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The entangled relationship between Indigenous spatiality and government service delivery

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SERIES NOTE

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ABSTRACT

The delivery of basic government services to remotely living and frequently mobile Indigenous populations is a highly contentious issue; one which has recently received considerable focus at a Federal policy level. Because of distinct motivations, frequencies, and spatialisation, Indigenous mobility practices in many rural and remote areas unsettle conventional Western frameworks of government service delivery, which assume relative sedentarisation. Many services are provided chiefly through fixed, permanent infrastructure such as hospital clinics and schools that promote and cater to single-locale, stationary lifestyles. In addition, neo-liberal cost pressures are reshaping service delivery models into more acute 'hub and spoke' configurations: services are increasingly withdrawn from rural and remote areas and concentrated in regional and metropolitan centres. Consequently, Indigenous people living in regional and remote areas and/or who continue to engage in frequent movements often have more sporadic and contested interactions with government service agencies.

This paper contends that understanding Indigenous spatiality is critical to redressing the inequitable and often inefficient nature of service delivery that has lingered in rural and remote Australia since colonisation began. Whilst the related literature acknowledges the effectual relationship between Indigenous mobility and service delivery, few published studies examine the substance of this relationship in any detail. Drawing on research in Yamatji country, Western Australia, this paper provides a thorough and focused examination of the relationship between Indigenous spatiality and the delivery of State housing, health and education services. The analysis is based on a careful engagement with the lived experiences of a group of Indigenous people in the region, and the service providers with whom they interact. By examining localised Indigenous mobility processes, and the challenges of servicing populations with diverse spatialities, the paper highlights the complex and often contested nature of the interface between mainstream services and Indigenous population dynamics.

Keywords: Indigenous mobility, Indigenous policy, health, housing, education, service delivery.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a political orientation toward neo-liberalism and economic rationalisation has fostered concern amongst State and Federal service agencies, and some public commentators, about a (unquantified) resource wastage associated with continuing to conventionally service highly mobile Indigenous populations living in remote areas (see e.g. Hughes & Warin 2005; Johns 2006; Vanstone 2007). Responses to these perceived inefficiencies have reverberated around consolidating services in larger towns and providing fewer resources in smaller, often seasonally occupied settlements. However, such approaches demonstrate an ongoing failure of governments to understand Indigenous spatiality beyond simplistic, conventional, Eurocentric conceptualisations. Policies developed to directly or circuitously urbanise and/or sedentarise Indigenous populations have overlooked, or ignored, fundamental issues of Indigenous population dynamics and how service delivery affects these. Indeed, such policies are reminiscent of failed past policies that sought to settle, confine and/or urbanise Aboriginal populations without any informed understanding of the forces that shaped their spatiality. These historical policies regularly resulted in the painful dislocation of Aboriginal people from kin and country, and the emergence of new spaces of relatedness that expanded both the geography and frequency of Aboriginal mobility processes.

There exists within the current socio-political climate—marked by a change in Federal government and an antecedent (and continuing) resurgence in public engagement with Indigenous Affairs administration—a renewed opportunity, and perhaps public will, to enrich policy deliberations about appropriately, efficiently and justly servicing Indigenous populations. To break with the failures of past policies, such dialogues should be constructed around more detailed and nuanced understandings of the both the characteristics of Indigenous spatiality (including large-scale population dynamics, small-scale mobilities, and immobility), and the full range of factors that shape it.

Indeed, the small existing indigenous[1] mobility literature emphasises the necessity of understanding and engaging with indigenous spatiality in order to develop more robust and appropriate service delivery frameworks (Martin & Taylor 1995; Memmott et al. 2004; Norris & Clatworthy 2003; Taylor 1996, 1998; Taylor & Bell 2004a, 2004b; Young & Doohan 1989). Recent policy discussions in Canada, for example, have focused on the pressing need to improve understandings of short-term, circular indigenous mobilities or 'churn' (Norris & Clatworthy 2006). These populations, they argue, have significant implications for:

- service continuity;

- adapting to the service needs of a changing population composition; and

- housing, health, and education outcomes.

In Australia, Taylor (1996, 1998) has also demonstrated that Indigenous population dynamics have widespread implications for the nature and location of basic services. However, beyond a broad recognition of this association, few studies have explored the specificities of the relationship between Indigenous spatiality and service delivery, particularly in relation to itinerant populations who engage in frequent, short-term mobilities.[2]

Through the lived experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members and service providers in Yamatji country, Western Australia (Fig. 1), this working paper intentionally draws the relationship between Indigenous spatiality and service delivery into focus.

The socio-spatial context in Yamatji country exemplifies the pressures of servicing remote and mobile populations. Its vast land area, coupled with low population densities, intensifies the fiscal pressures and logistical complexity of delivering basic services to mobile or transient populations. The town of

Meekatharra, for example, where most of the fieldwork was conducted, is located 765 kilometres from Perth and has a relatively small and fluctuating (majority Aboriginal) population of between 400 and 800 residents.

Importantly, this analysis does not seek to address the full range of circumstances and factors that shape Indigenous population dynamics in the region. Rather it focuses specifically on the entangled relationship between Indigenous spatiality and three case-study services: health, housing, and education. By adopting this specific focus, and employing in-depth and semi-structured interviews as the primary methodological tool, the study opens a unique window onto the complex considerations that mediate the relationship between mobility and service delivery. It demonstrates that the provision of basic services is both deeply influenced by, and exerts influence over, all aspects of Indigenous mobility and immobility.

DEVIATION AND DISRUPTION

Hamilton (1987) identified two general types of 'normalised' intra-national mobility processes in non-Indigenous society. The first is commuting: regular, usually intra-urban, short-term movements between home and work. The second is longer movements over space and time, for holidays, family gatherings, and other special occasions. Neither of these types of movements involves a permanent change of residence. A third type of mobility that may be added to Hamilton's list is permanent or long-term migrations. In non-Indigenous society, these usually occur in response to employment opportunities in geographically distant locales, or increasingly, for lifestyle reasons such as 'sea-changes' and 'tree-changes' (Costello 2007; Newton & Bell 1996; Wulff & Newton 1996). Long-term migrations are infrequent movements from one region to another for easily comprehensible and largely predictable reasons.

Whilst simplistic, this caricature of non-Indigenous intra-national mobility provides a robust, if basic, benchmark of the 'normalised' types of mobility which emerge from the literature, are drawn into public discourse, and form the basis of service delivery frameworks. In Australia, mainstream service delivery policies and models have been developed to cater to relatively settled existences, but with enough flexibility to absorb the occasional long-term change of residence. Investment in fixed and permanent infrastructure such as houses, hospitals and schools through which services are delivered reinforce a spatial ordering that privileges sedentarisation (Young & Doohan 1989: 199). Many Aboriginal mobility practices remain outside of this cannon of normalised spatial practices.

Between 2004 and 2005, 50 in-depth interviews with a range[3] of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research participants in Yamatji country identified two overarching types of contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices, a permanently resident Aboriginal population and a more mobile or transient Aboriginal population:

> *Certainly from my view, what I've seen is that there is strong bases here* [Meekatharra]. *There's about four or five main, major family groups, who are here all the time ... we have strong family groups for whom this is their town and this is their home and this is where they stay. But then each of those family groups will have amongst them a number of people (and not a huge number) but a number of people who are highly transient. And that may be for a number of reasons* (Interviewee A).

In Meekatharra, the permanently residing Aboriginal population—often referred to in interviews as the 'core'—comprises members of several family groups. Many of this 'core' own homes within the town and are either employed within the mainstream economy or have retired. The more transient individuals engage in frequent movements, largely within Yamatji country but sometimes along expansive routes to extended family in more distant locales.

Fig. 1. The fieldwork region in Yamatji country, Western Australia

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Fieldwork Region

KIMBERLEY

PILBARA

WESTERN
DESERT

Wiluna

Meekatharra

Mullewa ▲ *Mt Magnet*

Geraldton ▲

PERTH ■

SOUTH-
WEST

N

0   100   200 km

Field work area
ATSIC Yamatji Region
Main fieldwork location
Interview sites
Main roads

Source: Prout 2007: 39.

> You have a stable core of people that stay put. But you've got other members that are quite transient ... And they could be here one week, and in Mt Magnet the next week and stay there for three months and then two months they could be in Mullewa or Geraldton or whatever. Or they could come back here for another two weeks or three months and then they just go somewhere else. They could go to like Newman, Port Hedland, out to communities and Jigalong and Yulga Jinna. The movement of people is ... if you actually plotted them, would be phenomenal. (Interviewee B).

Interview data revealed significant variation with regard to the prevalence and frequency of transient movement amongst the Indigenous population in Meekatharra and surrounding region. Ultimately, neither this study nor any currently available data is able to accurately quantify the extent of this type of movement in comparison to any other movement type. However, Bell and Hugo (2000: 66) suggested that census data can make some estimates about the probable prevalence of Indigenous itinerancy. The 1996 Census, for example, revealed that the percentage of Indigenous people reporting multiple moves over a one year interval was 60 per cent higher than that of the non-Indigenous population. According to Bell and Hugo (2000: 66), this finding indicates that repeat or 'chronic' mobility is a common feature of Indigenous population movement.

Many research participants, particularly non-Indigenous service providers, described the movement of transient or highly mobile individuals as impetuous. They noted in particular an apparent absence of planning and preparation regarding these movements: transient individuals might be 'here one day and gone the next'. Indigenous transiency was also described as temporally variable. As the above quotation suggests, these mobilities can be anywhere in length from one week to a number of months. Most transient movement in Yamatji country is short-term in nature, with frequent journeys away from a 'home-base' and continual returns to it: a process defined by Bedford (1981) and Chapman and Prothero (1985) in the Melanesian context as 'circulation'. Other mobilities in Yamatji country involve movements between a more linear series of places, usually the locations of family members. Young (1990) describes these as 'chain migrations'.[4]

Because many of these Aboriginal spatial practices deviate from non-Indigenous norms, public discourse regarding the relationship between Aboriginal mobilities and service delivery focuses predominantly on the ways in which 'abnormal' Aboriginal spatial practices disrupt service delivery frameworks. This focus was clearly evident in Yamatji country. Much of the interview data collected during the study describes the impacts of Aboriginal mobilities on the delivery of basic government services. As this analysis clearly demonstrates, such disruption undoubtedly occurs. However, the disruption occurs in both directions. To frame discussion exclusively in terms of how highly mobile Aboriginal populations challenge conventional models of service delivery would be to overlook two important processes:

- the relative conformity of the 'core' to the sedentary lifestyles which access to government services command; and

- the ways in which contested and sporadic interactions with basic government services shape and perpetuate Aboriginal mobilities.

Both of these processes characterise the case-studies below.

