Aboriginal Fringe Dwelling in Geraldton, Western Australia: A Colonial Legacy

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Introduction

The term 'fringe dwelling' was popularised by celebrated Australian author Nene Gare when she published her novel *The Fringe Dwellers* in 1961 (Gare 1961). The book received critical acclaim and 'broke new ground' as the first Australian literary work to explore Aboriginal lived experience in urban Australia (Mattingley 2006). 'Fringe dwellers' were Aboriginal people who resided on designated reserves or in informal camps on the outskirts of established towns and cities. They were often characterised as spiritually, geographically and culturally homeless: having abandoned, or been dislocated from, their customary moorings and attachment to country, but being simultaneously unable or unwilling to become immersed within the socio-spatial systems and norms of settler society (e.g. Morgan 2006). Fringe dwelling was conceptualised as an equally psychosocial and geographical state of being.

At the time of Gare's publication, very little scholarly work had explored the experiences of Aboriginal fringe dwellers. However, by the 1970s, several scholars had begun engaging in detailed ethnographies of fringe dwelling experiences (Collman 1979; Heppell & Wigley 1981; Memmott 1991; Sansom 1980). Much of this work focused on the cultural and economic practices of residents of remaining[1] town camps in northern and central Australia. However, perhaps the most nuanced sociological treatment of constructions Aboriginal fringe dwelling in Australia was Elder's (1987) study. His work was based on an analysis of submissions to a 1982 federal government inquiry into the problems of Aboriginal town camps.

As Memmott (1996: p. 3) explains, four constructs emerged from Elder's analysis, each corresponding to particular stakeholder groups. First, local government representatives predominantly characterised fringe dwellers as 'being between two cultures and embodying the worst aspects of both'[2]. These local government characterisations were presented to the inquiry as justifications for excluding Aboriginal people from the urban landscape. Second, State and Commonwealth government representatives characterised the fringe as a transition space, and a place of cultural and socio-economic insecurity. Their submissions indicated a belief that with State intervention, Aboriginal people occupying this urban fringe could find a meaningful place in mainstream society (Memmott 1996). Finally, there were, according to Elder (1987), two contrasting characterisations of fringe dwelling in Aboriginal submissions to the inquiry. One view constructed fringe dwelling as a means of tempered (and in some cases highly strategic) engagement with the colonial frontier: they felt that being so located facilitated a form of engagement with non-Aboriginal society while resisting assimilation (see also Jacobs 1996). However, for those who had been displaced from their homelands, or were forced to reside on fringe reserves despite aspirations of urban living, fringe dwelling was characterised by hopelessness and despair (Memmott 1996).

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[1] Most designated 'Native Reserves' were closed down in the 1960s.
[2] In some places, this view was shared by Aboriginal people who lived in rural and remote localities, largely under the colonial radar (e.g. Fink 1960).

Though Elder's (1987) work related to conceptualisations of established town camps in the early 1980s, his findings bare uncanny similarities to the discourses and positions adopted by the same stakeholder groups decades earlier in relation to designated 'native reserves' that had been established in many cities and towns in Australia during the 1940s and 50s. Gare's *'The Fringe Dwellers'* explored the interplay between these multiple constructions. She was predominantly concerned with exploring the human implications, for Aboriginal people, of living literally and figuratively, on the edges of town life/urban Australian society. The novel was, in fact, a fictionalised account of her time living as the wife of the administrator of Native Affairs in the Western Australian port city of Geraldton during the early 1950s.

In this chapter, we return geographically, temporally and conceptually, to the essence of Gare's notion of fringe dwelling and its implications for contemporary notions of urban Indigenous 'homelessness'. Geraldton today is the largest regional city servicing Western Australia's vast north and is home to just over 36 000 people. Like many of Australia's regional cities (Taylor 2006), its Aboriginal population is a much more 'visible' minority (roughly 10% of the population) than is the case nationally (roughly 2% of the population). This visibility often fosters local socio-cultural tensions regarding Aboriginal presence and belonging. And, like many other regional cities in Australia (Memmott, Long & Thompson 2006; Prout 2011; Prout Forthcoming; Taylor 2002), Geraldton plays a particularly important role in the Indigenous settlement hierarchy in the immediate Murchison region: it developed around a sizable Aboriginal population and is a key centre of service-related temporary population in-flow from surrounding hinterland communities. These socio-demographic realities perpetuate a host of housing challenges.

In 2010, the Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Alliance (MAOA) who were deeply concerned about the ongoing struggle for many Geraldton Aboriginal people in accessing and maintaining affordable and secure tenure of housing, entered into a collaborative research partnership with the authors to examine the root causes of these chronic challenges. A high proportion of local Aboriginal households in Geraldton lived in situations that placed them, according to Memmott et al's (2003) classification, at risk of homelessness. That is, they were living in overcrowded homes and/or under precarious tenure arrangements. MAOA wanted to understand how this 'silent social tsunami' had gathered force and what could be done to positively transform the housing situations of hundreds of local Aboriginal individuals and families living daily with this risk and experiencing its widespread 'knock on' effects in their lives.

Our starting point was to look back through time. Through a process of archival research that drew on secondary documentary evidence such as published biographies and memoirs of local residents, aerial photographs and maps, local newspaper articles (1900-1950), and published policy documents, we began to chronicle the 'evolution' of Aboriginal experiences of housing and homelessness in Geraldton. What emerged was a story of deeply entrenched, profoundly marginalising, and actively contested 'fringe dwelling'.

The narrative relayed here gathers pace in the years preceding Gare's time in Geraldton. Though it outlines the evolution of Aboriginal housing and homelessness from the time of British settlement until the present, it focuses in particular on the policy context and social climate of the 1930s and 40s in Geraldton and how contemporary challenges regarding Indigenous housing and homelessness in Geraldton are inextricably linked to this formative period of municipal colonialism. Such historical narratives of fringe dwelling and contested urban Aboriginal presence are, we argue, critical to understanding the drivers of

contemporary urban Aboriginal 'homelessness' in all its forms, as well as assessing the capacity of Australian towns and cities to accommodate Aboriginal presence.

