**Abstract**

Arguably one of the most enduring icons of modernity is the automobile. The innumerable songs about motor vehicles are testimony to this status. This article examines Pilbara Aboriginal (marrngu) songs about the murtuka (motorcar). Focussing on a particular style of song known as yirraru to Ngarla people of the De Grey River area in Western Australia, I explore a range of questions concerning the impact of automobility on marrngu life-worlds. Is the ‘freedom of the road’ a value historically shared by marrngu and walypala? Or is the marrngu passion for automobility evinced in these yirraru simply an adaptation of pre-colonial values, beliefs and behaviours associated with mobility? This is not an ethnomusicology article; I treat yirraru as narratives, narratives that convey something about the relational in marrngu modes of orientation and engagement with the motor vehicle. Using archival and ethnographic data I argue that murtuka song-poems show that marrngu regarded motor vehicles as instrumental in their own efforts for autonomy in the decades in which these yirraru originate (1920–1960s). Ultimately I consider what the enthusiastic embrace of the murtuka by marrngu might say about the nature of socio-cultural difference, similarity, and marrngu and walypala boundedness in the Pilbara.

**Keywords:** Automobile; Pilbara; Pindan movement; Songs; Social transformation
Murtuka yirraru: Automobility in Pilbara Song Poem

[[Marrpawarna
Parta marra pirnu Wupurlan Marrpawarnalu,
yinjinpa jarnarra muurrkarra piturulkapurl,
murti kanyjilipa yara nguntuntu karri.]]

[[The Overland
Marrpawarna accelerated the Overland,
engine thrusting forwards
with a throaty noise as a result of the petrol,
swooping round the bends
with a whining roar.
Composer: Yintilypirna Kaalyamarra (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 62–3)]]

Introduction: ‘Riding Along in my Automobile’

While living in Port Hedland I routinely visited the home of Nyaparu¹ Brown, the co-author of the volume from which the epigraph above is drawn. Nyaparu often asked after my motor vehicle, adopting a sentimental tone when discussing its idiosyncratic virtues: its cramped, uncomfortable but utilitarian seating; its awkwardly placed handbrake; and its relatively unmodified style dating to the 1950s. On several occasions he remarked that the distinctive rhythmic ‘knocking’ of its diesel engine forewarned him of my arrival. In time I came to regard my Landrover as a mnemonic device that prompted Nyaparu to recall many stories of marrngu² life on nearby De Grey Station where he was born in 1930, and began at age seven his working life mustering alongside his kinfolk. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, most work on De Grey Station outside of the homestead was undertaken with the aid of horses, bullocks, and donkeys (Barker 1972; Hardie 1988; Fyfe 1983). In 1911 the Pilbara Goldfields News observed the first motor vehicle in Port Hedland, and by 1914 it was reported the ‘the motorcar was a novelty a couple of years ago in this district... but now there are several who have acquired them’ (cited in Hardie 1988, 197). Station managers purchased motorcars for private use, employing them extensively to visit neighbours and for the long haul to Port Hedland. The managers of Pardoo Station (adjacent to De Grey), the Thompsons, owned a motor vehicle in 1931 and their eastern neighbours at Wallal, the Lacys, acquired their first, a British-manufactured Citroen, in 1929 (Weller 1979, 32–38). Prior to the 1930s the main transportation stalwarts on which the pastoral industry relied (bullocks, camels and donkeys) carted huge loads of wool to Port Hedland, returning with stores to outlying stations such as De Grey. Fyfe in his account of the Western Australian wool trade states that from
1914 onwards in the Pilbara, donkeys were being slowly eclipsed by ‘an occasional motor truck’ (Fyfe 1983, 158). The first load of wool to depart De Grey by truck occurred in 1924 aboard a Reo Flying Cloud and a Vulcan lorry driven by Pilbara transport pioneer Len Taplin (Hardie 1988, 24). By the 1930s, beasts of burden were steadily becoming superseded by trucks. These early days of Pilbara motorised transport were hampered by a lack of spare parts, poor roads, floods, wide sandy river crossings and frequent punctures. Driving in the Pilbara continued to be a hazardous experience until the late 1960s when the economic shift from pastoralism to mining gave rise to significant upgrades to automobile infrastructure.

In the first third of Nyaparu’s life, few marrngu owned motor vehicles and access to them was limited to those working on pastoral stations. The De Grey Station day books detail the frequency of both work-related and personal marrngu use of station vehicles. Nyaparu’s father Arthur worked initially as a station hand on De Grey, he acquired a horse and buggy and later in life he attained the prestigious job of driver of the station manager’s motor vehicle.

[[‘My parents took me around all the Ngarla country. Dad had a buggy and a pair of horses, we spent our holidays at Puntanya on the Pirtimarra River; it was a meeting place for all the marrngu people. We went all over the Ngarla country hunting and fishing – De Grey, Pardoo, Kurnkarn, that’s Shaw River outcamp. ... In the end he [Nyaparu’s father] was working for the general manager driving his car, like a chauffeur. Sometimes he might have to take the bosses’ wife into town; take her into town to do the shopping and the business... ’]]

Nyaparu led me on several field trips across Ngarla country (De Grey and Pardoo pastoral leases) in the course of researching the Ngarla native title claim. On one occasion as the land council vehicle struggled through scrub on a De Grey Station track long overgrown, Nyaparu became increasingly agitated with our slow progress (and the likelihood of punctures), exclaiming with bewilderment that the last time he had been on it the track was clear ‘like a highway’. When I inquired how long it was since he had driven the track, he replied with utter sincerity: ‘1946’.