PUBLIC HOUSING

The subject of Aboriginal housing has received considerable scholarship across a range of academic disciplines (see e.g. Jackson 1997; Kirke 2001; Memmott 1997; Minnery, Manicaros & Lindfield 2000; Morgan 1999; Musharbash 2003; Neutze 2000; Pholeros, Rainow & Torzillo 1993; Prout 2002; Ross 1987; Sanders 1993; Thompson 2001; Tonkinson & Tonkinson 1979). Whilst much of this literature acknowledges

the significant relationship between Indigenous housing and mobility, the often contested relationship between public housing services and Aboriginal spatial practice has been under-researched. Gray (2004) provides perhaps the closest such analysis, albeit focused primarily on historical public housing policies and their impact on large-scale Aboriginal population redistributions. The present analysis examines the co-constructed and asynchronous relationship between the public housing sector and Aboriginal spatiality in Yamatji country.

One of the common local perceptions of itinerant Aboriginal people in the region is that they have no responsibilities or ties to a particular locale. Because owning or renting a home is a particularly tangible example of such an anchor, a person's housing arrangement is commonly used to assess their relative 'stability'. In Meekatharra, home ownership or prolonged rental arrangements are frequently used to distinguish 'the core' from 'the transients'.

One research participant suggested that 'core' Aboriginal residents in Meekatharra derive a similar sense of 'home' from their houses as she does from her relationship to her ancestral homelands:

> *You get a lot of locals, what they call home is their house. You know that* unna *(that's right). People get so attached to their house. And that's their home, that's their space. They bought that block of land, and then they get so attached to it, they don't want to move. They'll go, locals will go. They'll still have that house there. They'll rent it out and come back. Only unless something really dromestic* [sic] *happens, for them to force them out of town* (Interviewee C).

For these individuals, their home becomes a space over which they govern, and a familiar place to which they can return. Home ownership allows them the freedom to travel when necessary or desired but at the same time, anchors them to a particular place:

> I[5]: *... the home turns out to be the pain in the neck.*

> SP: *So would you prefer not to be in a home like that then?*

> I: *I enjoy it while I'm there. Wherever I'm at. So yeah, home is somewhere to—it's good to have a home to come home to. A place to come home to so that you're out of everyone's way, nobody's in your face you know. And you need somewhere to land so when you're back after ten days away people who have missed you or need you for some reason, they know you're home, they all come and visit. Then you catch up with them. It's good going away, it's good coming back* (Interviewee D).

While some Aboriginal residents in Meekatharra own their own homes, many do not. Most of these people enter the public housing system or reside with someone who has.

In Western Australia, public housing is provided in rural towns, regional centres and cities through Homeswest, a branch of the Department of Housing and Works (DHW).[6] In Meekatharra, Homeswest has a substantial housing stock and rents properties to primarily Aboriginal tenants who enter into tenancy agreements with the State Government. The Murchison Region Aboriginal Corporation is an alternate, albeit far more under-resourced, public housing provider for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal relationships with Homeswest are often characterised by frequent and ongoing contestation (Beresford 2001a). A recent report by the Western Australian Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) noted that although only 22 per cent of Homeswest tenants were Aboriginal, 42.6 per cent of all termination notices were issued to Aboriginal people. Further, 44 per cent of all court orders and 42.5 per cent of all bailiff evictions were issued to Aboriginal tenants (EOC 2004). Between 1996 and 2004, the EOC reported having received over 400 registered complaints from Aboriginal people claiming that they had been directly or indirectly discriminated against by Homeswest (EOC 2004: 43). The 2004 EOC Inquiry also detailed considerable anecdotal testimony of Aboriginal people who expressed concern about the nature

DHW:
Department of Housing and Works

EOC:
Equal Opportunities Commission

of Homeswest service delivery. From a service delivery perspective, Aboriginal tenancies are reportedly more likely to incur property damage and substantial repair and maintenance costs. They are also more likely to be abandoned and result in rent arrears. This contested relationship is largely the product of Aboriginal responses to both the marginalising housing policies of the past, and a contemporary public housing system which does not incorporate Aboriginal understandings about the role and purpose of housing.

Housing has historically been a non-Aboriginal mechanism of comprehensive intervention in Aboriginal lives (Sanders 2000). Until the mid twentieth century, Aboriginal people were denied access to public housing. Government policy was concerned with segregating the Aboriginal population from non-Aboriginal society on reserves and in institutions. During the late 1950s, Fink (1960), who studied cultural change amongst Aboriginal people in the Murchison region (the southern part of Yamatji country), described the frustration of local Aboriginal town residents at the lack of housing available. From the mid 1950s until 1972, the concept of 'transitional housing' was central to Indigenous public housing policy (EOC 2004; Manning 2004; Morgan 1999; Sanders 1990, 1993). As instruments of assimilation, transitional housing policies sought to progress Aboriginal people through various stages of accommodation as they demonstrated increasing integration into non-Aboriginal society and an increasing capacity to manage their new living environments. For many Aboriginal people, conventional European-style housing became an icon of the shortcomings of their Aboriginality and a symbol of colonial attempts to reform and remake their identities through an 'internalisation of white values' (Reser 1979: 78).

Transitional housing policies were based on particular Eurocentric understandings about the role and purpose of housing. Sanders (2000) describes the pivotal role of conflicting Indigenous and non-Indigenous housing traditions in perpetuating contemporary contestations. Traditional Aboriginal housing structures were flexible, seasonal and lived around and out of, as much as within (Reser 1979). Shelters housed various configurations of family members and in some instances, were constructed for separate men's and women's living areas (Sanders 2000). In contrast, European housing was constructed for the year-round and life-long residence of nuclear family units. Sanders (2000) suggests that given these highly divergent housing histories, it is hardly surprising that housing remains a source of contemporary inter-cultural contestation. He stops short of drawing the connection between these contradictory housing traditions and the equally incongruous mobility practices which they served to support: the Aboriginal housing tradition being based on a semi-nomadic lifestyle, and the European housing tradition on intensive settlement. It nonetheless follows that Aboriginal experiences of contestation within the public housing system are not merely the product of incompatible housing traditions, but also of the divergent spatial practices which inform them.

The public housing system in Western Australia is clearly designed to house small, sedentary nuclear family units. In response, some Aboriginal people have reformed their mobility practices:

> And I think you get into a Homeswest home and you get behind in your rent, and you feel that you shouldn't move out, you know, you gotta pay the rent. I don't know, all these little responsibilities that tie you down. Obligations and responsibilities to other people I think (Interviewee D).

Others experience alienation and marginalisation within the system as they struggle to maintain comfortable levels of conformity with the settlement expectations of non-Aboriginal society, and simultaneously foster and uphold the practices of self-governance and cultural distinctiveness. In some cases, Aboriginal mobilities may represent a reluctance to wholesale engagement with the public housing system which has, in the past, been the handmaiden of the colonial project.

OVERCROWDING—EFFECTS AT THE DESTINATION

Overcrowded dwellings are perhaps the most commonly identified manifestation of contested interaction between Aboriginal people and the public housing system. A considerable literature details the detrimental effects of overcrowding on physical, social, and emotional wellbeing in Indigenous contexts (see e.g. Gordon, Hallahan & Henry 2002; Gray & Saggers 1994; Tenants Advice Service 2003). Overcrowding also results in property damage and substantial repair and maintenance costs for housing providers. Because of the pervasive corollaries of overcrowding, it is often employed as a key measure of both the effectiveness and appropriateness of housing programs for Indigenous populations, and the capacity of Aboriginal tenants to conform to appropriate settlement expectations.

In Yamatji country, research participants identified overcrowding as a critical issue facing service providers. Many described the pernicious cycles into which it feeds:

> SP: *In what ways do these patterns of movement and transiency influence the functioning of the school?*
>
> I: *Highly. Highly!* [chuckles] *From overcrowding in the homes which causes—I know neglect is a really big word and I don't like using it but it does become fairly obvious … If a whole family has just lumbered up at someone's house, they may not have enough food for the dinner and the breakfast the next day so the kids will come to school and they'll be hungry. And therefore there might be a dozen people trying to have a shower in the morning or something. So the untidiness and that unkempt sort of look creeps in really quickly. They won't come with stationery or anything like that, and generally they could just be left with a carer. So it not only affects the kids who are transient, but it affects the stable ones as well because they're in the home. So everyone's out of sorts. As I say, if you're overcrowded, you're not getting the best of nights sleep. They're probably up late watching TV or just the fact that there's so many of them they don't sleep, so, they're pretty much all coming to school tired. They tend to fight a lot. A bit of fighting going on in the homes in the community. These sorts of things occur. So we are highly affected* (Interviewee E).

Another interviewee expanded on this scenario, explaining that the increased challenges to learning that arise from overcrowded home environments cause many children to disengage from the school system altogether. Once outside of the school environment, boredom or limited options and opportunities often lead these youths to begin a cycle of juvenile offending. Indeed, the link between truancy, school drop-out, and crime amongst Aboriginal youth has been well established (Beresford 2003a).

Overcrowding is commonly perceived by housing providers as a problem of supply: people live in overcrowded conditions because there are not enough housing options available to them. Certainly this is sometimes the case, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Perth, where there are extensive waiting lists for Homeswest accommodation and slow tenancy turnover periods of up to four years. Homeswest waiting lists are also increasing in larger regional centres such as Geraldton, where the turnover time from application for housing to offer of tenancy is generally between 12 and 18 months. Similarly, the Murchison Region Aboriginal Corporation currently have a waiting list of 45 applicants in Geraldton. Many waiting applicants bunk with relatives until housing becomes available, creating overcrowded situations in existing tenancies. Henry and Daly (2001) reported similar findings in Kuranda, Queensland. There, overcrowding was a matter of social necessity rather than cultural choice.

However, Sanders (2000) cogently argues that while providing more housing will solve some problems, it will inevitably create others because it is a solution based on a narrow understanding of the role of housing in lived experience. Data from the present study supports Sanders' claim. For at least two reasons, simply providing more housing will no eradicate overcrowding.

Firstly, some Aboriginal families prefer to live communally in a small dwelling. Such arrangements afford these families the opportunity to pool resources and jointly navigate the housing system. As one interviewee explained, some Aboriginal people choose to live together when other housing options are available to them because of the security and support that such well-established and cultivated arrangements afford. Like those who own their own homes, living together within extended family units can be an expression of self-governance.

A second reason why simply increasing housing stock will not eliminate crowded living conditions is that such responses do not address the complex mobility processes that often produce overcrowding. In the interview excerpt above for example, the research participant instinctively drew the links between Aboriginal mobilities and overcrowding. The cause of overcrowding in that example was the sudden arrival of visiting relatives, not a chronic long-term shortage of housing within the town. In Meekatharra, where overcrowding is reportedly widespread, the most common cause is frequent visiting amongst 'transient' individuals (Fewster 2003). Aboriginal people who have no permanent dwelling place of their own, or are highly mobile, commonly bunk with relatives and friends, creating overcrowded conditions and placing pressure on host families (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HORSCATSIA) 2001: 88).