We acknowledge at the outset, however, that the narrative that follows is not a-positional or complete. We are mindful of current debates and concerns amongst geographers and the within Indigenous studies arena about the positioning of Indigenous voice and agency within post colonial scholarship (e.g. Andersen 2009; Coombes, Johnson & Howitt 2012). Our narrative undoubtedly emphasises colonial conceptualisations of Aboriginal presence in Geraldton. It does so, however, not because we seek to privilege these voices or caricature the historical experience of local Aboriginal peoples as that of 'billiard balls knocked around by powerful colonial powers and forces' (Champagne 2007: p. 360), but simply because the colonial narrative is more dominant, and therefore readily analysed, within the (written) historical record.

We recognise as Morgan (2006 p. 106) does eloquently, that such an approach will always be partial as official records usually construct Aboriginal people as 'passive victims' who 'dart in and out of the official/colonial field-of-vision, appearing only where they pose problems to authorities and disappearing when those problems subside'. We argue, however, that these constructions are deeply instructive with regard to the structuring forces that shaped fringe dwelling in Geraldton – what Stanger-Ross (2008) referred to in the Vancouver context as 'municipal colonialism. Furthermore, such analyses are fundamental to understanding the different kinds of homelessness experienced by Aboriginal people in urban settings today, and developing culturally secure and better coordinated social housing responses for the future (Milligan, Phillips, Easthope & Memmott 2011). As Memmott and Chambers (2010) have noted, contemporary Indigenous homelessness is shaped by longitudinal and situational factors and circumstances, both of which are influenced by colonial history.

The Original Urban Dwellers
Few local historical accounts of Western Australia's Murchison region include anything more than a passing acknowledgement of Aboriginal presence in the place now known as Geraldton around the time of early colonial expansion (e.g. Bain 1996; Norris 1989). However, colonists' journal entries reportedly describe dense and semi-permanent Aboriginal settlements in the region that were marked by well constructed huts, defined pathways, and intensive land and sea management practices (Museum of Western Australia 2011a, 2011b). Large clan groups would have lived along the resource-rich coast of the region because the rich natural resource base in the region could sustain a much larger and more permanent population than desert and hinterlands localities where water sources were sparse and seasonal. And, because natural resources were so readily available along this part of the coast, seasonal hunting and gathering practices did not require the extensive migrations necessary in inland, desert country (Logan, Forrest & Brock 1998). Local settlements were, therefore, more permanent in nature.

The northward push of the colonial frontier in the mid 1800s was marked by conflict. Logan *et al.* (1998) describes how cultural groups, sometimes from considerably distant regions, would band together in efforts to raid or attack colonial outposts. Such attacks were a defensive response to the encroachment onto their country of foreigners staking claims of ownership and control over the region's resources. These strikes were met with fierce retaliation by settlers. Frontier conflict, coupled with the ravages of disease (particularly smallpox and measles), saw the local Aboriginal population decimated and profoundly effected the structure and fabric of socio-cultural moorings (Logan et al. 1998; Toussaint 1995). Few of those who survived attacks and disease epidemics in the area remained. Many

were pushed east and/or took up work on emerging pastoral stations as colonial development spread. Others were sent to Rottnest Island prison or 'native' missions further south.

An Upturned Urban Ordering
Increasing numbers of white settlers migrated to Murchison in the early decades of the 20th century due to the suitability of the region for agriculture and mining along two major river systems. In 1850, the town was officially established as a population centre that would support these industries. Some Aboriginal people continued to camp in the town's sandhills and along the Greenough River to the south of the town. By 1900, the town's population was estimated to be 2458 (Fraser 1902). In her memoir of the early 1900s, Geraldton resident Constance Norris (Norris 1989) recalls a large encampment of Aboriginal people living on the site now occupied by the town's landmark cathedral, which was at the time, some distance from the expanding urban hub. There are also recorded references to camps near and in the town that had always been used by Aboriginal people, and other Aboriginal families who rented houses and worked in the centre of town itself (Anon 1917: p. 2).

At the time, State policy regarding Aboriginal peoples was centered on 'protectionism' (Sanders 2000; Toussaint 1995). Under the *Aborigines Act of 1905* the State could declare any town, municipality, or any other place prohibited for any Aboriginal person not in lawful employment (Biskup 1973). The State also retained the right to manage (including through sale or dispossession) any and all property they possessed. Through the policy apparatus of 'protectionism' the State sought to maintain a clear delineation, spatially and racially, between the 'noble (but dying) savage' of the wilderness, and the civilised, urban settling population.

In the early part of the 1900s, the State seemed to largely ignore Aboriginal people of mixed heritage who lived in or around developing towns and cities. Over time, however, this 'fringe dwelling' group, some of whom were simply continuing occupation of their territories of belonging, grew in size. They became increasingly characterised unfavourably in colonial discourse, and more closely policed through the functions of Act. Popular opinion began to problematise the 'half-caste' and those living in proximity to 'civilisation' as somehow spoiled in comparison to the true Aboriginal person. For example, in July of 1930, an article published in the local Geraldton newspaper asserted that "We can see the native at his best, if we care to go so far afield to look for him, in large portions of the Kimberley and Northern Australia where he is still given a natural life, unaffected by contact with a superior race" (Anon 1930: p. 2). 'Fringe dwellers' were beginning to represent a threat to the colonial attempts to clearly demarcate between the 'civilised' settling population, and the 'noble savage' (Morgan, 2006). Consequently, urban living was a precarious venture for Aboriginal people. The policy of protectionism not only ignored the housing needs of urban Aboriginal people, but also actively worked to deter their presence entirely.