I was fascinated by Nyaparu’s stories of an era he clearly regarded as halcyon, and intrigued in turn by Ngarla murtuka songs such as the one detailing the journey of the ‘Overland’ in the epigraph above. Unashamedly ‘bloke-ish’, the song poems reveal an astute fascination with motor vehicles and new forms of mobility they engendered. I came to see in them a means to explore murtuka mobility as a dimension of this particular intercultural field (marrngu and walypala) on De Grey Station and in the Pilbara more widely.
Figure 1: Marrngu Workers, De Grey Station Early 1950s. Photograph by Heather Thompson

Figure 2: Map Showing Major Roads (Circa 1960s) as well as many of the places referred to in text (Adapted from Hardie 1988)
Yirraru and other Ngarla songs: ‘Car Wheels on a Gravel Road’

Ngarla man, Nyaparu Brown once described yirraru as the equivalent of ‘Country and Western’ songs. In essence yirraru are popular song-poems (see also Berndt 1976; Dixon & Koch 1996) of an anecdotal nature, describing specific events, emotions and experiences, including encounters with walypala technology. Yirraru are characterised among other things by an economy of language; ‘the poet knows what he wants to say, and he says it without ostentation or beating about the bush’ (Thomas in von Brandenstein 1974, no page no.). The song form is known throughout the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Ngarluma people in and around Roebourne know these songs as tabi (von Brandenstein 1974). A recent published collection of yirraru (on which this article draws) was the result of a long-standing collaboration between Nyaparu Brown and linguist Brian Geytenbeek (Brown and Geytenbeek 2003). Of the sixty-eight yirraru featured in the collection, the most frequent subject is an aspect of life on De Grey Station: mustering, horse-breaking, doctor’s day, wood-chopping etc. The second most popular topic is extreme weather events; perhaps not unusual in a region subject to severe monsoonal weather which in turn dictated the seasonal pattern of station work. There are also many songs admiring and in awe of large ships and other sea craft. Again, perhaps not unusual as Ngarla people primarily identify/distinguish themselves as ngaru kartikapu (‘from the coast’). Of the thirty-two songs detailing aspects of station life, eleven of these feature motor vehicles and many of these in turn depict travel in a motor vehicle. It is difficult to establish the precise date of each composition, however based on the lifespan of the composers and the song poems’ subject matter I estimate these songs were composed and performed between 1920 and 1960s. This time frame roughly approximates the working life of the identifiable makes and models of motor vehicles depicted in the songs (such as the ‘Overland’ in the epigraph) that were in use on De Grey Station at the time. Despite issues arising from translation (f.n. 4 Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 121) these murtuka yirraru are rich in kinaesthesia and other levels of sensory engagement; meticulous attention is given to the tone of their yinjinpa (engines) and exhaust, the capacity of the suspension to absorb the ruts and washouts on harsh, unpaved roads, the cast of their headlights across the nightscape, the sound of sand crunching under tyres, or of fuel slurping down the barrel of a carburetor. As will become evident, these murtuka song-poems also convey a strong sense of the ‘freedom of the road’ afforded by marrngu encounters with this new mode of mobility. This emotional element of mobility continues today: as marrngu routinely say to me, travelling in ones’ country makes one ngarlu ngalypa (feel good).

There are at least three categories of Ngarla song: yirraru, jarlurra, and wanarta. Jarlurra are commonly known as corroboree songs. The term jarlurra includes the song form and the accompanying choreography (yuurnpa), as well as the manner of dress and the particular ornaments used in the performance. Jarlurra have recognisable rhythms that determine the tempo of the dance. They are said to come to the composer in a dream, hence jarlurra are sometimes called ‘travelling songs’ because they depict the composer’s dream-journey which has a recognisable starting and finishing point. These dream-journeys tend to begin and end in Ngarla country, but they are not necessarily confined to it. Composition and design of jarlurra is an area of specialisation and certain individuals are said to be gifted composers and or choreographers.
Wanarta is a Ngarla song cycle performed only in the context of initiation ceremonies. Ngarla people know the ceremony as warlarra, a ritual that includes the application of munyuwanti (tourniquets) to the initiate’s upper arms, as well as a range of other ceremonial activities including prescribed fishing and hunting activities. The warlarra is not secret; it is a public ceremony that incorporates women and children for most aspects of proceedings. Ngarla people attest that wanarta has been handed down to them by Ancestral Beings in the creative epoch commonly known as the Dreaming, hence they are relatively codified and resistant to change. Both jarlurra and wanarta are performed by groups of (male and female) singers and dancers.

Yirraru are distinct in a number of ways. Firstly, they are not secret or sacred songs; they address everyday concerns and can be sung by anyone, in any context. Nyaparu Brown recalled with great fondness talented Ngarla composers (nyinirri) whose songs often travelled far and wide and were reinterpreted many times by several different performers. The work of one particular Ngarla composer, Smiler Ngarnujirri, was recorded at Roebourne, Millstream and Carnarvon, (a round trip of more than 2,000 kilometers) each time performed by a different singer, and each time the melody was varied (von Brandenstein 1974, 77). So not only do these songs express ideas and sensations of mobility, they are also temporally and spatially mobile. Secondly, in contrast to the communal singing of wanarta and jarlurra, yirraru are performed by individuals. Finally, yirraru lyrics are characterised by individuality and innovation which is as apparent in their performance, as in their form and content. In particular it is the topical ‘contact’ content (e.g. ‘Ship Anchored at Number 1 Wharf’ and ‘Aeroplane at the Racecourse’) that highlights their composers’ originality and attests to the relatively recent origin of many of the yirraru.

Murtuka were undeniably a form of walypala technology embraced by marrngu from early to mid-twentieth century. As the murtuka yirraru surveyed here indicate, while marrngu maintained a distinctive mode of orientation to, and engagement with murtuka, they also seemed to share the walypala trope of the ‘freedom of the road’. With this in mind I turn to teasing out some of the implications of this exchange dialogic of automobility.

Singing and Travelling: ‘Take us to Faraway Country’

Arguably one of the most enduring icons of modernity is the automobile. No other object, says Miller, has had such impact in mediating humanity’s relationship to the world, so much so that he refers to the ‘humanity’ of the automobile: a humanity that lies ‘in the degree to which it has become an integral part of the cultural environment within which we see ourselves as human’ (Miller 2001, 2). This sensibility, that a murtuka is imbued with the notion of a person or persons is a common thread in the literature on Indigenous Australian attitudes to motor vehicles (e.g. Altman & Hinkson 2007; Myers 1988; Stotz 2001; Young 2001). The humanity of the murtuka is evident in the following extract from Wilikuru Pamparu’s ‘The First Truck at Tambrey’:
Now we have seen you, stranger, coming – full length into view.
Poor fellow you, stranger,
– your transparent eyes reaching everywhere,
You stand there, fire spitting: eedj!
– your transparent eyes reaching everywhere
(translated from Yindjibarndi; von Brandenstein 1974, 21))

Apposite to this ‘humanity’, many yirraru display a tension in the alternate use of masculine and feminine pronouns applied to vehicles interspersed with the depersonalised ‘it’. In ‘Driving to Purarrka’ Yintilyirna Kaalyamarrra seems to emphasise the agency of the vehicle’s motor propelling its occupant to ‘faraway country’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 67):

[[Motor accelerating through the stony ridges, set free, singing a tune. Take us to faraway country! (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 67).]]