Visitors and the overcrowded conditions they produce are a common cause of tenancy failure for Aboriginal people in Western Australia (EOC 2004; Gordon, Hallahan & Henry 2002; Hansen & Roche 2003). Placing strain on the resources of existing tenants, overcrowded housing situations can cause fighting and feuding as well as property damage and maintenance fees. Unpaid fees often lead to debt accumulation, eviction, and preclusion from re-entering the public housing system until debts have been cleared. Evicted tenants usually seek alternate accommodation with other relatives, producing further overcrowding and further mobility. As Fig. 2 illustrates, overcrowding is therefore both a cause and a result of alienation from the public housing system.

This cycle of alienation is in many ways underwritten by mobility processes. Indeed an Environmental Health Officer in Yamatji country explained that in Meekatharra, many Aboriginal people had been frozen out of the public housing system because of debt accumulation. Consequently, 30-40 per cent of Aboriginal households were crowded, whilst 13 or 14 Homeswest houses sat vacant.

RENTAL ARREARS—EFFECTS AT THE SOURCE

Whilst overcrowding is one of the primary impacts of mobilities at destination places, there are similarly 'disruptive' impacts on housing services at source places. For example, existing tenants who choose to leave their place of residence for extended periods may end their tenancies without giving the agreed notice of 21 days. Interview data suggests that abandoned tenancies are relatively common in Yamatji country. Instead of ending their leases, other tenants who wish to travel may leave their property in the care of a relative. In the first instance, cancelled tenancies accumulate rental arrears. In the second instance, properties left in the care of relatives are reported to frequently incur considerable repair and maintenance bills that become the financial responsibility of the absent tenant.

These scenarios are further evidence of divergent conceptualisations between service providers and some of their Aboriginal tenants about the purpose and role of housing. For Homeswest, tenancy requires stationary lifestyles and individual responsibility. By contrast, some Aboriginal tenants see housing as merely a shelter, the responsibility for which can change and be shared amongst various family members depending on circumstances. Here, housing is not a consideration which binds a person to a physical locale, particularly in the context of other more pressing considerations for which travel may be required.

Fig. 2. A cycle of alienation from the public housing system

Preclusion from the public housing system

Overcrowding

Anti-social behaviour / property damage

Eviction

Debt accumulation
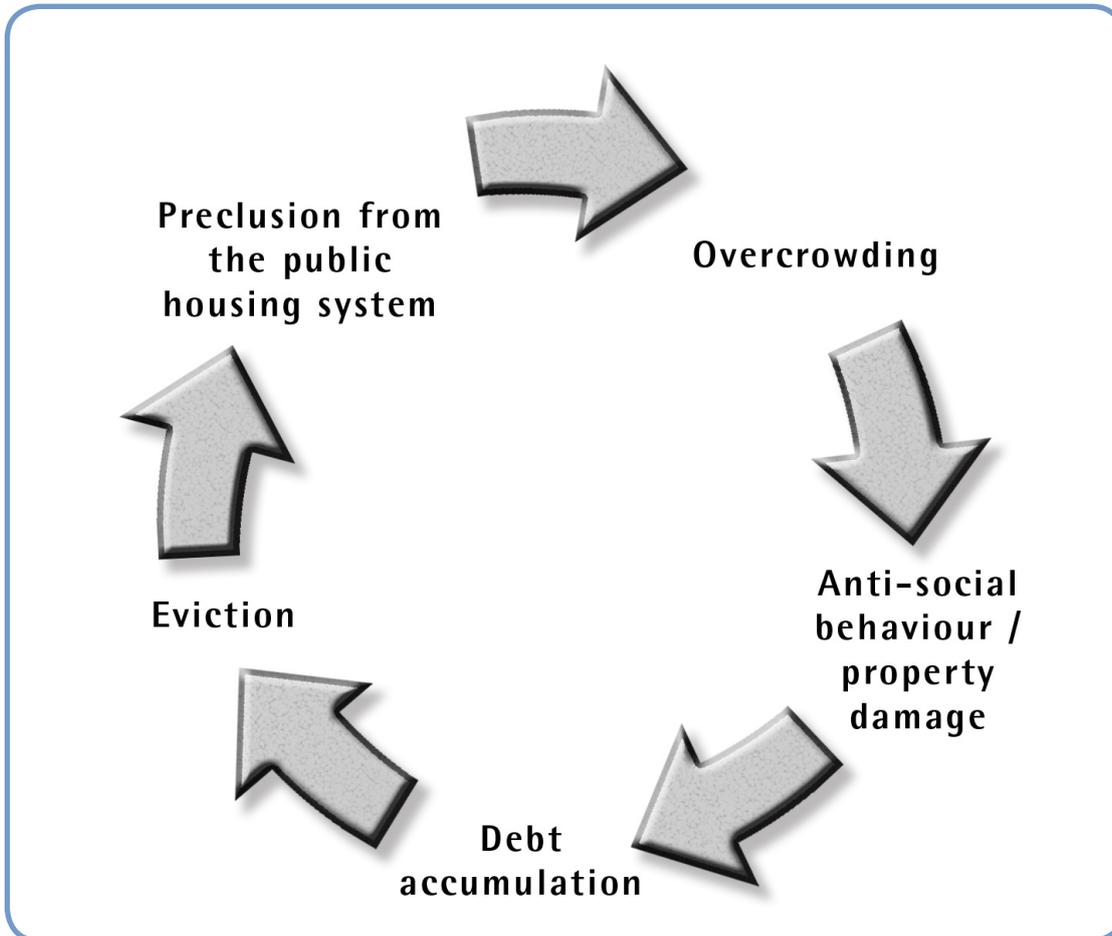
Source: adapted from Prout (2007: 124)

CYCLICAL DISENGAGEMENT

Homeswest procedural and administrative arrangements are also predicated on Eurocentric conceptualisations of mobility and housing that are often incongruent with Indigenous lived experience. The 2004 EOC report identified certain assumptions inherent in Homeswest policy which disaffect many Aboriginal clients (EOC 2004). For example, Homeswest communication with housing applicants and existing or previous tenants is primarily undertaken through written correspondence. However, many prospective tenants do not have a permanent mailing address, and therefore may not receive important communications. The consequences of non-response can be significant. An applicant may lose their position on the waiting list if they do not respond promptly to an offer of accommodation. Previous or existing tenants may accumulate large debts or be evicted if they do not respond to notices of rental arrears or repair and maintenance charges. In the 2001 report by HORSCATSIA, one submission referred to such systems of communication as 'intimidating and incompatible with the often transient lifestyles of many Indigenous young people' (HORSCATSIA 2001: 88).[7]

One of the most tangible expressions of the restricted, apprehensive, and often contested engagement that many Aboriginal tenants have with the public housing system is an indifference toward or limited knowledge of tenant rights and responsibilities in the initial phase of tenancy. Public housing available to Aboriginal people is often of a poor quality (EOC 2004). However, new tenants may not necessarily understand the significance of the property commission report and consequently find themselves becoming financially liable for damage to the property caused by previous tenants. Such situations are relatively common in Yamatji country:

> ... I went out a week after these people had been in there, they're very clean people, et cetera et cetera, and I put together three to five pages of defects in the house. Now if I hadn't done that, those people would be charged tenant liability on vacating because of the poor workmanship or the stuff that wasn't done before those people went into the house ... those people end up with a tenant liability bill that they can't surmount, they can't get over. And once it's actually in the system, they can't get over it. So once they're there, they can't get back on Homeswest housing. So while there's vacant houses, there's people waiting but they can't get on a waiting list, because they haven't paid their tenant liabilities (Interviewee B).

Clearly, response to the 'intimidation and incompatibility' of many Homeswest procedural and administrative arrangements is often further disengagement from the public housing system. This alienation only serves to entrench the importance of alternate, often familial, networks of support and reciprocity—what Peterson and Taylor (2003) have termed the 'Indigenous moral domestic economy'—and the mobilities required to maintain them (see Hamilton 1987; Prout 2007).

HOUSING AVAILABILITY AND MOBILITY CHOICES

The geographical availability of housing stock also considerably shapes and informs Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country. It has been noted that a lack of availability of housing, particularly in cities and large regional centres, can cause overcrowding. It can also prompt prospective Aboriginal tenants to seek housing elsewhere. Rural depopulation and tenancy eviction have resulted in increased Homeswest vacancies in small, more remote towns such as Meekatharra. Several interviewees described a recent influx of Aboriginal people to Meekatharra because of the availability of State housing there. The combination of these vacancies, and a shortage of housing options elsewhere, draws Aboriginal families from outside the area into the town.

One interviewee suggested that the widespread availability of housing in smaller rural towns made it much easier for Aboriginal people to move frequently between these towns in the region and take up Homeswest tenancies. Indeed several interviewees believed that the simplicity of the process of applying for and being offered housing in these more remote towns facilitated greater movement. When a person got tired of being in one place, they could simply move on to the next and be granted housing there. The sentiment of a number of mostly non-Indigenous local residents was that government service delivery practices too often pandered to the flippant whims of 'transient' Aboriginal people.

TARGETING

A final manifestation of the contested and co-constructed relationship between the provision of public housing and Aboriginal spatiality is Homeswest's continual struggle to effectively target its construction and property acquisition programs to the needs of a transient or itinerant Aboriginal client base. The challenge for Homeswest is one of rationalising sunk costs in fixed infrastructure to service a spatially dynamic and changing population base.

In order to ensure the 'responsible' allocation of resources, Homeswest annual construction plans are based on a needs analysis derived from waiting lists. However, many Aboriginal people have been frozen out of the public housing system because of evictions and/or accumulated debt. Unable to register their housing needs with Homeswest, they consequently live in crowded conditions with extended family. Because of circumstances such as these, waiting lists are unable to accurately capture the true Aboriginal housing needs in many rural towns. Further, housing stock expansion plans are developed annually whilst the housing needs of Aboriginal people do not conform to these timeframes and may change substantially at shorter intervals. These service planning measures are another example of incompatibility between the structure of the public housing system and Aboriginal lived experiences.

