressions of Aboriginal spatialities. Setting this first objective provided a direct impetus for examining not only first-hand accounts of participation in some form of mobility practice, but also perspectives informed by experiences of the effects of others’ mobility processes. The fundamental research question which this aim addressed was: how are Aboriginal mobilities constructed and expressed within Yamatji country?

The research design deliberately favoured methods that would facilitate the elicitation of perspectives of Aboriginal spatial practices borne out of direct personal experience, or fashioned through the lived experience of being affected by them in a personal or professional capacity. A qualitative analysis that focussed on the lived experience opened up a discursive space for developing a foundational understanding of the local public discourses about mobility practices. It also provided a basis for examining the full range of mobility processes that were enacted and undertaken in the fieldwork region. By deliberately avoiding placing limitations on the types of mobility processes which could become the subject of enquiry, this thesis heeded Taylor and Bell's (2004a p. 265) calls for scholarly research to begin to capture "the many forms of spatial activity that characterise Indigenous life."

8.1.1 Experiences of Aboriginal Mobilities

A diverse collection of experiences of Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country was woven into the narrative of this dissertation. Beginning in Chapter Three, Yvette's Story (Box 3.1) provided a rich testimony of the many and various forms mobility can take and the range of factors which inform and shape them. Chapter Four considered Aboriginal experiences of mobility practices which both influence and are influenced by the provision of basic services. Chapters Five and Six described some of the ways in which Aboriginal people's mobility experiences are influenced by the degree to which they engage with mainstream social and economic institutions. In Chapter Seven, the mobility experiences of Aboriginal people were framed within the context of family networks. Section 8.3 returns to the theme of experiences and expressions of Aboriginal mobilities as it summarises the framework of security and belonging through which these stories of mobility were ultimately interpreted.

8.1.2 Perspectives of Aboriginal Mobilities

Case study material presented in Chapter Three indicated that while contemporary Aboriginal mobility practices are 'read through' the public consciousness in the fieldwork region in a variety of ways, two perspectives or 'discourses' dominate. The first discourse categorised contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country as characteristic of either a 'core' or 'transient' population. According to this discourse, the 'core' are more settled. The 'transients,' by contrast, engage in frequent, spontaneous, short-term, often circular mobilities in geographical regions

largely defined by the extent of kinship networks. A second discourse that circulated locally as a lens through which mobility practices were interpreted, concerned Aboriginal 'authenticity.' This discourse constructed certain mobilities as genuinely 'Aboriginal,' some mobilities (or lack thereof) as an indication of a person's assimilation into non-Aboriginal society, and other movements as deviant, illegitimate, and ultimately, 'inauthentic.'

According to this authenticity discourse, Aboriginal spatial practices which closely mirror those of the non-Aboriginal population (i.e. either sedentarisation or long-term migrations for non-contingent reasons such as employment and education opportunities) are often perceived as an indication of a person's assimilation into mainstream non-Aboriginal society. In general, these types of movements were less frequently discussed in interviews, particularly by non-Aboriginal service providers. Chapter Three proposed two possible explanations for this thematic omission in the primary data. Interviewees may have understood these kinds of spatial practices as 'normal' and therefore of little relevance to their understanding of the research agenda. Alternatively they may not have considered such movements authentically 'Aboriginal,' thus assuming they were outside of the mandate of interview discussions. As part of an 'authenticity discourse' these perspectives of sedentary lifestyles as 'assimilated,' position authentic Aboriginal spatiality as oppositional to the notion of settlement. Essentially, they present 'settled spaces' as non-Aboriginal domains.

As part of this authenticity discourse, frequent mobilities are more genuinely 'Aboriginal' forms of spatial practices, but only those which characteristically conform to the interpreters' expectations of what is legitimately 'Aboriginal.' For some interviewees, all short-term circular mobilities, regardless of their rationale or form, were considered genuinely Aboriginal – a product of a nomadic pre-disposition and an expression of their cultural identity. For others, only those mobilities which were undertaken for 'traditional' reasons, or by 'traditional' people were deemed to be authentic. Many people in the fieldwork region who hold this latter view suggest that few of the movements amongst Aboriginal people in Yamatji country could be considered authentically 'Aboriginal.'

Underneath these two overarching, dominant discourses, public perspectives and explanations of Aboriginal itinerancy in Yamatji country are diverse and sometimes contradictory. There is a range of variously articulated and variously influential voices telling different stories which either reinforce or challenge the 'authenticity discourse.' One common explanation of itinerancy was that it reflects a higher valuation and prioritisation of fluid entities such as family than fixed or immobile possessions and commitments. Another common perception of itinerancy was that it is facilitated by a lack of ties to a specific locale and a sound knowledge of the resources available to assist transient lifestyles. Accordingly, a lack of employment or schooled-aged children translates to a freedom from commitments to any one place. Further, the automatic transaction of welfare payments into personal bank accounts, the availability of financial assistance packages at district DCD offices, and the existence of extensive and well maintained reciprocal networks of extended family members throughout the region, all support and encourage recurrent movement. A third common perspective of Aboriginal itinerancy was that it is the product of troubled existences. Interviewees frequently referred to feuding, fighting, domestic violence and financial discord as playing a significant role in informing Aboriginal mobility practices.

At one level the various explanations of itinerancy offered by interviewees reflect the complex and dynamic nature of Aboriginal mobility practices in the region. At another level, they reflect a social consciousness paralysed by the nuanced diversity of Aboriginal spatial practices and a subsequent lack of meaningful engagement which intentionally seeks to develop a more holistic framework for interpreting and understanding them.