The destination of this particular journey, (purarrka) a prominent rocky outcrop located on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, is a considerable distance from Ngarla country and acknowledged as such by the composer. Here and elsewhere, the ‘freedom of the road’ is celebrated; Kaalyamarrra’s ‘Arthur is Driving it Carefully’ contains the line ‘let her go ready for far distant country’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 73). Waparla Pananykarra sings: ‘Let the Landrover go, heading for the far country’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 163). It is tempting here to read into such expressions a yearning to escape the daily routines of station life, and perhaps also a desire to flee from the constraints, demands and obligations of living in close ‘settled’ proximity to one’s kinfolk.

A passion for travel to distant lands is juxtaposed alongside intensely local connections to country and a yearning to be home. Katakapu sings: ‘The vehicle is humming, speeding, swooping, eagerly returning on the homeward journey’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 135). Given that Nyaparu was born and raised on De Grey Station and that he included Ngarla yirraru exclusively in the collection, it is not surprising that several of them are particularly localised, perhaps even De Grey-centric; they are populated with names of, and references to, many marrngu who lived and worked on the station during the 1920–1960s including Nyaparu himself (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 144–145; 174–175) and his father. In the following yirraru the composer Kaalyamarrra literally sings the praises of Nyaparu’s father’s driving skill.
Arthur is Driving it Carefully

No need to worry about the bumpy road!
Let her go like the wind in the twilight,
with the motor purring and the headlights on.

Roaring along effortlessly,
let her go for far distant country,
engine working perfectly,
the bright lights lighting up the whole countryside.

Wheels spinning fast, car rocking along smoothly,
dust trailing out behind, billowing upwards.

In a relaxed way he is taking it for a long trip,
the pebbles rattling up underneath the
Buick’s mudguards as it travels.
Arthur is changing the gears carefully.

The speeding is stirring up the wind alongside,
the country flashes past.
Let’s take it in the headlights in the twilight,
the scenery ahead flashing in the lamplight.
(Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 72–73).]

Intimate localisation is also evident in the song-poems’ cultural geography. A number of the murtuka yirraru contain Ngarla toponyms that would be known primarily to De Grey marrngu. The following yirraru by Katakapi (Paddy Fremantle) details the route and cultural geography of a murtuka journey in Ngarla country. Departing from De Grey homestead and travelling south along the western banks of the De Grey River through significant sites including Kurrika, Yamarlingurrpa, Yarnajungu, Yirrka-Pukara and finally coming to rest at Nganta-Nganta.
Night Drive in a V8 Buckboard

Darting here and there, eager to get going,
‘Let’s tie the load tightly on the buckboard!’

‘When will we be on the move?
After sunset?’
‘After supper we’ll move, nonstop in the moonlight.’

He’s really speeding across the
plains country to Kurrkara.
The engine is rough, not too good,
not running smoothly yet.

He really let it go down the steep slope,
with no fear of the bridge.
The wheels make a different sort of noise
on the stony patches.

In the dazzling beam the V-8 is running
really fast now,
speeding southwards through the darkness
towards the open country.

Concentrating in the sandy country,
skimming along past Yamarlingurpa.
Let the tyres hum.

The many bends at Yarnajungu
are bouncing back the engine’s booming roar.
Steam, radiator!
At Yarnujangu he is standing for a while.

In the pool of light heading south at Yirrka-Pukara
the vehicle is speeding fast.
At Nganta-Nganta the engine’s exhaust is throbbing perfectly.
(Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 120–121)

_Marrngu_ competency with new technology as evidenced here is a common theme of _murtuka yirraru_. Arthur’s motoring skills are the subject of _Kaalyamarra_’s work (above) and _Waparla Pananykarra_ attests to his brother-in-law’s expertise: ‘Teddy Allen is taking it skilfully, nose westwards for the long trip’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 163). In _Wirrkaru Jingkiri_’s ‘Piyuwiki’ (Buick) the driver, Alec Beeton’s driving technique is also commended as well as the suspension of the vehicle itself:

[[It’s a bumpy road, but the ride’s not rough, it’s smooth, let the Buick sway.

He can see a long way ahead, he let it go free, he drove in a relaxed manner, that Alec Beeton.

(Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 51)]]

_Marrngu_ driving proficiency is allied with knowledge of ones’ country characterised by an explicit intimate physicality evident here between driver, country, road and _murtuka_.

Counterpoised with this intensely local cultural geography, genealogical intimacy and tripartite physicality is a yearning to revisit and recall distant places. This leads me to consider the following: Is the ‘freedom of the road’ a value historically shared by _marrngu_ and _walypala_? Or is the _marrngu_ passion for automobility evinced in these _yirraru_ simply an adaptation of pre-colonial values, beliefs and behaviours associated with mobility?

