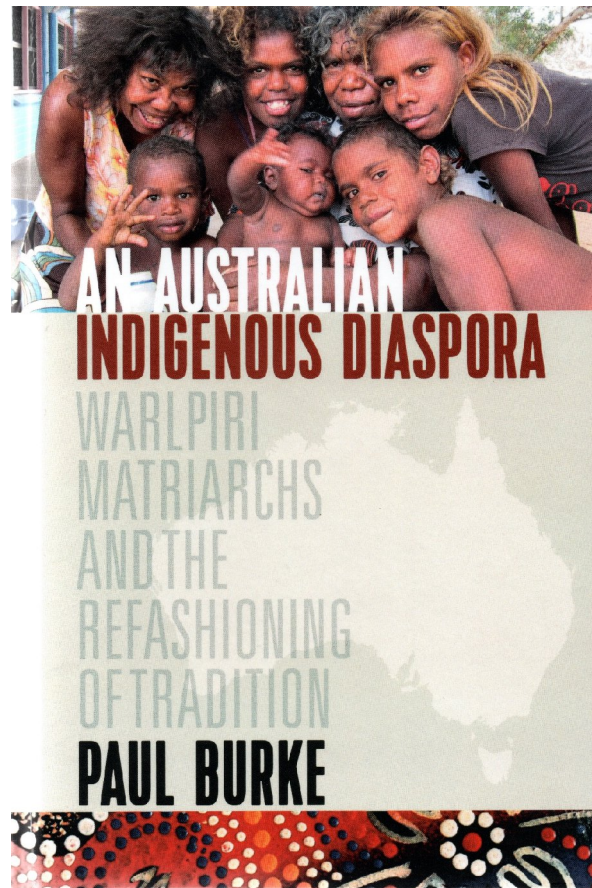
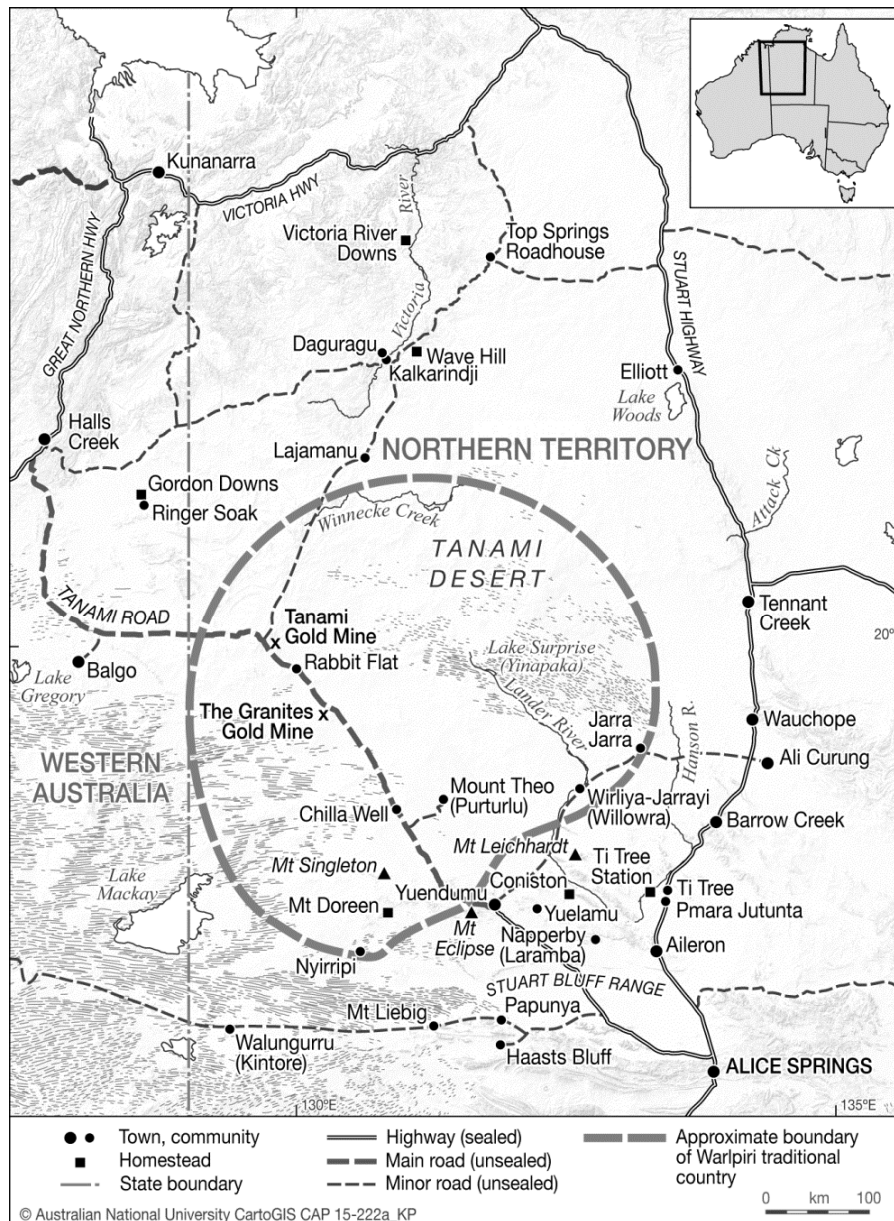