Each of these contemporary discourses of Aboriginal mobility is problematic and incomplete. The notion of 'core' and 'transient' populations, whilst perhaps in some ways reflective of reality, establishes a siloed distinction between two types of movement, masking the range of mobilities and the permeability of such categorisations. Many Aboriginal people move fluidly between being 'core' and 'transient' at different points throughout their lives. The 'authenticity discourse' is also problematic. As well as being remarkably exclusive, it perpetuates and reinforces marginalising discourses of certain types of mobility in a paradoxically

'modern' way. And finally, whilst the range of explanations of Aboriginal transiency offered by research participants are in many cases insightful and accurate, none can singularly be used as a framework for interpreting the various Aboriginal mobility practices enacted in Yamatji country. And yet, as the following discussion suggests, a more relational, flexible and comprehensive framework for interpreting and understanding Aboriginal spatial practices is essential if services are to be delivered efficiently and justly to Aboriginal populations.

8.2 Aboriginal Spatial Practice and Service Provision

The second aim of the research was *to investigate the relationship between the provision of basic government services and Aboriginal spatial mobilities in Yamatji country.*

This aim was developed to explore the specificities of the relationship between service delivery and Aboriginal spatial practices, particularly in reference to the implications for policy development. As the introductory chapter suggested, the small existing indigenous mobility literature emphasises the significance of understanding Aboriginal mobility practices for the development of sound service delivery policies (Martin and Taylor, 1995; Memmott et al., 2004; Norris and Clatworthy, 2003; Taylor, 1996; 1998; Taylor and Bell, 2004b; c; Young and Doohan, 1989). Beyond a broad recognition of this association however, few studies have explored the specificities of the relationship between Aboriginal mobilities and service delivery, particularly in relation to itinerant populations who engage in frequent, short-term mobilities. As the introductory chapter suggested, recent policy discussions in Canada have focussed on the policy implications of short-term circular mobilities or 'churn' (Norris and Clatworthy 2006). Norris and Clatworthy suggested that these mobilities have significant policy implications in terms of a) adapting to the service needs of a changing population composition; b) service continuity; and c) housing, health, and education outcomes.

By intentionally bringing the relationship between the delivery of basic government services and Aboriginal mobility into focus, this thesis has grounded Norris and Clatworthy's (2006) discussion of policy implications in the lived experience of both Aboriginal 'movers' and public servants in Australia. In general, evidence from Yamatji country supports their claims regarding the policy challenges of Aboriginal

itinerancy. A number of interviewees described the difficulties of responding to the changing service needs of itinerant populations. Chapter Four explained that health service providers are exploring new options for managing the financial burden and logistical complexity of adapting staffing needs throughout the region according to changing population compositions and their consequent health needs. Chapter Four also described the difficulties Homeswest face in targeting their funding effectively given that waiting lists cannot accurately capture the changing housing needs of transient Aboriginal populations.

Evidence from Yamatji country also parallels Norris and Clatworthy's (2006) claim that mobile aboriginal populations engender service discontinuity. The spontaneity and contingency which characterise short-term, circular Aboriginal mobilities in Yamatji country are particularly disconcerting and incomprehensible to many service providers. Interviewees commonly described these movements as engendering discontinuity and resource wastage in the provision of basic services. These characteristics made the planning element of service delivery particularly difficult. Some services providers suggested that booking specialist health visits or appointments is at times a futile and costly exercise when clients are suddenly absent or unavailable. Similarly, some educators noted that developing individualised education programs for particular students can be frustrating for teachers when their students are suddenly not in attendance for undisclosed periods of time.

Service discontinuity is closely linked to the third policy implication of itinerancy proposed by Norris and Clatworthy (2006); poorer socio-economic outcomes for more transient individuals. During service provider interviews, Aboriginal transiency was discursively related to the hindered progression of some positive health outcomes, the disquieted and disordered milieu of many schools and classrooms, and the accumulation of debt and property damage amongst public housing tenants. Whilst some service providers understood and accepted this environment of population fluidity in the context of their work, others either struggled to find any value in their professional functionality and/or bore ill-will towards their more mobile clientele.

Through detailed case-study material, Chapter Four explored the contested and sporadic interactions that many Aboriginal people have with the public housing, health, and education sectors in the fieldwork region. It argued that service delivery models are based on particular assumptions of 'appropriate' and 'normal' spatial practices: namely that people live sedentary lives. Consequently, considerable disruption to services delivery occurs when Aboriginal spatial practices do not conform to these assumed patterns of spatial behaviour. However, Chapter Four also demonstrated that the relationship between Aboriginal mobility and service delivery processes is dialectical. It is not simply a one-way process where Aboriginal transiency disrupts service delivery.

A minority of interviewees suggested that the flexibility built into service delivery models and the extensive range of services available actually enables greater transiency amongst the Aboriginal population. However, careful and comprehensive analysis of interview material suggests that the ultimate inflexibility of fixed, infrastructure-driven service delivery has an equal if not greater impact on Aboriginal spatiality. The locationally-grounded nature of service delivery impacts Aboriginal spatial practices in three primary ways. First, it can constrict movement. Aboriginal people who wish to, or need to have continuing access to services must remain permanently in one city or town. Second, it can prompt long-term migrations. With the increasing rationalisation of services, many Aboriginal people who require access to health treatments or wish to pursue a higher standard of education for their children are prompted to make often painful and worrisome decisions to leave their spaces and places of belonging and engage in long-term migrations to be closer to larger service centres. Others undertake these long-term migrations eagerly and welcome the access to a wider range of social, economic, and service opportunities that such moves facilitate.