‘On the Road Again’

One possible explanation for humanity’s ongoing attraction for the motor vehicle is its flexibility as a mode of travel. Motor vehicle travel can potentially be undertaken at any time of day or night, to any destination; in other words to seemingly transcend time and space (Urry 2004, 28). _Marrngu_ understanding of the _murtuka_’s capacity for temporal distortion is evident in ‘The Truck’ where Dingo George declares ‘The brand new engine, shrinking the country’ (von Brandenstein 1974, 5). The freedom of the road and the pleasure of movement across country are emotions eloquently expressed in _murtuka yirraru_: ‘motor accelerating through the stony ridges/set free, singing a tune./Take us to faraway country’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 67); ‘Fast runs the truck over the ground./Steered in the wind so that it cuts the air’ (von Brandenstein 1971, 8); ‘Hey! What a speed! Such a bouncing!/ There goes
Mount Targurana on my left’ (von Brandenstein 1971, 39). Marrngu automobility however, was not purely for the love of the journey; having acquired competency as drivers, the most common use for the murtuka outside of station work was to meet ceremonial obligations. Up until at least the 1960s, marrngu traffic in and out of De Grey Station was also a consequence of it being a centre of ceremonial activity. The seasonal calendar of mustering, lambing and shearing had long accommodated marrngu’s ritual calendar (or perhaps the inverse). Typically, ceremonial activities commenced in the seasonal lay-off from station employment (known locally as pingkayi). If early colonial observations are any indication, prior to the advent of the murtuka, marrngu had long established patterns of sociality and mobility primarily centred on ceremonial responsibilities that extended throughout the Pilbara and beyond.

Historical records indicate that marrngu travelled between the Pilbara, the Kimberley and the Western Desert fulfilling responsibilities to kin, especially reciprocal ritual obligations. It is also evident that large numbers of marrngu assembled periodically for large-scale ceremonial gatherings in Ngarla country. (Locals at the time called these gatherings ‘big buckleys’; ‘buckley’ being the anglicised form of pakarli the Ngarla term for an initiate.) One of the earliest written accounts of such events passing through Ngarla country is found in a report by Police Constable A. L. McSpeerin investigating the spearing of a native Muckandee (Broome Charlie) written in 1905:

[‘Constable asked native Charlie how he got the wound in the side of his thigh, & he replied ‘That he had come from Broome along with other natives down the coast past Condon & Port Hedland picking up natives at both places to join natives from Cossack & Roebourne outside the Old Shaw tinfields’. Here a big corroboree was held natives from the Marsh & Nullagine joining in.’]]

Nearly ten years later, on 21 January 1924 Police Constable M.J. Riggs of Port Hedland reported a ‘Big Buckley’ on De Grey Station:

[‘At 7pm Mr Harding of De Grey rang Mr Craggs Post Master Condon stating that a big Buckley boy corroboree was in progress amongst the natives at De Grey & he expected trouble amongst them as some of the natives wanted the ceremony to take place at Carlindi, over 200 natives were present. … In consequence of above information left Condon at 12 m.n. arrived De Grey Station at 4.30 am. The Buckley boy was in full swing & everything orderly. At 7am visited camps again (the Buckley boy being over) … the Native Camps stretched for a mile and a half down the riverbed and an estimate of 300 Natives were there.’]]

Later, station vehicles, primarily trucks became increasingly vital in facilitating large aggregations of marrngu for ceremonial purposes. Les Miller, the manager of De Grey Station noted in the station day book a number of instances of marrngu workers attending regional ceremonies. His entry for 11 September 1942 reads: ‘All natives to Mulyie for corroboree in Gas Truck and Ford Truck’. On 6 October the following year Miller again
recorded several ‘natives’ returning from ‘Warrawagine buckley’ in a borrowed motor vehicle.

As will be discussed, the 1940s were turbulent years for marrngu in the Pilbara, and in the ensuing years the murtuka was to become central to indigenous autonomy, independence and mobility. It may be that one of the most pervasive and persuasive ideologies of automobility is that of untrammelled individual mobility; the freedom of self-directed travel to distant places, but marrngu journeys in these song-poems appear more purposeful. The fact that many of the journeys are undertaken in borrowed vehicles points to not only differing sensibilities inherent in marrngu and walypala travel, but also to wider social and economic inequalities.

In Australia, regardless of the propensity for the system of automobility to reproduce social inequalities, and despite (or perhaps because of) the more tangible reality of urban traffic congestion, the urge to ‘put the pedal to the metal’ on the open road is nonetheless a powerfully seductive trope, evident in cinema and art as much as in consumption patterns and advertising. Suffice to say the Australian phenomenal and imagined landscape has been colonised by this system. This leads me to consider the celebration of automobility in murtuka yirraru as alluding to the (at very least temporary) transcendence of specific forms of governmentality that at the time imposed a range of constraints on marrngu pastoral workers’ freedom. In particular I turn here to demonstrate how marrngu came to regard the murtuka as instrumental in their struggle for autonomy and independence.

Marrngu Mobility: From Station-time to Strike-time

Indigenous Australian mobility has long been a source of tension between particular Aboriginal populations and the State. ‘Settling’, involving the imposition of walypala values of residential stability, productive labour, and domesticity, has long been a cornerstone of State policy and practice (Hamilton 1987, 47). Indigenous mobility couched pejoratively as ‘nomadism’ and ‘walkabout’ was regarded as antagonistic to this civilising mission. De Grey Station was at the frontier of attempts to ‘civilise’ and ‘settle’ local Pilbara marrngu. In 1863, De Grey Station was the first pastoral lease taken up in the North West under special land regulations following favorable reports of the region from overland explorer F. T. Gregory. Gregory’s report on the potential for pastoral expansion raised the prospect of engaging the indigenous population in the development of the area.

[[‘As the number and disposition of the aborigines is likely to have some effect on the first settlement of a district, I would give it as my opinion that these people will not prove particularly troublesome to the settlers, if properly and fairly treated. They are not numerous, and appear very willing to take employ under Europeans... (Gregory 1884, 96–97)”]]

The experience of settlement for colonised and coloniser was markedly different between the north and the south of the nascent colony of Western Australia (Hasluck 1942, 28). The North West pastoralists were a vast distance from the centres of colonial administration and authority. Unlike the situation in the south, marrngu were numerically superior to walypalas in the Pilbara. Furthermore, legislation forbidding convict labour in the North West bestowed marrngu a greater economic role in the burgeoning pastoral industry. Hamilton (1987, 47) argues that the widespread belief that Aboriginal people could not be ‘settled’ in ‘normal’
Australian society has provided justification for a range of policies of ‘protection’ and segregation. In the North West, indigenous mobility was curtailed by the Aborigines Protection Act of 1886 (and subsequent Acts) which bound *marrngu* ‘employees’ to their pastoralist employers. While not committing employers to any specific rate of pay, the Act stipulated that *marrngu* workers were to be engaged under written contract. Absconding was a criminal offence. Similarly restrictive and punitive legislation prevailed in the pearling industry. The records of the Roebourne Police Station from 1880 through to the turn of the twentieth century contain few references to workers ‘absconding’ from De Grey. Whether through threat of imprisonment or because of attachment to their own country, archival records indicate that many Ngarla people in the early colonial period remained largely within their own country, living and working on De Grey Station (e.g. Chief Protectors Report 1899; Olivey 1901). Radcliffe-Brown observed as much in his brief visit to neighbouring Munda and Portree Stations in 1911:

[[‘In the early days of the settlement of the whites in the country of this and neighbouring tribes, the squatters made use of the natives as shepherds, and I have been told on several occasions that they found it at first impossible to persuade a native to shepherd the sheep anywhere except on his own country’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1913, 146).’]]