# Is diaspora the future? Where does it place native title anthropologists?

By Paul Burke





The traditional country of the Warlpiri is in the Tanami desert in the Northern Territory. So strictly speaking the Warlpiri settlements of Yuendumu and Lajamanu are already diaspora locations. But for the purposes of my research between 2009 and 2014 I lumped all the Warlpiri settlements and traditional country together as the Warlpiri homeland. I wanted to understand how Warlpiri people, who had moved away permanently, made a life for themselves in distant towns and cities – what I call the Warlpiri diaspora.

These are some of the people I encountered:





Warlpiri women of Bagot Camp, Darwin



Warlpiri long-grassers of Darwin



Warlpiri residents of Cairns



Bess Nungarrayi Price, Alice Springs



Alice Springs Warlpiri at a friend's wedding



Warlpiri artist in Kununurra, WA



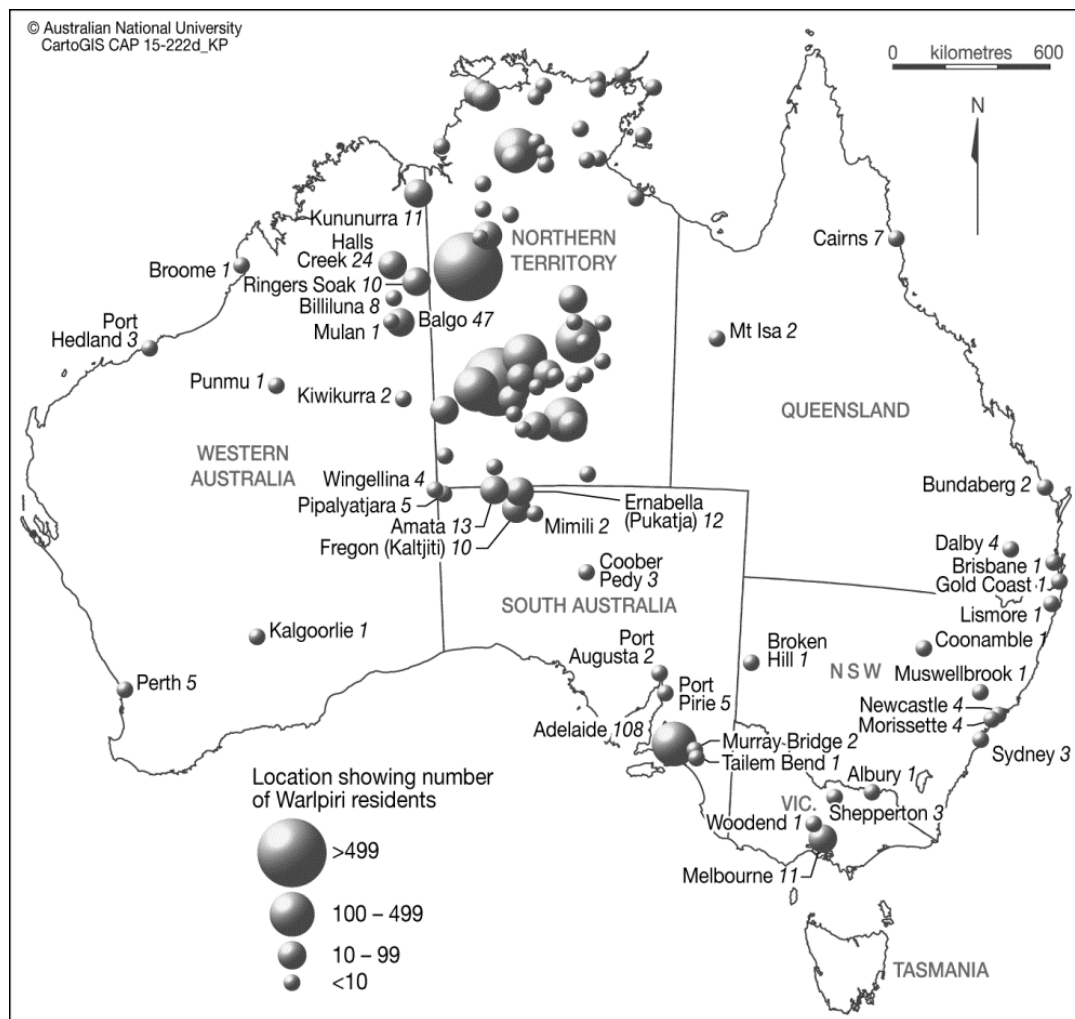
Warlpiri family at Elizabeth, SA



Adelaide Warlpiri artist

Speaking to the Warlpiri women, I begin to reflect on the relatively recent Warlpiri history out of which they emerged, particularly the social stratification within remote settlements resulting from the big government project of education. Many who sustained lives in the diaspora were from a group I called the bicultural adepts. This consists of people who through their formal education and their own strong personalities and boldness were able to extend their own personal networks beyond their own kin and function in the broader society.

I will illustrate the moderate scale of the Warlpiri diaspora through the following map:



I included in these numbers the voluntary diaspora and the involuntary diaspora. The involuntary diaspora are those people who live in the towns and cities but not through their own choice: those on dialysis treatment, those incarcerated in jails, those attending rehabilitation facilities, those who were fostered out to white families. Taking away the involuntary diaspora, I calculated that approximately 23% of the Warlpiri had voluntarily decided to live in towns and cities. This could be compared to 80% of the Torres Strait Islanders who live on the mainland. But I do not wish to underestimate the significance of the 23%. It means that most Warlpiri people have relations in towns and cities and thus kinship networks which extend all over Australia.

The numbers were also fairly stable over the course of my research and were not as much influenced by the Intervention as one might expect. Thus while the diaspora is certainly the demographic future of the Torres Strait Islanders it does not appear to be so for the Warlpiri as yet.