STABILITY VS. FLUIDITY

In describing Noongar interactions with the public housing system in Western Australia's south-west, Hansen and Roche (2003) capture and distil the essence of wider Aboriginal experiences:

> The strength and priority of Aboriginal values in relation to their family, culture and spirituality is well known within multicultural Australia, yet remains a barrier to maintaining housing without societal conflict. Public Housing codes of behaviour especially demand tight restraints on size and occupancy of rental properties. It is not easily acceptable for family 'visitors' to come and stay for a while, or for tenant families to wander for a term elsewhere. The idea of the Aboriginal 'fluid' family that shares and travels and expands and contracts according to family needs and events is in conflict with a system that requires an ideal of family 'stability.' The system is designed for a family structure that rarely changes and where applicants know in advance whether they will need only one bedroom or two or three. The system cannot easily respond to the level of change and spontaneity that an Aboriginal family needs to have flexibility, freedom and life, nor comprehend the confusion and despair of struggling to comply with rules to keep their haven from homelessness.

> Thus the culture that is the Noongar's intricate family support system can also become the trigger towards eviction within mainstream housing. During times of funeral or family illness or crisis, rent becomes food provision for extended family members. Every room in the house is potential shelter for weary long-travelled mourners to lay their head. Paintwork becomes damaged, fly-screens are torn, keys are lost and windows are broken to gain entry. Water use escalates, as do costs for heating, cooking and lighting. The home becomes noisy. The children play and fight and laugh and throw a stone or two. The neighbours complain (Hansen and Roche 2003: 5).

Here, Hansen and Roche paint a picture of the disconnect between the static and sedentary nature of the public housing system, and the more fluid familial structures and socio-cultural practices of many of their Aboriginal clients. Their notions of 'stability' and 'fluidity' reflect the contested experiences of many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country as they navigate the public housing system.

HEALTH

Like housing, an analysis of the relationship between the provision of government health services and Aboriginal spatial practices must necessarily begin with some understanding of the ways in which both service delivery models and Aboriginal peoples construct and understand 'health'. Social and medical research continues to identify a widening gap between the health of Indigenous and non-Aboriginal Australians (see e.g. the Australian Medical Association 2002; Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2001). The life expectancy of Aboriginal Australians remains approximately 17 years lower than that of non-Aboriginal Australians (Taylor 2006). The incidences of chronic disease are far greater amongst

the Indigenous population (Howitt, McCracken & Curson 2005). Further, Australia lags behind Canada, New Zealand, and the United States in terms of health outcomes for its Indigenous population (Howitt, McCracken & Curson 2005; Watson, Ejueyitsi & Codde 2001).

However, Bond (2005: 40) cautions against discourse about Aboriginal health that continues to 'discursively reverberate around the inadequacies, impairment and hopelessness of our people, families and communities'. Bond astutely challenges the ways in which Aboriginal people have been constructed within a health system which measures its success solely on the basis of its ability to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health statistics. She argues:

> One must also question the practice of continually highlighting the health inequalities facing Aboriginal people without explaining the precise causal pathways … The perception of Aboriginality as nothing more than a label, a health risk, and predicator of unhealthy behaviours within Indigenous public health practice reinforces stereotypical ideas of Aboriginality, demonises those who possess it, and disconnects Aboriginal people from their own identities in a manner similar to past oppressive policies of colonisation, assimilation, segregation and integration. Critically examining such practices is not just a matter of 'political correctness', but a vital step that will have profound and meaningful implications for the health of Aboriginal people (Bond 2005: 41).

Following Bond's appeal, this discussion explores one of the 'causal pathways' to health inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people: the often unreconciled relationship between the delivery of public health services and the spatial practices of Aboriginal people.

HEALTH SERVICES CHASING CLIENTS

In Yamatji country, certain strategies have been employed by the public health service at a regional level to respond to the challenges of servicing the needs of a changing population. The Health Director for the Midwest Health Service described two programs—the Health Worker Program and the Therapy Assistance Program—that have been implemented to adjust to changing population compositions, and to what he described as a trend of declining rural populations:

> *Changing that mix is quite challenging and that's why we have a lot of generic positions like Health Promotion, that can have some flexibility in re-targeting the issues that they're dealing with. But they're quite generic positions so the issues could change and we can still deal with it without necessarily changing the skill mix of the staff that we've got … we've gone on a program of embarking on training Aboriginal health workers to do a whole range of things. And here in Geraldton and the Midwest we're looking at therapy assistance we call it, to do a whole range of things where, under supervision, those categories of employees can do a whole range; speech pathology, occupational therapy. And they can actually be the person that's implementing the programs under the supervision of a qualified therapist. We find that's really successful because those people, particularly the Aboriginal health workers, are the people that are there for the longer term. They're not going anywhere generally. To put our allied health staff out into Meekatharra, we would have a huge turnover rate because people would go stir crazy out there and just move on to the next challenge. So we've deliberately tried to resource and train people that we think are going to be long term. Not necessarily in the town, but within the district, who will be there and can continue to provide a level of service when the professionals come and go all the time (Interviewee F).*

Whilst acknowledging the complexity of such a task, the director described these programs as having been successful in addressing the issues of rural depopulation, changing service needs, and the necessity of service rationalisation.

At a more localised level however, Aboriginal itinerancy is interpreted by some health service providers as a factor which considerably mitigates against effective service delivery and improved health outcomes for Aboriginal people. Frequent mobility is often associated with sporadic, indifferent and/or apprehensive engagement with public health services, resulting in service discontinuity, resource wastage, and poor health outcomes.

DISCONTINUITY OF SERVICE

> *With them being so mobile makes it difficult in doing your service because you're doing one thing and then they're gone for a month or two months and for your own self it becomes quite frustrating when you're trying to work. And then you do spend quite a lot of time trying to chase them up. Your paper work's notorious—which Geraldton and Perth don't understand because you might have to leave a file open for a month or two months and because the policy is that if you don't see someone for three months then you close their file. But ... people do go away for long periods of time but always come back. And then they come back and see you and then they're gone again... And of course then you go to all the bosses and everything, they don't understand so they bitch* (Interviewee G).

As this interview excerpt suggests, Aboriginal transiency interrupts ongoing treatments. It can also increase administrative tasks of tracing records or updating files. At the time of fieldwork, there was no State-wide health database where patient records could be accessed across the five State health regions. Therefore, if patients needed medical assistance whilst travelling outside of the health region in which they were normally treated, their medical histories were not available. A doctor from the Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Services (GRAMS) described the challenge of maintaining the medical records of a transient client base:

GRAMS:
Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Services

> *It makes it difficult—the thing is we've got about fourteen, fifteen-thousand files of which perhaps five, six thousand of them are active, very active files (that's people we see on a regular basis). But if a patient—and I think it's because of this fact that they move around so much, but we have files here that the patient was last here in 2001 and then all of a sudden he walks in as if he was here yesterday. And 'I just want to get my medicine again.' 'But you haven't been here ....' 'Oh yeah, I was just in Meekatharra.' And then we just phone Meekatharra and find out on what medicine he was the last time and update his file here and then he's ready to go again. But it makes it sometimes a bit hard because we have problems with compliancy, patients staying on their medicine. Lots of our administrative time at the front desk are dictated by other practices around the place phoning in; 'We've got a patient of yours here and we'd just like to know on what medicine he was.' Or that sort of stuff. If they run out of medicine visiting Perth for instance* (Interviewee H).

When records are not available, they can be transferred where required. However, these administrative transfers can result in a failure to keep records properly updated. Incomplete records may lead to inappropriate treatment and some patients in high-need situations can consequently become very sick, perhaps even die, because they 'fall through the cracks of the system'.

In addition to disrupted treatment programs and resource-taxing record keeping, frequent Aboriginal mobility can also impede effective service follow-up:

> And sometimes the follow-up, to be honest, is hard because they'll be seeing the doctor in—say they see the doctor in Meekatharra, and then they go home to Cue, or go home to Magnet or go home to Sandstone or go back out to Burringurrah. Where's the follow up? We don't have systems in place for follow-up sometimes. And I mean broader follow-up. Someone has a bub here in Geraldton goes home to Meekatharra, where's the follow-up? Is there much? I mean, we try, but sometimes it's that access that inhibits the follow-up too (Interviewee I).

A number of service providers described the difficulty in establishing post-care contact with patients who are highly mobile. They may have no permanent address for correspondence. They may not be contactable to make necessary follow-up appointments. In each case, Aboriginal mobilities are understood to fragment the effective delivery of health services which endeavour to improve their health outcomes. Service providers can quickly form the conviction that their work is essentially futile.

RESOURCE WASTAGE

Several interviewees also suggested that Aboriginal mobilities engender significant resource wastage for health services:

> So for today for instance, you might have a major plan organised for today right. You might be bringing in specialists ... say it's trachoma screening. And yet, we could fly someone in today, we could have all the gear ready, the whole—everyone could know, we could have all the consents done by the parents, everything, and there's a funeral on so actually no-one turns up because we've got a funeral on. Or it could be a funeral on at Wiluna, so everyone will leave town. You could be bringing in a specialist that cost you $1500 a day and you could be bringing in another specialist who works with him who could cost you $300 or $400 and then you've got accommodation and airfares and everything and in fact when they get here, they can do no work because there's actually no-one to do it on. Because for Aboriginal people, the reason behind the transiency is much more important than anything else. But the difficult thing for us is that those same people could come in Monday morning and abuse the woopie out of you because 'my kids ear is really crook and when the hell are you gonna do something about it?' And you go 'Well, remember Friday?' 'Yeah, well, I was busy Friday.' And that creates huge difficulties because, the Aboriginal people demand that they be able to live the lifestyle that they want but there has been—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 (Interviewee A).

In another scenario, a health worker described arranging patient visits to specialists in Perth, and finding out the day of the appointment that the patient has left town. Airfares to Perth, accommodation bookings, and the cost of the specialist appointment may all then be lost because of seemingly impetuous mobilities.

CLIENTS CHASING HEALTH SERVICES

Clearly, some Aboriginal mobility practices unsettle health programs and hinder positive health outcomes for Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. However, the location and nature of health services—which necessitates patient inflow into regional hospitals and town clinics—also impact on Aboriginal spatiality in the region.

