Beyond the Pale: Measures of Mobility in Postcolonial Australia

John Taylor

Australian postcolonial demography, or 'Indigenous demography' as it has become colloquially labelled (Taylor 2009a), has emerged as a form of applied demography in support of attempts by the state to quantify and respond to the social and economic needs of Indigenous Australians as a separately identified homogenous group. In this way it forms part of a social justice agenda that gained impetus by the late 1960s by the calibration of Indigenous socioeconomic change relative to non-Indigenous outcomes as a device for policy formation (Rowse and Smith 2010: 100). This is presently articulated as a 'Closing the Gaps' strategy, with the aim being to bring about convergence in outcomes by shifting Indigenous indicators closer to those observed for the wider majority population. In this sense the underlying approach to policy is one of remedialism, defined by Kowal (2010: 189-90) as 'a belief that lives can be improved by good government', and that 'the lives of Indigenous people, so badly affected by colonisation, can be improved through reasoned intervention'. The emphasis, then, has been on the 'top down' application of initiatives to socially excluded people who are regarded by the state as having little or no agency of their own (Buckmaster and Thomas 2009).

While the tools of conventional social science are well suited to gaps-type analysis — or what Jones (2004) calls a 'demography of disadvantage' — such analysis is achieved with scant regard for the intercultural nature of Indigenous social and economic relations which,

almost by definition, isolate the population in the first place. This is because, in order to establish and monitor the gap, the categories and contexts of postcolonial demography are inevitably reflective of social and economic institutions that frame the lives of the majority population. They are therefore non-inclusive of Indigenous ways of being (Taylor 2008). The outcome is a substantial omission from official statistics of key aspects of Indigenous sociality. This is readily apparent in efforts to quantify Indigenous spatial behaviour, ironically because Indigenous people can, and often do, move quite literally beyond the 'eye of the law' in the sense of administrative capture and control implied by the theme of this special issue.

This is not to say that available statistics on the population labelled 'Indigenous' have no validity or use — I have argued elsewhere that Indigenous demography has been highly productive in Australia and highly responsive to the needs of government. As such it remains inextricably linked to the practice and discourse of public policy. However, I have also questioned whether current demographic practice tells us much about Indigenous sociality, and whether what it does reveal may mislead to the point of compromising meaningful policy development (Taylor 2009a). To illustrate what is meant here, this paper provides summary examples of what official statistics can tell us about Indigenous mobility and it then compares these with other forms of recorded mobility constructed from ethnographic methods. What these latter examples reveal, by way of comparison, is a mismatch between spatiality as expressed by Indigenous groups themselves, and official views of the [same] reality. This leads to a consideration of alternate methods for data collection using categories that are more directly informed by the patterns and structures of Indigenous social organisation.

Categories of Knowledge

Reference to the limitations of official statistics leaves us mindful of Barry Hindess's (1973) critique of attempts by ethnomethodologists to advance an argument that it is 'experience' rather than 'concepts and

rationalist forms of demonstration' that establishes the foundation for knowledge in the social sciences (Hindess 1973: 9). As the argument goes, official data cannot be considered 'as adequate descriptions of specifiable phenomena', nor are they capable of representing 'real world events' because of the intrinsic subjectivity brought to the exercise by the initial observers of events and in the subsequent processing of data (Hindess 1973: 10-13). The issue here, for social and policy analysis, is not that such data constructions are inherently flawed as representations of reality. As Hindess was quite right to suggest, any construction, including those proposed by ethnomethodology, suffers the constraint of subjectivity (1973: 11-12). His point was that 'the evaluation of social statistics for scientific purposes is always and necessarily a theoretical exercise and that different theoretical problematics must produce different and sometimes contradictory evaluations of any given set of statistics' (Hindess 1973: 47).

This view of knowledge as contingent on theory illuminates two shortcomings of Indigenous demography. First, there is an over-confidence in positivism, whereby attention to technical detail and the precise labeling of observations leads analysts 'to equate statistical categories, defined in the first place in order to make measurement possible, with the underlying social reality' (Caldwell 1996: 312). Then, there is the fact that official statistics are afforded a degree of authority in the public representation of Indigenous populations — the way in which they are made 'legible' to the state (Scott 1998: 65; Morphy 2007b; Taylor 2009a) — to a point where alternate representations are devalued, dismissed or simply not in view. As Kertzer and Arel (2002: 19-20) point out, undue focus on the technical aspects of measurement takes for granted the existence of categories themselves as if these exist beyond politics, a sort of 'technology of truth-production'. This reflects the concern of Szreter et al (2004: 6), who highlight a tendency in population studies to apply pre-formed analytical categories to 'study populations' without verifying their relevance. As a consequence, whilst the state can claim to measure events such as the movement of people, and can do so with integrity, it is disingenuous (as Caldwell notes above) to assume that the task of representation necessarily ends there

(as much policy analysis does). For the development of an adequate Indigenous affairs policy, the mode of construction of demographic categories therefore becomes a critical issue. In particular, the degree to which culture (or the 'underlying social reality to use Caldwell's term) is implicated in the process should become a key question for policy discourse: what might official representation be missing or distorting if this is overlooked?

This dilemma for measurement and state surveillance is tied up in the logic of Australian postcolonialism as a form of liberal multiculturalism. As Kowal (2008, 2010) explains, the self-determination phase of Australian Indigenous policy since the 1970s involves a tension over interpretations of Indigenous difference between what she terms 'remedialists', who aim to change Indigenous people in order to overcome inequality, and 'orientalists' who require them to remain different. Over the past decade the tendency has been for policy to shift away from the latter view towards the former (Sanders 2010). From the point of view of demography, what is of interest is that both of these positions stem from a view of Indigenous particularity as oppositional to the dominant society (Kowal 2010: 189-92). This, in turn, requires a mechanism for establishing difference in order to either maintain or eliminate it, and the official device instituted for this purpose is the broad population binary: Indigenous/non-Indigenous. Statistically, then, postcolonial logic requires that official representation of Indigenous sociality is necessarily relational. The aim is not to give expression and substance to Indigenous difference *per se* but simply to compare aspects of it. Along the way, much that is uniquely Indigenous in terms of mobility and other aspects of sociality is rendered invisible.

