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## **Petronella Vaarzon-Morel**

### **Continuity and Change in Warlpiri Practices of Marking the Landscape**

#### **Introduction**

Warlpiri people of Central Australia have served on a number of occasions (e.g. Rothenberg and Rothenberg 1983: 139; Biddle 2002) as exemplars of the Derridean premise that no society is without writing (Derrida 1976: 109). The debate about the reasoning behind this proposition is outside the scope of my interests here. Nonetheless, it is certainly helpful to have a term, such as “writing”, that groups together the various kinds of practices that Warlpiri engage in to give visual form to their understanding of the world.

Earlier work has focused on such aspects of Warlpiri visual communicative practices as sand drawings, body and ground designs, and sacred objects (e.g. Munn 1974); contemporary acrylic paintings (e.g. Dussart 1999); and gesture language (e.g. Kendon 1988). Building on the voluminous literature on marking of the Australian landscape by ancestral Dreaming beings (e.g. Meggitt 1986; Myers 1986; Munn 1974; Langton 2000), more recent work among Warlpiri and their neighbours has explored the issue of inscription of the landscape in relation to the domain of women’s ritual and artistic practice (Biddle 2002; Watson 2003). The purpose of the present contribution is to extend the discussion of the marking of landscape.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, this chapter explores how, when and why Warlpiri Aboriginal people in Central Australia mark the landscapes within which they live. Attending to continuities in people’s socio-cultural practices through time, I also consider the relationship between ancestral and contemporary practices of marking landscape, through which people imbue place with meaning and manage space.

The paper is in two parts. The first provides the ethnographic background for the study, and the second surveys a range of examples of landscape marking, as well as considering the relationship between customary and contemporary instances of such marking. Each part is divided into a number of sections. In the first these sections cover the following topics: the Warlpiri and their environment and the kinds of features in the Warlpiri landscape that receive toponyms; the Jukurrpa (“Dreaming”) and its relevance to ancestral markings; the marking of country; and negotiating social space. The second part provides examples of the marking of landscape in the following four contexts: tracking and negotiating country; wayfaring and navigation; inscribing country with fire; and death and burial. I also consider the relationship between customary and contemporary instances of such marking in the creation of meaning in place and the negotiation of space.

#### ***Part 1: Ethnographic background***

##### **1.1 The Warlpiri**

Traditionally the Warlpiri were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers, whose territory occupied an area of roughly 100,000 square kilometers (Meggitt 1962) in the southern Tanami Desert region of Central Australia. First contact between Warlpiri and Anglo-European settlers occurred in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Meggitt 1962, Vaarzon-Morel et al. 1995), when large areas of the better watered Warlpiri lands were taken up by settlers for cattle stations (ranches). European invasion had a radical impact on

Warlpiri demography and use of the land, in particular on their subsistence economy. By the 1950s patterns of mobility had radically altered, with people living more sedentary lives at government settlements such as Yuendumu, Alekarenge (formerly Warrabri) and Lajamanu (formerly Hooker Creek) or on cattle stations such as Willowra on the Lander River. Following the introduction of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, 1976*, Warlpiri people mounted a number of successful land claims<sup>1</sup> with the result that much traditional Warlpiri territory is now Aboriginal freehold land. Despite sedentarization, many Warlpiri continue to hunt and gather, visit sacred sites, camp out, perform rituals, and otherwise engage with ancestral country, while observing their customary responsibilities toward it. In doing so they continue to mark the land through a range of social practices which, in addition to customary methods, draw upon new techniques and forms of marking.

The climate of the Warlpiri region is semi-arid with hot summers and cold winters. Precipitation is irregular, with most rain occurring in summer between December and March, when rivers and creeks may flow briefly. Prior to European colonization the population density was low: on average it was estimated to be one person to “between 35 to 40 square miles” (Meggitt 1962: 32, 206). However more well-watered areas surrounding drainage lines such as the Lander River in eastern Warlpiri territory supported larger numbers of people (Meggitt 1962: 2). In the past, the presence or absence of water influenced people’s movements and use of land. During well-watered seasons people took advantage of ephemeral waters to travel widely, visiting kin in more distant areas. As the land dried out they would retreat to more permanent waterholes and dig water from soaks in the dry river bed.

Meggitt (1962: 47-48) identified four major socio-cultural groups or “communities” within the wider Warlpiri region as follows: Ngaliya, Wanayaka, Warlmala and Yarlpiri. These social divisions reflected “natural topographical and physical divisions of the countryside that influence[d] patterns of movement and communication” (Peterson et al 1978:1). While reference will be made to other Warlpiri, the focus of this paper is on people who identify as Yarlpiri or Lander Warlpiri from the eastern Warlpiri region who, for the most part, now live at Willowra and Alekarenge.

