Aboriginal mobility is—and always has been—highly political, drawing on a history in which mobility was key to racial discourse; that is, Aboriginal people were seen as inappropriately mobile. Consciously or unconsciously, implicitly or explicitly, the concept of mobility has been a key component of historical and contemporary views of Aboriginal people. The much maligned and erroneous legal fiction of terra nullius was not built on the belief that the land was empty, but rather on an idea that the occupants wandered without structure or planning and had no notion of land ownership. Without identifiable social and political hierarchies or laws, they could be dispossessed and their land acquired as part of the imperial project. ‘Wanderer’, ‘nomad’ and ‘walkabout’ are all terms that abound with the idea of movement, fluidity and mobility. Mobility discourse has framed conceptions of Aboriginal authenticity and has been linked to racist themes like ‘walkabout’ and to the perception of the aimless, wandering (starving) nomad. Almost counterintuitively, these concepts have limited our ability to imagine the past and have been both contentious and restrictive for contemporary race-relations debates. Ironically, Aboriginal movements were also seen as extremely local—that is, mobility within a relatively small area. Containing Indigenous people and managing Indigenous mobility was key to the ‘civilising’ mission.
It is obvious, with over 220 years of perspective, that this containment was really about access to land. As Martin Thomas revealed in his study of surveyor-turned-ethnographer R.H. Matthews, the notebooks and journals of those measuring and carving up the land make for interesting reading. As they measured, pegged, claimed and opened up land for colonisation, they also observed and recorded.\(^1\) With containment, be it via missions or stations, came the (attempted) erasure of authenticity. As Maximilian Christian Forte pointed out, the authenticity of indigenous peoples continues to be connected to the idea that they were and are rooted to place and disconnected from the mobility associated with modernity.\(^2\) Such a view is, of course, completely at odds with anthropological and archaeological understandings of indigenous settlement and mobility patterns. Therefore, today we have a conundrum that is almost an inversion of the system that was established in the nineteenth century. Popular contemporary views of Aboriginal people that suggest they are highly mobile are juxtaposed against the image of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people as fixed and local. Where once being contained reduced authenticity, now it is mobility that undermines it.

Inspired by Daniel Richter’s *Facing East from Indian Country*, my aim is to examine case studies as stories of coastal Australia during European colonisation, rather than as aspects of the European colonisation of coastal Australia.\(^3\) As inhabitants of an island continent, those Indigenous people living along the coastline encountered new arrivals, for the most part, by sea. As these newcomers made their way to the shores of what came to be known as Australia, numerous sea-based industries were developed. These included bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber) and pearl shell in northern Australia and the Torres Strait, and pearling in Broome and Western Australia. Sealing was contained to the southern coastlines and whaling was ubiquitous. Indigenous men and women who engaged with these industries were often highly mobile, travelling significant distances. Given that Aboriginal people and Islanders have always taken advantage of new economic niches, this engagement might be read as a simple extension of the traditional range of activities. I argue that Aboriginal people looked out to sea for economic reasons, to gain freedom from colonial restriction and, ultimately, as a way for culture to be maintained away from the strictures of life on government stations, missions and camps.

---

1 Thomas 2011: 21.
2 Forte 2010: 2.
Two case studies form the basis of my argument. First, I argue that Henry Whalley, as a whaler, found freedom from racially based restrictions in an environment of relative equality. In the second case study, I discuss a group of Aboriginal women who travelled across the Indian Ocean and back again, maintaining their freedom away from colonial officials and continuing to work as sealers while bringing up their families.

**Indigenous Mobility**

Recent historians, including many in this volume, have begun to consider the conceptual framework of a nineteenth-century indigenous diaspora and cosmopolitanism. Within Australian historiography, groundbreaking foundational works have documented exchanges of pre-colonial sea-based contact in northern Australia; these have undermined views of Aboriginal culture as fixed and local, and have challenged colonially informed historical views of Aboriginal people as mobile but aimless. Work in this field looks at the extension of relationships into Macassar and South-East Asia, showing evidence of sustained and reciprocal mobility.4