With the widespread adoption of neo-liberalist approaches to resource rationalisation, health services in Australia are being increasingly withdrawn from rural and remote areas and concentrated in larger urban centres. In Yamatji country, for example, most services have been concentrated in the regions' largest centre, Geraldton. Smaller, more remote towns throughout the region are serviced by single-employee nursing posts which emphasis primary health prevention. Being a district centre, Meekatharra has a larger primary health care service and a small, sparsely staffed hospital. Specialist services are available to these towns through a range of fly-in fly-out rotating visitations by optometrists, speech pathologists and podiatrists. This combination of service withdrawal and increased health risks amongst the Aboriginal population is changing the spatial practices of many Aboriginal families:

> SP: *Does the way in which health services are delivered influence people's patterns of movement and transiency in the region?*
>
> I: *Yeah, to some extent. But that's not really a problem with the health service. It's a problem with the small size in our communities. You can't have an old person's home in bloody Sandstone, because it's just not big enough. So people will travel—people with chronic disease may travel to it. Renal dialysis classic example. You've probably had it pointed out to you several times. Families will move to Perth because their husband's on renal dialysis. Then he might get sent back here to Geraldton. After he's been stabilised he'll come back here to Geraldton stabilised. Family will move back with him to Geraldton. Mum might move down as well as brothers and sisters or wife and husbands, you never know who's going to turn up. Depending on—someone might be vacillating between moving out of Meekatharra and not, but if Uncle so-and-so's down Perth on dialysis, and he's got a house, 'Hey, maybe we can live down there and the kids can go to school.' Or 'The boy can play footy.' Or whatever. That can actually, and that's probably a good example of where it does happen. Someone's having a bub. Hubby doesn't stay up there and leave his wife down here. He comes down and they all sort of settle down. And that might be a 12, 18 month exercise ... so I suppose what I'm saying is, people may chase the services if they require them. We've got an old fella down here at the moment from Cue. He said he loved being in Cue, that's his home, always will be. He still goes home every chance he gets. But his missus is crook and they like to be near the hospital* (Interviewee I).

Many people who suffer ill-health, particularly the elderly, either feel compelled or wish to access health services and must make difficult decisions about leaving their communities and country to migrate toward larger regional and urban centres. This is often a troubling choice, particularly for elderly people who may serve important roles within their community and/or feel highly uncomfortable at the prospect of moving to a new, potentially unknown place. However, a number of interviewees noted an influx of Aboriginal people into Geraldton from more outlying areas such as Mt Magnet and Meekatharra, citing health considerations as the primary motivation for population change. Such changes are commonly the product of a need to access dialysis treatments.

DIALYSIS

The Australian Aboriginal population has one of the highest diabetes rates in the world. The diabetes mortality rate for Aboriginal people is 11.3 times that of the non-Aboriginal population (Watson, Ejueyitsi & Codde 2001). In Yamatji country, death rates from the disease amongst Aboriginal men are significantly higher than any other region in the State Watson, Ejueyitsi & Codde 2001).

Because dialysis treatments are concentrated in Geraldton and Perth, diabetes sufferers in advanced stages of the condition have two options.[8] The first is frequent Patient Assisted Transfer Scheme (PATS) subsidised travel either by air or road, to a major centre for dialysis. For most patients however, the cost and logistical complexity of this process makes it impractical.[9] The more common trend is permanent relocation to either Geraldton or Perth.

As the previous interview excerpt explained, the relocation of family members to 'chase' dialysis treatment can have significant ripple effects on Aboriginal spatiality. It is not uncommon for immediate and extended family members to also relocate to be closer to their family member receiving medical treatment. In other cases, the relocation of a family member to a larger urban centre simply extends the geographical limits of the mobility networks within which their relatives feel comfortable moving.

Coulehan (1995) makes similar observations of health and mobility amongst Yolngu people in the Northern Territory. She explains that Yolngu are culturally obligated to 'keep company' with their sick, accompanying them to larger regional centres and cities for medical treatment. She contrasts this Yolngu paradigm of caring for the sick with Western medical strategies that seek to isolate the sick. Coulehan (1995: 217) notes that these widespread, although largely unaccounted, mobilities toward health services place considerable pressure on emergency housing services. Further, since those who move to 'keep company' frequently rely on the provisions of urban-based Yolngu people, such practices create overcrowding and economic burdens that 'threaten the viability' of urban-dwelling Yolngu households.

SPATIAL MOBILITY: A CAUSAL PATHWAY TO ILL-HEALTH?

One implicit understanding shared by a number of service providers regarding the relationship between Aboriginal spatiality and health services is that Aboriginal transiency fosters disengagement from mainstream health services, which in turn contributes to ill-health. Certainly, Aboriginal mobilities often result in disjointed engagement with the public health services. And, according to bio-medical conceptualisations of health, which are conceived upon the basis of measurable epidemiological data and outcomes, the general status of Aboriginal health is poor. However, as Bond (2005) has argued, the narrow conceptualisations of health that dominate in the mainstream can be alienating and marginalising for Aboriginal people. Like housing, this marginalisation can perpetuate a cyclical disengagement from the system. Here again, investment in informal networks of support and reciprocity—the Indigenous domestic moral economy (Peterson & Taylor 2003)—becomes a survival mechanism. Because this domestic moral economy is anchored in notions of interconnectedness and demand sharing with kin, these networks of support and reciprocity must be cultivated and maintained by their frequent utilisation, thus commanding mobility.

Aboriginal mobilities may alternatively or additionally reflect a more holistic understanding of health, where Indigenous people experience 'health' through the broad and fluid processes of cultural affirmation, self governance, and family and community consolidation. Indeed Walter (2004) suggests that for some Indigenous people, the concept of good health might be most closely associated with being personally mobile, not being institutionalised, and not experiencing trouble within kinship structures.

Importantly though, the above discussion also suggests that many Aboriginal people *have* adapted their spatial practices to 'chase' services. In some instances this involves permanent relocation and in other cases, a desire to access health services simply increases people's mobility practices and networks.

EDUCATION

Like housing and health, literature on Indigenous education describes substantial disparities in comparison to the non-Indigenous population (Beresford 2001b; Hunter & Schwab 2003; Schwab & Sutherland 2005). Some of the generalised reasons for these gaps have been documented. These include social and emotional home contexts, intergenerational disadvantage, past policies, and experiences of racism at school (Beresford 2001; Hunter & Schwab 2003). Of these casual factors, the mobility of Indigenous families and the characteristically high levels of truancy and absenteeism amongst the Indigenous student population, were consistently noted causes of comparatively low Indigenous mainstream education outcomes (Beresford 2001b; de Plevitz 2007; Gray & Beresford 2001; Gray & Partington 2003). Gray and Beresford (2001), for example, note that whilst Aboriginal students comprise only 5 per cent of the total Australian government school population, they account for 30 per cent of the total number of truanting students. This of course does not include Aboriginal children who are no longer (or have never been) enrolled within the government school system.

Beresford (2001) explains that education policies generally acknowledge the broader social factors that impact on Aboriginal school attendance, but do not demonstrate a systematic understanding of causation, and thus fail to adequately address them. Henderson (2001) has also argued the need to better understand the context of student movers. Following Henderson, this case-study explores the context of Aboriginal engagement with the mainstream education system in Yamatji country, focusing particularly on issues of mobility and immobility.

Engagement with the mainstream education system varies dramatically amongst Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. Like housing, education was historically used as a tool of the colonial project; modified according to different phases of government policy (Beresford 2003b). Fink (1960) noted that even by the 1950s, few education opportunities were available to Aboriginal students in the Murchison. Aboriginal parents were not engaged by the school system and, as Fink (1960) explained, many were pessimistic about the purpose of mainstream education for their children given that few, if any, mainstream opportunities awaited them at the end of their studies.

Today, Aboriginal participation in the mainstream education system ranges from active and voluntary engagement, to compliance and pacification, and in some cases, purposeful resistance. As the following discussion explains, these variously participatory relationships are in many ways enacted through spatial practices.

THE FIXING EFFECT

Many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country consider a mainstream public education part of a natural progression, and regard it as a priority for their children. Because mainstream education is delivered solely through fixed-locale schools, residing permanently in one place is a fundamental necessity for these families. In some cases, the conviction that mainstream education is empowering, and therefore advantageous, has developed through observing particular family members or role models who have followed that path. For others, these convictions have been developed through generational socialisation. Almost every research participant who placed a high priority on their children's education and tailored their spatial practices accordingly was raised by parents with similar convictions. Only one research participant reversed the travelling trends of her childhood when she became a mother. She explained that by the time her children were of school age, the socio-political environment was not conducive to the lifestyle of mobility she had enjoyed as a child:

Well you had to send your kids to school. There was always that ... threat that if you didn't send your kids to school, I don't know why my parents weren't threatened with it but, it sort of hung over us where if your kids didn't go to school, they might be better off at the mission. Not that it worried me much because I was pretty ready to fight them, but my husband didn't rock the boat. You know. 'Just do what you're supposed to do and get on with it.' So I went with the flow (Interviewee C).

Whilst this coercive colonial gaze directly influenced the mobility choices of some parents, others voluntarily made the decision to settle in one place during the school term, perceiving it as advantageous for their children:

All Aboriginal people worked on stations at that time because you didn't have social welfare then. If you wanted a feed you had to work. And there was no jobs for us in town. So everyone worked on stations and just followed the work around ... But when you had kids, you had to move into town so the kids could go to school and be near a hospital (Interviewee J).

THE RELOCATION EFFECT

In the fieldwork region today, both Meekatharra and Mt Magnet run secondary programs and are classified as District High Schools. However, like health services, declining rural populations and service rationalisation have left many rural and remote schools under-resourced and under-performing. Service concentration in metropolitan areas also means that many school programs (curricula and extra-curricula) are not available in small towns such as Meekatharra. In addition, most of the schools in the region experience severe difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff (Prout 2003). Consequently, rural and remote postings are filled by inexperienced teachers who are involuntarily placed there in order to earn permanency within the public teaching service.[10] These recent graduates are learning to teach and require additional support from administrative staff and more experienced colleagues. Compounding the under-resourced and under-performing milieu in which many of these schools operate, the sporadic participation of many Aboriginal students with the education system disrupts the teaching process both behaviourally and academically, militating against a focus on educational outcomes in the classroom.

The deteriorating standard of education offered in rural and remote institutions is a growing concern for many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents, who fear that their children's educational future is being compromised:

There's too many kids that have fallen that far behind and there's not enough effort to help them catch up. Or the ones—they focus on those ones that are behind and leaving the ones that are in front on their own. There's no support for the kids that are smarter than the average in the school. When [my daughter] *finished school, she finished at a grade seven level at year 10. How healthy is that? Grade six, seven sums she was doing at the end of year 10* (Interviewee L).

Similar sentiments reverberate throughout Yamatji country amongst Aboriginal families who are concerned about the standard of education available to students in rural and remote areas. Responses to the declining capacity of schools in these regional areas vary. A significant number of Aboriginal students, with the support of Abstudy, are sent to boarding school in larger regional centres:

Every child has to be given that chance. And I've done that for my kids and I tell them straight out 'I am giving you the chance. What you do with it from here is entirely up to you.' And this is why I sent my boys away to school. To give them that chance. So the reality is, if Meekatharra District was up to the standard throughout the State, then why would I want to send my kids away? I'd rather them be home with me (Interviewee K).