### Warlpiri matriarchs



At the heart of the persistence of the Warlpiri diaspora were the mature Warlpiri women who ran functioning households. They had left the Warlpiri settlements for varying reasons: some to escape promised marriage, some escaping alcohol restrictions to take up the drinking life in town, others to move the home town of their white husbands and others to further their own education. The white husbands varied in their social standing, opening up diverse social trajectories: underclass, working class and middle class. The Warlpiri matriarchs typically had a dual orientation: both towards helping their own kin and expanding their own social networks beyond kin. In the town camps of the larger Northern Territory towns, needy kin, visitors and drinkers would gather around their functioning households. The Warlpiri diaspora of drinkers was never far away. The social networks beyond kin included the congregations of the churches in which they were involved, white friends and acquaintances sometimes met through the churches; business contacts, their children's schoolteachers, white in-laws and key personnel in government and NGO service organisations. These friends and contacts helped to sustain their household in numerous ways through different kinds of assistance. This kind of social networking required the development of social skills that were not easy to master for many of their kin – what I label in the book as non-traditional social technologies. Examples of these include learning to moderate the demand sharing which tended to dominate their interaction with kin and accepting the limitations of some useful relationships with non-indigenous people. In effect, they had to restrain themselves from turning their white friends and contacts into kin or at least making careful judgements about the nature of their requests for help (figuring out which demands were likely to be accepted in particular circumstances). Sometimes the offer of a skin name was part of this evaluation of the contact's willingness to engage.

The ability of the Warlpiri matriarchs to sustain these non-kin social networks stabilised the households and enabled the households to become valued destinations in their own kin networks. Because the matriarchs became points of contact for service organisations they were able to fulfil one of their ongoing personal projects to be generous to needy kin. In some locations the matriarchs were also able to pursue their own personal projects such as setting up a Christian women's household based on the traditional widow's camp; extending their own education; taking up leadership positions in churches and greater economic independence via the sale of their artwork. One Warlpiri woman in Adelaide made it her life's project to host many children from her home settlement while they attended schools in Adelaide. On a very different tack, another Warlpiri woman dedicated her life to being an outrageous character among the tough homeless men of the Adelaide parklands.