The uncontested relationship between Aboriginal people and country or place has led to an emphasis on Aboriginal culture, perceived as spatially fixed or rooted. However, as historians Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow note, ‘mobility was and is as much a defining characteristic of Aboriginal cultures as affiliations with meaningful bounded places’.5 Mobility was an essential component of Aboriginal life ways. Over the course of millennia, the Australian landscape’s environmental and climatic zones shifted and changed; as Libby Robin puts it, in the post–Ice Age period ‘mobility, more than rooted dwelling, may be a survival skill for an increasingly arid and unpredictable world’.6 This travelling through and across territory creates country.7

Elsewhere, I have discussed at length how Australian Aboriginal culture has been historically and popularly perceived as nestled within a discourse of homogeneity.8 This operates at both a spatial and chronological level, in which Indigenous cultures with a history of over 40,000 years are

---

4 Marika-Mununggiritj 1999. See also Thomas 2012.
6 Robin 2012: 288.
7 Robin 2012: 290.
compressed into a single phase or unit: an ‘unchanging people in an unchanging landscape’, as the earlier observers put it. Contemporary Aboriginal people have been multiply disadvantaged by these models, chiefly because change or adaptation—or, indeed, the adoption of modernity—is seen to challenge the authenticity of Aboriginal people. Today, there is a commonly held view that the contemporary Indigenous Australian population is highly mobile, even transient. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the 2011 census, Indigenous people were both more likely to be away from their place of usual residence on census night and to have changed their living arrangements in the previous five years than non-Indigenous people. However, as demographers Biddle and Markham have noted, there is ‘as much variation within the Indigenous population as there is between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’.

Recently, historians have begun to examine what we might think of as a nineteenth-century Indigenous diaspora. Both Aboriginal and Māori mobility have been mapped and analysed in a growing body of literature. This work (my own included) has shown that, for the greater part of the last 200 years, Antipodean indigenous people have been moving, settling and resettling throughout the region. The groundbreaking work of Judith Binney, which examines Māori on Norfolk Island, and the doyenne Ann Salmond’s Between Worlds, now sit alongside the more recent scholarship of Tony Ballantyne, Rachel Standfield, Kristyn Harman and Cassandra Pybus in demonstrating that mobility, travel and journeying were normative for many people throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Cahir and Clark have observed, the movement of ‘Māori and Australian Aboriginal people was far more complex than histories that imagine indigenous peoples as fundamentally local and place-bound allow’.

Most of these analyses have focused on Southern Ocean traffic. While I barely scratch the surface of northern Australian ocean traffic, it is worthwhile contemplating whether there is a broader model that we might consider that supposes coastal-based Indigenous people were

9 Pulleine 1929: 310.
10 Biddle and Markham 2011: 2.
12 Salmond 1997.
14 Cahir and Clark 2014.
highly mobile and adaptive and sought out the opportunities that contact and later empire brought. Crucially, these movements and engagements should not be seen as contradicting the importance of place, country or connections to specific rivers, mountains and other features.\footnote{Cahir and Clark 2014.} Fred Cahir has documented how the Australian goldfields attracted significant numbers of Aboriginal people from both the mainland and Tasmania.\footnote{Cahir 2012: 5–6, 27, 68.} John Maynard’s work on the transcultural connections of the early twentieth century resulted from a study of the movements of Aboriginal people in the maritime and wharf industries.\footnote{Maynard 2007; Maynard 2005a.} These travels brought them into contact with black and civil rights activists in America and the inspired writings of Marcus Garvey. Maynard has suggested that these twentieth-century connections were an extension of early movements that can be traced back to the whaling and sealing industries. Intriguingly, Maynard suggests the possibility that Māori and Aboriginal people may have travelled to the Californian goldfields via the American Civil War.\footnote{Maynard 2005b.}