In addition to the rivers and smaller creeks (which are dry most of the year), the topography of the Warlpiri region includes sand plains, sand hills, rises (colloquially termed “jump ups”) and rocky hills and outcrops on which vegetation may grow. Typical vegetation of the region includes seed bearing grasses, spinifex (*Triodia pungens* and *Plectrachne schinzii*), low shrubs (for example, *Acacia spp.* and *Grevillea spp.*) and species of Eucalyptus trees (Gibson 1986), the larger of which tend to grow along drainage lines. Warlpiri associate different areas with specific types of vegetation, soil types and land forms thought to have been created by ancestral beings during the creative period known as *Jukurrpa* (usually glossed as “Dreaming” in English). Significant features that are held to embody ancestral persons or substances are regarded as sacred and are generally named. Such features may include rockholes, soaks, hills, ranges, claypans, rock formations, caves, rivers, creeks, swamps, floodouts, stony ground and trees, which may occur singly, or as part of a wider site complex,

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<sup>1</sup> The author undertook research for five land claims that involved Warlpiri people: Willowra (1980); Kaytej-Warlpiri (1981); Mount Barkly (1983); Yurrkuru (Brookes Soak) (1991) and Kanturrpa-Kanttaji (1992). As I discuss later, the claim process involved extensive mapping of Dreamings, sacred sites and country in relation to social organization and land tenure (see also Sutton 1998a).

or as a tract of country.<sup>2</sup> Warlpiri place names reveal people's intimate knowledge of their environment.

Hercus et al. (2002: 19) have analyzed the semantic content of place names in Central Australia and divide them into four types as follows. The names may describe or refer to: 1) physical features of the environment; 2) ancestral beings; 3) both ancestral beings and the environment; 4) figurative content (for example, the name may refer to an ancestor's body part(s), tool or activity). Of those place names which are environmental descriptors, more refer to vegetation than topography (Hercus et al. 2002: 16). Commonly, names of ancestral beings are generic names for a species, for example, "kangaroo" or "goanna", but many are proper nouns.

Hercus et al. (2002: 13) note "the importance of a systematic mnemonics" to Aboriginal people who were highly mobile and did not build permanent structures which could be used as reference points (see Aporta for a discussion of Inuit place names and O'Meara on Seri place names in this volume). While toponyms are integral to Warlpiri navigation practices, they are but part of a complex multimodal system of mnemonics (cf. Severi 2012) that derives from ancestral ways of marking of the land and shapes contemporary practices. Of fundamental importance to this system are Dreamings tracks, which sequentially link named places along ancestors' paths of travel. These Dreaming tracks or itineraries become inscribed in people's memories as they travel through and experience country in the company of knowledgeable kin, who in turn instruct them by naming places, telling stories<sup>3</sup>, and singing associated Dreaming songs. People also learn about places and country by participating in ceremonies in which they are taught about Dreaming songs, designs and dances. As discussed in the following section, Dreaming tracks are not simply memory aids but inscribe Warlpiri Law in the land. As Munn (1996: 453) notes, "the Law's *visible signs* [emphasis in original] are topographic 'markings'". As Aboriginal marking practices cannot be abstracted from the cultural context in which they are produced, I now consider Warlpiri cosmology and land tenure.

## 1.2

### **Ancestral marking: Jukurrpa, Dreaming tracks and songlines**

While traditionally Warlpiri did not possess an elaborate material culture, their socio-religious system is complex and grounded in the Jukurrpa<sup>4</sup> or "Dreaming". Jukurrpa concerns the pre-human cosmogonic period when ancestral beings emerged from the earth and created the features of the Warlpiri lifeworld. As they travelled, sang and interacted with other entities, the ancestral beings inscribed the surface of the land, naming the sites where their bodily substances and activities became metamorphosed or were "externalized" as features in the landscape (Munn 1973). In doing so they established "order, meaning and obligation" (Meggitt 1972: 71) and the "lawful processes", which govern interactions among the constituents of the Warlpiri world, be they human, plant, animal or spirit. Thus, according

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<sup>2</sup> While an entire range may be named, features of the range such as ridges, springs, spurs and caves may also be named.

<sup>3</sup> In these stories the identity of remembered grandparents may become fused with that of ancestral Dreaming figures.

<sup>4</sup> Spelt *Tjukurrpa* in Western Desert languages and referred to as *Altyerr(e)* in Arandic languages.

to Warlpiri ontology, nature and culture, “matter and meaning”<sup>5</sup>, subject and object are not regarded as fundamentally separate but as having come into being relationally. Ancestral marking is foundational in this process.

The Warlpiri ideology of an unchanging Dreaming provides the conceptual structure by which stability and order are determined in the Warlpiri lifeworld. However, as many other writers have pointed out (for example, Ingold 1996; Merlan 1998; Myers 2000; Godwin and Weiner 2006: 125-126; Tamisari and Wallace 2006), the Aboriginal landscape is not simply a backdrop to which fixed meanings attach. The agency of ancestral beings continues to effect the present and is sustained by Warlpiri who “follow-up” the Dreaming. This involves Warlpiri engaging with country through embodied practices such as hunting and gathering, ritual performance (singing and dancing), the care of sacred sites, country and other every day activities. While individual subjective experience is important in this process, as Myers’ (2000: 77) points out in relation to Pintupi, Aboriginal people “do not simply ‘experience’ the world; they are taught—indeed disciplined—to signify their experiences in distinctive ways”. Noting that “stories, songs, designs and the like provide components of an ‘inner representation’ of the country, instructing learners what to find”, Myers (2000: 78)<sup>6</sup> emphasizes the socially mediated nature of landscape. Following Myers’ approach, I view Aboriginal hunter-gatherers’ subjective experience and cultural constructions of the environment as dialectically constituted. This is especially the case with older Warlpiri who spent their early years walking the country and have an intimate familiarity with it. Recent changes in Aboriginal lifestyles mean that younger people’s modes of engagement with country may be radically different.