The networking beyond kin seems to have benefited from the positive revaluation of Aboriginal tradition in the broader society commencing in the 1970s. They arrived in town just as the new Aboriginal organisations of the self-determination era required members, employees, directors and traditional cultural input. There was also the positive reception of Western desert style painting and more generally, the overwhelming positive reception of the sober industriousness of the matriarchs.

#### Parallel diaspora

Particularly in Adelaide, the social networks of the Warlpiri matriarchs included white people who had worked on their home settlements as teachers or missionaries or art advisers (similar in some ways to Emma Kowal's 'White anti-racists'). These proved to be critical contacts for the initial establishment of the Warlpiri in Adelaide.

### The politics of home and away

I detected the beginnings of a mutual stereotyping between those on the home settlements and those in the diaspora. Those on the settlements associated the move to towns and cities with the abandonment of responsibilities to traditional country and as a move towards dangerous disorder and alcohol abuse. Those in town thought the settlements were blighted by too much sorcery and boredom. The town-dwellers asserted their traditional credentials by continuing their generosity to kin, continuing to speak Warlpiri, organising sorry business and return visits to the settlements for mining royalty meetings and to initiate their sons.

### The nature of the matriarch's refashioning of tradition

In summary, the Warlpiri matriarchs did embrace many aspects of tradition. They did object to how some traditional laws were applied to them and to the unfair beatings they had received. The diaspora locations were more of a repositioning away from the intensity of settlement life and allowed them to be more in control of their lives and to pursue their own projects.

I did encounter connected issues of the attenuation of traditional knowledge of country and what could be called the fragility of traditional means of the transmission of traditional knowledge. These issues were most clearly illustrated in what I have called 'second generation diaspora', that is the Warlpiri people who were born in distant towns and cities and grew up there.

Even within this group there were a variety of circumstances ranging from complete ignorance of Warlpiri language, kinship etiquette or traditional country to those who had some limited understanding of these things. In the book I describe the case of a young Warlpiri woman who had been brought up in Adelaide who did make a successful return to one of the Warlpiri settlements because she had just enough Warlpiri language and the patronage of a well-entrenched uncle on the settlement. But she was the exception that proves the rule: without language, without contact with knowledgeable relations, without opportunity for visiting country it was understandable that there would be a dramatic decline in the traditional knowledge of the second generation diaspora.

What I wasn't prepared for was the apparent attenuation of detailed knowledge among the generation who were born in the Warlpiri settlements in the 1950s and 60s. On one memorable occasion I asked one of the Warlpiri matriarchs about her traditional country. She said that she wasn't sure and that I should go and ask the land Council. This answer is of course pregnant with the difficult issues in which we are all implicated: our role in contributing to an archive which may in future supplant more traditional modes of the transmission of

knowledge.

Again there are a variety of circumstances among the Warlpiri and across Australia. Working in some areas of Australia, some claimants appear as our skilled co-researchers retrieving relevant nuggets of their cultural heritage from the documentary archive. In areas where the old people who grew up on the country are still alive such sources of knowledge are frowned upon.

Because of these complexities, I am not suggesting that it is possible to resist the tendency towards documented traditions. Rather it is just to note that working in native title we have a front row seat in observing these processes.

The Warlpiri diaspora research project was essentially about cultural change. It was guided by the conviction that indigenous culture, even that of the remote communities, needs to be understood as a relationship to the broader encapsulating society and the changing conditions of that relationship. This is what Francesca Merlan has labelled the intercultural and in her recent book 'sedimentation'. I take that to mean simply that current relations between indigenous and nonindigenous are built on previous interactions and that some aspects of culture change more readily than others. Is the intercultural approach the enemy of native title's insistence upon traditional continuity? I don't think so. Ideally, it should help us to explain cultural transformation in a more realistic and credible way and not just in terms of cultural loss (although there is also plenty of that).

The changes to the culture of the Warlpiri matriarchs of the diaspora were relatively subtle compared to the second generation diaspora who grew up in completely different conditions. For me this demonstrates the truism that as social conditions change so does identity, culture and traditional laws and customs.

Indigenous Australia is so diverse it is always questionable whether remote area studies like mine are generally applicable. People here at this conference have to reflect on their local situations. In the Pilbara, for example, the wholesale move from tribally mixed station camps to tribally mixed towns was more or less completed by the 1980s. It is not surprising then that some features I have identified with the second generation diaspora would also emerge there.

This includes:

- continuing orientation to traditional homelands but with the attenuation of detailed knowledge of country
- increasing use of documented traditions as sources
- the rise of educated Aboriginal women as key intermediary figures

And there are no doubt many other variations across Australia.