This mobility and movement was two way, with visitors arriving in Australia from Macassar and, later, from elsewhere in South-East Asia. For hundreds of years in the north of continental Australia, the bêche-de-mer industry flourished and trade and exchange was a feature of relations between local Indigenous people and the visiting Macassan fishers. Cultural traits that tell of these relationships include oral tradition, songs, folklore and rock art. Yolgnu, Yanyuwa and many other groups talk of their kin over the seas and there are familial ties between Northern Australian Aboriginal people and the inhabitants of Sulawesi and other islands.\footnote{Yanyuwa Families, Bradley and Cameron 2003.} Similarly, I have been told in Indonesia by people born in Macassar of their ‘Australian families’.\footnote{Basoeki Koesasi, pers. comm. 2012.} Linguist Paul Thomas has shown that the similarity of language terms between these two groups is clear evidence for not merely occasional visits but rather sustained and bi-directional exchanges.\footnote{Thomas 2012: 131.} Colonial policies to curtail mobility outlawed Macassan connections; however, Regina Ganter, in this volume, explores not only the possibility that this contact extended over greater areas of the Australian mainland than has previously been recognised, but also how this bi-directional exchange is being re-established.
Anthropologist John Bradley has documented Aboriginal people who travelled to Macassar, settled there and never returned.22 The pioneering research of Campbell Macknight supported a strong case for regarding the northern coast of Australia as the westernmost extremity of South-East Asia.23 Macknight’s comments are certainly a chastening reminder that ‘Australia was never terra nullius (a timeless land without history), nor its seas mare nullius, and [that] the idea of the island nation as separate, isolated, quarantined was a myth’.24 As Ganter has demonstrated, pearling in Broome and Western Australia, and the more recent pearl shell trade in the Torres Strait, caused an influx of travellers to the region and facilitated the movement of local people.25

Maritime Worlds

The mobility of a life at sea, or at least employment within the maritime industries, provided economic potential, freedom of movement and adventure. These and possibly other factors attracted Aboriginal people (predominately men) to the maritime worlds. Within the American maritime and fur trades, some of the work I have found to be critical to my own has included that by Susan Sleeper-Smith, Sylvia Van Kirk, Carolyn Podruchny and, more recently, Brian Rouleau.26 In terms of whaling and sealing, there are parallels with what Rouleau has noted as the transcultural nature of the American industry and the mobility this enabled. He argues that ‘African Americans long favored waterborne work for its more egalitarian character, as did Native Americans and Pacific Islanders’.27 The Australian maritime industry, like those of Europe and the Americas, was built on multiracial and multinational crews and has its origins in the transnational (and transcultural) mobility of the early contact period when Aboriginal people (and, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori people) travelled, worked and looked out to sea.

In what follows, I want to consider two (out of many) examples of Indigenous travels. While these case studies are very specific, the biographical approach allows for extrapolation and theorising. The first is Henry Whalley. Born on Kangaroo Island to his European father and

---

22  Yanyuwa Families, Bradley and Cameron 2003.
26  Sleeper-Smith 2001: 6; Van Kirk 1983; Podruchny 2006; Rouleau 2014.
27  See Rouleau 2010: 394.
Tasmanian Aboriginal mother, Whalley became a colonial success story through travel and mobility. My second example is focused on the travels of a group of Tasmanian women who sailed across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius and home again.

The whaling industry of Hobart in the early to mid-nineteenth century was a thriving industry that provided a much-needed economic base for the colonial outpost. The ships that sailed within these fleets were crewed by Aboriginal and Māori men, as well as Polynesians, Europeans and, on occasion, Native Americans and Africans.\(^{28}\) The crews were subject to frequent changes when crewmen left the ships and, in this dangerous world, the replenishment of crew was often necessary as ‘death was an ever present shipmate’.\(^{29}\) Life on a ship was extreme; cramped quarters and communal sleeping arrangements prohibited privacy, and work conditions ensured that no one escaped observation. For their chequerboard crews, a whaleship acted as a microcosm of wider society, yet mobility and life at sea offered a kind of freedom that was difficult to achieve on land. Ian McNiven has described the ocean and the sea as a transitive or inverted place where the beach/shoreline provides a portal into its liminality.\(^{30}\)

Since the early colonial period in Tasmania, Aboriginal people had been rounded up and confined to the government station. Harman’s chapter in this volume sets out the conditions for the Aboriginal people at the Oyster Cove settlement, where they had been sent in 1847 after their initial exile to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait, and she examines the mobility that was possible around the settlement for those people who were confined to the land. For Whalley and his compatriots, the transitive space of the ship and their time at sea offered the opportunity to be assessed on the basis of their skills and expertise, rather than their ethnicity. Whaling, in particular, offered social and economic opportunities not usually available to Indigenous people in the early colonial period. For these men, life at sea occasioned different sets of race relations to those on land. There was a much greater sense of equality among sailors and whalemen than might be anticipated in the colonial ports they visited. Survival at sea and success in pursuit of whales was dependent on each member of the crew operating in synthesis. Since everyone had a role to fulfil, a level of egalitarianism was necessary.\(^{31}\) Life on land could stand in stark contrast to this world.