The paths taken by ancestral beings on their travels are referred to variously in English as Dreaming tracks, itineraries or “songlines”. Collectively they form a complex network across the continent, linking different social groups from different regions. Many, though not all, sacred sites on a Dreaming track are water places. Emphasizing the instrumental function of songlines, the archaeologist Cane (2013: 81) notes that the corpus of such narratives creates “an iconography of the desert, explaining and defining its resources and the socio-political relationships of the people using them”. If one were to follow them, he writes, they would allow “the deserts of Australia to be traversed and occupied with comparative ease”. Popular literature has sometimes given the impression that Dreaming tracks functioned like highways, which people utilized to travel between regions far beyond their linguistic group. For example, in his book *The Songlines*, Chatwin uses a conversation between two characters to describe Dreaming tracks or songlines as “‘ways’ of communication between the most far-flung tribes” (1987: 13). A song, says the main character, “was both map and direction-finder. Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across country” (cf. Lewis 1976: 274). While noting that a man who “strayed from his Songline” would be regarded as “trespassing”, he affirmed that “as long as he stuck to the track, he’d always find people [“brothers”] who shared his Dreaming”. The reality, however, is far more complex.

As is well known, among Warlpiri and other Aboriginal groups Dreamings structure relationships between people and place. This occurs first and foremost at the level of

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<sup>5</sup> In thinking about these issues I draw on Barad (2003) and Marshall and Alberti (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Myers was criticized by Ingold (1996) for emphasizing the role of cultural construction over dwelling in his representation of Pintupi understandings of place. While in accordance with Ingold’s view that “it is through *dwelling* in a landscape, through the incorporation of its features into a pattern of everyday activities, that it becomes home to hunters and gatherers” (Ingold quoted in Myers 2000:77), Myers (2000: 78) points out that Ingold ignores the “operations and practices that mediate between a subject and the world”.

language. By naming sites in a particular language in one region and changing the language as they entered another, ancestral beings inscribed language in land and provided people with a language identity (see Sutton 1991). Although today some people may identify with a particular language but not speak it, it nevertheless remains the case that “speaking the appropriate language is a kind of passport, marking you – both the local people and to the spirits of the land – as someone known and familiar, with the right to be there” (Evans 2010:8).

In addition to placing language in land, Dreaming narratives provide the framework for land tenure organization in Central Australia. In Warlpiri land tenure, a clan’s “country” or “estate” comprises the area surrounding a number of enmeshed Dreaming tracks for which they have responsibility. Warlpiri countries are inherited through a system of patrilineal descent, in which members of a clan are regarded as having a consubstantial link with the ancestral beings who gave form to their country.<sup>7</sup> In this system, children of males of the descent line (*kirda*, “owners”) and children of females of the descent line (*kurdungurlu*, “managers”) have complementary rights to and responsibilities for land. Members of adjacent clans who own different sections of the same Dreaming track are regarded as having a close relationship. Here it should be noted that some Dreamings are localized and “stop” in one place, some travel from one country to visit another within the same region then return, and still others travel through adjacent clan countries connecting different regions in Central Australia. Additionally, there are some well-known Dreamings (for example, the Seven Sisters or Pleiades) that travel across the continent “linking landowners who, at least until recent times and the advent of modern communications, did not know each other” (Sutton 1998a: 360). Importantly, while Dreaming tracks link clan groups they also serve to differentiate between them (Peterson et al. 1978, Sutton 2003).

In addition to descent based rights, Warlpiri may also acquire interests in country through other means, for example, by being incorporated into a kin group, growing up in that group’s country and acquiring the requisite knowledge of local stories and ceremonies for it. A person may also acquire a “conception Dreaming” or totemic relationship to the place where the person’s mother first became aware she was pregnant with him/her.<sup>8</sup> A child so conceived may bear an identifying totemic mark on her/his skin, which illustrates the fact that marks can be embodied and materially relate people and country to each other. An individual also may receive a personal “bush” name (or names) from a paternal grandparent of the same sex, which connects him/her with a particular place and country and hence ancestral being.<sup>9</sup>

In the past in the Lander Warlpiri region, people who identified as Yarlpiri constituted a loose social assemblage of patrilineal clans with close ties established through kinship, ritual and marriage. These people regarded each other as “*warlalja*” or “countrymen” and would regularly hunt and gather on each other’s country. This reflects the fact that Aboriginal land holding and land-using groups were not identical (Hiatt 1962; Stanner 1965). While

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note the Warlpiri land tenure system is more structured than that of groups who lived in the arid Western Desert. Western Desert systems are characterized by fluidity and openness (see Myers 1986), with emphasis placed on social relations which are created through the sharing of extensive Dreaming tracks (Smith 2013: 217).