At first *marrngu* were engaged as shepherds and then put to work on the offshore reefs pearling, where women, men and children worked side-by-side. The division of labour on the pastoral stations was typically that men were engaged in all aspects of stock work: shearing, mustering, repairing windmills and tanks, while women were generally confined to the domestic sphere as housemaids, cooks and nannies. However, women and children also washed, scoured and dried wool (Hardie 1988, 24–25).

Following the Roth Commission, the worst features of the indenture system were abolished; but Roth’s call to introduce a minimum wage to Aboriginal employees and to establish hunting reserves was ignored. The *Aborigines Act 1905* granted the Aborigines Department widespread control of Aboriginal peoples’ lives in terms of their personal behaviours and their freedom of movement (Biskup 1973, 59–65) and also of the behaviour of *walypalas* toward *marrngu*. The Chief Protector became the legal guardian of all children under the age of 16, and Aboriginal women required permission to marry. Pastoralists were prohibited from engaging children under the age of 16 and compulsory employment contracts were introduced. By law the pastoralists were also required to provide *marrngu* with rations, clothing, blankets, medicine and medical attention during the course of their service. As best as can be ascertained, by the 1920s a relatively calm coexistence founded on mutual dependency developed on De Grey Station. Tensions periodically flared over the removal of *marrngu* children. Nyaparu never knew his older sister, as the police forcibly removed her from De Grey Station before he was born. Wilson notes however that as numbers of *walypalas* in the district increased, and they became economically and socially secure, ‘the general liberal paternalistic view’ toward *marrngu* ‘became more pronounced’. This occurred in tandem with ‘less intimate contact’ with *marrngu* outside of station work. In turn this fostered what Wilson dubs ‘a distinctive station sub-culture’ combining features of both *marrngu* and *walypala* ‘ways of life’ (Wilson 1961, 27). This seems likely to have been the uneasy intercultural climate extant on De Grey Station during the era in which many of the
yirraru composers lived; an era characterised by ‘social and economic barriers that kept [marrngu] from more intimate contact with Europeans who attained higher status in the station systems’ (Wilson 1961, 38). This ‘station sub-culture’ may well have been further cultivated in Port Hedland during World War Two. Following the Japanese bombing of the North West coast in 1941, it was feared the recalcitrant marrngu would act as fifth columnists siding with the invading Japanese. Marrngu mobility was further curtailed as curfews and restrictions under Security regulations were implemented requiring, for example, that all marrngu be outside of town limits by nightfall. In 1942 it was also proposed (and subsequently abandoned) to intern all unemployed marrngu in a detention camp at Warrawagine (Biskup 1973, 210). In 1941 in response to an outbreak of leprosy in the southern Kimberley the Native Administration Act 1936 was amended and the movement of marrngu south of the 20th parallel (approximately 25 kilometers north of De Grey homestead) was prohibited (this became known as the ‘Leper Line’).

Between 1935 and 1942 a prolonged drought in the North West devastated an already lean pastoral industry; as a consequence, on the worst affected stations marrngu were sacked and evicted by the pastoralists (Olive 2007, 139). The experience of the uncertainty in station work, coupled with the understanding that sanctioned by the police, pastoralists could drive them from their country, engendered much discontent among marrngu. Many were forced to relocate to Port Hedland town reserves, where they assumed the status of fringe dwellers. Marrngu had come to understand the reciprocal nature of their relationship with pastoralists (especially on stations like De Grey where Ngarla families and others had a long history of labour and residence), as one where their labour was exchanged for residence (as well as such items as blankets, and clothes). Being thrown off their country signaled to marrngu that the walypalas did not share this understanding of their mutual dependencies.

Throughout the 1940s under the Native Administration Act 1936, marrngu continued to be bound by the permit system, a system that was reinforced by the local police who ‘discouraged’ marrngu from leaving their workplace. Many of the provisions of this Act continued in force until the mid 1950s.

In the 1940s conditions for marrngu pastoral workers and their kin across the Pilbara varied greatly (Olive 2007, 98–154). Nyaparu’s early life was mostly spent in the De Grey ‘native camp’, a series of tin huts and makeshift shelters situated in the bed of the De Grey River ‘about a hundred yards straight down’ from the homestead. At the time, children like Nyaparu received no formal education. There was much disparity between wages paid to men and women, and between marrngu workers on different properties. On Pardoo Station marrngu wages were between ten and fifteen shillings per week, while ‘next door’ on De Grey they were between five shillings and one pound per week (Wilson 1961, 54). The prevailing attitude of the pastoralists was resistance to any kind of uniformity in wages because they argued they provided ‘keep’ or rations to dependants other than those in the nuclear family of the worker (Rowley 1972, 268). Marrngu discontent with their lot in the pastoral economy no doubt led to one of the first organised industrial actions by Aboriginal people in Australia (see Stuart 1959; Wilson 1961; Brown 1976; McLeod 1984).