\(^{28}\) See Morrell 1832.
\(^{29}\) Lawrence 1966: xvii.
\(^{30}\) McNiven 2001.
\(^{31}\) Russell 2012: 67.
Whaler John Philp worked in the twilight years of the Tasmanian industry and, decades later, as an old man, he recorded his and some of his colleagues’ memories, some of which dated back to the 1870s. He reflected on the difficulties of whaling, which he acknowledged ‘was a hard school’; however, he also added: ‘The native youth took to whaling like a duck to water, and in the years that followed were recognized as able to hold there [sic] own in any company of whatever nationality’.32

Whaling was an industry where a seaman’s skill and expertise ensured his economic and even physical survival. Although by no means a utopian or idyllic existence devoid of race-related problems, the whaling industry nonetheless required men of all races and nationalities to get along together: safety and profit depended on it. It is not surprising, then, that for some Aboriginal men, life at sea was appealing. The version of freedom it offered, especially in contrast to indentured or convict labour, was something on which whalers prided themselves. For the Aboriginal whalers, this freedom enabled them to exert autonomy in ways that were not possible on land.

It is known that at least six (and probably many more) Tasmanian Aboriginal men went whaling in the nineteenth century. There is indirect evidence that across Australia the whaling industry attracted the attention of many Aboriginal people. In 1829, George Augustus Robinson wrote several journal entries documenting attempts to ‘rescue’ Aboriginal people from Kelly’s whaling station south of Hobart.33 Elsewhere in the country, Aboriginal whalers were much sought after. At Eden and Twofold Bay in New South Wales, entire crews of Aboriginal whalers worked,34 and in Western Australia some of the whale boats were manned entirely by Aboriginal crews.35 The excellent skill Aboriginal men showed in spear throwing translated well onto the boats—they tended to be excellent harpooners.36 Aboriginal and mixed-race men became actively involved in the Hobart based industry and one whaleboat in 1839 had an entirely Aboriginal crew.37

32 Philp 1936: 27.
33 Russell 2012: 68.
34 Russell 2012: 37.
35 Russell 2012: 32.
When Whalley died in 1877, the *Tasmanian Mail* recorded this simple death notice: ‘WHALLEY—In August last, at Macquarie Islands from the effects of a severe accident, Henry Whalley, mariner, 58 years of age’.\(^{38}\) Obituaries for Aboriginal people in colonial times were unusual. Whalley, whose mother was a traditional tribal Aboriginal woman from Tasmania, was a rare example of a ‘half-caste’ success story. Whalley was born on Kangaroo Island sometime towards the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century. He was the son of Henry Senior (known as Robert), the self-proclaimed unofficial ‘governor’ of Kangaroo Island.\(^{39}\) The name of his Tasmanian Aboriginal mother is unknown; however, it is likely that she was known as Bet or Betty.\(^{40}\) It is clear that she was a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman who had been taken to Kangaroo Island by sealers or whalers. She may have been a sister of Truganini or a relative of William Lanné. Elsewhere, I have suggested that Whalley’s close relationship with Lanné was possibly on account of this existing kinship.

Whalley sealed with British Captain John Inches Thomson in the sub-Antarctic sealing grounds, including Campbell and Macquarie Islands, on board the ship *Bencleugh*.\(^{41}\) During a storm near Macquarie Island in August 1877, with waves that ‘seemed to reach the heavens’, 58-year-old Henry Whalley, first mate, whaler and harpooner, was badly injured.\(^{42}\) As the ocean tossed his ship to and fro, he was flung across the deck and, as a result, either dislocated his leg at the hip or broke it; he may even have broken his spine. His crewmates were unable to determine exactly what his injuries were. The next day, a concerted effort was made to get the now paralysed Whalley ashore and to tend to his injuries. As he was quite incapacitated, they constructed a hoist and pulled him aloft with ropes and pullies. That evening, one of the crewmen who had taken it upon himself to stay with Whalley gave him some coffee. After he finished it, Whalley is reputed to have said: ‘That is good; now I will have a long sleep’.\(^{43}\) These were his last words, as he never woke.