<sup>8</sup> Conception is said to involve the animation of a foetus by a Jukurrpa spirit associated with a particular Dreaming being and place.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Vaarzon-Morel was given the “bush” name Yimarda-ngali. “Yimarda” is the name of women’s Dreaming site to the east of Willowra “Ngali” is a suffix used for female names. The name signals Vaarzon-Morel’s incorporation into the Ngarnalkurru family who are *kirda* (“owners”) for the site.

landholding groups have an enduring corporate identity, the composition of residential groups was fluid, with individuals joining and leaving them to hunt, visit relatives and for other reasons (Keen 2004: 308). Although people's own country is especially "dear" to them and they regard it with deep emotion and pride (see Peterson 1972; Lewis 1976: 253), oral histories collected from Warlpiri at Willowra reveal their extensive travels in, and knowledge of, countries in the wider Lander region (see Vaarzon-Morel 1995). As I discuss later, places within these countries are associated with ancestral and familial happenings, which people recall when revisiting them.

Elders' visits to their own country are occasions for "checking-up" on places to see that they have not been disturbed, with men closely monitoring the ground surrounding sacred sites for untoward signs, for example, the marks left by strangers or other persons who do not have permission to be in a place. According to Warlpiri Law, strangers should not enter people's country without asking. In the past, according to Meggitt (1962: 45), an outsider needed "the protection of a 'mate' or 'sponsor'" to enter Warlpiri territory unless he was a "ceremonial messenger" or novice on a post-initiation ritual tour in the company of his guardians (Meggitt 1962: 46). The messenger would be "decorated with totemic patterns" identifying his Dreaming.<sup>10</sup> Although today people travel on public highways to towns and settlements and cannot avoid passing through strangers' lands, they generally do not venture far beyond the road corridor lest they encounter dangerous places and thereby run the risk of Dreaming spirits causing them to become ill (see discussion below regarding spirits).

Clan ownership of a particular country implies the clan's possession of the requisite religious knowledge and associated sacred objects for the sites that lie along Dreaming tracks within that country. Importantly, access to religious knowledge about country is restricted according to factors such as kinship, a person's gender and seniority, and in the case of men, whether or not they are initiated and have participated in certain highly restricted post-initiation ceremonies. In general, only those people who hold core rights in land may speak for and make decisions about the land and its resources. These people have the right to paint designs depicting the Dreamings of the land and perform associated ceremonies. They also have the responsibility to look after their country. The recognition of Aboriginal land rights has meant that some forms of sacred site protection are enshrined in Australian law, although the form and extent of protection varies widely from state to state and according to the type of land tenure. In the Warlpiri region, traditional owners of freehold country frequently participate in site surveys and "clearances" of their country with staff from the local land council in order to prevent buildings, roads, mines and other infrastructure from infringing upon, and desecrating, important places. Importantly, looking after country also entails people monitoring and interpreting signs of Dreaming and other beings, all of which resonate with meaning. Stanner (1979: 131) described the Aboriginal world as a "realm saturated with significations. Here 'something happened'; there 'something portends'". Furthermore, he noted, "Aborigines, seeing the signs, defer to the significations; and, watching others do so, seem to understand why". Similarly Godwin and Weiner (2006: 125) remark "the conceptual life of Aboriginal people is always indexed by some material mark, sign or impression on the environment from which it is possible to infer the actions of beings –whether they be animals, humans, or creator beings".

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<sup>10</sup> The ritual tour to which Meggitt refers continues to be a significant way that men acquire religious knowledge of sites and country beyond their own language group. Today, women's Law and Culture meetings, which involve women from different language groups in Central Australia, provide a forum for Warlpiri women to extend their religious knowledge beyond their home community.

### 1.3 Marking country

In the Warlpiri religious landscape, topographical features such as rock formations, hills, watercourses, trees and other vegetation bear the traces of ancestral activity: all potentially are signs. As mentioned earlier, the power and agency of Jukurrpa beings and features associated with them continue in the present. In moving through country, Aboriginal people are constantly alert to signs indicating Jukurrpa and the presence of ancestral spirits who watch over country (see Povinelli 1993). These spirits have the capacity to inflict harm on strangers or people who treat country disrespectfully; conversely the spirits reveal food and other resources to those who belong and behave appropriately. As one person told me, “If you are a stranger they hide food from you and make you confused so you’ll get lost”. Thus, when in an area not visited for some time, Warlpiri call out to the spirits of the country and introduce themselves, and when visiting unfamiliar country they act with great circumspection and limit their activities. For example, people refrain from lighting fires, cooking food, hunting animals, gathering firewood and otherwise leaving their mark on country. Conversely, lack of success in a pursuit—such as hunting or recording a place on film—may be attributed to the agency of spirits from the land who prevent the person from making his/her mark, so to speak. For an example of the latter, Hinkson recounts an incident where she was told that a person’s failure to capture images of a Dreaming place on film happened because “they didn’t let those photos come out, those spirits” (quoted in Hinkson 2014: 96).