'You weren't meant to be seen': Reserve Negotiations
By the early 1930s, the Great Depression had rendered a wide segment of the Western Australian population quite socio-economically disadvantaged. In Geraldton, housing need had become acute for many residents and temporary camps with make-shift shelters had sprung up over time in various localities around the formal settlement. One of the most prominent camps was on a large sand dune behind the district hospital known as the 'Edward Rd' or 'Hospital Hill' camp (see Figure 1). It was close to the centre of the town but generally away from the public eye due to the difficulty of accessing the top of the sandy dune by vehicle. Residents of the camp, from wide ranging nationalities and ethnic backgrounds (including Aboriginal people), were locally referred to as the "League of Nations" (Anon

1943: p. 4). In 1931, the Geraldton Municipal Council (GMC) received a strongly worded letter from residents near the camp asking that 'the camp be removed and placed in an area where it could be under strict supervision'. The complaints indicated that the camp was in a 'filthy condition' and was a 'menace to women and children'. Though health inspector reports did not support this view, the Mayor indicated that a solution needed to be found for the campers.
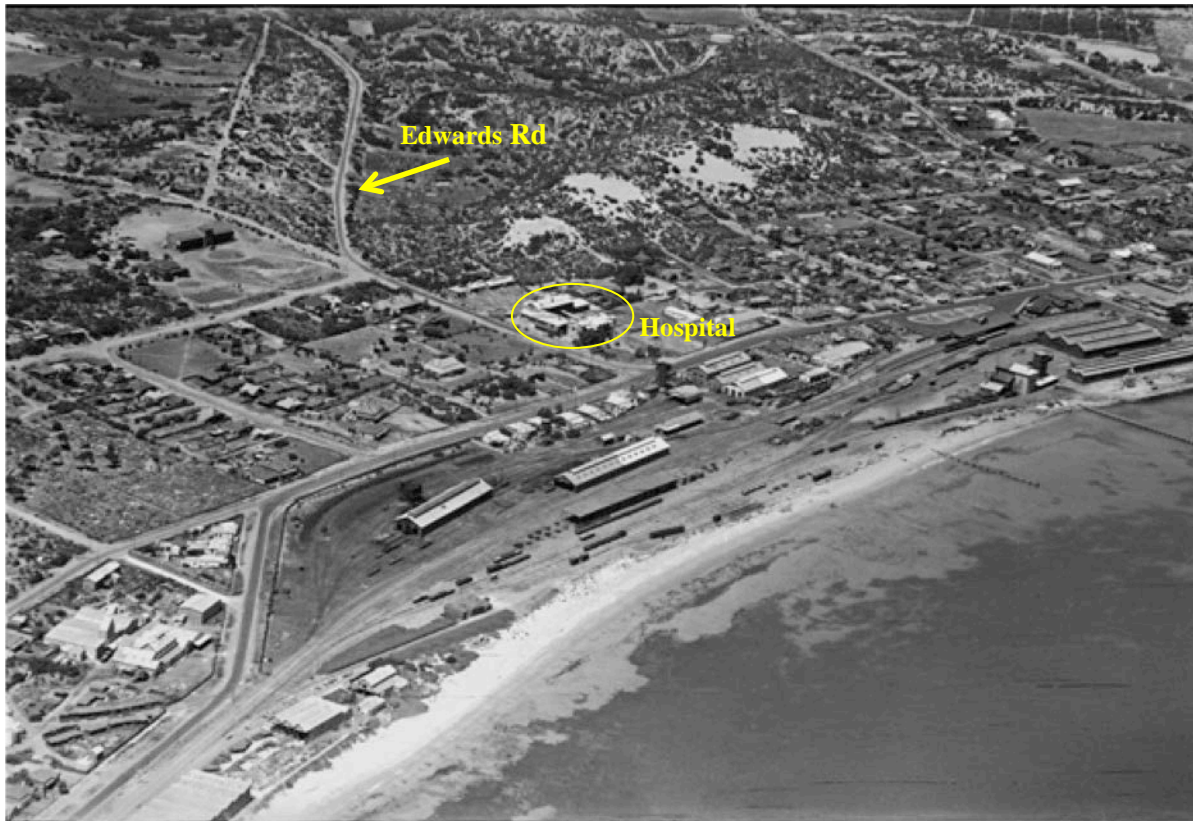

Figure 1   Partial (northern) Aerial View of Geraldton, 1936
Source: Stuart Gore Collection, Battye Library, Western Australia

The State government was also beginning to think through how it would respond to the growing presence of Aboriginal people on the outskirts of urban centres throughout WA. In 1934, a State advisory committee recommended that special housing be provided for 'detribalised Aborigines' in several country towns. Their report argued that "Aborigines 'capable of taking their place in the community' should be given houses of a standard comparable to the 'reasonable standard' laid down by the committee for European housing, with the government making a contribution towards the rent" (Biskup, 1973 p. 205-206). The Commissioner for Native Affairs responded that this was not a viable recommendation since 'fringe dwelling' Aborigines still had nomadic tendencies and would abandon a house after a death. 'Native Affairs' policy at the time would instead focus on the creation of Aboriginal 'reserves' on the outskirts of towns to contain Aboriginal people and place them under government control (Armitage 1995). Aboriginal people were often forced to move following threats to destroy their existing camp sites (Department of Indigenous Affairs 2003).

The living conditions on these reserves were poor. They lacked basic facilities and infrastructure, including water, ablution, and laundry facilities. Ironically, the unsanitary conditions that the government forced Aboriginal people to endure were used to justify further segregation, including the removal of Aboriginal children from public schools (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003).

In 1934, the Geraldton police sergeant reported to the GMC that they had begun searching for a reserve site to 'deal with the native campers on Hospital Hill'. Aboriginal community member Mrs Alice Nannup noted in her memoir that when she moved to Geraldton that year, there were not many Aboriginal families living in the town (Nannup, Marsh & Kinnane 1992). Most that did – she estimated about five families – were camped on Hospital Hill. Building make-shift houses was one of the only options for Aboriginal people at the time. They were unable to own land because they were not considered citizens. They could have land leased to them for personal use, but most experienced high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and suffered through discrimination in the private rental market. Of living on Hospital Hill, Mrs Nannup explains: " … I wasn't living there because I wanted to – we had four kids, and steady work wasn't easy to get. Even if you had the money, you couldn't just go and find a place to rent – white people had first option there" (Nannup *et al.*, 1992, p. 167).

For the next four years, there were protracted, and at times acrimonious, negotiations between the GMC and the State government (henceforth 'the government') about containing and relocating the Aboriginal camping presence in Geraldton. Cost and location were the two key points of tension. At no time during this process, did Aboriginal people appear to be consulted, or engaged as to their aspirations and preferences.