---

38 *Tasmanian Mail*, 9 March 1878: 11, col. 4.
39 Taylor 2002: 25. According to Taylor, Whalley’s father is sometimes referred to as ‘Robert’ and sometimes ‘Henry’, ‘Whallen’, ‘Wharley’, ‘Wallon’ and ‘Wally’. For convenience, the spelling Whalley is adopted and, to avoid confusion, Whalley senior will be designated Robert, while the son is named Henry. See also Copland 2002: 135.
41 Taylor 2002: 66. Taylor also notes that Whalley whaled in sub-Antarctic seas. The importance of these sealing grounds and the Macquarie Island Elephant seal population is shown in Cumpston 1958. See also Jones 1971.
42 Thomson 1913: 142.
43 Thomson 1913: 142.
After a solemn, short funeral, Whalley’s shipmates set about digging his grave. His epitaph was inscribed into the folding-slate ship’s log of the Bencleugh with the words:

There, calmly let him sleep.
Not all the winds that blow
Can shake his bed, and he shall keep
A quiet watch below.44

Thomson’s journal has a heartfelt poignancy. This British captain, himself translocated thousands of miles from his homeland, recollected the loss of a valued friend and crewmate. From my perspective, it is particularly pertinent to note that here there is no mention of Whalley’s ethnicity, unlike the earlier ship’s log references to him as a ‘half-caste’. Instead, the story is told of Whalley, mariner. Whalley had transcended his racial category. This is also how he was described in the Hobart marriage register 15 years earlier in 1862 when he married Margaret Elizabeth Cole; she was described as a spinster and he, simply, as a mariner.45 Travel, particularly the mobility afforded by the maritime industries, enabled Whalley to move not just across the oceans, but also, I argue, across race and class divides.

Incidents of Aboriginal people travelling to Europe and even the Americas were not common, but they did occur.46 Usually travel was enabled by their roles as domestic servants to European families. On a number of occasions, this involved travelling with these families when they returned to Europe. An Aboriginal woman from Hobart known as Kitty left Port Jackson with Mr Hogan and his wife in the ship the Minerva in 1818.47 The family were relocating to Batavia (Jakarta). Two years later, Catherine Knopwood, a young Aboriginal Tasmanian woman who was a servant to Mrs Briggs, the wife of the captain of the Admiral Cockburn, immigrated with the family to London.48 That same year, an Aboriginal man from Hobart, William Thomas Derwent, left for England onboard the Medway.49 Unfortunately, most of those who travelled disappear from the historical records. Perhaps they perished in the harsh European

44 Thomson 1913: 15.
45 Registry of Marriages in the District of Hobart, 1862, R6037/1/21, Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart.
46 In her meticulously researched study of a troupe of Aboriginal performers, Roslyn Poignant has documented their travels across eastern and western Europe and North America. Poignant 2004.
47 Mollison and Everitt [1976]: entry for 1818.
48 Knopwood 1977.
49 Mollison and Everitt [1976]: entry for 1818.
winters, or succumbed to diseases such as cholera or consumption. However, maybe some lived on, forging new lives in unfamiliar places. Perhaps among these we might one day find those who travelled to the Californian goldfields and the American Civil War.

Aboriginal men from Western Australia were also employed on whaling expeditions and were known to sail on American and French ships. The acquisition of new languages and cultural knowledge was one of the many side effects of travel. In 1832, Quaker missionaries Backhouse and Walker met a group of Aboriginal women who had spent time sealing in the Bass Strait. The missionaries were surprised to discover that, as well as speaking English, several of them could speak a 'passable' French. These women were among the five who had travelled from Tasmania, along with their children and their dogs, to Mauritius, Rodriguez, Amsterdam and St Paul Island in the southern Indian Ocean. This level of mobility suggests a degree of (admittedly attenuated) agency and autonomy. Although they may have been compelled, coerced or forced to undertake the travel, their later actions belie the status of victim. As Angela Wanhalla's contribution to this volume sets out, scholars are yet to fully explore Indigenous women as mobile subjects and find ways to recognise and account for their agency, including in situations where mobility may not have been a freely made choice.