The third way that the 'fixed' nature of service delivery impacts Aboriginal spatiality in the fieldwork region is by actually contributing to increased itinerancy through the extension of mobility networks or by reinforcing marginalisation from mainstream institutions. In a flow-on effect, networks of extended family members are expanded through long-term service-related migrations. This is particularly so where long-term migrations are health related. Mobilities amongst family members often increase in

order to visit their sick relatives in other places. Even where migrations are not health related, however, they expand the mobility regions within which family members feel comfortable, and open prospects for additional future mobilities.

Chapter Four also described the experiences of Aboriginal people whose itinerant lifestyles were at least in part a response to feelings of isolation from or marginalisation within dominant institutional structures. Alienation from the public housing system for example has led some Aboriginal people into a state of 'homelessness' or perpetual movement between a series of family members within their mobility network. In some cases, feelings of marginalisation and alienation are legacies of past eras where government services were instruments of 'protection' and 'assimilation.' In other words, colonial legacies of intervention continue to permeate some Aboriginal people's conceptualisations of government services. These services are consequently considered 'whitefella business' and are met with indifference or mistrust. Aboriginal people who hold these perspectives may see little benefit in wholesale engagement with government services agencies. Their mobility practices reflect a resistance to such engagement and/or the need to seek economic and social security from alternate sources, often family.

In investigating the specificities of the relationship between Aboriginal mobility and service provision, Chapter Four argued that the dialectical nature of this relationship cannot be ignored if policy is to be developed in a progressive, efficient and just manner. Indeed, case study material presented throughout the thesis illustrates the significant role of mobility processes in the context of service provision to Aboriginal people, and the largely dysfunctional nature of the relationship between these two processes in historical and contemporary contexts. As Taylor and Bell (2004a) have noted however, the challenge for research lies not only in establishing the historical and contemporary relationship between policy and mobility, but in gauging effective and appropriate policy responses:

Given the central role of public intervention in guiding Indigenous mobility and settlement outcomes over the course of history, a policy focus seems uniquely appropriate for research in this field. The challenge for the future however, lies not only in establishing how policies and programs have shaped previous mobility outcomes, but in gauging the policy responses that will

best facilitate the future goals and aspirations of Indigenous peoples in developed country settings (p. 266).

Understanding Aboriginal mobility processes is fundamental to policy development and implementation in terms of effectively targeting service resources, infrastructure and personnel. One of the primary conclusions of this study therefore is an affirmation of Taylor and Bell's above assertion which inextricably links future policy development with an improved understanding of Aboriginal mobility processes. Policy must begin to more effectively and intentionally engage with the reality of Aboriginal population movement. Rather than simply instituting against movement (which has essentially been an unsuccessful policy mandate since colonisation began), there must be a systematic and regionally-specific approach to intentionally engaging with the issue of mobility in policy and research contexts.

8.3 Reconceptualising Aboriginal Spatial Practices

In setting the third objective, *to reconceptualise Aboriginal mobility processes in Yamatji country the case-study region*, this thesis developed one potential interpretive framework through which service providers and scholars might seek to develop a more holistic understanding of Aboriginal spatial practices. In essence, the framework developed is based upon the proposition that Aboriginal mobility processes, both historically and in the present, are underpinned by the procurement, cultivation and contestation of security and belonging.

Building on Taylor and Bell (2004a; 2004b), Young and Doohan (1989) and Hamilton (1987), this thesis has argued that contemporary Aboriginal mobility practices are the product of complex interplays between socio-cultural expression and engagement with mainstream social and economic institutions. These interplays, which are essentially expressions of the procurement, cultivation, and contestation of security and belonging, produce contemporary Aboriginal spatial practice. Two broad and interwoven considerations inform such negotiations. Firstly, a colonial history encompassing land alienation, removal and confinement to government settlements, and marginalisation from the mainstream economy, have resulted in changed spatial and socio-cultural structures. This history has redefined the sources from which Aboriginal people derive security and belonging. Secondly, and consequently, Aboriginal populations engaged in significant socio-cultural

adjustments to these colonising practices, including the appropriation of new spaces of belonging. Through these adjustments, Aboriginal Australians have adapted their cultural expressions and identities. Today, adjustments continue to be mediated by individual aspirations as well as cultural identification, obligations, and expressions.

Chapter Five surveyed the changing experiences of Aboriginal mobilities across the historical landscape of the past two centuries. It described pre-colonial subsistence lifestyles where movement was a primary mechanism of survival and socio-cultural expression. Mobility in Yamatji country was motivated by the need to secure a constant supply of food and water, to trade, and to engage in and maintain ceremonial practices and relationships. As the colonial project established and expanded, the mobility practices of Aboriginal people in the region began to change and adapt to the new boundaries, seen and unseen, that were asserted through spatially oppressive government policies. Ironically, policies originally orchestrated to discipline and reform Aboriginal mobilities often resulted in increased movement. Since the primary employment opportunities available to Aboriginal people in the early colonial period were sporadic, and often required considerable movement, and since services such as housing and education, that would require sedentarisation, were not available to Aboriginal people, there were few incentives to settlement (Hamilton 1987). Mobility also became a mechanism for escaping the colonial gaze and the discriminating legislation which accompanied it. Hamilton (1987) suggests that marginalisation from the mainstream economy prompted Aboriginal people to invest significant social, cultural, emotional and physical resources into maintaining strong webs of kinship associations which would provide them with economic, cultural and social security. 'Shoring up' these kinship networks required significant mobility.