The primary site under consideration was at Mahomets Flat ('Site 1' on Figure 2): an area close to the ocean (for sanitation purposes), with fertile soils (for growing vegetables). At a distance of approximately 2.5 kilometeres from the town centre, and outside of the municipality, it was considered far enough away not to be a nuisance, but not too far that residents would eventually just move back. However, several GMC Councillors were not in favour of this site since it was a popular resort location for local residents during the summer months. In November that year, the State's Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr A.O. Neville, visited Geraldton and inspected both the Hospital Hill camp and the Mahomets Flat site. He advised that he would recommend the latter site to the government for the reserve.

Throughout 1935 the GMC repeatedly discussed their desire for a 'natives reserve' and lamented the lack of government action to this end, despite regular communication regarding the issue. In early 1936, the Mayor met with Mr Neville in Perth to discuss the reserve. Mr Neville advised that he had spent considerable time gathering advice as to the suitability and cost of the Mahomets site. Though he had recommended the site to Treasury, they were reluctant to expend the necessary funds to purchase the land. Mr Neville requested local help to raise the necessary funds. A month later the GMC was advised that the government was exploring other government-owned sites for the reserve. The favoured site was located roughly two kilometres to the east of the townsite and beyond the municipal boundary ('Site 2' on Figure 2). The site was behind a large ridge of sand dunes and in bushland that had minimal road access. It was considered because water could be supplied there from the main. The GMC was not in favour of this site because it was considered too close to town and not far enough back from the present campsite. They expressed dissatisfaction that though they agreed the Mahomets site was preferable, the government had been unwilling to 'provide the small amount to purchase the site'. In July, Mr Neville visited Geraldton again to discuss the reserve. Both parties were anxious for a resolution to what had been a testing set of negotiations. Mr Neville explained that the Mahomets site was simply not viable from a government perspective and the 100-acre block behind Eastern Rd (Site 2) should be selected. It was far enough away from the town, so as not to 'cause annoyance'. He indicated that the government could probably provide some galvanised iron for the shelters.
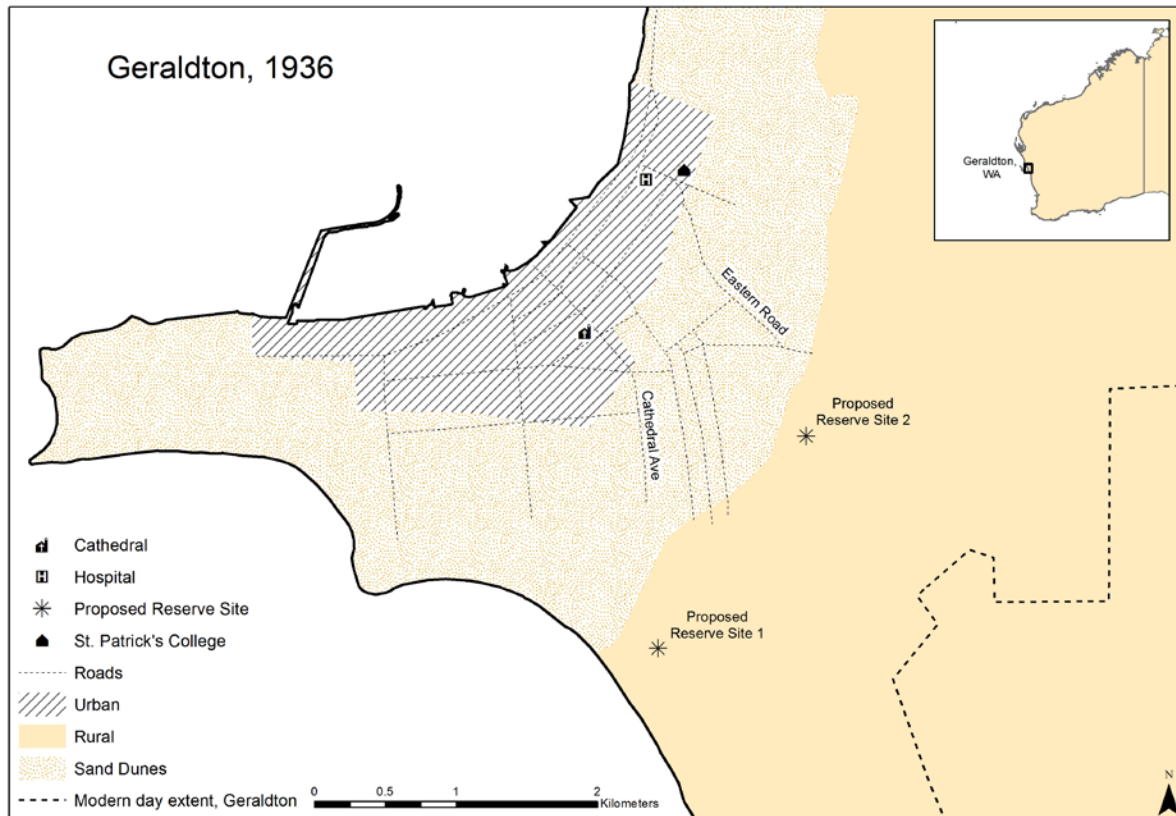
Figure 2   Proposed Reserve sites in relation to urban Geraldton, 1936

With the site now ostensibly settled after a two-year process, the next round of negotiations, which consumed much of 1937 and 1938, concerned site preparation. As these negotiations progressed, more public opinion articles were published in the local newspaper concerning the growing 'half-caste problem' and the complexities of assimilation in Australia. These somewhat amorphous societal anxieties were reflected in local cross-cultural exchanges, as well as dialogues about dealing with the 'native problem'. During this period in the town's history, Mrs Nannup recalled numerous personal accounts of being unwelcome at various public gatherings and sites. She described struggles in carving out spaces of legitimacy for her children at school and in the health care system, and keenly feeling the gaze of the law on herself and her family at every turn. She explained: "You see, if you were a blackfella in those days, you weren't meant to be seen" (Nannup *et al*., 1992, p. 188).

The GMC continued to press the government about progress on the reserve while the government responded with concerns about the cost of clearing the site and laying the water pipe. The government indicated that perhaps they should consider alternative sites. At the 1938 March meeting of the GMC, one Councillor expressed exacerbation, suggesting that the 'sooner the present camp was disbanded, the better'. He noted that the camp was near a school and 'local residents would be delighted when it was moved' (Anon 1938a: p. 4).