I have argued that these women used their expertise as sealers to negotiate their way to the Indian Ocean and, perhaps more importantly, back to their Tasmanian homelands. While the archive is rich with their travels and travails, unfortunately, the women's own voices are silent; the archive is only ever about them and not from them. The women first appear as the subjects of a contractual agreement; it is noted that they were taken on King Island, Van Diemen's Land, on 3 August 1825. The archivally anonymous women had sexual and possibly domestic relationships with some (perhaps all) of these men. The agreement notes:

51 Robinson 2008: 685. See also Backhouse 1843; Plomley and Henley 1990.
52 All the material relating to this incident was copied from the Colonial Office and is housed in the Tasmanian State Archives. CSO 1/121/3067, Hobart. See Letter from CSO to Commander of ship Admiral Cockburn, 22 May 1827; CSO1/121/3067; Letter from EA Abbott, Launceston, re death of one of the women, 25 August 1827; CSO1/121/3067; Statutory Declaration of A Delabye, Thomas Taylor and Twelyer, 12 December 1826; CSO1/121/3067.
This is to certify that Thos Taylor, John Seweler and five women natives of Van Diemen’s Land are left on Rodriguez Island to remain until the vessel returns from the Isle of France to convey them to the Island of St Pauls and Van Diemen’s Land.

Signed G.W. Robinson,
loved with John Finniss
[the Acting Chief of Court Police, based in St Louis] in Mauritius.

Tyack did not remain on Rodriguez Island for long before he travelled to Mauritius, where he found employment. For those that remained on Rodriguez Island, almost a year passed and the Mauritian authorities (and possibly the women and men sealers themselves) believed that they had been abandoned. However, on 15 December 1826, John Finniss wrote to A.W. Blane, acting chief secretary to the Mauritius Government, informing ‘his Excellency the Governor’ that the group had been rescued by the schooner Les Deux Charles and relocated to Mauritius. In reply, Blane requested advice on ‘how these persons are to be disposed of until an opportunity offers of conveying them back to New Holland’.

Taylor, an Englishman, possessed documentation proving that he was not indentured; he requested that ‘he might be employed in some vessel sailing from this Port, if it should be his Excellency’s pleasure’.

Finniss was concerned about the situation and he continued his documentation with a statement taken from the sailors. He did not record whether the women were present when the statement was made or whether they made statements of their own. He noted that the sailors had a written agreement with the captain of the ‘Hunter, with five women and a child who [also] joined the vessel’; they were to proceed to ‘St Paul’s Island to process seal skins’ and they were entitled to ‘remain … if they chose’ on this or any other island.

According to the official, this was at least the second time they had been stranded (previously the captain had left the group at King George’s Sound, Western Australia, for several months). When the captain returned, they continued into the Indian Ocean towards St Paul’s Island. Again the captain was ill-prepared; within a very short time their provisions were limited and they encountered difficult weather. After further delays and hardships associated with a lack of provisions, Taylor (whose voice is the only one evident in the records) and the group relocated to Rodriguez Island in the Indian Ocean, where ‘they [the male sealers] put ashore with those five women and three children with provisions for seven weeks at
the rate of forty pounds of bread flour [each]. They remained there for many months. When another ship arrived they were informed that their vessel had shipped out of Mauritius twice since leaving them on Rodriguez Island and the group assumed they had been abandoned. Once again, they were returned to Mauritius. When interviewed the male sailors:

Declare[d] that the Capt[ain] … told them that the reason he sent those women on shore was for fear of meeting a Kings vessel between Rodriguez and this island, that the Capt[ain] of the Man-O-War would not believe that those women were free people and would seize the Hunter.