Postcolonial Demography

A key event in the establishment of contemporary statistics was the constitutional referendum of 1967 since this paved the way for the enumeration of a self-identified population binary on a consistent basis nationally. Rowse and Smith (2010: 104-6) argue convincingly that the interests of the then Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics in

ensuring full enumeration of the Australian population coincided with the perceived wishes of Aboriginal people to continue to be identified, but without 'distinctions of descent', to produce a self-identified race question in the 1971 Census. This was, as the Australian Statistician put it, for 'general interest, and in particular to meet the statistical requirements of Commonwealth and State authorities responsible for Aboriginal Affairs' (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1973: xiii). In that census, and again in 1976, respondents were invited to self-identify their 'racial origin' as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, European or Other. With subsequent variation (dropping the term 'racial' and asking directly if people are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin or not), this form of question has provided the basis for constructing an official population binary, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, ever since. In truth, the Bureau had already created an 'identified Aboriginal population' on an effectively similar basis with the release of a monograph in 1969 that tabulated 'Aboriginal' against total Australian population characteristics (Rowse and Smith 2010: 100), but it was the 1971 Census that established the means to do this in a statistically consistent manner.

Notwithstanding the opportunity for self-identification presented by these developments, the state still controls the categorisations available and, therefore, the prism through which Indigenous sociality and spatiality is constructed for the purposes of service delivery, policy deliberation and so on. The effect is to simplify complexity and to overlook essential workings of Indigenous sociality, especially in remote areas where Indigenous people find themselves on the margins of market society and where they are frequently mobile for non-market related reasons. To the extent that Indigenous mobility practices are acknowledged, these are invariably seen from a neoliberal market perspective as an obstacle to useful participation and as a by-product of welfare dependence (Hughes 2007: 21-3, Johns 2008, 2011: 280-1). By this logic, a corollary of participation is heightened sedentarism or, if not, then at least mobility for the precise purposes of labour market engagement and service access (Gregory 2006: 130-4; Johns 2008). As Austin-Broos (2009: 7) observes from the perspective

of Arrente transformations, in the postcolonial world Indigenous self-determination is fine as long as the outcome is modernity and a 'disembedding' from kin-based community. Invariably, this means modifying behaviour including aberrant (non-market related) mobility.

The fact is, though, for many Indigenous people, especially in very remote parts of the continent, life on the social and spatial periphery of market society continues to be the primary experience. While individuals are inevitably encouraged into the market by actions (mostly) of the state, there remains an adherence to practices of relatedness within kin-based structures. One enduring feature is 'hyper-mobility' — movements stimulated and shaped by spatial relations to nodal kin and connections to country (Morphy 2010). Woven in here is travel, often seasonal, associated with customary land use and ceremony (Altman 1987, Young and Doohan 1989, Povinelli 1993). Other movement is highly contingent and includes opportunistic use of transport between country areas and town and, increasingly, almost serial movement associated with funerals (Young and Doohan 1989, Peterson 2004, Memmott et al 2006, Morphy 2007a: 35).

Wider networks between rural and urban areas are also sustained as diaspora with an emphasis on roots, exile and home (Skeldon 1997: 28-9). This reference to diaspora may seem odd given that internal, not international, population movement is the focus here. However it reminds us that Indigenous peoples in Australia, as elsewhere, have homelands that are now encapsulated by settler societies. For them the story of movement is often one of dislocation; of populations uprooted and compelled, either by force or circumstance, to take up residence 'in exile', albeit within the nation-state. Even where this does not involve relocation to an urban area, but to locations where Indigenous peoples and their institutions predominate, many people still live away from their affiliated country, as guests on someone else's land in one of many centralised townships distributed mostly across remote Australia. This colonial arrangement of mission and government settlements, now re-stimulated by growth-town strategies (Taylor 2009b), undermines endogenous governance structures and brings with it problems of social

cohesion which can also stimulate movement as flight, on occasion, from civil unrest (Taylor 2007: 55).

More substantive engagement with the state and market society occurs invariably as a form of dependency. In line with the state's agenda to close the gaps, such dependency brings with it new requirements to be mobile in order to participate in education, training and employment, as well as to access essential services such as health care and housing. While these forces for change tend to pull in the direction of urban places, movement is invariably tempered and shaped by the continuities in social and economic relations noted above, as well as by an inability to fully engage the mainstream for want of adequate human capital. Spatially, the overall effect is the establishment of 'multi-locale relationships' (Uzzell 1976) involving high levels of circular mobility. Whatever the motivation, such relationships and the short-term movements that they create invariably elude the fixed-period and cadastral measures of Indigenous demography. A fundamental postcolonial challenge, then, is to recognise a risk for policy-making in uncritically accepting social data in which Indigenous sociality is unaccounted for (Rowse 2010: 177). But in order to establish this risk we require some practical sense of the gap in understanding that exists between official portrayals of Indigenous mobility and the social conditions and outcomes of everyday life. It is to this task that we now turn our attention.

State Measures of Indigenous Mobility

The main vehicle for gathering comprehensive demographic information on the Indigenous population remains the five-yearly national Census of Population and Housing conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This includes a question on usual place of residence one, and five, years ago. When compared to current usual place of residence it produces a standard fixed-term measure of mobility in those instances where the geographic unit of usual residence changes. If we add responses to the census question on Indigenous status this establishes the official basis for identifying Indigenous mobility and

its internal and comparative features.

What such data show is that crude national rates of mobility measured in this way have always been substantially higher for Indigenous people compared to the rest of the population (Table 1). However, such rates are greatly affected by the younger age profile of the Indigenous population. As such, the age-standardised rates in Table 1 tell a different story. When age structure is controlled for, Indigenous people are reported to be consistently no more or less mobile than other Australians at the national level. As is generally the case, these absolute and relative rates vary considerably by age, sex and location.