The Aboriginal pastoral strike took some time to gather momentum. It began on the first of May 1946 (corresponding with commencement of the Pilbara shearing season) with ‘a
number of tentative stop work-meetings’ (Wilson 1961, 53) occurring over several days across a number of stations in the east Pilbara. Nyaparu recalls that several marrngu left De Grey in May 1946, but he remained on the station along with a number of elderly. He reasoned the low level of De Grey employee participation in the early months of the strike was because few could ‘afford to actually go into town’, which he believes, is why so many remained on the property. Wilson (1961, 54) states that De Grey workers were sympathetic to station management and that stockmen bargained for, and received a 1 shilling per week pay rise prior to May Day. Nyaparu first learned of the scale of the strike by ‘bush telegraph’ a few weeks later. He joined the strike group late in 1946. Initially he and his brother Rob hunted kangaroo and goats on De Grey, herding, butchering, and then skinning the animals where they were slain. The pelts were taken back to camp where they were pegged out to dry. When they had accumulated 300–400 pelts they would load them on to one of the strike leaders’ (Clancy McKenna’s) truck and travel to Port Hedland where they were sold. McKenna would then purchase stores from the sale to enable them to continue hunting. Sometime later Nyaparu returned to Port Hedland, teaming up with his brother-in-law, Jack Coppin who had secured the tender for replacing the poles on the telegraph line linking De Grey with Pardoo. For this work they borrowed a truck belonging to a well-known walypala drover, Vincent Clark. Nyaparu also recalled that in 1947 he joined Don McLeod’s group outside of Nullagine in an area known as Blue Bar. He received a message to return to De Grey via Moolyella for an initiation ceremony. He left Moolyella with his brother and a number of others in Clancy McKenna’s truck. When they reached Mulyie Station the truck broke down and they were forced to continue on foot to De Grey. Many of the accounts I have compiled of marrngu journeys to and from ceremonies (or as part of the ceremony itself) throughout this period include at least a component of travel by motor vehicle.
The 1950s saw the state accept the national policy of assimilation, and was a period of radical change and repression for Aboriginal people. Despite this, the 1960s heralded the beginning of the liberalisation of Aboriginal policy and legislation in Western Australia and the gradual conferring of civil and economic rights to Indigenous Western Australians. During this period many of the restrictive provisions of the aforementioned legislation were removed. Some of the more liberal attempts at reform in the economic sphere including the lifting of exclusions to Social Security payments to Aboriginal people in 1959 and the introduction of the 1967 Pastoral Industry Award resulted in unintended consequences. In keeping with the 1960s nation-wide agenda of assimilation these legislative reforms were specifically targeted at so-called ‘full-blood’ marrngu. (Somewhat contradictorily, the 1965 version of the Award applied only to Aborigines of ‘mixed blood’ and excluded ‘full-blood’ Aborigines.) Equal wages ostensibly undermined the control of the North West squattocracy over marrngu lives but in the Pilbara many marrngu say they were evicted by pastoralists who maintained they could not pay increased wages and provide ‘keep’ (provisions such as meat, flour and tea). Social Security payments were also intended to offer marrngu the opportunity to free themselves from the paternalism of station life and assimilate them into wider society despite there being very little institutional alternative for such a transition (Jebb 2002, 249).

During the 1940s–1960s in response to such dramatic economic and social change, marrngu became increasingly mobile, moving between part-time station work, town life, fringe camps, and periods of relative economic independence working and living in the numerous work...
camps that sprang up at assorted locations across the Pilbara. Much of this movement was dictated by the economic fate of various enterprises adopted by the Pindan group (as the strikers came to call themselves), which included mining, pearling, fishing (see Hale 2012, 63–75), and collecting buffalo grass seed (see Hale 2012, 59), as well as hunting animals for meat and hides (see also McLeod 1984, 49–60). Nonetheless some marrngu periodically returned to station work when circumstances in the camps became too harsh. Initially the police had adopted repressive tactics such as intimidating and imprisoning the so-called marrngu ‘ring-leaders’ and their walypala ‘trouble-maker’ associates such as former prospector Don McLeod. However, by 1959–60 the strike group had become a part of status quo around Port Hedland, and marrngu were intermittently engaged in seasonal pastoral labour. Wilson (1961, 106) notes that at this time pastoralists recruited their workforce from the marrngu camp at Two Mile (subsumed by BHP’s port facilities). Mining ventures undertaken by the group were subject to the vagaries of the market; as prices for wolfram, beryl, tin, tanto-columbite and manganese fluctuated, marrngu demography shifted accordingly. This may account for the divergent accounts of the numbers of marrngu involved in the strike. Wilson (1961, 89) claims that in the 1950s, Frank Gare, a Native Welfare Officer, reported that there were ‘633 persons’ across the fourteen work camps run by the Pindan group. Wilson (1961, 93) also recorded that there were over 600 members in the Pindan Group in the boom years of 1951–52 and only 364 by 1954. Rowley (1972, 257) says that in 1959 there were 300, whereas Hardie (1988, 185) estimates that from 1951 to 1953 there were ‘more than 700’ in the strike group and only 250 marrngu working on stations.7 Ngarla people’s mobility is indicative of the broader Pilbara marrngu commonality developing as a result of the Pindan movement at the time. When Norman Tindale’s research team visited the region in 1953, Ngarla people were identified in many of the Pindan camps across the Pilbara. The North West genealogies compiled by Tindale show that Nyaparu’s father and mother along with one of his sisters and two brothers were at Pilykankura (‘Pilgangoora’) mining camp along with several other kinfolk. Ngarla people are also identified at Marble Bar and Yandeyarra, as well as at Port Hedland Hospital (Tindale 1953) 

The members of the Pindan group demonstrated that marrngu could live free from legislative constraints and institutionalised dependency. At several of the work camps they erected wood and iron buildings with communal washing, cooking and dining areas. They established a kibbutz-style ‘kids’ camp’ and held adult literacy classes in Port Hedland and elsewhere. They had had several victories in the courts defending their autonomy, and had battled with the police and ‘the Department’ (of Native Affairs). They had won the right to carry weapons, hold vehicle licences, drive trucks and use explosives. Most importantly their new social/political order was established on their own terms and at their own pace, operating under the legal framework of a registered company, an economic entity that incorporated principles of traditional Law (marrngumili), and kinship ties and obligations (Wilson 1961). 