A number of ethnographic studies in a range of geographical settings across Australia conducted since Hamilton's study have all confirmed the significance of kinship networks in informing Aboriginal spatiality (Beckett, 1988; Birdsall, 1988; Smith, 2004; Young and Doohan, 1989). Indeed case-study material presented in this thesis also emphasised the centrality of kinship networks in shaping both the temporal and spatial characteristics of Aboriginal mobility practices in Yamatji country. Chapter Three explained that the locations of an individual's extended

family generally define the geographical bounds of their 'mobility network.' Chapter Seven specifically explored the mobility experiences of Aboriginal people within the context of family networks. It explained that some Aboriginal people move continuously within mobility networks. They experience great freedom and comfort in the knowledge of a collective sensibility which ensures that they will receive resources and support amongst family. This freedom enables them to 'just go with what you've got'⁸⁸ – to be spontaneous. Movement within family networks is often dictated by contingent family circumstances such as illness, funerals, and feuds. Through procurement, cultivation, and contestation family relationships facilitate and on occasions command spontaneous mobilities and the contingent timeframes which characterise them.

Hamilton (1987) proposed that Aboriginal people would remain dependent on familial networks as the sole sources of their economic security only as long as they remained living in remote areas, had few opportunities for integration into the mainstream economy, depended upon government welfare, and had few chances of social mobility. This study is well placed to reflect on Hamilton's proposal because it is situated in a contemporary context of varied engagement with the mainstream economy, varied degrees of remote living, and varied aspirations toward social mobility.

The picture painted in Chapters Five to Seven is not one of simple trade-offs or polarities between social and spatial mobility. An increased engagement with the mainstream economy for example does not necessarily imply that the family network has been rendered irrelevant. Through an exploration of historical processes and contemporary practices, the thesis demonstrates that in addition to economic survival, kinship networks in Yamatji country have also been integral to Aboriginal social and cultural survival. Family structures have adapted and persisted as spaces of social and cultural resiliency and sovereignty. They therefore remain central to the 'spatiality' of most Aboriginal people in Yamatji country, even though the spatial expression of this connectedness is negotiated on the basis of individual aspirations and circumstances. In addition to an alienation from the mainstream economy, which produced an economic and social dependence on kinship networks, the

⁸⁸ Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004. See section 7.5 for full interview excerpt.

reconfiguration of both relationships to country and kin which many Yamatji people experienced through colonising policies, increased the significance of family networks as spaces where identity and belonging are variously affirmed and rooted. Here, mobility practices which engage networks of support and reciprocity might not only be conceived as exercises central to economic survival, but additionally or alternatively as cultural practices which foster identity and belonging. The findings of this study stand in some contrast to those of Norris and Clatworthy (2003; 2006) who suggest that First Nations 'churn' between reserves and urban areas impacts poorly on community cohesion and creates social isolation. In Yamatji country, Aboriginal mobilities are often conscious acts of maintaining and cultivating important socio-cultural and socio-economic connections.

In addition, as Hamilton predicted, kinship networks are not the only source from which Aboriginal people in Yamatji country derive their security and belonging and are thus not the sole consideration which undergird Aboriginal mobility practices in the region.

8.3.1 The Derivation of Security and Belonging

Chapters Five to Seven demonstrated that in Yamatji country today, Aboriginal people procure, cultivate, and contest security and belonging through complex negotiations between socio-cultural familial relationships, mainstream social and economic institutions, and various relationships to country. These chapters described the experiences of some Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region who derive their security and belonging almost exclusively from their engagement with the mainstream economy and the support mechanisms of basic government services. Their spatial practices reflect this orientation: they are often more 'settled' and may engage in long-term migrations to pursue mainstream opportunities.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven also described the experiences of some Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region who continue to feel alienated by or disinterested in mainstream institutions and derive their security and belonging almost exclusively from their family networks. The mobility practices of these individuals reflect the processes of cultivation and contestation within those networks. However, the data presented in these chapters do not permit the presentation of these two scenarios as a

bipolar choice - as the two alternative models of Aboriginal mobility in Yamatji country - where individuals derive their security and belonging from either mainstream institutions or familial structures. Rather, in Yamatji country, the majority of Aboriginal people derive their security and belonging from a complex inter-play between the two. This interplay is mediated by: a) the corollaries of colonial policies that sought to fracture Aboriginal connections to kin and country and reform their 'lazy' and 'abhorrent' nomadic tendencies, b) responses to contemporary government policy and practice, c) individual life-stage, circumstances, and aspirations, and d) socio-cultural identity, obligations, and expressions.

Several important conclusions emerge from reconceptualising Aboriginal mobility processes within this framework of security and belonging. The first is the significance of geographical and temporal context in interpreting and understanding contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices. In Yamatji country today, the legacies of historical government policies continue to inform the sources from which Aboriginal people iteratively derive security and belonging. The removal of the 'stolen generations' to the Moore River Native Settlement was perhaps the most intrusive of these policies. It facilitated the creation and cultivation of new sources of security and belonging for many Yamatji people that continue to inform their contemporary spatialities. Since past policies have profoundly influenced contemporary Aboriginal spatialities, understanding these impacts is critical to developing appropriate future policies.

A second important conclusion to emerge from this framework for understanding the complex nature of Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country, is the impact of life-stage and circumstances in directing the derivation of security and belonging from this interplay between mainstream institutions and socio-cultural expression. Many of the spatial stories referred to throughout the thesis illustrate the dynamic nature of procuring, contesting, and cultivating security and belonging according to life-stage and circumstances. Not having mainstream employment, children of school age, accumulated material possessions, or a property to maintain (either through rental or ownership) were commonly observed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research participants as circumstances that facilitate greater mobility.