Many parents, however, prefer not to exercise this option. Past experiences within the education system are central considerations for many Aboriginal parents making decisions about their children's education. The common experience of being sent to Perth or Geraldton was almost always isolating and unhappy for the current generation of parents. To avoid boarding school, some parents arrange for their children to live in Aboriginal hostels or with relatives in larger towns or cities where better schooling options are available. Parents often feel more comfortable with these arrangements because their children are still within familiar support networks. However, these fluid exchanges of care and reciprocity amongst family members, particularly in relation to children and youth, can prompt the disapproving and censorious gaze of non-Aboriginal society. A 2005 article in the *West Australian* newspaper described a tenancy dispute involving an Aboriginal family who, in addition to three of their own children, were caring for eight young boys, all relatives from the north of the State, who had moved to Perth for their schooling (Parker 2005). The landlords were threatening legal action unless the family stopped running a 'boarding house'. The family's mother disputed the accusation, explaining that all the children under her care were part of her extended family (Parker 2005).

Other families decide that they must relocate with their children to larger regional centres or cities:

> *There's quite a movement of people out of the remote areas for education. It's not only a non-Aboriginal thing. I left Meekatharra for my kids schooling. I'll be buggered if about three of four people with kids the same age as mine—Aboriginal community—didn't turn up in Geraldton about the same time. Getting their kids to a high school where they can actually have a chance at a matriculation rather than just entertaining them for four years* (Interviewee I).

For some families this decision to migrate is extremely difficult because it involves leaving behind networks of social support and the security of familiarity. One research participant, for example, faced the choice of relocating to Geraldton for her daughters' education, or remaining in Meekatharra to care for her elderly parents. Because of her own past negative experiences of boarding school, she was reluctant to send her daughters there. Thus, either choice involved significant sacrifice: the socio-culturally significant role of caring for her parents, or her children's future mainstream prospects.

Despite the emphasis here on the significant ways in which the availability and quality of education services impacts Aboriginal spatiality, few of the education service providers interviewed identified such impacts. Rather, the focus remained on Aboriginal people who have highly mobile or transient lifestyles. A common perspective amongst both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators was that itinerant lifestyles are not inhibited by the education system: the sporadic interaction that such transiency engenders perpetuates both a poor understanding of the school system and a cyclical disengagement from it.

DISRUPTED CLASSROOMS

When asked what impact Aboriginal mobility practices had on the provision of education services, one educator began his comprehensive response with: *"Well, 'decimates' is too soft a word"*. Indeed the effectual relationship between Aboriginal transiency and mainstream education was perhaps one of the most contentious points of public discourse in the fieldwork region. Many interviewees, even those who were not teachers or school administrators, described the detrimental effects of Aboriginal mobilities on the functionality of schools and the academic progress of students:

> I: *And that's one of the hardest things at school because the kids are just—it's just a complete lack of education for the kids that are just carted around and never face the school because they haven't any permanent place of residency. And that's a big issue all over.*
>
> SP: *So kids coming into school for short periods and then ...*

> I: *Coming into town for short periods, and not even attending school. And we see a lot of that; kids that come and don't attend. They—Aboriginal people tend to shift around a lot for funerals and things and a lot of times their kids just miss schooling completely. And it's got to have an impact on the kid in its later life.*
>
> SP: *The gaps in schooling, or going to different schools?*
>
> I: *The gaps in schooling* and *going to different schools. You set up a program and if you're going to start the program, you want the kid here from the start to the finish if you want to teach them something. And unless you're an exceptional sort of a student* (sic), *chopping and changing can't help can it* (Interviewee M).

The overwhelming frequency and volume of student movement through the towns and communities in Yamatji country makes Indigenous mobility a central consideration facing mainstream educators in the region. According to conventional definitions, both internationally and within Australia, a student is considered 'mobile' if they move schools more than twice within a three year period (Sorin & Ilsote 2006). By this measure, Aboriginal mobility in Yamatji country would be considered chronic. For example, one school principal in the region explained that it was not uncommon for 100 per cent of a class population to turnover in a given year. In Cue and Mt Magnet, it is estimated that between 60 per cent and 100 per cent of the secondary school population is itinerant, and at least 40 per cent of the school population in Meekatharra are not in regular attendance.[11]

Children who are frequently mobile may miss significant portions of school, and consequently fall further behind academically. Some highly mobile families enrol their children at various schools during their travels. However, the characteristically short duration of their stay often impedes academic progress:

> *These kids are moved, and it makes it harder for them to learn. Because they've started a program say this week here, next week they go to Wiluna, which is completely different program or system that they're running. So they could be backwards in their work. They could be forwards where it's too hard for them. So by the time they get back here again, we have to start them back from scratch again. So they do a test and it's more or less, they haven't learnt anything if they're out of school—that's not achieving much. They go right back to where they were when they were here in the beginning. So got a lot on them, it's a lot of impact on their learning* (Interviewee O).

Gray and Beresford (2001) in fact suggest that after several moves between schools, many children never return: 'This drifting away from school flows from the difficulties students have in continual adjustments to new school environments, both socially and in lack of correct uniforms' (Gray & Beresford 2001: 20). Both attendance at numerous schools and gaps in school attendance cause interruption to a child's academic development and militate against program continuity and academic progression. In addition, chronic student mobility has the capacity to comprehensively disrupt school functionality and, consequently, the standard of education for all students.

Movement of Aboriginal families throughout and within Yamatji country means that school classrooms frequently contain new compositions of students. As the following interview excerpt explains, these classroom composition changes compound the challenges teachers face in achieving educational outcomes:

> *Like our Year Eight/Nine class for example, had 100 per cent turnover. That's a lot for a teacher to monitor and assess and report on groups of students. Let alone always having to assess a student's level of work. Because the transient kids often are out of school for a great length of time before they enrol at a new school. So therefore if they've done that a few times, they're missing an awful lot of schooling.*

> *Which means their levels are no-where near a kid who's in school all the time. So a teacher could have 16 kids and yet almost 16 levels of ability. And until the student fronts up and the teacher can assess that level, it's pretty difficult. They can't actually do too much in preparation for them* (Interviewee E).

In environments of constant student turnover, teacher workloads are consumed with tracking the academic records of new students from their previous schools and assessing their academic capabilities. Consequently, strong inter-school, inter-regional, and inter-agency communication networks are considered vital in servicing highly mobile Aboriginal populations. Ultimately however, these tracking and tracing tasks detract from lesson preparation time and curriculum development opportunities.

Varying levels of academic ability in one classroom also make it extremely difficult for teachers to undertake group teaching exercises. Concentrated one-to-one instruction is required, but often not possible. In many cases, teachers simply lack the resources to invest in tracing records and carrying out individual assessments, and developing tailored lesson plans. Consequently, students who are enrolled in a school for only a short time may become passive participants in classroom activities. When they eventually return to the school from which they came, they may be equally as far behind as if they had not attended any school whilst away. Lessons are therefore necessarily aimed at the lowest level of academic ability in the classroom, and many students are unable to be properly challenged academically. Poor academic results create dissatisfaction amongst many parents, but educators often perceive this as a consequence of itinerancy amongst a significant portion of their school population.

In this environment of constant change, academic outcomes are not the only consideration for school administrators. The strain on teachers, who are mostly new graduates, is also very wearing, and the professional and personal welfare of teachers is a constant concern. They often become frustrated when, after having poured creative resources into developing individual programs for children who are considered 'at educational risk' (because they frequently miss school), that child is suddenly absent from school and then returns two weeks or three months later needing to start again.

Compounding this situation, continually churning classroom compositions are often accompanied by behavioural issues that necessarily shift the teachers focus from instruction to classroom management:

> SP: *In terms of kids coming and going, what impact does that have, or does that have an impact on the classroom and teaching?*

> I: *Yes, yes, yes. We have to really really focus on health and wellbeing with our teachers. Because, they need to cope with the amount of movement in their classrooms, and often they are severe behavioural issues ... In schools such as this we get graduate teachers and they cop the toughest of schools. So yeah, it's difficult* (Interviewee E).

Another educator described a lack of an 'education ethic' amongst students who continually move with their families. He suggested that when parents 'cruise' or 'wander', their children do not see the value in education. These children are consequently uninterested at school and would rather play (or be disruptive) than learn. This interviewee described a process of 'code switching' which involves helping students settle into school life and adjust to the rules and behaviour codes which apply there. However, educators described code-switching as a lengthy and resource-taxing process.

When teachers face a combination of additional responsibilities including behaviour management, tracing and assessing the academic progress of new students, delivering lessons to students with a wide range of academic abilities, and developing individual programs for children 'at risk', it often fosters resentment (see also Beresford 2001b). Many educators begin to perceive their work as a baby-sitting service for itinerant

parents rather than a meaningful contribution to producing tangible educational outcomes. Indeed as Beresford (2001b) notes, many teachers disengage from their highly mobile Aboriginal students because they view irregular attendance as so problematic.

The relationship between student mobility, academic progress, and behaviour problems observed in Yamatji country has also been identified by Sorin and Ilsote (2006) in northern Queensland. As part of their study, they interviewed staff and parents from five regional schools (which included Indigenous and non-Indigenous students) about issues related to student mobility. They argued that student mobility can stifle academic achievement, delay growth and development, foster learning disabilities, and have adverse affects on the behaviour and social interactions of students. Many of the consequences of mobility that Sorin and Ilsote observed in northern Queensland mirrored those in Yamatji country. For example, they noted:

> Many of the mobile students were reported to require special support programs to address their academic needs; yet mobility was said to disrupt these programs, and the length of time it often takes to transfer students' records from the old school to the new one can mean the problems are not addressed for lengthy periods of time, if at all (Sorin & Ilsote 2006: 235).

Sorin and Ilsote also observed social problems where mobile students had difficulties in cultivating relationships with teachers and other students. Further, many staff had negative attitudes toward mobile students because of the additional workloads their movement generated. Sorin and Ilsote's (2006) study—perhaps the only other Australian study that has focused specifically on the relationship between student mobility and educational service delivery—provides an excellent point of comparison with Yamatji country. Importantly, the north Queensland study does not focus explicitly on Indigenous mobility, and includes the mobility of students that might be described as far less 'chronic' than that observed in Yamatji country. However, its findings are remarkably similar to those identified in Yamatji country, suggesting that student mobility processes are a fundamental consideration for educational policy across jurisdictions.

ENTANGLED CO-CONSTRUCTION

The relationship between Aboriginal spatiality and mainstream schooling in Yamatji country might best be described as one of entangled co-construction. The fixed and permanent nature of service delivery has drawn some Aboriginal people to live sedentary lives in a single locale. Further, the deteriorating nature of schools in many remote and regional areas has prompted some Aboriginal people to migrate to larger towns or cities. The lower standard of education available in many rural and remote schools is the result of a number of factors including resource withdrawal and staff inexperience. This case study suggests that it can also be at least partially attributed to the more transient student population whose turnover disrupts classroom environments and hinders academic progress. As the education standard of the whole school drops, 'core' parents (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) become increasingly concerned about their children's education, placing considerable pressure on all families to 'settle' when their children reach school age. For more itinerant families, their engagement with the mainstream education system is characterised by compliant or resistant responses to these external pressures. Those who do not comply with this pressure are further alienated from the system.