As these brief examples reveal, marking country is not a neutral activity, but one redolent with significance. Indeed, marking is sometimes thought to be instrumental, as indicated by the fact that people “marked” sacred sites in various ways to increase species related to the site or to bring rain. Significantly, in the past in Australian Aboriginal societies generally there was a strong prohibition on marking except by those in authority. (Children’s games involving sand drawing or stone arrangements were also permitted.) This constraint is illustrated by the following example from the Yolngu man Galarrwuy Yunupingu:

When I was 16 years old my father taught me to sing some of the songs that talk about the land... One day I went fishing with Dad. As I was walking along behind him I was dragging my spear on the beach which was leaving a long line behind me. He told me to stop doing that. He continued telling me that if I made a mark, or dig, with no reason at all, I’ve been hurting the bones of the traditional people of that land. We must only dig and make marks on the ground when we perform or gather food (quoted in Sutton 1988: 13-14; cf. Langton 2002: 259).

Similarly Vaarzon-Morel witnessed a Warlpiri child being admonished by her parents for aimlessly carving marks on trees, which was said to offend ancestral beings and hence cause her to become ill.

As this section has indicated, socio-cultural and religious factors constrain and enable marking activities, and the customary protocols governing them. In addition to seniority, factors such as gender, kin relations, possession of religious knowledge and rights in land determine the way people engage with, and mark, country. To put it another way, Warlpiri marking practices and rights in country are integrally related and involve issues of identity, recognition and respect. As I now explore, the question of how Warlpiri mark cannot be analytically separated from how Warlpiri negotiate social and physical space and construct place.

## 1.4 Negotiating social space

Munn notes that complex “sociomoral” (1996: 448) considerations govern the way kin negotiate space and place, such that “one cannot abstract ‘social space’ from ‘concrete space’ (1996: 449). As I will show, this has implications for how people delimit space in general. First, it is important to note that in the Warlpiri socio-spatial schema space is employed to mark relationships. Physical distance often implies social distance and people use space not only to diffuse conflict—a well-known strategy of hunter gatherers—but also to signify social identity. For example, at large ceremonial gatherings close kin will camp together and position their camps in the direction of their country. This reflects the fact that Warlpiri, like other Aboriginal groups, employ an absolute rather than relative frame of reference to position objects and people in space (Evans 2010; Green 2014). Cardinal points are used consistently to navigate country and indicate direction. As noted by Green (2014: 20), speakers of Aboriginal languages who use absolute reckoning “typically show directional awareness and precision in their use of the various communicative systems at their disposal”. In a statement that applies equally to Warlpiri, Green states in relation to Anmatyerr people that “discussions about songs, travel and people are almost always accompanied by gestures, diagrams or maps on the ground that indicate the location of places and events in an absolute frame” (2014: 21).

However, the absolute frame is not only employed by individuals to spatially orient themselves in relation to fixed locales but also by patrilineal groups who employ the relative spatial orientation of their clan countries to ritually structure social space. For example, the countries of several Warlpiri clan groups who belong to the patri-moiety containing the subsections Jangala/Jampijinpa and Jupurrula/Jakamarra are located upstream on the southern Lander River. Several other countries belonging to clan groups associated with the opposite moiety are located downstream on the northern Lander. Reflecting the spatial distribution of the two groupings, the following terms are used to refer to the two moieties: Ngurra Kurlarinyarra, meaning those whose country is situated in the south and Ngurra Yatujumparra, meaning those whose country is in the north. This socio-spatial mode of identification is employed during mortuary rituals and ceremonies such as Ngajakula at Willowra, when members of the two groups position themselves in relation to each other on a south-north axis.

Second, correct observance of Warlpiri Law includes respectful practices of gender segregation, avoidance relationships and ritual exclusions. To take an example, relationships between a mother-in-law and son-in-law necessitate physical avoidance, a practice which Warlpiri describe as having “no room”.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, prohibitions related to gender and/or age govern people’s access to sacred sites and gendered places such as ceremonial grounds. Munn (1996) has analysed spatial interdictions as a fundamental aspect of Warlpiri marking and I draw extensively upon her work in what follows in this section.

It has long been noted that the concept of bounded areas is problematic among Warlpiri and other desert peoples and that the extent of their countries is often ambiguous. Similarly the extent of sacred sites cannot be clearly delimited. Imbued with ancestral power, these Jukurrpa places have been likened to “a gravitational field weakening out from the center” (Peterson et al. 1976: 5), which can cause harm to those who do not observe Warlpiri Law (Munn 1996). According to this Law, women are not allowed to access men’s restricted sites,

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<sup>11</sup> Interdictions also apply to names, for example, when a person dies their Christian name becomes “taboo” and is temporarily replaced by the generic term “*kumanjayi*”, meaning “no-name”.

and vice-versa. Breaches of the Law attract physical and/or supernatural sanctions (Meggitt 1986). The power of the Dreaming is not restricted to sacred sites, and people may be frightened to encroach on an area if they feel a threatening Dreaming presence. As Munn (1996) notes, when this occurs people describe the experience in terms of being “blocked” from the place. Munn’s analysis of such “spatial interdictions” highlights the importance of indexicality to the process of delimiting space. Crucially, she points out that “Aboriginal fixed markers of dominion are visible centers rather than place boundaries” (1996: 456), and that boundaries may be created by movement out from these stationary centers which “can also become boundaries”. As indicated later, this way of marking and perceiving place and space has implications for Warlpiri representation of country in so-called “mud maps” and sand drawings.