Table 1. Indigenous and non-Indigenous propensities[a] to move, 1971–2001

Intercensal period	Indigenous (1)	Non-Indigenous (2)	Total	Ratio (1/2)
Crude rates				
1971–1976	46.7	40.4	40.7	114.7
1986–1991	44.6	40.3	40.7	110.7
1991–1996	52.2	42.9	43.0	121.7
1996–2001	50.8	42.2	42.0	120.4
2001–2006	46.5	43.1	43.2	107.8
Age standardised				
1986–1991	40.8	40.3		101.2
1991–1996	46.9	42.9		109.3
1996–2001	42.8	42.2		101.4
2001–2006	42.5	43.1		0.98

a. Movers per 100 population

Figure 1 displays age- and sex-specific mobility rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Australian cities and regional towns. Familiar peaks and troughs in the propensity to move are common to both populations and they reflect life course influences such as participation in tertiary education, the labour market, housing market, and family formation and dissolution. Of interest are the much higher rates of Indigenous movement among city-dwellers at almost all ages, especially among young adult females, suggesting not

just heightened participation but also perhaps tenuous participation involving high turnover in secondary labour and housing markets and enduring links to country roots (Gray 1989, 2004; Taylor and Bell 2004).
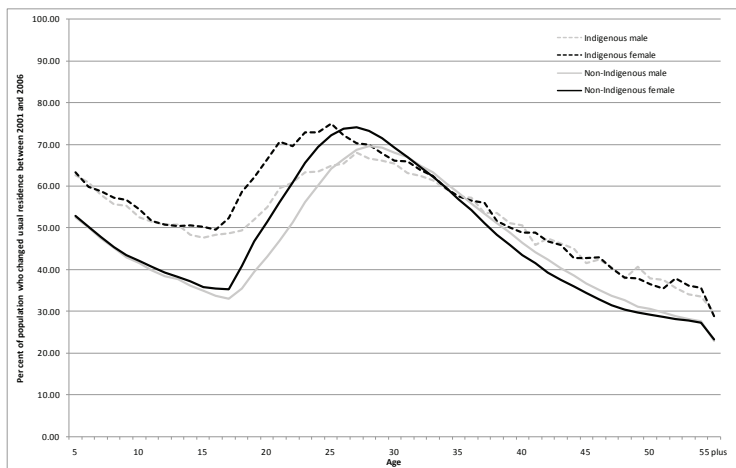

Figure 1 Indigenous and non-Indigenous mobility rates by age in major cities and regional towns, 2001–2006. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census of Population and Housing

Nothing could be more different from this representation of high mobility among urban Indigenous residents than the almost total lack of movement recorded by the census for Indigenous people in remote areas (Figure 2). Here, non-Indigenous mobility is enhanced, largely for employment reasons and especially for males of working-age, but the most striking observation is the very low overall rate of Indigenous mobility and almost total lack of any response to the usual social and economic life course correlates of movement presented by age and sex. The overwhelming message is a lack of migration and participation which, in the sense of permanent movement and market engagement, is a reasonably accurate depiction. However, as an overall marker of mobility and its importance in remote area social and economic life, this only serves to demonstrate how fixed-period measures have limited

utility in representing sociality in populations where circularity in movement predominates.
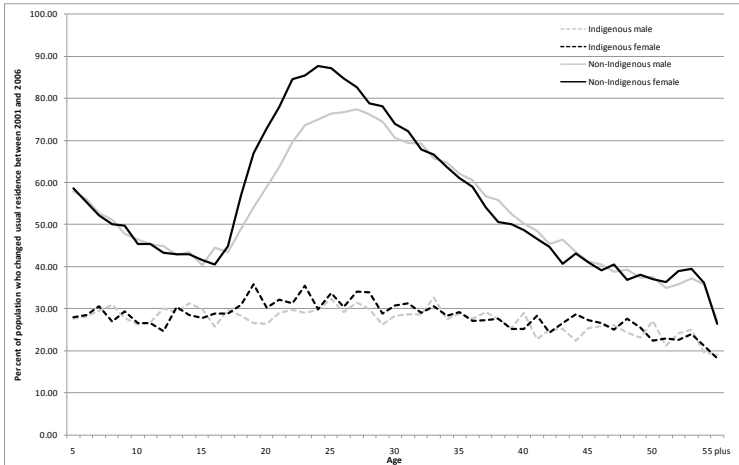

Figure 2 Indigenous and non-Indigenous mobility rates by age in remote areas, 2001–2006. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census of Population and Housing

It is true that census data have some capacity to better reflect temporary moves by plotting place of enumeration on census night against place of usual residence. For Indigenous people, this reveals a temporary shift at any one time of around 7 per cent of the population, which confirms the higher propensity for such mobility among Indigenous people since this rate is almost double the national average. Much of this short-term shift occurs in remote Australia and it almost entirely involves movement from rural areas to urban centres (Taylor 1998, Biddle and Prout 2009). It is also true that the broad contours of this rural-urban transfer are reasonably well identified, but their dynamics and impacts remain poorly understood for lack of relevant census or survey information.
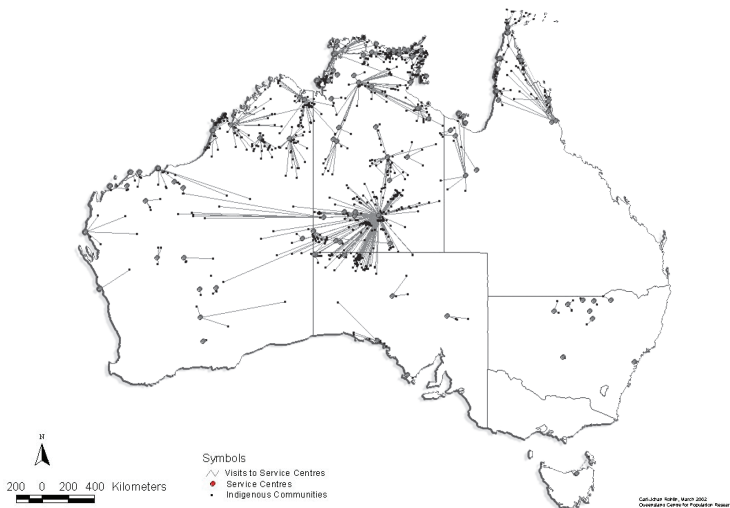
Figure 3 Indigenous population flows for service access.
Source: J Taylor 2006

Among the devices for registering movements of this type are periodic surveys of the ABS, especially the (now unfortunately defunct) Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS). In 1999 and 2001 this recorded the primary destination for individuals seeking access to services of a higher order than those available locally in their own community. The resulting pattern of population flows is shown in Figure 3. This reveals clear spatial networks of interaction defining catchments of variable size and configuration connecting clusters of smaller settlements to particular larger service centres. Some of these catchments reflect historic and contemporary administrative arrangements, others more cultural connections. Such arrangements have been referred to as 'mobility fields' and they were first charted across central Australia by Young (1990) and Young and Doohan (1989), and most recently in the Mt Isa region by Memmott et al (2006).