However, all of these circumstances can and do change over the course of individuals' lives and these changes alter their spatial practices. Indeed, the mobility of many Aboriginal participants, who told stories of moving and travelling, was greatest in the period between finishing adolescence, and beginning families of their own. Many young people travel frequently throughout the region, engaging minimally with mainstream social and economic institutions, but alter this relationship when they become parents. Classic migration models privilege demographic characteristics as important variables that determine individual migration trajectories (see for example Goldscheider, 1971; Lee, 1966; Stillwell and Congdon, 1991). In the present study, even mobilities that transcend these migration models are significantly influenced by life-stage and circumstances.

Changing life circumstances, individual aspirations, and contingent family relationships all unsettle the dominant discourse of simplistic categorisations of 'core' and 'transient' populations. Rather than a binary, these categorisations might be more appropriately understood as representing the two extremes of a mobility continuum along which a range of mobility processes are enacted.

A final conclusion to emerge from this re-conceptualisation of Aboriginal mobility practices as processes of procuring, cultivating, and contesting security and belonging from a number of sources, is that reductionist and pejorative conceptualisations of Aboriginal spatial practices are neither instructive for the development of policy, nor reflective of lived experience. In particular, the findings presented in this thesis do not allow a conclusion, for example, that Aboriginal people derive their security and belonging from either engagement with mainstream services and employment opportunities or family networks, or that all employed Aboriginal people live sedentary lives, or that all unemployed Aboriginal people have the same priorities and cultural values. Rather, mobilities are enactments of iterative engagements with a number of sources from which Aboriginal people derive security and belonging. Chapter Seven for example argued that family structures are highly significant to the socio-cultural fabric of Aboriginal existence in the fieldwork region, but considerations such as employment status, and nature of engagement with service agencies, mediate the spatial expression of these relational ties.

Clearly, Aboriginal mobilities cannot be conceived as having existed in a cultural vacuum which renders them exclusively the product of an imagined and stereotypical nomadic pre-disposition. Rather, they have been reconfigured through a process of negotiation between cultural identity and practices as well as colonial and 'modernising' forces. As threads which bound the narrative together, the range of experiences of Aboriginal mobility presented in this thesis coalesce to illustrate the complexity and diversity of Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country. Mobility practices are entered into, characterised by, and shaped through a range of circumstances and considerations. And yet, they can all be understood as 'rational' when placed within the framework of procuring, cultivating, and contesting security and belonging.

8.4 Policy Implications: Negotiated Practice

In the conclusion to their study, Young and Doohan (1989) suggest that the way forward in the often fractious relationship between service provision and Aboriginal mobility is found in compromise:

Altogether, mobility probably plays an even greater part in contemporary Aboriginal society in Central Australia than in the past. However administrative authorities and policy-makers have consistently failed to recognise this. The development of an acceptable compromise, between those in service delivery who favour the enforcement of sedentary ways and Aborigines for whom mobility is a vital component of cultural and economic survival, is the challenge to be faced (Young and Doohan 1989, p. 199).

According to Young and Doohan, Aboriginal communities have a responsibility to recognise that some services cannot be infinitely relocated and others cannot be practically provided in remote areas. There must therefore necessarily be limits on the spatial behaviours of Aboriginal people who wish or need to access these services. In addition, they suggested that service providers have a responsibility to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors which effect Aboriginal mobility. Young and Doohan (1989) proposed that this involves listening more attentively to the voices of their Aboriginal clients and developing a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of European settlement on Aboriginal populations and spatialisation. They argued that more localised understandings will create more effective processes of local service provision.

In the present study, the notion of compromise was also advocated by several interviewees as a necessary component of improving service delivery to Aboriginal populations. Chapter Four (section 4.3.1.2), for example, in discussing some of the implications of frequent, short-term circular mobilities on the delivery of health services, drew upon interview discussions with the Murchison Health Director. Having described a situation in which significant resources were wasted because of spontaneous Aboriginal mobilities, the Director suggested:

... while there has been an effort to create and provide services around that there has to be some join in the middle where there has to be some give and take on both sides. And in some areas, you'll see give and take on no sides, and a mixture, you know all sorts of mixtures from complete give and take, to none, and everything in between (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).

A manager at the Department of Education's Midwest branch expressed similar sentiments when describing the service delivery of education services in the region. She explained that the Education Department seeks to be as accommodating as possible in terms of where it targets its resources, but at the end of the day, education is delivered through schools which are immobile, permanent structures.

This discussion then of mutual accommodation raises the question of whether the current fixed, infrastructure-based frameworks of service delivery are perpetuated through prejudice or practicality. Research presented in this thesis suggests that elements of both imperatives permeate policy and practice. From a pragmatic perspective, acknowledging the complexity and multiplicity of Aboriginal spatial practices does not translate into an easily identifiable service delivery framework. Practically, services cannot be delivered in infinite ways to cater to every different type of spatial practice. With this in mind, the thesis has also argued throughout that particular conceptualisations of Aboriginal spatial practices perpetuate prejudiced discourses which affect service delivery and marginalise many highly mobile Aboriginal people. In other words, within the practical necessities of service delivery frameworks, discourses of mobility serve as powerful directives that either challenge or reinforce a spatial ordering that privileges sedentarisation.

The findings of this thesis therefore support Young and Doohan's (1989) conclusions that systems of service delivery cannot support an unlimited range of Aboriginal mobility practices, but service agencies are obligated to develop a more comprehensive and localised understanding of the factors and phenomena that undergird them. The policy response to a multiplicity of Aboriginal spatial behaviours, such as those identified in Yamatji country, must be one of negotiated practice. That is, a willingness to rethink the assumptions upon which current service delivery models are based and to begin to engage in a new way, or perhaps for the first time, with the issue of Aboriginal mobility.