During this period (1940–1960s) marrngu mining operations and other economic ventures across the Pilbara were reliant on motor vehicles to transport both commodities and labour, and to service the various work camps of the Pindan group. In 1959 Pindan operated five vehicles, for providing stores, carting minerals and transport between camps (Wilson 1961, 103). As Nyaparu’s accounts above indicate, motor vehicles, particularly trucks were instrumental in facilitating marrngu mobility (see figures 1 & 2). Nyaparu Coppin a co-director of Pindan drove one of these service vehicles, a short-wheel base Landrover,
carrying supplies and news throughout the camps. One of his journeys is memorialised in the following *yirraru* by Nyaparu Brown’s brother Waparla Pananykarra:

[[*I’m Thinking Marble Bar’s a Long Way Away For You*]

I’m thinking it’s a very long way for you.
to go to Marble Bar in the afternoon.
No sleep, traversing the distance freely
out that way, eastwards.

While it’s heading that way, urge it on,
that way, on the downhill run.
After coming a long way the engine
is really warming up now.
Treat it carefully [Nyaparu] Coppin.
(Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 165)]

In 1959 the Pindan movement ruptured into two distinct entities that eventually became known as the Nomads group and the Mukurinya group. The former largely comprised of ‘desert’ peoples sided with McLeod, while the latter group made up of ‘riverline’ peoples branched out under the leadership of Ernie Mitchell and Nyaparu Coppin. According to Wilson (1961, 103) in ‘1959–60, trucks were to figure largely in the disputes between [the Mitchell and McLeod] factions.’ An ex-army ‘white scout-car’ was at the centre of one such dispute at the Two Mile camp. A member of Mitchell’s group was repairing the vehicle when approached by a cohort of McLeod supporters who pushed it to their camp some distance off. A tug-of-war ensued as the disabled jeep was repeatedly pushed between the camp of each faction. The dispute was eventually settled in court (Wilson 1961, 317–320). Aside from being a valuable resource the ‘white scout-car’ may well have been emblematic of long-standing *marrngu* unrest concerning desert interlopers’ challenges to the land rights of local ‘riverline’ countrymen (c.f. Palmer 1983).

**Conclusion: ‘Country Road Take me Home’**

*Murtuka yirraru* reveal how automobility has for some time reinforced the strong emotional bond *marrngu* feel for one’s own country (*ngarlu nyalpa*) while simultaneously collapsing time and space. *Murtukas* are a fundamental aspect of the contemporary *marrngu* cultural landscape. Today, despite the relative absence of bitumen in the Pilbara, pre-colonial *marrngu* territorialities of ‘home’ country (*warrarn*), hunting and foraging range, ‘law business’ and obligations to kin have been reshaped by the *murtuka*. Of course the more mundane activities such as shopping and visiting various Indigenous service providers are now also a routine occurrence. Along with reinforcing the pleasure of movement, *murtuka*
mobility has facilitated new Indigenous socialities of family and community, expanding marrngu social horizons and compressing time and space. Murtukas are integral to large-scale ceremonial gatherings, enabling kinfolk from far afield to participate. Between 2001 and 2006 I witnessed Western Desert people arriving in large numbers to ceremonies based in the Pilbara at Warralong and Yandeyarra. In turn, marrngu journeyed across the Pilbara and to the southern Kimberley and the Western Desert, taking initiatives on the journey known in the Pilbara as marlurlu. Peterson (2000) has shown that in the Western Desert the reproduction of a broader regional sociality facilitated by increased access to and ownership of motor vehicles began in the early 1970s. The historical evidence for the Pilbara indicates that marrngu appear to have maintained long-distance relationships with both Kimberley and Western Desert peoples well prior to the arrival of the murtuka. The values expressed in the yirraru coupled with historical accounts indicate that in the Pilbara a broad regional sociality was in place in the early colonial period and was subsequently maintained and bolstered by marrngu access to and ownership of murtuka.

As I have shown here, in the Pilbara between 1920 and 1960 particular local historical circumstances, namely marrngu engagement in the pastoral industry, and the aggregation and high intra-regional mobility of coast, river and desert peoples in the Pindan movement served to maintain and foster marrngu sociality. In the material sense during ‘strike-time’ murtukas were regarded by marrngu as instrumental in their own efforts for economic autonomy and in their redefining of a broader collective identity.

As is evident in murtuka yirraru automobility was/is a source of independence for marrngu. Arguably prior to colonisation mobility was one key to marrngu economic survival in the harsh climate of the Pilbara. So too was mobility an essential feature of marrngu social exchange. The murtuka is an icon of modernity. However, as Hamilton (1987) and Altman and Hinkson (2010) have argued in Pitjantjantjara and Kuninjku contexts respectively, this does not simply mean that marrngu use of murtukas is a straightforward continuation of pre-colonial values, beliefs and practices pertaining to mobility. Nor am I suggesting that marrngu’s passion for murtuka signals the wholesale adoption of modern capitalist values. For marrngu throughout 1920–1960 residential stability, domesticity and productive (rather than subsistence or ceremonial) labour were elusive, intermittent and emergent aspects of their life-worlds. Rather, I have been at pains to show how murtuka yirraru and historical accounts from the era in which they originate offer insights into a shared history of contact, influence and adaptation that characterised expanding marrngu sociality facilitated by murtuka-mobility. Marrngu participation in the pastoral economy and their subsequent attempts at independence through mining and other ventures established by the Pindan group reveal complex processes of transformation and adaptation in each sector. I am conscious that intercultural relations were asymmetrical throughout this era, in both the pastoral era and in the heyday of the Pindan movement (and continue to be). Exchange was asymmetrical in the first instance because in the Ngarla view the land and waters upon which De Grey Station was established belonged to Ngarla people who had been usurped by the colonists; marrngu dispossession was reinforced by the state through a range of legislative measures. Secondly, up until the Pilbara pastoral strike, marrngu were effectively indentured and largely unpaid labourers, with absconders facing imprisonment. Thirdly, in terms of social-cultural life, marrngu were regarded as remnants of a past it was believed they could never reclaim, and it was not until 1967 that they were accorded the same rights as other Australian citizens. As such marrngu in the Pindan movement had to fight through the courts to obtain a license and
drive a truck. Hence, for marrngu the ‘freedom of the road’ trope was not taken-for-granted, nor is it wholly equivalent with the trope in the non-Aboriginal domain. Automobility has a particular materiality for marrngu; a driver’s license was a mili-mili (paper) that signified their hard-won autonomy and independence.