Later that year when the Premier visited Geraldton, these sentiments were conveyed to him, along with an overview of the protracted process, and he agreed to expedite the process. By December, several 'huts' had been erected on the reserve site. The road was not yet passable for vehicles and the water pipe still needed to be extended. The GMC was perturbed that the government had not completed these road and water works. Nevertheless, a police sergeant was dispatched to order Aboriginal families to move to the reserve. Most local Aboriginal

people resisted. Mrs Nannup recalls: "A lot of people were against the idea; when it was finished and the Sergeant came out and told us to move at a certain time, we didn't take any notice of him" (Nannup et al, 1992 p. 167). The local Inspector conveyed these sentiments to the Department in writing, stating in a letter that "the natives have been warned to remove to the new reserve, but so far they have failed to obey the instructions and have intimated that they do not intend to move." The Town Clerk explained that "the natives wouldn't go to the reserve because they didn't think it was satisfactory: particularly with regard to sanitary conditions. They had scattered to various parts of the town" (Anon 1938b: p. 3) But as Mrs Nannup explains, there was another reason: "See, a lot of people didn't class themselves as Aborigines and they didn't want to get pushed onto a reserve" (Nannup et al, 1992 p. 167).

Indeed the 1905 Act had introduced a set of particularly challenging and discriminatory dynamics for Aboriginal people seeking a legitimate place in urban Australia:

> "The object of the 1905 Act was protection. Most part-aborigines, however, felt no need to be protected: they were 'educated, and ratepayers, and not savages', so they wanted to be treated 'like any other respectable man'. The effect of the Act on part-aborigines, as one parliamentarian remarked during the debate, 'was to make a very invidious and humiliating distinction'" (Biskup 1973 p. 143).

Aboriginal adults of mixed heritage (at the time referred to as a 'half caste') could apply for an exemption from the stipulations of the Act, but only if they did not associate with any 'full-blood' Aboriginal people, or have children (Armitage 1995; Biskup 1973). Furthermore, exemptions were rarely granted and could be revoked at any time.

In 1939, the GMC authorised the condemnation and demolition of several shacks and camps around the town, including camps on Hospital Hill to force relations to the Reserve. However, in 1940, the GMC received further complaints from residents about 'natives making camps and buildings in the vicinity of Eastern Rd.' The GMC noted that: "the trouble arose in connection with half-castes who did not regard themselves as natives. These people raised objections about going to the native encampment. If these people, however, regarded themselves on a plane with ordinary rate payers, they would have to live as such" (Anon 1940: p. 3).

Eventually, reluctantly, Mrs Nannup moved her family to the Reserve. She describes what met them there in particularly unfavourable terms. The 'houses' she described as "a few sheets of corrugated iron knocked together into two rooms" (Nannup et al, 1992 p. 171). The walls were unlined and did not reach the ground so the wind would 'tear through'. There was no covering on the floor or fireplace for cooking and the only available water was a sandpipe 'about fifty yards away'. She concluded: "Our place [on Hospital Hill] might not have been great, but this was certainly no better. It was obvious from my days working as a housemaid that what meant houses for white people meant quite another thing for us" (Nannup *et al*., 1992, p.171).

'As if they own the place!'
By the late 1930s, the general Australian housing crisis had become extreme. The poor conditions generated during the Great Depression of the 1930s deepened during World War II (Hayward 1996). There were chronic housing shortages, many substandard houses that needed replacement, escalating building costs, and a lack of private investment. In 1943, the Federal Government established the Commonwealth Housing Commission to conduct an inquiry into the crisis. It concluded that the private market was unable to provide adequate housing for low-income earners, but that housing should be a right for all citizens (Hayward, 1996). Consequently, a national public housing system was established in 1945.

Despite having filled crucial domestic labour shortages, as well as active service roles abroad during the war, Aboriginal people were ineligible within this public housing scheme in the post-war years. They were not technically recognised as citizens until the 1948 Nationality and Citizenship Act. And even then, Aboriginal people continued to be subject to the restrictions of prior legislation (Chesterman & Galligan 1997), much of which prevented them access to the rights of other citizens, such as entitlements to social welfare and public housing. This exclusion became particularly marginalising in the Murchison region where Aboriginal people were increasingly moving in to towns to take advantage of the higher wages available as railway workers and miners, and to receive child endowments to which they were now entitled.

Mrs Nannup recalls an increasing migration of Aboriginal families into Geraldton during the war years and immediately afterward. Some set up camps near existing camps and in different locales between the reserve and the town. This whole area became known as 'Blood Alley'. Many residents of these camps were acutely aware of being alienated from the spaces created by the colonisers over their traditional homelands, and of only being able to look in from the fringes. For example, Aboriginal artist Brian McKinnon grew up in this fringe camp. He recalls: "Blood Alley was built from recycled tin and timber from the rubbish tip over the sand dune. Our furniture was all makeshift old banana boxes for chairs, cable drums for tables and our cooking and heating came from an open fire" (Indigenart 2008). In 2008, he held an exhibition in Perth entitled "From Blood Alley to Anywhere". His work was explained as a portrait of growing up always feeling like he "existed on the fringes of society" (Indigenart, 2008). Here, he found "pathos and beauty in the makeshift bricolage of life on the outskirts of white Australia" (Indigenart 2008).

Figure 3   A 'Blood Alley' Camp, 1960
Source: © The West Australian, reprinted with permission

As the war began to fade from memory, Aboriginal presence in Geraldton once again returned to focus for local residents and governing authorities. At a 1945 meeting of the Murchison

Road Board Association (which included Geraldton), a motion was carried to seek that all towns in the Murchison be declared prohibited areas *1936 Native Administration Act* - a revision of the 1905 Act. Similar motions would follow in other regional towns throughout the State. The Minister for Native Affairs responded forcefully, explaining that he did not support a policy of segregation and would not support a region-wide prohibition on urban living amongst Aboriginal people. He argued that many Aboriginal people in the Murchison region were not subject to the Act because of their ancestry, and that many of those who were, had jobs and contributed positively to the commercial life of their communities. Therefore, in response to local complaints received by town residents regarding Aboriginal people in Geraldton, the GMC adopted a 'tied-hands' approach. Aboriginal people not subject to the *Native Administration Act* could not be forced from the town and onto the reserve, and those coming under the Act were the responsibility of the government, which had in its view, to date, been negligent in the provision of services for Aboriginal people.