As Norris and Clatworthy (2006) have suggested, misunderstandings concerning indigenous migration and mobility have the potential to adversely affect policy development. Certainly, this thesis has demonstrated that 'misunderstandings' have been the historical legacy of colonial Australia, and that a number of parochial conceptualisations of Aboriginal mobility have continued to circulate unchallenged for many decades. The practices of service delivery to date have not been negotiated by service providers *and* their Aboriginal clients, and outcomes have been poor for both parties concerned. From a policy perspective, negotiated practice therefore requires a departure from 'quick-fix' or 'band-aid' solutions and a commitment to the long and challenging process of building partnership and mutual participation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, around the delivery of services.

The findings of this thesis suggest that at least two conditions are crucial to the process of negotiated practice. The first is abandonment of conceptualisations of Aboriginal itinerancy as somehow mysterious, irrational or deviant. Conceptualising Aboriginal population movement as being based upon the procurement, contestation, and cultivation of security and belonging provides a framework for illuminating the rich tapestry of complex and dynamic Aboriginal spatial practices that are undertaken in Yamatji country. It also provides an interpretive lens through which to understand alternate rationalities upon which some Aboriginal mobility practices are based. Conceptualising mobility in this way, despite its generality, provides an Aboriginal-centric entry point to engaging with the practitioners of different mobility practices. Service delivery policies might then be able to better appreciate the

complex machinations of economic, social and cultural milieux which undergird Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country.

The second necessary condition of negotiated practice that this thesis advocates is geographical contextualisation. Because geographical and temporal context so comprehensively inform contemporary Aboriginal mobility behaviours, negotiated practice may look different across regions depending on the sources from which Aboriginal people in those areas procure, cultivate and contest a sense of security and belonging. As Young (1990) noted, setting and situation are integral to shaping the characteristics and nature of Aboriginal mobilities. Preceding chapters have provided glimpses of distinctions regarding mobility processes, cultural expression, service engagement, and geographical composition across the various regions of Western Australia. In Chapter Five, interviewee Bill Atyeo contrast the 'sense of belonging' to Meekatharra with that of Aboriginal populations in the Kimberley. He suggested that in the Kimberley there is a more concrete and specific sense in which birthplace determines where a person 'belongs.' At another point during his interview, Bill noted:

Up in the Kimberley where you get – say you get 10 or 11 people here a week – you get like 100 in a day or 200 or even 600 in a day ... Because of communities on the move. Or could be three or four communities on the move, or they're coming in for a special event. They'll come and just camp around the town. Just anywhere. They travel in bigger lots, or they travel in trucks up there. They're not silly, they utilise the transport where they can. Usually if two or three family members go, they'll all go. Whereas here, it could be the brother, the son, or the daughter will go but not necessarily mum and dad and the rellies (Environmental Health Officer Bill Atyeo, 10 September 2004).

Interviewee Russell Simpson also suggested that the Kimberley is more compact than Yamatji country – there are more communities in closer proximity to one another – which makes the logistical complexities of servicing these communities less extreme than in the Midwest.

In Chapter Six, interviewee Deborah Robinson contrasted her own lifestyle with that of the people of Wiluna. She suggested that they have relatively little interest in possessions and mainstream institutions. Although cars were one exception, they

were really only valued because of their ability to support mobility aspirations. In addition, several interviewees supported the notion that Aboriginal mobility processes in the Wiluna/Western Desert areas were more traditionally oriented than the movement of many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. These orientations had a range of implications for the spatial and temporal dimensions of mobility processes.

These few insights alone suggest that various processes of procuring, cultivating, and contesting security and belonging in Yamatji country are in some significant ways markedly different than those in other regions. One of the important limitations of this study therefore is that the specific findings about mobility practices in Yamatji country should not be used to generalise about Aboriginal spatial practices at wider spatial scales or in other regions. In fact, it is precisely the ungeneralisable nature of studies such as this which call in to question the merit of theory generation and public policy development based singularly on broad-scale trends or a normalised 'average' sort of mobility, as if that should service the range adequately. Whilst broad-scale trends provide an important context, an emphasis on these alone can obscure or overlook important regionally or locally-specific contexts. It also risks reducing policies to some sort of 'lowest common denominator' approach that reinforces the marginalisation of the most vulnerable elements of the Aboriginal population.

Depending on the specific data sources employed, a focus on long-term indigenous population trends as the basis for policy development can also fail to capture unenumerated spatial behaviours such as short-term, circular mobilities. Chapter Four demonstrated the significant impact of these more transient population movements at the level of policy implementation and service delivery. One of the fundamental contentions of this thesis, therefore, is that local nuances and circular mobilities are central considerations in the dialectical relationship between service delivery and Aboriginal spatial practices. They must be captured, if not quantified, if social theory and service delivery policies are to be effectively developed. It follows then that comparable 'regions' are in fact the most appropriate scales for both academic investigation and policy development concerning Aboriginal mobility practices.

8.5 Opportunities for Further Research

Given the relative paucity of research which addresses indigenous mobility processes both in Australia and other settler-states, there remains ample scope for scholarly enquiry into all aspects of Aboriginal spatial practices. This section highlights four broad research imperatives that emerge from the present study.

8.5.1 Regional Comparative Studies

Following directly from the preceding section which discussed the merit of approaching negotiated service delivery practices from a 'regional' perspective, conceptual and methodological frameworks comparable to those adopted in this study could be applied in other geographical contexts (particularly in comparable service jurisdictions in Western Australia such as the Western Desert region, the Kimberley and the Pilbara) to aid in the development of robust social theories of Aboriginal spatiality. Implementing these frameworks of study in other geographical contexts would provide a solid foundation for comparing the factors which inform, shape, and characterise Aboriginal spatial practices across the geographical landscape. From studies at this scale, comparisons could be drawn regarding the commonalities and differences in the processes of procuring, cultivating and contesting security and belonging, and the ways in which these processes influence spatial practices across regions. These comparisons would be useful in identifying what characteristics of Aboriginal mobility processes can be accurately generalised about across service jurisdictions and which are geographically situated. They would therefore have great value for both the development of service delivery policy and social theory.