It is unclear what happened to the group over the next five months. I think we can assume that they lived within the township of Port Louis in Mauritius, which, since 1810, had been a British colony (prior to this it had been administered by the French). The town was made up of white and ‘coloured’ settlers, Indians and around 60,000 slaves. The women most likely lived among those who were described as the ‘free coloureds’, who numbered over 7,000.53 Port Louis was a bustling trade port, filled with ships and sailors from all around the globe. Vessels were stocked with sugar, textiles, spices and, of course, seal skins. Perhaps—even though the culture and language were different—the similarities to the port town of Hobart enabled them to negotiate their time there with relative ease.

The authorities permitted one of the children to remain in Mauritius with his father, Tyack, provided ‘his mother voluntarily allowed him to stay’. Finniss witnessed this in his own office and he allowed the boy to stay. By this stage, Tyack had secured employment in the Office of the Registry of the Admiralty. On the same day, 3 March 1827, he recorded that ‘one woman died’. Unfortunately he did not enter her name in his journal; although, on the death certificate, he recorded her as Wateripitau. She entered the government hospital on 24 December and died on 4 January of dysentery.

The Mauritian colonial office arranged for the group to be transported to Sydney. On 12 May 1827, Alex McLeay of the Colonial Secretary’s Office in Sydney noted that they had arrived ‘on board the Orpheus at the NSW government’s expense the women, their two children and several dogs’. The Sydney officials were keen to have the women relocated and McLeay requested ‘that an endeavour to ascertain the wishes [of the women be made,] that direction may be given for their disposal. Perhaps they may

53 Norvill and Bell 1864: 82. Compare with Toussaint 1954.
wish to join the natives in this neighbourhood'. Two days later, on 14 May 1827, the Master of Attendants Office of Thomas Nicholson wrote to the colonial secretary, having determined the women’s wishes. He noted that:

They are desirous of returning to their native place, consequently I should recommend that they be forwarded in the *Admiral Cockburn* which sails for Van Diemen’s Land tomorrow, or on the next vessel that may be destined for that Island.

The group was transported on the *Admiral Cockburn* to Van Diemen’s Land for the sum of five pounds. Disputes arose around payment for their passage between the various colonial governments, New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land, and, by 1829, the government of Mauritius still had not finalised the bill for their transferral from the Indian Ocean to Sydney and then on to Tasmania.

These women, who travelled across the Indian Ocean and returned home, engaged with colonial society at both an economic and personal level. They made personal choices within the confines and impositions of the British Empire. As Aboriginal women, they were restricted in what they could and could not do, but there were some freedoms they both sought and achieved. It seems an irony that, in order to maintain their sense of themselves culturally, they chose to travel away from their home. The idea that Aboriginal people are fixed to place would seem to fall apart when we take a closer look at these mobility patterns.

**Conclusion**

Aboriginal people travelled. It seems such a simple concept and yet the historical literature and popular accounts of history are so often mute on this. By the time of Federation, the presence of ‘coloured labour’ was the subject of dispute. In an extension of the White Australia Policy, in 1904 the Australian Government passed into law the ‘White Ocean Policy’, which stated that no shipping company employing black labour would be permitted to carry Australian mail. Designed to protect the employment of white Australian sailors, it was assumed to rest:
On one argument only—the maintenance of the purity of the whole race on this continent. There must be no intermarriage of blacks and whites … the white ocean policy was on a different footing, inasmuch as the colored seamen did not settle on the land—they took the white man’s place at sea.54

For the best part of a century, Australian ships had been transnational; they had employed black and white, native and settler, and immigrant and sojourner. As the newly formed nation became increasingly anxious about its place in the world, ships’ crews became whiter and the ships decks were not so much a liminal zone.55

References

Backhouse, James 1843, A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies, Hamilton, Adams, London.


54 The Advertiser, 8 March 1905.
55 At this point, many of the sailors chose to ‘pass as white’ for the purposes of their maritime career.


Mollison, Bill and Coral Everitt [c. 1976], A Chronology of Events Affecting Tasmanian Aboriginal People Since Contact by Whites (1772–1976), Psychology Department, University of Tasmania, Hobart.

Morrell, Benjamin 1832, A Narrative of Four Voyages to the South Sea, North and South Pacific Ocean, Chinese Sea, Ethiopia and Southern Atlantic Ocean, from the Year 1822 to 1832, Harper, New York.