As we can see from Figure 3, these data are quite successful in identifying the major role played by Alice Springs in servicing vast areas

of central Australia. Altogether, Alice Springs (population 24,000) services some 260 small Indigenous communities, encompassing a combined estimated population of 15,000, many of whom engage in frequent movement to and from the town (Warchivker et al 2000, Foster et al 2005). Moving north, Katherine and Darwin emerge as other major regional centres of attraction, while Cairns stands out in north Queensland. In Western Australia, a string of smaller mobility catchment areas are evident. In each case, the primary direction of movement for services is illustrated and it is significant that not all populations access their nearest service centre. This is partly a function of variable transport links, but in some instances it reflects patterns of cultural affiliation. It is important to know for context that movement of Indigenous people away from remote areas to other parts of Australia is relatively small (Taylor 2006, Biddle 2009), as this suggests that the patterns shown here cover most of the rural-urban interaction that occurs for remote area dwellers.

Finally, administrative sources of data are also available to the state as a by-product of the individual exercise of citizen rights. One such source in Australia includes the records of welfare recipients via the centralised Federal Government benefits and pensions system known as Centrelink.[1] This provides demographic details of all beneficiaries, including Indigenous status and monthly change of address notifications based on determination by the authorities of a permanent residential shift. While these data refer only to individuals who accurately report such changes, and exclude those who are non-compliant or non-eligible, because of growing state surveillance of Indigenous people in certain parts of the country, most notably under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) measures (Altman and Hinkson 2007, Yu et al 2008), it might be assumed that compliance rates are now high, although there are no available data to support this proposition. One question asked when using these data is whether the measures imposed by the NTER have resulted in increased migration into urban areas. To answer this, monthly change of address notifications over a five-year period from 2003 to 2008 for Indigenous residents of remote communities were analysed as part of a review of

the NTER measures (Yu et al 2008: 92-4). The size of flows in and out of urban centres that this revealed are shown in Figures 4 and 5.
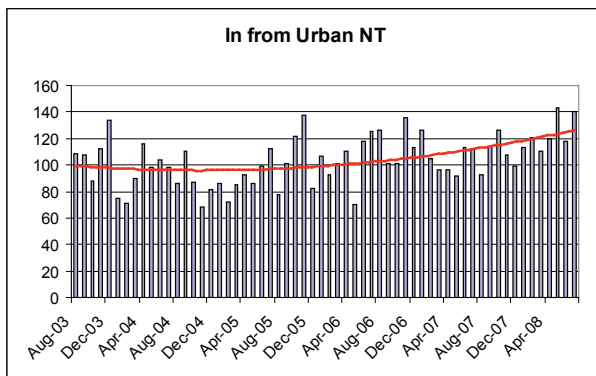

Figure 4 Monthly Indigenous change of address notifications from urban areas of the Northern Territory to NTER communities: 2003–2008. Source: Yu et al 2008: 93
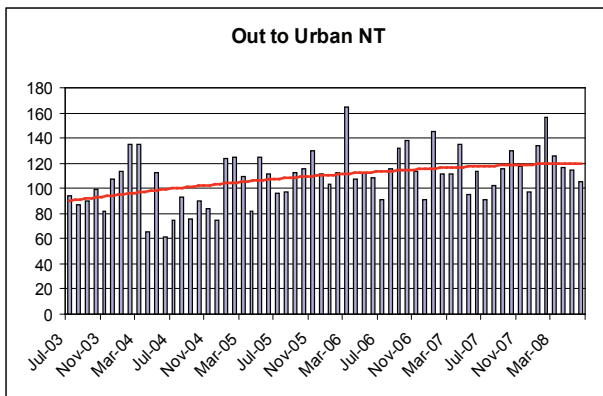

Figure 5 Monthly Indigenous change of address notifications from NTER communities to urban areas of the Northern Territory: 2003–2008. Source: Yu et al 2008: 93

What we see is a monthly churn between town and bush involving just two per cent of the eligible population. While numbers moving into urban areas appear to have risen over time, there were just as many moving in the opposite direction, with no clear evidence from this source of an overall net shift of population from any one area to another. Interestingly, though, submissions to the review from community-based organisations suggested much greater urban in-flows, some of it away from the Northern Territory to other jurisdictions, and much of it associated with access to alcohol and retail outlets (Yu et al 2008: 94). As with census data, it is likely that this gap between low measured movement and perceptions of high mobility among service providers reflects the administrative rules and understandings applied for determining a change in usual residence. It is also likely to reflect passive avoidance of administrative systems on the part of Indigenous people.

One example of the social environment in which such avoidance occurs is provided by a recent reflection on the introduction of NTER measures in the central Australian community of Yuendumu. In commenting on modes of travel to and from Yuendumu, Musharbash (2010) draws a distinction between 'back' roads and 'long' roads (specifically, in the latter case, the Tanami Highway to Alice Springs). The following is a compilation of her relevant obervations:

> Back roads are often the shorter route between places but they are sandier and less well maintained. Long roads are marked on maps, back roads only on some. Long roads have signage, back roads have none. The long roads are busy with traffic — teachers, policeman, contractors and increasingly bureaucrats — but on the back roads you only meet blackfellas. What Warlpiri call a short cut holds little appeal to non-Indigenous travellers. Most likely they see such roads as 'semi-private' especially when they traverse Aboriginal-held lands. This is not unfounded as back roads can be closed at times to women, children and uninitiated men, when initiands travel along them. Back roads connect places that Indigenous people visit regularly such as swimming holes, outstations and favoured hunting grounds. No doubt whitefellas feel safer on long roads where there is whitefella traffic,

but blackfellas feel more relaxed on the back road where they know everyone they pass (Musharbash 2010: 214-18).
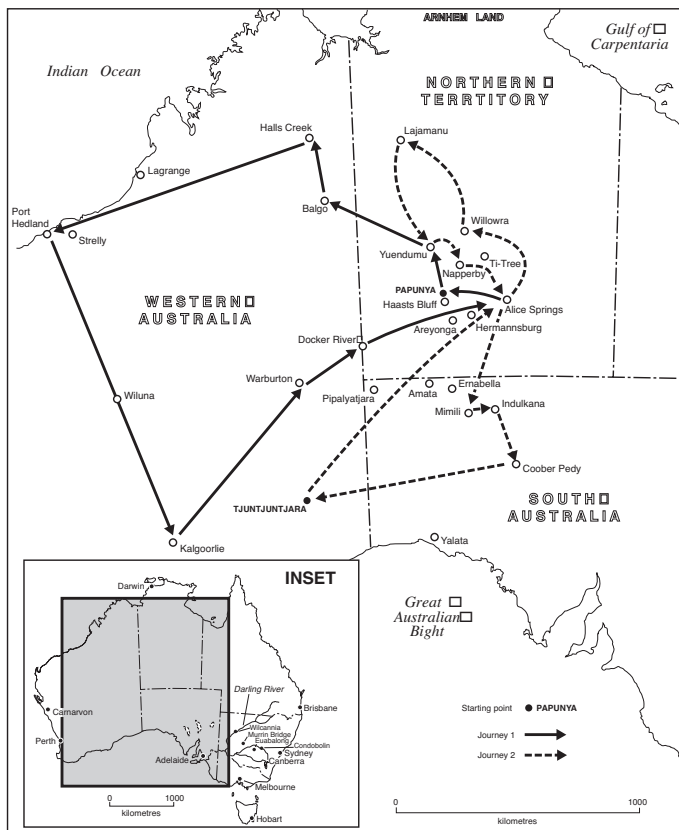

Figure 6 Jilkaja journeys in Central Australia. Source: Peterson 2004

What struck Musharbash most of all, in terms of considering impacts of the NTER, was that roads, and their sociality and spatiality, were rich metaphors for a growing rift or gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds (2010: 224). In short, it suggested that one impact of increased state intervention has been a reinforcement of endosociality.

Mobility and Endosociality

In the 1980s, anthropologists used the term 'Aboriginal domain' to describe the spatial continuity of Indigenous institutions within a framework of welfare colonialism. The term reflected spaces where social closure acted as a form of resistance to state dominance (Trigger 1986) and where Indigenous peoples and their social and cultural institutions predominated (von Sturmer 1984: 219, Rowse 1992). Within such spaces, Blaser (2004) and Peterson (2005) refer to 'life projects' as reflecting the desire of Indigenous peoples to achieve meanings of life that are autonomous and independent of the state. Embodied in this is an inward-looking endosociality that emphasises relational aspects of personhood and the importance of place, and relationships to place, in the construction of personal identity (Peterson 2004: 235). These distinctive aspects of culture give rise, not wholly, but in part, to intense mobility. More to the point, because of their lack of relatedness, or even resistance, to outside influences, Indigenous peoples in Australia often remain impervious to attempts by the state at surveillance.

As a consequence, Indigenous mobility, especially in remote areas, is delimited to a large degree by territories of ancestral belonging and networks of relatedness (Taylor and Bell 2004, Prout 2009), and these give rise to a concept of Indigenous 'mobility regions' (Young 1990, Memmott et al 2006). The configuration of such regions reflects a mix of custodial ties to a traditional land base and spatial arrangements of kin within different language groups. As such, they rarely coincide with the geographic units of official statistics that are constructed with more administrative purposes in mind. It has been argued that such regional kin-based networks are so innately understood that a particular feature of Aboriginal sociality is an essential (im)mobility, in so far as individuals are anchored locationally by 'nodal' persons and places (Morphy 2010). Within such networks there may be constant mobility but no real sense of movement as in standard understandings of a residential shift. This is in line with Roseman's (1971) distinction between 'partial' and 'total' displacement, with the severance of extant

social and economic ties due to movement occurring only in the latter case. One essential construct of mainstream enumeration methodology that is significantly undermined by such partial movement is the notion of a 'usual place' of residence. Some examples of mobility practices among the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land and among Western Desert peoples will suffice to illustrate this point.

According to Morphy (2007a: 42-4), Yolngu who live in a main settlement, but retain strong attachment to a clan homeland, have difficulty categorising themselves as a usual resident of one place rather than the other. She observes that the distinction 'my country/ not my country' is far more salient to them than the western concept of 'resident' or 'visitor' and the possibility of recording movement as a change of usual address is therefore substantially jeopardised. Morphy also identifies those who are constantly mobile and cannot be classified as resident anywhere (so-called 'people of the track') who are invariably young men and, increasingly, young women. In her view they are not, however, homeless in the mainstream sense since wherever they go they will be in the households of more sedentary relatives.

Compounding the problems for measurement that arise from these observations, it is claimed that the level of mobility within such networks has grown substantially since the 1970s due to an increased occurrence of funerals and heightened ritual importance attached to them. In Morphy's words, 'funerals have become the site of community politics par excellence' (2007a: 35), and the funeral of an important and senior person can attract hundreds of people from a wide region and take several months. Funerals are therefore a widespread major cause of intra-regional mobility (Glaskin et al 2008). Unlike other cultural influences on movement, such as ceremonies and festivals that are more seasonally-based, funerals provide the opportunity for large numbers of people to gather throughout the year (McCoy 2008: 60). Not only does this make mobility hard to measure, it undermines attempts to enumerate people in the first place (Morphy 2007a).