Focusing on the “mobile *spatial* field of the actor in contrast to a determinate region or locale” (1996:451), Munn observes that, unlike Western practices of marking out space with fixed boundaries, among Warlpiri “*spatial prohibitions* [act] as a mode of boundary marking” (1996: 449) and also that the Law carries “the power of boundary making with it” (1996: 462). Furthermore, she states, this power can be “transposed”, such that “the ancestral Law’s power of spatial limitation on movement becomes directly embodied in a centred mobile field apart from any fixed, enduring centre” (1996:461). For example, when initiation ceremonies are performed today it is often the case that the senior Law men involved have to travel in a vehicle from one community to another. When this happens the roads they travel on become restricted to women and children (Munn 1996: 460-2). Logs are also placed across non-public roads within Aboriginal land to indicate that religious business is in progress. This is another example of modern marking, which nevertheless delimits space and “blocks” progress in a similar way to the modes discussed earlier.

## **Part 2: How landscape is marked**

Having briefly considered the socio-spatial context in which marking is embedded, and having further provided some related examples of marking, I now want to consider other modes and arenas of marking. My focus is on temporary signs, rather than the more durable markings such as the engraved and/or painted walls of rocks, stone arrangements and quarries, which have attracted so much archaeological research (see Smith 2013).<sup>12</sup>

I begin with recollections from Nungarrayi, a Warlpiri woman I interviewed about how people used to locate geographically dispersed kin in the period when they subsisted almost entirely from the land.

We made our camp there at that shady place, and camped for two nights, then we said, “Let’s go and look for tracks of people”. We walked to another soakage, digging yams and hunting all the way...On the way to the soakage we saw tracks. “There were people living here the day before yesterday” we said. There was a bough shade belonging to other people who had stayed here earlier. “They must be at another soakage we said”... as we walked along we saw grass burning from other people’s fires, and then we saw their bough shade and camp. “They left here yesterday,” we said and followed their tracks until we saw another bushfire. Those other people had told each other, “Oh there must be people coming today”. One woman had felt

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<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to note here that Warlpiri regard rock paintings and engravings as originating in the Jukurrpa. As Smith (2013: 220) points out “this view is encapsulated in the Warlpiri term, *kuruwari* (lit. ‘significant mark’ [see later discussion in this chapter]), which applies to any visible mark left by a totemic ancestor and which does not conceptually distinguish rock art from natural marks on rock surfaces”.

twitches in the muscle of her arm, which indicated that family was coming (Vaarzon-Morel 1995: 9).

I now take up some of the modes of marking country referred to in Nungarrayi's narrative and discuss how they continue to be used today despite the increasingly sedentary nature of people's lives at settlements.

## 2.1 Tracking and negotiating country

While ancestral marking of landscape is fundamental to how Warlpiri understand their world and relations between people and place, marks on the ground made by other living beings also resonate with meaning. As Green (2014: 242) notes for Aboriginal people in Central Australia generally, the ground is "a locus of important information, coding movement, habitation and histories, like a vast notice board". Tracks and prints are the preeminent way Warlpiri mark country and interpret agency and action within it. Whereas Jukurrpa marks are considered to exist eternally however, marks and tracks made by humans are transient but may be repeated. Tracks are like public announcements, they are available for all to interpret and, as Jackson notes, they are "crucial to respecting the Law in everyday life" (2013: xvi). According to Warlpiri cultural logic, only suspicious persons who are intent on harming others, or ritual executioners<sup>13</sup>, would conceal their tracks.

Most adult Warlpiri are skilled trackers and can identify people by their footprints and, in the case of an animal, the direction it traveled, its type, size and age, and whether it is female or male. Not surprisingly, the Warlpiri language has a lexicon pertaining to the nature of different kinds of marks inscribed on the ground. The term *kuruwarri* refers to a mark, pattern, design, drawing or painting which symbolises Jukurrpa events (Laughren 2012). In the context of ceremonial events and sacred objects (e.g. see figure 1), *kuruwarri* are regarded as embodying the invisible potency of ancestral beings and thus as being ritually efficacious (Munn 1973). To take some other examples, *julpurrpa* means "soft earth disturbed by activity such as kangaroos wrestling, children playing or ceremonial dancing" (Laughren 2012). The verb *pantirni*, meaning "to pierce or spear" is also used for processes of inscription such as writing, painting, engraving and drawing (see Biddle 2002). There are other terms for the following indicia: an impression in the ground such as a footprint in mud, a scar or a pothole; an imprint left by a scooping action in wood or earth; the furrow made by a snake; a mark made by the dragging of a tail; and a mark made by a moving foot to signal the presence of something that one may wish to return to, for example native honey in a tree (Laughren 2012).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> They are known as "*kurdaitja*" or "feather feet" because of the down-covered boots they wear to hide their identifying footprints.

<sup>14</sup> Sutton notes (pers. comm. 10/4/2014) that in the Wik area of Cape York when men come across a tree with honey and want to reserve it for later, they mark the tree with a hatch nicked in the bark.