Some GMC Councillors agreed that many local Aboriginal people had served in the war, and conducted themselves in the same manner as most other residents in the town. The GMC continued to press the Administrator of Native Affairs to take action to accommodate the increasing Aboriginal population in Geraldton. There was a growing recognition that the reserve conditions were unacceptable. The new Commissioner for Native Affairs, Stanley Middleton, responded by suggesting that:

> "… every opportunity should be given to detribalised natives who wish to live under civilised conditions or are endeavouring to do so. These people are mostly employed at white rates of pay and since they receive social benefits and pay taxes and as many have served in the forces it is thought that every opportunity should be extended to them" (Anon 1946: p. 1).

This laissez-faire government position, packaged as a rights-based standpoint, conveniently aligned with the fiscal and political philosophy of Middleton's government. He also noted, for example, that the government simply lacked the resources to provide proper housing and facilities on all reserves and indicated that the 'nomadic tendencies' of many 'natives' who mis- or under-used existing housing, rendered such an undertaking a reckless waste of government revenue.

Meanwhile, conditions on the reserve continued to deteriorate, and there was growing discontent amongst many non-Aboriginal residents regarding Aboriginal presence in Geraldton. Mirroring the trend in other parts of the country (see e.g. Morgan 2006), many complaints were couched in terms of issues of hygiene and perceived drunkenness. They were, however, deeply racialised. For example, in a letter to the editor of the Geraldton Guardian in early February 1949, one resident wrote:

> "Sir, I am writing to ask why the native population of Geraldton is allowed to wander about the streets during the day, especially on Fridays. Some of them look simply revolting and are ill-mannered, bumping and pushing their way about on the streets as if they owned the place. I would suggest that a store be set up somewhere out of the town for them so that they would have no need to enter the town at all. Geraldton would certainly be a more attractive place for the tourist if these people were kept off the streets and beaches close to the townsite" (T.M.S. 1949: p. 5).

Over the next few days, numerous responses – some in support, and some critical, of this letter – flowed into the editor. Secondary sources suggest that at least some Aboriginal people

were upset and angered by this public debate and discussion. Eventually, the acting Mayor weighed in. He insisted that Aboriginal people had only recently been allowed any comforts or privilege in Australian society and it was everyone's responsibility to make sure they were not deprived of it. He explained that the GMC was uncertain of how to deal with the concerns raised within the community. In the end, however, he argued that no satisfactory resolution would be reached unless and until the government began to more systematically address the housing needs of the local Aboriginal population. The editor of the newspaper agreed:

> "The natives, with so many others in the community, are deleteriously affected and put at a very distinct disadvantage by the acute housing position. A first pre-requisite to raising the living standards of these people is to supply them with suitable homes. The old native reserve is totally inadequate and is an indictment of those who selected it … The housing scheme for these people needs to be approached with a full appreciation of the debt the community owes them. It is doomed to failure if it is hemmed in by rigid economics and impenetrable red tape, so characteristic of everything undertaken by Governments" (Anon 1949: p. 2).

Late that year, the government began investigating the viability of a second reserve site in Geraldton: located to the north of the town on the Chapman River. This site was selected after vigorous local debate, primarily because the GMC wanted to ensure that the reserve was not too close to town, but also recognised that access to a water source (the ocean or Chapman River) was a critical condition that had been missing at the existing reserve. In 1951, the second reserve was formally established (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003, p. 124), and in 1953, Mr Frank Gare was stationed to Geraldton as the district officer of the Native Welfare Department to attend to the basic needs of Aboriginal reserves within the region. Mrs Nannup explains that houses constructed under Mr Gare's oversight were of better quality than the original reserve 'houses' but still not of sufficient size and standard. Other assessments were not as gracious:

> "The reserve houses were a state-wide standard design of steel frames on a concrete slab with tin roofing, no ceiling, and single-sheet tin partition-like walls that did not touch the floor or reach the roof. Often there were no floor coverings, just the bare concrete particularly in the large living spaces in the middle" (Little 2000: p. 171).

This design became known as the 'Geraldton House'. It was used on numerous reserves and became a prototype described as popular amongst Aboriginal people and approved by local authorities (Morgan 1972). Mr Gare, however, regretted that the 'Geraldton house' was rolled out across reserves in other parts of the State where weather and climatic conditions were not conducive to such a design. Indeed, Aboriginal families would abandon these often uninsulated and inflexible housing designs by constructing their own more culturally and climatically appropriate shelters (Grant & Memmott 2007).

The More Things Change …
In the 1960s, housing became a fundamental vehicle for driving assimilation policies leading to the reform of Aboriginal camps and the introduction of transitionary public housing programs (Grant and Memmott 2007). It was thought that 'suitable' Aboriginal candidates would adopt 'mainstream' values when they were taught to live in European-style homes (Lydon 2009). Aboriginal couples who were deemed to have reached a reasonable standard of living were selected to move into urban areas (Grant and Memmott 2007). Aboriginal urban

presence could now be tolerated, as long as it closely resembled non-Aboriginal urban presence. Aboriginal people encountered considerable pressure to become 'respectable' citizens, and conform to non-Aboriginal norms with regard to privacy, sobriety, 'moral restraint', nuclear families, conventional gender roles, and wage labour (Morgan 2000).

In allocating land for "native housing", little consideration was given to the location and availability of resources or the development and servicing of sites (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Development was hindered by insufficient funds to meet the housing need and slow construction of housing at the various stages (Grant and Memmott 2007). Despite the challenges, the policy shifts did provide some Aboriginal people who were previously living on reserves with a standard of housing previously only enjoyed by non-Aboriginal people. Demand for Aboriginal housing considerably outstripped supply. In 1963, it was estimated that the State Government required 2000 houses for Aboriginal people, but only 298 dwellings had been provided up to that time (Lovejoy 1972).