Figure 7: *Mobility on the back roads* courtesy of Bill Fogarty

A specific example of such disarrangement is provided by observations made by Peterson (2004) regarding the central Australian male initiation journey (Jilkaja). According to Western Desert customary practice, just prior to circumcision, boys are taken by guardians on a journey to visit kin in the region to gather them together for ceremony. Peterson notes that in the past this was done on foot over several months but, with growing access to vehicles since the late 1960s, movement associated with this customary ceremony has increased in distance as well as in the numbers of people involved. Today, some initiation candidates tour with their guardian using a variety of forms of transport and, along the way, they can gather many hundreds of people in journeys that are truly transcontinental. Figure 7 describes the route of two such journeys observed by Peterson in the 1990s and here we focus on the one commencing at the Tjuntjuntjara community in the Spinifex Determination Area of Western Australia (dotted line). According to Peterson's field observations:

An initiation journey made in October 1994 started at Tjuntjuntjara outstation in Western Australia with the novice and guardian flying to Alice Springs and then on to Willowra [by car]. A leading man at

Willowra then handed the novice and his guardian on to the Lajamanu community: by road Lajamanu is approximately 2,250 kms from Tjuntjuntjrara. At Lajamanu the novice started the journey back. He was accompanied by two buses, one small car, one Toyota Landcruiser and a large truck filled with supplies. At Yuendumu twelve cars joined the party. By the time they arrived in Alice Springs they had been joined by people from Napperby station, Willowra, Ti-Tree and people from the Papunya area. They camped in Alice Springs for two days securing money from royalty accounts set up to assist with ceremonial expenses. They then drove south to Mimili and Indulkana staying two days in the latter place. From Indulkana they went to Coober Pedy, then drove south towards the railway line and turned west along a back country road until they arrived at Tjuntjuntjara. By the time the convoy reached Tjuntjuntjara it had more than 30 vehicles (cars, buses and trucks) carrying some 300 men and a similar number of women and children. They joined over 400 people already gathered at Tjuntjuntjara, the normal population of which is around 200, with the eventual estimated number of people present around 1,200. The Northern Territory group stayed there three or four nights during which time a number of young men were circumcised (Peterson 2004: 233-4).

It is significant that this depiction of movement is drawn from a qualitative ethnography of Western Desert peoples rather than an attempt to quantify via more standard survey or census means. This is because the boundaries, composition and timing of movements become self-defining, open-ended and context-driven. For precisely these reasons, of course, difficulties arise for mainstream measurement systems where the tendency is to impose social and spatial boundedness (Morphy 2007b). The implication here is that a truly Indigenous demography only becomes visible from the ground up, hence the postcolonial dilemma.

Conclusion

For the general public the movement of Indigenous people often goes unseen. It takes place on back roads, firmly on Aboriginal lands and within Aboriginal domains. Statistically, therefore, it also goes unseen and is largely absent from postcolonial demography. While there are points of spatial connection with mainstream institutions and attempts at regulation and close surveillance, as we have seen with census and administrative data, for the most part Indigenous mobility proceeds beyond the 'eye of the law'. For some time, the proposition has been that the social actions of Indigenous people are best viewed as a strategic engagement on their part, where principles of self-determination enable the persistence of customary practice amidst pressures for change. This follows Merlan's (1998) depiction of postcolonial relations as intercultural and it establishes patterns of mobility behaviour that at one and the same time can move both in and out of official scope.

While this still holds empirically, it is increasingly the case that frequent mobility on the part of Indigenous people, or 'walkabout' to use the pejorative (Peterson 2004), is seen as deviant behaviour by a system that privileges, almost demands, sedentarism (Prout 2009: 177-9) or, at least, a willingness to be mobile for the purposes of mainstream participation, especially in labour markets. In the meantime, it is ironic that universal access to citizen entitlements — regardless of location and, often, net of effective enforcement of participation requirements — ensures that Indigenous people are more or less unencumbered, if not enabled, in their pursuit of a preferred Indigenous spatiality. However, in the current politics of welfare delivery conditionality is again ascendant (Altman and Hinkson 2007, Sanders 2010) and the distinct possibility exists that the state may become more forceful in its attempts to dampen or direct mobility to ensure that individuals more fully engage with labour markets. According to Morphy (2010: 376), this would represent the 're-emergence in a new guise of an old colonial discourse about desirable and undesirable forms of mobility'. In her view Indigenous forms of mobility constituted through attachment to country and kin are implicitly seen as undesirable because they

hamper 'good mobility' — that is, the movement of individuals in search of work.

At the same time, as we have seen, extant forms of Indigenous sociality are mostly absent from policy discourse, primarily because they are not made 'legible' to the state in the sense invoked by Scott (1998). Part of the problem here is identified by Morphy (2010: 377) as a failure to take into account 'units of sociality that are larger than the individual, household or nuclear family' — a view of the region and wider domestic moral economy in which individuals are embedded by relatedness (Memmott et al 2006). To the extent that this is so, a key point to note is that the primary organising principles of Indigenous social formation are both spatial (land-based) and socio-relational (kin-based). As a consequence, these invariably do not coincide to produce bounded social geographies that mesh neatly with official statistical units. In effect, the Indigenous cultural map is vastly different from that devised by the state for the purposes of data gathering and reporting (Arthur and F Morphy 2005), and formal statistical geographies are therefore unlikely to provide a demography of Indigenous polities that have rights and interests in particular places — an issue of boundary mismatch that has been well exposed in Australia in relation to land rights (Sutton 1995, 2003; H Morphy 1999).

For some time now there has been growing recognition in the social sciences of a need for ethnographic and biographical approaches to the study of population mobility. It is argued that these provide a richness of detail that enables the proper interpretation of population movement as culturally situated in appropriate social fields and individual and group life courses (Halfacree and Boyle 1993, Lawson 2000, McHugh 2000). In postcolonial Australia, this demands a new approach to data-gathering of a type that is increasingly sought by Indigenous groups, in particular those peoples whose inherent and proprietary rights are manifest in the many forms of native title settlement and agreement-making that increasingly exist (Tehan et al 2006). However, it also extends to the widespread and associated configurations of post-classical Indigenous social organisation that Sutton (2003) refers

to as 'families of polity' involving cognatic descent groups. These he describes as the most visible customary organisational structures of contemporary Indigenous society enabling larger groupings into tribal units or language groups. Importantly, they are the sort of population groupings that constitute the major structural element of public life in contemporary Indigenous society as manifest via widespread applications for native title determination. As such, they provide the means by which Indigenous peoples express collective identities and seek to negotiate for their needs and aspirations (Tehan et al 2006: 3). It is significant, then, that postcolonial demography is unable to delineate such entities.