8.5.2 Methodological Limitations and Potential Innovations

Chapter Two presented a set of propositions about the usefulness and capabilities of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in the study of Aboriginal population mobilities. It described the perceived 'trade offs' involved in both approaches. Quantitative data sets provide sufficient breadth of analysis for theory building and policy development, but they are often imprecise, reinforce non-Aboriginal conceptualisations of rational spatialities, and fail to capture short-term circular mobilities. Qualitative methodologies offer rich depth of understanding of the localised processes, nuances, conceptualisations and consequences of Aboriginal

mobilities, but lack the breadth of scale or broader applicability to be useful for theorising and policy development.

This study sought to develop a somewhat exploratory methodological approach that would address some of the trade-offs of the qualitative approach. As Chapter Two explained, the primary method employed for this study was interviews (some in-depth and some semi-structured) with a range of participant groups at different scales. Including participants from regional and local scales of government administration and diverse professional and personal backgrounds, provided a rich texture to the data and made some attempt to retain a level of both depth and breadth in the data. Local participants were able to contribute concrete, contextualised responses. Regionally-based service providers were able to reflect on the broader trends of spatial practices across Yamatji country as well as the unique mobility process in different parts of the region. Participant observation and document analysis were other methods employed to allow triangulation of findings as they emerged from the interviews. In addition to providing some balance of breadth and depth, this methodological approach also facilitated the capture of data which could explore and depict the lived experiences, local nuances and subjective discourses of Aboriginal spatial practices in the fieldwork region.

However, there were undoubtedly limitations to this methodological approach. Primary among these was the logistical complexity of collecting the 'spatial stories' of people whose mobility practices are variable. As Chapter Two explained, the financial and time constraints of the field research meant that capturing such data was a highly opportunistic exercise. Consequently, interview data was skewed towards the perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal public servants who were less mobile. Some of this data bias was countered by the contributions of Aboriginal participants who described specific experiences of their own movement and that of extended family members. However, the practicalities of this research method certainly limited the collection of certain kinds of stories and data. Despite its shortcomings, the methodological approach adopted in this study was a focussed attempt to redress some of the gaping data deficiencies in relation to Aboriginal population movements.

Nevertheless, there remains a broad mandate for research which seeks to integrate qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to robustly contextualise the nuanced data that studies such as the present one produce. Although this thesis was conceptually positioned to privilege qualitative data, namely the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal mobility, accurate quantitative data pertaining to short-term, circular mobilities would have enhanced the contextualised picture of Aboriginal spatial practices which qualitative methodologies were able to produce. Certainly, numerous attempts have been made to quantify a wider range of Aboriginal mobility processes, and in particular, short-term, circular movements (see for example Martin and Taylor, 1995; Taylor, 1996; 1998; Warchivker et al., 2000). However, a lack of robust data sources impedes these efforts. As researchers become increasingly innovative in manipulating existing quantitative data sources and developing new ones which can more accurately capture a wider range of Aboriginal movements, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods will greatly enhance the picture of Aboriginal spatiality that scholarly research can paint.

8.5.3 Developing ‘Security and Belonging’

In proposing the framework of security and belonging as a tool for understanding Aboriginal mobility practices, this thesis is ultimately open to a range of critiques, refinements, and opportunities for further conceptual development. Despite the complexity of the process, further research which focuses specifically on Aboriginal ‘spatial stories’ and the ways in which Aboriginal people conceptualise and understand their movement are essential to the robust development of social theory and government policy regarding Aboriginal spatial practices. Very little research of this nature exists in the Australian context and yet it seems vital that more be done if dominant assumptions are to be challenged, and negotiated practices, which better match mobility practices to service delivery practices, are to be realised. Research which further develops a catalogue of experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal mobilities has the capacity to delve more deeply into a number of themes about security and belonging to which the present thesis made only surface reference.

In particular, as Chapter Two noted, the present study was biased towards the spatial stories of Aboriginal women. Interesting research opportunities therefore lie in exploring the spatial stories of Aboriginal men and any potential gender differences

that exist in the process of procuring, cultivating and contesting security and belonging. In addition, there are opportunities to explore the mobility aspirations of Aboriginal youths and the extent to which engagements with mainstream social and economic institutions influence their thinking about security and belonging. Following Nikora et al. (2004) in New Zealand and Wilson and Peters (2005) in Canada, Indigenous mobility research in Australia could also be expanded to explore the lived experiences of those who have engaged in permanent or long-term migrations away from their home communities or towns to larger urban centres. Elements of this relationship were discussed in Chapters Five to Seven. However, further research which specifically explores the stories of those who have 'left' could more comprehensively address questions about the push-pull factors involved in their decision making processes, and the nature and expressions of their sense of connectedness to 'home' communities. These questions address the broader notion of how such migrations inform and are informed by a sense of security and belonging.

The 'contested' element of security and belonging and its impact on Aboriginal spatiality has also received little attention in the existing literature. Data collected on this subject during the course of the present study indicate that it has significant policy implications. Movements to avoid court appearances, arrest, and traditional punishments were all described, albeit in passing, as considerations that significantly impacted Aboriginal spatiality, particularly in other regions of Western Australia. Although the relationships between the criminal justice system, tribal law, and Aboriginal mobility in Yamatji country were discussed briefly in Chapters Three and Seven, they warrant further scholarly investigation, particularly in other parts of the State and country.