**Figure 1.** Sand paintings with ritual poles marking the site of Pawu (Mount Barkly), around which women performed a *yawaylu* ceremony during the Mount Barkly land claim hearing in 1983. Photo by author.

As Munn demonstrated in her ethnography *Walbiri Iconography* (1973), such marks form the basis of the Warlpiri “graphic representational and symbolic system”, which is employed in traditional sand drawing, ceremonial body and ground paintings, sacred objects and rock art. The marks are “iconic” in that they resemble imprints of the objects and acts that they denote (Munn 1973: 87). When used to recount cosmological narratives or “microtemporal” events centered on everyday life, the marks employ a basic circle/line: site/path structure. The tendency is for men to concentrate on long journeys, whereas women focus on more detailed cosmology and localised events such as hunting and events in camp (Munn 1973; cf. Green 2014; see Lovis this volume on the relationship between gender and spatial knowledge). According to Munn “men equate the camp with the female, and the path with the male principle” (1973: 166). In so far as designs may reference ancestral stories which are restricted to certain categories of people such as women, Munn (1996: 463) notes that they are yet another instance of the “transposibility” of spatial interdiction.

In recent years the “communicative range” (Munn 1996) of the designs has greatly expanded with the production of acrylic paintings on canvas (the so-called dot paintings) that are now part of the international art market (see, for example, Sutton 1988; Dussart 1999, Myers 2002). Although intended for a different audience than was traditionally the case, these paintings mark people’s relationships with country, announcing their identity and custodial rights in a similar fashion to iconographic designs painted on bodies and objects during ritual performances. In that such designs may depict “different spatial distributions of locales” (Munn 1973: 136), they have been likened to maps. However, as Sutton (1998b) points out, while they may reference topographical features, unlike cartographic maps they are not concerned with accurate geographical representation. Rather, they are “selective depictions”

of segments of particular Dreaming tracks which tend toward symmetry in design; or they may represent political and religious relationships at a general, schematic level—or a combination of both (Sutton 1998b: 361-364; 379-383). Moreover, in seeking to convey and/or inscribe religious meaning, iconographic designs used in paintings “arise principally as display or performance rather than as explanation or record” (Sutton 1998b: 365). Yet, as I now discuss, Warlpiri employ map-like drawings which are used to indicate relative positioning of sacred sites and other features in the landscape and to assist in finding their way.

## 2.2 Wayfaring and navigation

While subsistence patterns have radically changed and Warlpiri now use motor vehicles to travel, they still hunt and undertake trips involving wayfaring and tracking. For example, depending upon rainfall and seasonal availability, women undertaking a hunting trip will specify the area they want to travel to in order to procure bush food. After driving to the chosen area, which will likely have a named waterhole in the vicinity, the women will fan out and, walking in a circular orbit, look for signs indicating the presence of the desired resource such as a goanna or bush potato. To avoid becoming separated from the group the women will monitor their position in relation to significant features such as trees, hills, patterns of vegetation and the location of the sun and call out to inform the latter of their whereabouts. On such trips women generally select a shade tree to rest under during the heat of the day, where they will cook lunch, sing Dreaming songs associated with the area and recall previous visits with relatives to the place. The term “country-visit” is increasingly being applied to occasions when Warlpiri camp out on country and travel away from settlements “in the bush” with the explicit purpose of teaching the younger generation about the Law.

“Bush travel” is facilitated by unsealed public roads that link Willowra with other settlements and old station roads or tracks. These latter follow fence lines or lead to water bores, from which excursions to areas of interest are regularly made. The old station track along the Lander River follows a line of important waterholes for Warlpiri, on which European colonisers sank wells and watered introduced stock such as cattle. According to Meggitt (1962), prior to intensive European settlement the Warlpiri region was “latticed with native tracks following the lines of such waters”. These were not as extensive as traditional walking trails in the Great Sandy Desert trails, which according to Cane (2013: 77-8) extended for 350 kilometres. Nor were they like the well-worn paths established over centuries of use in regions such as rainforest North Queensland or at Flinders Island, Cape York Peninsula, where some paths were named in a similar way to sites (Sutton pers. comm. 10/4/2014). In areas such as this people placed twigs and branches at strategic points on paths to indicate the direction of travel. In the Lake Eyre region of South Australia small sculptures called toas, which were decorated with designs depicting named places on songlines, are thought to have functioned as direction posts (Sutton 1998a: 383-384; see also Jones and Sutton 1986). Sutton (1998a: 384) notes that while the purpose of toas remains a matter of controversy (due in part to their unusual form and origin), “their supposed functions are effectively the same as those of directional markers once used in northeast Queensland and Victoria”. As indicated in the quote from Nungarrayi earlier, in the Warlpiri region smoke was (and continues to be) used to signal direction and location.