Nonetheless, these groups do exist as institutional players and they increasingly demand information based on how they themselves view their social and economic world and how they see opportunities and constraints towards the achievement of goals that they define. What they are seeking from statistical agencies is not so much a regular reminder of national and regional gaps in outcomes but rather support for capacity building in the compilation and use of customised data as a means of promoting their full and effective participation in local governance and development planning. In the post-land rights development era, Indigenous organisations have responsibilities to their own constituents and they require unique data resources to fulfil them.

Significantly, such aspirations are now codified as rights in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. The UN Declaration is a non-binding text that sets out the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples as peoples. It emphasises the rights of such peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations. It also prohibits discrimination against Indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It affirms their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social development.

Given this acknowledgment of wide-ranging and inherent rights, it is not surprising that Indigenous peoples and signatory governments

around the world have started to contemplate what exactly their endorsement of the Declaration might mean for the usual practice of government business in relation to indigenous peoples. Discussion at the UN on this matter continues to focus around Article 42 of the declaration and the so-called 'implementation gap', where even good intentions by states in the form of legislative and administrative changes have failed to deliver benefits for Indigenous peoples in terms of their enjoyment of rights (Malezer 2009). This includes the what, how and why of information gathering.

Notes

1   For an example from North America see the study of migration between Anchorage and rural Alaska using data from the Alaska Permanent Fund reported in A Taylor et al (2011: 175-7).

References

Altman J C 1987 *Hunter–Gatherers Today: An Aboriginal Economy in North Australia* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Canberra

Altman J C and M Hinkson eds 2007 *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise and Exit Aboriginal Australia* Arena Publications Melbourne

— eds 2010 *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia* UNSW Press Sydney

Altman J C, Morphy F and T Rowse eds 1999 *Land Rights at Risk? Evaluations of the Reeves Report* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Australian National University Canberra

Arthur W and F Morphy eds 2005 *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia: Culture and Society Through Space and Time* The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd Sydney

Austin-Broos D 2009 *Arrente Present, Arrente Past: Invasion, Violence, and Imagination in Indigenous Central Australia* University of Chicago Press Chicago

Austin-Broos D and G Macdonald eds 2005 *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia* Sydney University Press Sydney

Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies 1984 *Aborigines and Uranium* AGPS Canberra

Biddle N 2009 'The Geography and Demography of Indigenous Migration: Insights for Policy and Planning' *CAEPR Working Paper No 58* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Australian National University Canberra

Biddle N and S Prout 2009 'Indigenous Temporary Mobility: An Analysis of the 2006 Census Snapshot' *CAEPR Working Paper No 55* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Australian National University Canberra

Blaser M 2004 'Life Projects: Indigenous People's Agency and Development' in Blaser et al 2004: 26-44

Blaser M, Feit H and G McCrae eds 2004 *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization* Zed Books London

Buckmaster L and M Thomas 2009 *Social Inclusion and Social Citizenship: Towards a Truly Inclusive Society* Parliamentary Library Research Paper 23 October 2009 No. 8 http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/2009-10/10rp08.pdf Accessed 15 January 2011

Caldwell J C 1996 'Demography and Social Science' *Population Studies* 50/3: 305-33

Carson D, Rasmussen R O, Ensign P, Huskey L and A Taylor eds 2011 *Demography at the Edge: Remote Human Populations in Developed Nations* Ashgate Publishing Farnham

Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1973 'The Aboriginal Population' *Bulletin 9, Census of Population and Housing, 30 June 1971* Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics Canberra

Foster D E, Mitchell J, Ulrik J and R Williams 2005 *Population and Mobility in the Town Camps of Alice Springs* Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre Alice Springs

Glaskin K, Tonkinson M and Y Musharbash eds 2008 *Mortality Mourning and Mortuary Practices in Indigenous Australia* Ashgate Publishing Farnham

Gray A 1989 'Aboriginal Migration to the Cities' *Journal of the Australian Population Association* 6/2: 122-44

— 2004 'The Formation of Contemporary Aboriginal Settlement Patterns in Australia: Government Policies and Programmes' in J Taylor et al 2004: 201-23

Gregory, R.. 2006 'Asking the Right questions?' in Hunter 2006: 127-39

Guillet D and D Uzzell eds 1976 *New Approaches to the Study of Migration* Rice University Studies 62/3 Rice University Houston

Halfacree K and P Boyle 1993 'The Challenge Facing Migration Research: The Case for a Biographical Approach' *Progress in Human Geography* 17/3: 333-48

Hindess 1973 *The Use of Official Statistics in Sociology: A Critique of Positivism and Ethnomethodology* Macmillan London

Hughes H 2007 *Lands of Shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Homelands' in Transition* The Centre for Independent Studies St Leonards NSW

Hunter B H 2006 *Assessing the Evidence on Indigenous Socioeconomic Outcomes: A Focus on the 2002 NATSISS* ANU E Press Canberra

Johns G 2008 'The Northern Territory Intervention in Aboriginal Affairs: Wicked Problem or Wicked Policy?' *Agenda* 14/3: 65–84

— 2011 *Aboriginal Self-Determination: The Whiteman's Dream* Connor Court Publishing Victoria

Jones G 2004 'The Demography of Disadvantage' *Journal of Population Research* 21/2: 107-26

Kertzer D I and D Arel 2002 *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in National Censuses* Cambridge University Press Cambridge

Kowal E 2008 'The Politics of the Gap: Indigenous Australians, Liberal Multiculturalism, and the End of the Self-determination Era' *American Anthropologist* 110/3: 338-48

— 2010 'Is Culture the Problem or the Solution? Outstation Health and the Politics of Remoteness' in Altman et al 2010: 179-95

Langton M, Mazel O, Palmer L, Shain L K and M Tehan eds 2006 *Settling With Indigenous People* Federation Press Sydney

Lawson V A 2000 'Arguments Within Geographies of Movement: The Theoretical Potential of Migrants' Stories' *Progress in Human Geography* 24/2: 173-89

McCoy B F 2008 'Death and Health: The Resilience of 'Sorry Business' in the Kutjungka Region of Western Australia' in Glaskin et al 2008: 55-68