NON–ABORIGINAL ITINERANCY AND SERVICE IMPLICATIONS

So far, this paper has focused exclusively on the relationship between Aboriginal mobilities and service provision. However, this two-way relationship is also influenced by non-Aboriginal spatial practices, particularly those of the service population. Although non-Aboriginal movement usually occurs for

economic or 'normalised' reasons, it can be equally disruptive to effective service delivery and social cohesion within rural towns such as Meekatharra. This section provides a brief overview of non-Aboriginal spatial practices in Meekatharra and how these impinge upon and compare to Aboriginal spatiality.

As with Aboriginal people, interviewees circuitously identified a 'core' and 'transient' division of non-Aboriginal populations living in Meekatharra (and the wider fieldwork region). The 'core' included those families who have lived in the town for many generations and whose businesses and livelihoods are located there. For them, Meekatharra is home. They have a great sense of ownership over the town and have seen it undergo many changes over the decades. Most of this group of local residents are between 40 and 80 years of age. Many of their children and grandchildren have followed opportunities out of the town. Like the Aboriginal population, many parents concerned about their children's education have relocated to larger regional centres and cities, or have sent their children to boarding school. Growing numbers of this 'core' population have been leaving Meekatharra in recent years because of increasing crime rates.

The more transient non-Aboriginal population in Meekatharra includes public servants such as teachers, nurses and police officers. These workers are usually stationed in the town for a fixed term of between one and three years, although some leave before they have completed a full year of work. At Meekatharra District High School for example, there have been 15 principals in the last nine years. Almost the entire school staff turns over every one to two years. Most of the nursing staff turnover regularly every few months. Others who might be considered part of this more transient group include electricians, plumbers and Shire workers who come to Meekatharra for short periods of up to two years to make money.

Many of this transient population feel socially excluded by the 'core'. To a degree, their relegation to outsider status is the product of aggravation amongst long-term residents about these transients' perceived lack of engagement with, social integration into, or contribution towards the town—a social dynamic common to many small rural towns (see e.g. Dempsey 1990):

> You've got your core that stay here. You know, basically born and bred here or been here forever. And then you have the teachers who can't wait to get out of the place and have to race and go. And everyone says it's like you're doing your time here. A lot of it is seen in that sense. Which then doesn't give the community—when you've got people with that sort of attitude, then they're constantly finding—they don't put anything back into the town. They just can't wait to get out of the place, and do nothing but whinge and bitch. So it sort of adds to the town of being so, oh I don't know, disheartened … the ones that are here for the core have got the friends and all that and are really quite terrible … You can really tell. They're just like the teachers. I can't believe the teachers at times. It's a race to see who gets out of the place first. And when it comes to community … like even trying to get them to buy raffle tickets or something they're not interested. It's seen as a sentence and I find that really sad because Meeka's got a lot to offer (Interviewee G).

A number of interviewees compared the mobility of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents in Meekatharra, suggesting that in many ways, non-Aboriginal transiency was more damaging to the town. Unlike Aboriginal residents, the transient non-Aboriginal population were not socially invested in the town and would not return to it:

> They're a bigger problem than for instance the transient Aboriginal people because this is still their home. [Transient Aboriginal people] might go away for a year, or something, but it's still their home. They come back. And you know, you never see these people again. They haven't necessarily done much to improve the community in my opinion (Interviewee P).

In an almost complete inversion of popular discourses which position Indigenous populations as intrinsically oriented toward movement, one Aboriginal research participant described non-Aboriginal service providers as 'the movers' in Yamatji country. She interpreted this 'constant movement' as the product of a natural non-Indigenous inclination to pursue employment opportunities wherever they arise. She believed these itinerant service providers would consequently never fully understand why Aboriginal people 'stay in one spot'. Even though some Aboriginal people engage in frequent circular, short-term mobilities, their continual returns to 'home-base' and/or containment within country, reinforces a resilient commitment to place and testifies to deep-rootedness and stability. Indeed, as Brody (2000) argues, across the span of time, hunter-gatherer peoples are more 'geographically-fixed' than their agriculturally-based counterparts.

Like Aboriginal itinerancy, non-Aboriginal transience in the fieldwork region results in service discontinuity and the perpetuated alienation of Aboriginal residents, particularly in relation to health and education services. For example, research has demonstrated that one of the most significant facilitators of academic achievement for Aboriginal students is their relationships with teachers (Gray & Partington 2003; Partington & Gray 2003). Clearly, Aboriginal itinerancy fragments the development of this relationship. Equally, however, the continual turnover of staff in schools means that even students who are regular attenders must continuously forge new relationships with teachers who do not, or cannot, sustain a long-term commitment to the school. For many parents, the perpetual turnover of teachers and their reluctance to become involved in community activities during their posting creates further barriers to Aboriginal engagement with the school:

> Often communities would say 'well, we've had a different teacher every year.' Or, 'we've had a different maths teacher.' Or, 'my child has not had the same teacher two years in a row.' So it's about that perception of communities about schools as well. And that obviously is going to affect how they look at schools. So the transiency of teachers I think does have a big impact (Interviewee Q).

Similar sentiments were expressed regarding health services:

> For us, it's really difficult because we are affected by that transiency of the non-Aboriginal community. And so that creates significant problems in providing consistency of service. Because our service is very much modelled on a primary health model—not an acute care services model—that actually requires significant education and significant understanding by clinicians, most of whom have a very targeted, very task oriented focus. 'You have a cut, I'll sow you up, you're fine.' Our focus is 'how did you get the cut, how can we avoid you getting another one'. We'll fix the cut, but we also want to know what caused it and what we can do to stop it. And unless you've got a group of people who really understand and sit well with that philosophy, then in fact you lose a lot of that continuity of service. So one of our biggest difficulties has been maintaining a stable workforce. And to maintain a stable workforce for 12 months is actually a really good result. So to maintain it for anything longer than that is really difficult (Interviewee A).

One service provider who had been living in Mt Magnet for 15 years—an exceptionally long period of time for someone in his role—suggested that to the local Aboriginal population, transient staff are considered tourists: they come in and out of town, and nothing really changes. This perception only further alienates Aboriginal people from the services that these 'tourists' provide. Non-Aboriginal itinerancy offers very little incentive for 'transient' Aboriginal populations to remain permanently in one place so that they can engage more actively with local public services.

ABORIGINAL ENGAGEMENT WITH MAINSTREAM SERVICES

By examining three basic government services, this paper has depicted a continuum of Aboriginal engagement with mainstream institutions. At one end of the continuum, there are Aboriginal people who actively engage with health, housing and education services. For these individuals, access to basic government services significantly influences their spatial practices—either prompting them to make long-term migrations, or remain permanently in one locale. At the other extreme are Aboriginal people who have more passive engagements with housing, health and education services. These individuals generally engage in more transient lifestyles and have more contested and sporadic interactions with service agencies. Whilst some parents maintain that a mainstream education is vital to their child's future prospects, and adapt their spatiality accordingly, other parents move frequently without necessarily attaching significance to the potential link between the number of schools their child attends in one term and their educational progress. Similarly, whilst some Aboriginal people view housing as an essential component of their daily living, others have a more peripheral understanding of the public housing system, and remain at the margins of it.

The passivity that seems to characterise some Aboriginal interactions with government services is exemplified in the story told by one research participant of a man who presented to the Department of Community Development in Meekatharra asking for a welfare ration. Although this incident took place within the last five years, the practice of handing out government welfare rations ceased some 50 years ago. The interviewee told the story to illustrate the point that, for whatever reason, many Aboriginal people do not actively engage with government service agencies. Similar sentiments were echoed by another interviewee who described a recent inter-agency meeting in the town of Wiluna, some 180km east of Meekatharra (see Fig. 1).[12]

> *That's what this whole agency meeting was about last week. Is getting the agencies together to sort of solve hopefully some of the issues we're looking at. And we're still doing that. We'll be doing that for a long time. But, we got a handful of people and we invited everyone in the town. No one wants to come. They'll come to land issue meetings. They'll come to other meetings, but when it comes to education, employment, training, health. Like you try and get a community member to that, they'd all rather go down to the pub or stay at home. Don't care. You know 'just another bunch of whitefellas trying to get blackfellas to do something'* (Interviewee R).

Many interviewees described these various engagements and subsequent spatial practices as a reflection of values and priorities: whilst some Aboriginal people value access to housing, health and education, others are concerned primarily with family and other socio-cultural obligations, and their sporadic engagement with such services reflects this orientation. Although ideological positioning undoubtedly influences Indigenous spatial choices, the above interview excerpt intimates that story is more complex than merely reflecting a bipolar range of values. The comments above suggest that some Aboriginal people have relegated mainstream social services to the realm of 'whitefella business'—an area of governance in which they have little desire to participate. In most cases, this deliberate dissociation from 'whitefella business' is mediated by any combination of the following three considerations:

- historical alienation;

- perpetuated contemporary marginalisation; and

- divergent conceptualisations of health, housing, and education.

HISTORICAL ALIENATION

Because government health, housing and education services were, historically, symbolic conduits for the expression of colonial rule, contemporary interaction with these services is still marked by apprehension, confusion, and in some cases, defiance for many Aboriginal people (see e.g. Beresford 2001b). After colonial settlement first began in Yamatji country, Aboriginal people were excluded from accessing public housing, health and education services for several decades. When they were granted access to these services and institutions, it was generally for the purposes of assimilating them into non-Aboriginal society. In essence, these services became tools for 'weeding out' Aboriginality. For some Aboriginal people, this history of exclusion from and subsequent conditional acceptance within mainstream services produced resentment and mistrust which perpetuates further contemporary disassociation (Sims, O'Connor & Forrest 2003). Today, disinterest in, or alienation from, public housing, health, or education services may in some cases, be a legacy of resistance to these oppressive policies. Of contemporary Aboriginal relationships with the education system, one interviewee reflected:

> We used to ask them to just leave their kids at the gate. And we did this with non-Aboriginal parents: 'You leave your kid at the gate and come back and pick them up six hours later and we'll do whatever we do to them while they're inside the gate'. And now all of a sudden we're saying, 'Well no, schools are really participative consultative places. Come on in, welcome you'. It's going to be hard to make that transition and particularly for Aboriginal people given what—they've only really had access to education in the last 30 years (or a little bit over 30 years but roughly that). That's even going to be more in their minds, in terms of 'Come in. You're welcome. We want your involvement. We want you to participate.' And in lots of ways, schools are—you can't get around the fact they're non-Aboriginal places of existing (Interviewee Q).