In Geraldton, both 'Native reserves' were officially closed in the late 1960s. The government began purchasing and constructing basic housing in outer suburbs for Aboriginal families (Department of Indigenous Affairs 2003). This was a superficial attempt to overturn the practices of concentrating and quarantining Aboriginal presence on the urban fringe. Most of these new houses were located on the fringes of the town and even on the site of the old reserve. In addition, the title of these mini reserves was held by the Crown, so there was no possibility for Aboriginal people to own the land or the house in which they lived (Lovejoy 1972).

These subtle shifts coincided with the 1967 Referendum. The affirmative vote gave the Federal Government jurisdiction to pass laws concerning Aboriginal people (previously, this had been the responsibility of State governments only) and include them in official national population counts. Policy reform would follow to address concerns over structural disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal Australians (Sanders 2000). There were a number of changes in the administration of Aboriginal housing in Western Australia following the Referendum. In 1968 the Commonwealth began giving grants to the State to provide public housing for Aboriginal households, 40% of which was allocated to support urban housing (Sanders 1993). In Western Australia, an Aboriginal Housing Board was established in 1970 to provide a structure for Aboriginal voice within housing policy, and Aboriginal housing became incorporated into the State Housing Commission's portfolio (Milligan, Phillips, Easthope & Memmott 2010).

By the early 1970s, the public housing systems' construction program was gathering pace. However, public housing properties were very basic and not well maintained. Rod Little, who migrated to Geraldton with his family in the early 1970s, recalls that there was very little housing available for Aboriginal people in those days and the house his family was allocated was too small to accommodate them adequately (Little 2000). This was a common experience: "Many Aboriginal families were fairly large and the waiting list was four years for a four-bedroom house" (Little 2000 p. 173). Five bedroom houses did not appear to exist. Little describes the landscape of Aboriginal housing in Geraldton during the period from the 1970s to 1990s as being marked by: poor living conditions – Aboriginal families were repeatedly placed in houses that were not fit for occupancy; prejudice and discrimination, and; alienation – many Aboriginal families were locked out of the public housing system because of previous insurmountable property damage bills which had resulted in unpaid debts to the Department of Housing.

Nationwide, as in Geraldton, the major housing concerns for many Aboriginal people related to inadequate supply of public housing, restricted access to private rentals, and limited opportunities for home ownership (Macintyre 1974). Though the housing market had ostensibly 'opened up' in Geraldton, most Aboriginal people still faced considerable barriers to moving beyond 'fringe-dwelling' existences either figuratively or literally.

In the 1980s, governments reduced social spending as the 'Keynesian consensus' deteriorated (Hayward 1996). In 1984, however, a landmark new Commonwealth State Housing Agreement was signed. This agreement included provisions and associated funding for specific housing assistance programs for Aboriginal people. Limited resources were allocated to maintenance or housing in urban centres (FaHCSIA 2010). Government support was also available for the establishment of Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs). In 1986, the Murchison Region Aboriginal Corporation (MRAC) was established and became the ICHO for the region. MRAC was federally funded to purchase and supply affordable rental accommodation to Aboriginal people across the region, but primarily in Geraldton.

Ostensibly, support for the establishment of ICHOs represented a policy shift toward recognising that self-determination was critical to improved housing outcomes for Aboriginal people. Like many ICHOs, however, MRAC managed only small stock numbers and throughout the 1990s, issues of access to affordable, quality housing continued to prove incredibly challenging for Aboriginal people. In addition, many of MRACs properties were located in outer suburbs where housing was more affordable for them to purchase. The WA public housing system had also been poorly managed for the preceding two decades and the economy had endured several boom and bust cycles (Hayward 1996). In 1999 an independent housing advocacy agency released a report documenting concerns in Geraldton relating to the underrepresentation of Aboriginal staff in the Geraldton public housing office; complex and changing tenancy processes that were often alienating for Aboriginal clients; and a lack of compatibility between departmental allocations processes and Aboriginal family structures and practices (Valesini & Cameron 1999).

Recent Wrestling with Co-existence
In 2001, Federal, State, and Territory Housing Ministers endorsed a statement recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing as a major national issue requiring immediate action. However, the resultant 10-year plan did not deliver support to improve urban Aboriginal housing conditions. This reignited the debate about which level of government should be responsible for Aboriginal housing in urban areas (Milligan *et al.*, 2010).

A research study conducted in 2004/5 revealed little positive change for Geraldton Aboriginal residents. Appropriate and affordable housing remained a primary local concern (Flatau, Cooper, McGrath, Edwards, Hart, Morris, Lacroix, Adam, Marinova, Beer, Tually & Traee 2005: p. 139). Study participants spoke consistently about unacceptably long waiting periods for public housing, the poor quality of existing dwellings, problems with repair and maintenance practices, and supply that was not maintaining pace with demand. The study also found that many houses were not deemed to be of sufficient size to properly accommodate Aboriginal families and that the placement of feuding families next to each other in public housing was a major concern within the Geraldton community (Flatau et al., 2005). Concerns were also expressed about personnel at the State Department of Housing (DoH) regional office. Primary among these concerns were the underemployment of Aboriginal staff, and the manner of non-Aboriginal staff when dealing with Aboriginal clients.

The study identified a general lack of trust of DoH amongst Aboriginal people (Flatau *et al*., 2005). DoH's communication strategies were perceived as disempowering for many Aboriginal people (Flatau *et al*., 2005). Many simply did not bother to approach DoH to get on the waiting list because they assumed they would be rejected. It was also difficult for tenants to remain tenancy-literate when the policies seemed to change with alarming regularity. Some interviewees explained that Aboriginal people often asked non-government agencies to approach DoH on their behalf. Despite joint Federal and State policy platforms of concentrated investment in improving housing outcomes for Aboriginal people, positive change seemed largely absent from the housing landscape in Geraldton.

In 2008, the National Affordable Housing Agreement was introduced, paving the way for a widespread 'mainstreaming' of previously Aboriginal-specific housing programs and structures. There was a marked political shift away from seeing Aboriginal people as having unique housing needs and aspirations. There was also no secure and long-term funding arrangements with regard to the provision of affordable housing for Aboriginal people in urban areas like Geraldton (Milligan *et al.* 2010). Western Australia followed broader trends by transitioning to manage Aboriginal clients within mainstream housing programs.