McHugh K E 2000 'Inside, Outside, Upside down, Backward, Forward, Round and Round: A Case for Ethnographic Studies in Migration' *Progress in Human Geography* 24 /1: 71-89

Meehan B and White N eds 1990 *Hunter–Gatherer Demography: Past and Present* Oceania Monograph 39 University of Sydney Sydney

Malezer L 2009 'Dialogue with States Regarding Respect for and Application of the UN Declaration and Follow up on its Effectiveness' *International Expert Group Meeting on the Role of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in the Implementation of Article 42 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* 14-16 January 2009 PFII/2009/EGM1/10 United Nations Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues New York

Memmott P, Long S and L Thomson 2006 *Indigenous Mobility in Rural and Remote Australia* Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute University of Queensland St Lucia

Merlan F 1998 *Caging the Rainbow: Places, Politics and Aborigines in a North Australian Town* University of Hawai'i Press Honolulu

Morphy F 2006 ed *Agency, Contingency and Census Process: Observations of the 2006 Indigenous Enumeration Strategy in Remote Aboriginal Australia* ANU E Press Canberra

— 2007a 'Mobility and its Consequences: The 2006 Enumeration in the Northeast Arnhem Land Region' in F Morphy 2006: 33-55

— 2007b 'Uncontained Subjects: 'Population' and 'Household' in Remote Aboriginal Australia' *Journal of Population Research* 24/2: 163-85

— 2010 '(Im)mobility: Regional Population Structures in Aboriginal Australia' *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 45/3: 363-93

Morphy H 1999 'The Reeves Report and the Idea of the Region' in Altman et al 1999: 33-9

Musharbash Y 2010 '"Only whitefella take that road": Culture Seen through the Intervention at Yuendumu' in Altman et al 2010: 212-27

— 2004 'Myth of the "Walkabout": Movement in the Aboriginal Domain' in J Taylor et al 2004: 223-39

— 2005 'What can Pre-colonial and Frontier Economies tell us about Engagement with the Real Economy? Indigenous Life Projects and the Conditions of Development' in Austin-Broos et al: 7-19

Povinelli E A 1993 *Labor's Lot: The Power, History, and Culture of Aboriginal Action* University of Chicago Press Chicago

Prout S 2009 'Security and Belonging: Reconceptualising Aboriginal Mobilities in Yamatji Country, Western Australia' *Mobilities* 4/2: 177-202

Roseman C C 1971 'Migration as a Spatial and Temporal Process' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61: 589-98

Rowse T 1992 *Remote Possibilities: The Aboriginal Domain and the Administrative Imagination* North Australia Research Unit Australian National University Darwin

— 2010 'Re-figuring "Indigenous culture"' in Altman et al 2010: 153-79

Rowse T and L Smith 2010 'The Limits of "Elimination" in the Politics of Population' *Australian Historical Studies* 41/1: 90-106

Sanders W 2010 'Ideology, Evidence and Competing Principles in Australian Indigenous Affairs: From Brough to Rudd via Pearson and the NTER' *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 45/3: 307-31

Scott J C 1998 *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* Yale University Press New Haven

Skeldon R 1997 *Migration and Development: A Global Perspective* Longman London

Sutton P 1995 *Country: Aboriginal Boundaries and Land Ownership in Australia* Aboriginal History Monograph 3 Aboriginal History Inc Canberra

— 2003 *Native Title in Australia: An Ethnographic Perspective* Cambridge University Press Cambridge

Szreter S, Sholkamy H and A Dharmalingam eds 2004 *Categories and Contexts: Anthropological and Historical Studies in Critical Demography* Oxford University Press Oxford

Taylor A, Johns G, Williams G and M Steenkamp 2011 'The "Problem" of Indigenous Migration in the Globalised State' in Carson et al 2011: 163-89

Taylor J 1998 'Measuring Short-term Population Mobility among Indigenous Australians: Options and Implications" *Australian Geographer* 29/1: 125-37

— 2006 'Population and diversity: Policy implications of emerging Indigenous demographic trends' *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 283* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Australian National University Canberra

— 2007 'Whose Census? Institutional Constraints on the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy at Wadeye' in F Morphy 2006: 55-73

— 2008 'Indigenous Peoples and Indicators of Well-being: Australian Perspectives on United Nations Global Frameworks' *Social Indicators Research* 87: 111-26

— 2009a 'Indigenous Demography and Public Policy in Australia: Population or Peoples?' *Journal of Population Research* 26: 115-30

— 2009b 'Limits to Diversity: The State and Indigenous Settlement in Remote Australia' Paper presented at the European Science Foundation Conference *Moved by the State: Perspectives on Relocation and Resettlement in the Circumpolar North* Arctic Centre University of Lapland Rovaniemi Finland 26-28 October 2009

Taylor J and M Bell 2004 'Continuity and Change in Indigenous Australian Population Mobility' in J Taylor et al 2004: 13-44

— eds 2004 *Population Mobility and Indigenous Peoples in Australasia and North America* Routledge London

Tehan M, Palmer L, Langton M and O Mazel 2006 'Sharing Land and Resources: Modern Agreements and Treaties with Indigenous People in Settler States' in Langton et al 2006: 1-19

Trigger D S 1986 'Blackfellas and Whitefellas: The Concepts of Domain and Social Closure in the Analysis of Race-relations' *Mankind* 16/2: 99-117

Uzzell D 1976 'Ethnography of Migration: Breaking Out of the Bi-polar Myth' in Guillet et al 1976: 45-54

Von Sturmer 1984 'The Different Domains' in Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies 1984: 218-237

Warchivker I, Tjapangati T and J Wakerman 2000 'The Turmoil of Aboriginal Enumeration: Mobility and Service Population Analysis in a Central Australian Community' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 24/4: 444-9

Young E A 1990 'Aboriginal Population Mobility and Service Provisions: A Framework for Analysis' in Meehan et al 1990: 186-96

Young E A and K Doohan 1989 *Mobility for Survival: A Process Analysis of Aboriginal Population Movement in Central Australia* North Australia Research Unit Australian National University Darwin

Yu P, Duncan M E and B Gray 2008 *Northern Territory Emergency Response: Report of the NTER Review Board* Commonwealth of Australia Canberra