A history of alienation from active and participatory engagement with the education system has, for some Aboriginal people, produced deeply entrenched perspectives about the potentially discriminatory or harmful role of mainstream education in their children's lives (Gray & Partington 2001). Their mobility practices, characterised by the sporadic insertion of their children into various schools, may therefore serve to facilitate some compliance with wider societal pressure which insists that all children should be schooled, whilst avoiding wholesale engagement with the system.

PERPETUATED CONTEMPORARY MARGINALISATION

Contemporary marginalisation can also stimulate and perpetuate passive engagement with mainstream services:

> I mean, there's certainly a perception that people don't use the services because they don't care about their health ... Whether it's because they're transient, or whether it's because they are, don't feel welcome at the service is the story. I mean a great example in Meekatharra is, I don't know if you've met a girl; [woman's name] ... Lovely girl. But absolute Meekatharra redneck ... when I told her I was with the Aboriginal Medical Service, she said, 'Oh, where's the whitefellas medical service?' And I was really quick for a change, I said 'up there on the hill' [referring to the Meekatharra public hospital].' It's $2.3 million a year. And that's how it really is. It's a flash medical service designed for whitefellas in a town that's fundamentally black. So there's not a single non-Aboriginal person that has any trouble accessing Meekatharra hospital. But there are a lot of Aboriginal people that have trouble. Not all of them, don't make that mistake. You're probably talking about 50 per cent have no problem, but unfortunately it's the bottom, or it's the 80/20 perhaps. The 20 per cent that really need to, don't. The 80 per cent that don't, can. And that's the perception people see. There's certainly Aboriginal people who are unfamiliar with and frightened of the system, don't come in anywhere near as quickly, as they should (Interviewee I).

As the case-studies presented above demonstrate, the nature of service delivery can be very marginalising for Aboriginal clients in Yamatji country. Intimidating reporting requirements and methods of correspondence such as those implemented by Homeswest, the constant turnover of service personnel and subsequent apprehension about forging new relationships of trust regarding personal matters of health or education can all be deeply unsettling for some Aboriginal people. According to de Plevitz (2007), even school syllabuses based on the building blocks of learning are indirectly discriminatory toward many Aboriginal children. She explains that these programs are predicated on regular school attendance, and many Aboriginal children cannot attend regularly, for reasons beyond their control (de Plevitz 2007: 57).

Perhaps one of the most profoundly marginalising facets of contemporary public services, however, is the stereotypical discourses of Aboriginality that often characterise them. Sims, O'Connor and Forrest (2003) have suggested that many Aboriginal parents and children face marginalising stereotypes within the public education system. Similarly, Bond (2005) has described the alienating impact of the dominant discourses of Aboriginal ill-health that pervade public health practice. She relates passive engagement with mainstream services to a form of self-protection from negative stereotypes of Aboriginality:

> Is it actually any wonder, then, that we'd have to beg 'Aunty' to come along to a presentation where she was depicted as nothing more than a subset of problems and unhealthy afflictions that could be remedied by simply telling her to eat better and exercise more? I remember feeling shame about having enticed community members to a workshop for a free feed, only to have them subjected to the paternalism of visiting health professionals, who, by virtue of their occupation alone, assumed they could completely disregard cultural and community protocols and that they were instantaneously authorised to speak to our old people as a parent would to a child (Bond 2005: 40).

In a moment of casual conversation during fieldwork, one Aboriginal research collaborator echoed Bond's sentiments. She explained her belief that one of the primary factors underlying a pervasive apprehension amongst many of the local Aboriginal population in Meekatharra to engage with service providers, consultants, community development initiatives, and research projects was the desire to protect the fragile remaining sense of self-autonomy they possessed. She suggested that years of government policies which dictated how they could live, parent, and interact had left many people dejected and reluctant to expose themselves to potential ongoing criticism.

There is not scope here to elaborate further on the topic of contemporary Aboriginal experiences of marginalisation in interactions with basic government services. Rather, this brief treatment serves to illustrate that Indigenous mobility may in some instances, be a response to alienation from mainstream services.

BROADER CONCEPTUALISATIONS

A third consideration that mediates Aboriginal engagement with mainstream services is the extent to which accessing such services constitutes a person's conception of being healthy, housed and educated. In other words, the passive, sporadic or contested engagements that some Aboriginal people have with mainstream services may in fact reflect a more broad and fluid understanding of the concepts of health, housing, and education. For example, Bond (2005) contrasted non-Aboriginal conceptualisation of health, measured by discrete epidemiological statistics, with a more holistic Aboriginal understanding of health as interconnected to cultural exchanges and social processes which affirm identity. According to this conceptualisation, frequent mobility could be understood not as disruptive of health but rather, when undertaken to foster and maintain social and cultural networks, as a practice which affirms 'healthiness'.

In applying this principal to public housing, some Aboriginal itinerancy is best understood not necessarily as a product of alienation from or contestation within the public housing system, but rather a reflection of a broader understanding of housing as something temporary which must be adaptable to frequent mobility. Some interviewees also noted that mainstream education represented only one part of a much broader process of learning for Aboriginal children. This holistic understanding of the education process influenced parental decisions about the priority of school attendance in the context of other social and cultural obligations which may require movement.

CONCLUSION

Through detailed case-study material this paper has explored the complex and interconnected relationship between Aboriginal spatiality and the delivery of State housing, health and education services. The analysis has demonstrated that, in various ways and for a range of reasons, service delivery can significantly influence 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 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 leave their spaces and places of belonging and migrate to larger service centres. Havemann (2005) refers to such movements as 'coerced mobilities'. However, some Aboriginal people 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 on Aboriginal spatiality in the fieldwork region is by increasing itinerancy by either expanding mobility networks when relatives migrate away from their communities to 'chase' services, or by perpetuating alienation from mainstream institutions.

The analysis also examined the impact of Aboriginal spatiality on service provision. In each case study, frequent Aboriginal population mobility was constructed as problematic for service provision. A number of interviewees described the difficulties in responding to the changing service needs of itinerant populations. The impulsiveness which seems to characterise short-term, circular Aboriginal mobilities in Yamatji country is particularly disconcerting and incomprehensible to many public servants. The unpredictable nature of many Aboriginal mobilities made the planning element of service delivery particularly difficult. Interviewees commonly described these movements as causing service discontinuity, resource wastage, and poor socioeconomic outcomes for transient individuals. Aboriginal itinerancy was discursively related to ill-health, 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 an 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.

Some interviewees felt that the range of services available to Aboriginal people, and the ease with which they could be accessed, actually assisted itinerancy. For some, such statements were merely reflections and observations. Others maintained attitudes of concern or derision over a perceived pandering to itinerant whims and catering to indulgent mobility practices.

The case-studies 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, passive engagement with mainstream services is a legacy of past discriminatory policies.

These services are 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.

This paper clearly demonstrates the entangled nature of the relationship between Aboriginal spatial practices and basic government services in Yamatji country. It paints a picture of this complex and asynchronous relationship as often contested; provoking an imagery of 'spatial struggles'. The data presented suggest that because the relationship between service delivery and Aboriginal spatiality is in many ways co-constructed, it is inadequate for government service delivery policies to be developed with regard only to the disruptive impact of Aboriginal mobility on service delivery. Careful consideration must also be given to the nature of service delivery and how it shapes Aboriginal spatiality.

The analysis also raises several fundamental questions for the new Federal government. For example, if it intends to carry forward the previous government's agenda of 'mainstreaming' through a process of coercive urbanisation and sedentarisation, how realistic, and indeed how just, is this policy? Is it possible to constrict Indigenous mobility? Perhaps more importantly, should this be a policy goal? Havemann (2005) suggests that attempting to stifle Aboriginal mobility is another form of dispossession because it undermines the ontology of connectedness to family and country that characterises much Aboriginal movement. History would also suggest that past attempts to impede Aboriginal mobility through government policy have failed in their objectives (Prout 2007). A continuation of policies that seek to urbanise and sedentarise Indigenous populations may lead to further marginalisation from mainstream institutions, increased dependence on the Indigenous domestic moral economy, and further mobility.

As the introduction to this paper suggested, the broader questions of Indigenous policy reform must be addressed in a holistic manner, considering the historical, socio-cultural, economic, and geographical context of Indigenous spatiality. The intentionally focused and detailed analysis presented here builds into this context by providing a timely dissection of the co-constructed and often asynchronous relationship between Indigenous spatiality and mainstream service delivery. It demonstrates the pressing need for this relationship, and its corollaries, to be recognised and engaged with in policy debates.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper, the non-capitalisation of the word *indigenous* signifies a collective reference to Indigenous populations in *all* settler-states.

2. Young and Doohan (1989), in their study of mobility in Central Australia, provide the most thorough analysis to date, whilst Gray (2004) and Sorin and Iloste (2006) provide partial analyses in relation to housing and education respectively.

3. Research participants included local council members, business owners, town residents, and service providers in the town of Meekatharra as well as public servants involved with the provision of health, housing and housing and welfare services at local levels in Mt Magnet, Wiluna, Mullewa and at a regional level in Geraldton. However, this paper only includes interview excerpts from those research participants who consented to the use of their words in this format. Whilst some of these research participants consented to be named and/or be identified by their position, no names are used in this paper. Italicised quotes indicate direct portions of tape-recorded transcripts. Non-italicised quotes indicate fieldnote paraphrased responses from non-recorded interviews.

4. For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of Aboriginal mobility processes in Yamatji country, see Prout (2007b).

5. "I" denotes "interviewee" and "SP" denotes the interviewer.

6. This program is administered by the State Government but is jointly funded by the Federal Government under a Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA).

7. The report submission referenced was speaking specifically about Youth Allowance correspondence methods, which are the same as Homeswest.

8. There is one dialysis machine in Meekatharra that has the capacity, at best, to provide for two patients. The next closest treatment centres for dialysis patients in the region are in Geraldton and Perth.

9. Dialysis treatments take several hours and must be undergone two to three times a week.

10. Teachers with permanency within the public school system in Western Australia are guaranteed a permanent teaching position in a public school. However, permanency has become increasingly difficult for teachers to earn. One of the requirements for eligibility is two years of continuous good services within a public school in Western Australia. Given that most metropolitan schools are fully staffed, most two or three year contracts available to graduate teachers are in rural and remote postings. Consequently, many graduate teachers accept rural and remote postings in order to increase their chances of being eligible for permanency.

11. These figures are based upon anecdotal estimations since accurate statistical information about itinerancy is not yet available at these schools. Some schools are developing programs to distinguish itinerancy from truancy in non-attendance statistics.

12. Wiluna is not part of Yamatji country but was included in the study because of the close links between many families in Wiluna and Meekatharra. Aboriginal people in Wiluna are often considered (by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Yamatji country) more 'traditional' than those in Meekatharra.

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