Today, in line with national trends, DoH is focused on outsourcing the construction and management of social housing in urban areas to registered housing 'growth providers'. The State's new housing policy framework targets partnerships with the not-for-profit sector as a key mechanism for alleviating the shortage of affordable housing for middle and low income earners in urban areas. However, Milligan *et al.* (2010) note that while both Federal and State governments are encouraging growth, entrepreneurship, capacity building and greater participation in social housing within the not-for-profit sector, ICHOs operate in environments characterised by multiple compliance and reporting requirements, complex accountabilities, intense scrutiny, and in some cases, coercion to relinquish assets and control to the government. Further, unlike in the past where their funding was secure and separate, ICHOs like MRAC are now being integrated into broader funding and regulatory regimes where they will be forced to compete for funding within a vastly larger pool of housing providers.

Given significant policy shifts since 2008, the present housing policy landscape is characterised by a national devolution of responsibility, reduced autonomy and support for Aboriginal housing providers, mainstreaming of Aboriginal housing programs, State moves toward increased outsourcing of social housing development management, and lack of long-term funding provision for affordable housing in urban areas. Despite these changes, the local situation of housing for Aboriginal people in Geraldton has remained remarkably consistent: concerns over supply, appropriateness, and tenancy management persist. In 2010, an investigation commissioned by the State government revealed little change from the situation described in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and 00s. The report identified a lack of housing for Aboriginal people, particularly large families and young people, as a pressing concern in the Murchison (Cant, Penter, Henry & Archibald 2010). The investigation further indicated that these housing shortages had produced overcrowded homes, in turn leading to a raft of social problems. It explained that although a range of community and non-government organisations provide housing and crisis accommodation in Geraldton, there is a lack of community knowledge of what support services are available. Home ownership and private rental accommodation were also described as options financially beyond the reach of many Aboriginal people in the region (Cant *et al*., 2010). In relation to public housing, the report indicated that there continues to be a tenuous relationship between many Aboriginal communities in the region and DoH, particularly with regard to transparency and the

provision of clear and accurate information for Aboriginal clients. Long waiting times for basic repair and maintenance, and inadequate mechanisms for assessing housing need place further strain on the relationship.

While homeownership and private rental have become a reality for a proportion of the Geraldton Aboriginal community in the last decade, urban presence has been characterised by considerable turmoil and uncertainty for many local Aboriginal people. Shifting housing policy 'goal posts' and the continued exchanges of funding and responsibility for affordable housing programs at all levels of government have generated considerable confusion about housing availability and tenancy expectations for Geraldton Aboriginal residents who are unable to access other housing options due to financial constraints or experiences of discrimination. The legitimacy of Aboriginal urban presence in Geraldton remains contested.

Conclusion
Although the long-term Aboriginal historical legacy in and around modern-day Geraldton was marked by refined practices of environmentally adapted 'urban living', the last 150 years have been characterised by a series of evolving challenges to the legitimacy of Aboriginal presence in the town. From the time of earliest contact, the colonial frontier has sought to push Aboriginal people, literally and figuratively, to the fringes of Geraldton. The establishment of colonial Geraldton engendered forms of homelessness for the Traditional Owners by dislocating many of them from their customary grounds and living spaces, and for future generations that were forced to contend with, and at times subvert forces of municipal colonialism that would seek to keep them at arms length.

Aboriginal presence in the town has historically been viewed as a problem that needed to be solved, but never with regard to the aspirations or perspectives of Aboriginal people themselves. Municipal colonialism has played out powerfully as a structuring force increasing experiences and risks of homelessness amongst local Aboriginal people. The narrative presented in this chapter through a predominantly colonial lens, demonstrates that Aboriginal presence in Geraldton, as mediated by housing policy, has been a political football repeatedly tossed between local and State governments, with varying degrees of impact on the lived experience of local Aboriginal people. Though not without nuance, the arguments presented by various actors in these debates and decisions, while often couched in terms of the best interests of Aboriginal people, aligned with particular public and political agendas. Governments made decisions on behalf of Aboriginal people without concerning themselves with the aspirations, perspectives, and life projects of Aboriginal people. This invariably led to further alienation and poor housing outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Somewhat remarkably, Aboriginal people were largely excluded from the real housing market until very recently. It was not until the 1970s that home ownership and access to affordable public rental housing became options for most Aboriginal people. From our present-day vantage point, this is a short, 30-40 year history when compared with the 130-140 years over which non-Aboriginal people have enjoyed such access. The intensely discriminating private rental market continues to remain a contested and largely inaccessible or undesirable domain for many Aboriginal people in Geraldton. The dominant historical narrative, then, is of exclusion and projected un-belonging for local Aboriginal people, which has led to persistent struggles to secure quality, appropriate and affordable homes.

The minor narrative of persisting strength and progressive reform is also, however, instructive and important. Aboriginal people were the original 'urban dwellers' in the place now known as Geraldton and have remained and returned: not as a passive presence, but with agency and

voice. When attempts were made to 'relocate' the 'Aboriginal problem' to the fringes of town, Geraldton Aboriginal residents resisted through evasion and sometimes confrontation, asserting their rights to decent and self-determined living conditions. Over time, housing policy has responded slowly through reform. Segregated and oppressive reserves were abolished, a public housing system was established, and Aboriginal people eventually gained access to it as citizens with equal rights to all others.

Perhaps most significantly, the 1980s continue to be viewed locally as the historical era in which Aboriginal housing outcomes were at their peak. Concerns regarding the adequacy of supply persisted, but MRAC was empowered to deliver culturally secure housing services to local Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal Housing Board served as a functional, representative structure through which Aboriginal people could meaningfully contribute to positive reform in housing policy and practice. Here was an important moment of urban Aboriginal self-government that contrasted sharply with decades of housing policy constructed and constrained by simplistic constructions of 'fringe dwelling' and/or homelessness.

Finally, the Geraldton narrative illuminates the deeply geographical nature of contemporary urban Aboriginal housing challenges. It highlights, on the one hand, the intersecting political, geographical and social scales at which local colonial visions of identity and coexistence have been constructed, enacted and contested. It also demonstrates the significance of the unique histories and cultures that characterise the specific localities where Aboriginal people have lived, moved, and worked to carve out spaces and places of belonging for generations.

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