Finally, some broader themes that were referred to throughout the thesis in relation to security and belonging could be elaborated on in future research endeavours. These include, for example, distinctions between collectivist and individualist mindsets in influencing Aboriginal mobility practices. Further research could also examine distinctions in discourse between 'social conditioning,' cultural practice, and socio-economic status as factors that influence Aboriginal spatialities. It may eventuate that such distinctions are in fact elusive and perhaps inconsequential but further research would be required to reach such conclusions.

8.5.4 Best (Negotiated) Practice

A final research theme that emerges from the present study is the identification and illumination of potential avenues to negotiated practice in service delivery.

Developing the process of negotiated practice seems vital not only in engaging with the issue of mobility, but in beginning to challenge and defuse some of the unhelpful stereotypes that currently plague the relationship between service agencies and their disillusioned Aboriginal clients.

Data collected for the present research offered some glimpses of potential ways forward in this process. Some service providers for example described the importance of strong communication networks within and across service agencies at various 'tiers' of management, and program flexibility as necessary strategies for 'coping' with Aboriginal itinerancy. However, these strategies were generally individual responses to the recognition of the deficiencies in current service delivery models for servicing highly mobile Aboriginal clients. They were coping mechanisms rather than implemented policy responses to an intentional, systematic, or comprehensive engagement with Aboriginal clients about the issues.

Perhaps one of the most significant avenues for further research that emerges from this study, and the proposed notion of negotiated practice specifically, lies in the potential connection of the field of indigenous mobility research with contemporary scholarly critiques of the notion of Aboriginal governance. Agius, Davies, Howitt, Jarvis, and Williams (2004), for example, provided a range of constructive insights into the processes of 'negotiation' on particular issues of cross-cultural concern. From a series of groundbreaking Native Title negotiations in South Australia, they drew out several lessons for Native Title negotiations which have broad applicability. They suggested, for example, that in negotiations regarding Indigenous issues, agendas must be shaped by affected Indigenous peoples rather than technical 'experts.' They also advocated a grass-roots approach to such negotiations which engenders real self-determination. Further, they compellingly demonstrated the significance of 'processes' as a central focus in successful negotiations. Drawing on Agius et al. (2004) in the context of negotiated service delivery practices, important questions of 'process' arise. A commitment to negotiated practices in the delivery of services to mobile indigenous populations would need to carefully address questions

of representation: who might be governments' negotiating partners in the development of negotiated practices, and how might people represent themselves or be represented in such negotiations? The process of negotiated practice would also need to carefully consider the notion of needs: what are the requirements of each stakeholder group in developing a process which produces real, long-term outcomes? It would also need to consider expectations: what would positive outcomes look like for each stakeholder group? These questions invite careful scholarship which links the broad notion of indigenous governance, with the field of indigenous mobility research.

Manguri and WACOSS (1994), for example, have advocated the greater incorporation of what they call 'Aboriginal values' into service delivery policies and systems. In particular they emphasised the significance of the notion of family and the necessity of service providers to engage more intentionally with the Aboriginal families in delivering services. They offered a range of practical principles and guidelines for beginning such a process. Manguri and WACOSS's emphasis on engaging with family as an entry point to more effective service delivery seems particularly appropriate to addressing Aboriginal mobility more intentionally in service delivery policy since the findings of this study, and others like it in Australia (e.g. Beckett, 1988; Birdsall, 1988; Hamilton, 1987; Memmott et al., 2006; Young and Doohan, 1989), suggest that family is fundamental consideration that undergirds Aboriginal mobility processes. Further research that explores the potential connections between these approaches could have significant positive implications for both policy development and a more equitable co-existence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in rural and remote Australia.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

This empirically-based thesis has examined the lived experiences of Aboriginal people and service providers in Yamatji country to develop localised conceptualisations of Aboriginal mobility practices in the region. Conceptually it followed Chapman (1991) and Wilson and Peters (2005) in deliberately avoiding structuring analysis around a pre-existing model of migration or mobility. It instead sought to gather and analyse ground-level conceptualisations of Aboriginal mobilities. In so doing, the dissertation opened up a discursive space in which to

interrogate dominant constructions of Aboriginal spatial practices, particularly as they relate to service delivery policy and practice. Through this discussion, a narrative of spatial struggles unfolded. Here, authenticity discourses and the notion of 'walkabout', which subtly render some Aboriginal mobilities irrational, deviant and/or mysterious were linked to the perpetuation of a historical spatial ordering which privileges sedentarisation and marginalises those whose spatialities do not conform to mainstream norms.

Given the significant, but often fractious dialectical relationship between Aboriginal spatial practices and public service delivery, the thesis turned to a reconceptualisation of Aboriginal mobility practices in the region which explored the way security and belonging were procured, contested, and cultivated. It argued that these processes were mediated by responses to historical government policies, individual aspirations, and life circumstances. Ultimately, this reconceptualisation provides a framework for understanding the alternate rationalities upon which some Aboriginal mobilities are based, and for 'de-mystifying' spatial practices that do not conform to mainstream norms.

As an understanding of Aboriginal mobility grows within any given geographical area, so too will the possibilities of framing service delivery policy and practices in ways that more closely match the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal clients. A search for greater efficiency and equity in policy and practice is fundamentally predicated on a methodology which intentionally listens to and engages with the voices of those at the margins. In this sense, negotiated practice has the potential to map a future of co-existing spatialities that bears the markings of mutual compromise and partnership.