Allied to the trope of independence is that of recognition of skill in handling a particular vehicle, whether that is motor vehicle, as in ‘Arthur is Driving it Carefully’, aircraft – ‘only holding it for a short time ... that sky-travelling expert’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 131), or for the ship Koolinda – ‘the skipper will take care of it out in the deep water’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 37). Such acknowledgement is frequently accompanied by praise for the craft’s technology; as for the Koolinda – ‘huge, plucky thing, all its masts and derricks sticking up’ (Brown & Geytenbeek 2003, 37); and for the aircraft landing at Roebourne – ‘the big bird has landed comfortably from above ... [the dust rises] with the propeller’s rapid turbulence ... the exhaust pipes underneath are throbbing’. While marrngu awe for such technological wonders is apparent, in relation to ships and aircraft this awe may well have been at least partly fuelled by the inaccessibility of such alternative modes of transport.

What I have been keen to show here is the way these yirraru reveal the common experiences of marrngu in this era of immense social transformation. Yirraru are not static reproductions of long-standing ‘tradition’ but rather a genre of creative reproduction encompassing particular indigenous values, adapting and engaging with the dramatic shifts from indentured labourer in the pastoral era to autonomous marrngu in the Pindan era. Being characterised by individuality and innovation clearly offered yirraru composers and performers fertile ground for the accommodation and apprehension of social and cultural change. This selection of murtuka yirraru demonstrates the Ngarla composers’ intensely local attachments to country and kin, as well as offering glimpses into everyday aspects of marrngu lifeworlds. They also illustrate a yearning to broaden further their social horizons, to experience distant lands and a passion for the (then) newfound mode of mobility afforded by the murtuka. The marrngu view from ‘behind the wheel’ evident in these yirraru reveals something of the nature of the productive exchange between them and the broader Pilbara social and cultural milieus in which marrngu found and redefined themselves.

Notes

1 Mr Brown is recently deceased and in keeping with marrngu preference I use the respectful term Nyaparu to avoid offence.

2 Throughout I will use the Nyangumarta terms marrngu to indicate Pilbara Aboriginal person/people, and walypala for ‘whitefellas’; these are the local terms used by marrngu. Nyangumarta is the lingua franca of the north-western Pilbara. In using these terms I do not infer that there was, or is, an identifiable boundary between the two cultural domains, rather that the two categories of persons have arisen out of particular historical circumstances that have led to such racial categories gaining mutual (relational) currency (Cowlishaw 1999, 295-300).
Thomas states that ‘[m]ost of the tabis [in the von Brandenstein collection] are not older than half a century’ (von Brandenstein 1974, no page no.).

For the sake of brevity hereon I have reproduced only the English translation.

I am indebted to Benedicta Rousseau for this insight.

AN 5/2 Roebourne Acc 430 File 4144/1905 State Records Office, Perth, Western Australia.

AN 5/3 Acc 430 File 1347/1927 State Records Office, Perth, Western Australia.

The pearling season in the North West ran from October through to April whereas shearing, and the drafting of sheep in preparation for shearing occurs outside these months. It became the De Grey leaseholders’ practice ‘to spend six months of the year on the pearling grounds and six months on the station (for) the natives at this time proved at expert at diving as they were at shearing’ (The Western Mail 27 April 1912). By the early twentieth century as the abundance of shallow water shell diminished, Malay and Japanese divers replaced marnggu labour.

The numbers of Aborigines employed under permits across WA steadily increased from 5,463 in 1946 to 6,294 in 1950. From 1951 to 1954 there is a gradual decline (5,677 - 4,785). The lack of statistical evidence for the Pilbara pastoral strike may however be indicative of the Pilbara pastoralists’ evasion of the permit system (Biskup 1973, Appendix IV).

According to John Wilson who was undertaking ethnographic research among the group at the time, the ‘split’ was based on long standing social and cultural distinctions made by marnggu at this time in the Pilbara:

[[‘The tribes could be broadly classified into ‘river-line’ and ‘desert’. These categories were used by marnggu themselves. The ‘river-line’ grouping included the Bailgu [Palyku], Gariera (Kariera) [Kariyarra], Indijibarndi [Yinjibarndi] Naluma [Ngarluma], Ngala [Ngarla], and Njamal [Nyangumarta]. ... The riverline people were regarded as coming originally from the rivers of the Pilbara, from the de Grey and its tributaries in the north, to the Sherlock and Harding in the south. The ‘desert’ category encompassed the Gadadjara (Gadudjara) [Kartujarra], Mandjiljdara [Manyjilyjarra], Mangala, Njangomada [Nyangumarta], Warman [Warman], Djualing (Djuwali) [Juwaliny] and, Yilbaridja [Yulparija] (Wilson 1961, 153-154).]]

Initiation journeys facilitated by motor vehicles originating in the Western Desert and travelling through the Pilbara have been documented by Peterson. He notes that in 1974 Wiluna residents travelled over 1000 kilometres on an initiation journey to Strelley (approximately 75 kilometres east of Port Hedland); in 1973 a Papunya group journeyed over 1200 kms northwest to La Grange (Bidyadanga), and in 1977-78 Yuendumu residents travelled to Port Hedland (Peterson 2000, 210-211).

Motor vehicles are used in numerous ways throughout these ceremonies: to screen female and/or male restricted activities from the wider assembly; to delineate avoidance relationships; as a windbreak; comfortable platforms in which the elderly are seated; to facilitate communication between ‘visitors’ and locals who often camp several kilometres distant from the main ceremonial ground; and to ferry supplies of food and water around the numerous camps etc. Similar uses have
been documented by Young (2001). Motor vehicles also enable more frequent trips to visit kin living throughout the Pilbara and southern Kimberley especially funerals which involve extended periods of mourning with the immediate family in proximity to the deceased place of death.; several marrngu families resident in Port Hedland have children at boarding school in Perth, or kin in Peth hospitals, necessitating a 3,500 km return trip.

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