A long standing Aboriginal practice for explaining directions or relative location of sites in an area is to use “mud-maps” and sand drawings, both of which employ iconography and conventions used in ceremonial designs (on bodies, the ground and ritual objects) and acrylic paintings produced for the commercial market. As Munn (1973) observed, women, in

particular, use sand drawings to narrate Dreaming stories and everyday events. Typically, they sit on the ground and clear a space to draw in the soft red earth. As the story unfolds each episode is erased from the ground before another begins. Green (2014) has built upon Munn's earlier work to demonstrate the particular ways in which verbal (speech, song) and visual art forms (sign language, gesture and sand drawing) are combined in practice to produce complex multimodal performances. According to Green (2014: 242), "the use of drawing to augment stories is a response to the potential for using inscribable ground for narrative purposes". While a detailed discussion of sand drawing is not possible in the present context, sand drawing is noted here as another—albeit circumscribed—form of marking the land. As I now discuss, maps drawn on the ground, which are commonly referred to as "mud maps", are yet another form of such marking.

When explaining the location of a site or giving directions Warlpiri typically draw a sketch or "mud map"<sup>15</sup> in the ground using a finger or twig. Orienting the mud map in the direction of the country discussed, they use the absolute frame of reference to draw Dreaming tracks and locate sites sequentially in relation to topographical features such as rivers, springs, hills, infrastructure such as fences, roads, bores and windmills and other details. Employing the circle line framework of Warlpiri iconography, each site is typically depicted as a circle with lines linking sites. In a detailed analysis of Aboriginal maps and plans, Sutton (1998a: 405-408) discusses "mud maps" and quotes a description by the European explorer Charles Chewings of an Aboriginal man drawing one in 1909. As the quote concerns the Lander River region I provide an excerpt here:

...Paddy drew a map showing the course of the Hanson Creek..., also of the large Lander Creek (Native name Allalinga [Yarlalinji] a good many miles to the west. He indicated certain conspicuous hills near the Lander and the sites of certain springs and soakages on the routes he had travelled, and, by marking his various camps, the time it took to travel from water to water (Chewings 1930, quoted in Sutton 1998a: 407).

In his seminal study of Aboriginal "route finding and spatial orientation" among Western Desert Aboriginal people, Lewis (1976: 255) noted that when Aboriginal people are asked the location of a site they typically provide directions not from the position of the person asking the question but from a known place. The same is true of Warlpiri.

In the course of mapping sites with Warlpiri people for Aboriginal land claims I have had much opportunity to observe how they make their way through country. The land claim process occurs in an intercultural space involving both Aboriginal Law and Australian law. In that the legal process involved claimants identifying sites and country and proving their ancestral relationships to land, it is an instance of contemporary marking writ large. Here, however, I want to discuss briefly how Warlpiri make their way through known country with the intention of locating a sacred site.

The adults with whom I have worked have an intimate knowledge of the cultural geography and topography of the Lander region. As they travel through it by foot, or more commonly, motor vehicle (and infrequently helicopter), they "read" the Jukurrpa in the landscape, identifying ancestral paths of travel and the bodies of the ancestral beings with specific vegetation, trees, hills, mountains, rocks and water sources. When stopping at a sacred site elders will recount Jukurrpa events that occurred there and may sing songs that evoke the

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<sup>15</sup> Nash (in prep.) refers to these as "sand maps" and provides a detailed explication of their production, features and the underlying semantic and semiotic systems on which they are constructed. I draw here on conversations with Nash and also Sutton (1998a) about Warlpiri "mud maps" and navigation.

events. While vision is important in wayfinding, Warlpiri employ all their senses including smell, hearing and other forms of bodily perception when interacting with country (see also Poirier 2004). Warlpiri apprehend their environment as an integrated whole of which they are part, attending to signs and the presence of other entities as they move through it. To take some examples, the appearance of chirping flocks of Zebra Finches (*Poephila guttata*) indicates the presence of surface water. The call of a bellbird indicates that a malevolent *kurdaitcha* being is in the vicinity. The smell of wild orange fruit (*Capparis umbonata*) indicates that it is ripe and ready to eat. As mentioned earlier, Warlpiri call out to ancestral spirits such as *milarlpa* and introduce themselves. A night, it is said, *milarlpa* can be heard whistling, or breaking twigs in recognition of such respectful behaviour.

As the earlier discussion of Dreaming tracks indicates, Warlpiri sites do not exist in isolation but are part of an interdependent network of named places. Thus, when travelling off road through the bush and attempting to locate a place not visited for a long time, Warlpiri attend to spatial relationships among known sites and other landscape features. In finding their way to the site they will note characteristics of the country that they travel through (for example, vegetation, soil type, form of the land, drainage, the presence of large trees, hills, mountains, fences, bores or windmills) to check that they are on the right course. They may light fires behind them (depending on the direction of wind, time of day and temperature) and use the smoke to help maintain their bearings. They will also orient themselves by observing the prevailing wind direction and the shadows cast by the sun. The flow of water over the ground is another direction indicator. As people move through country they constantly recalibrate their position in relation to features appearing on the horizon. In travelling with Pintubi Aboriginal people, Lewis found people's spatial orientation in their own country was highly accurate (1976: 260). He surmised that they used "some kind of *dynamic image* or *mental 'map'*, which was *continually updated* in terms of time, distance and bearing, and more radically *realigned at each change of direction*, so that the hunters remained at all times aware of the precise direction of their *base and/or objective*" (1976: 262, emphasis in original; cf. Aporto's discussion of maps and Inuit wayfaring in this volume). Lewis's observations accord with my own experience.

Particular places are identified not only on the basis of their spatial relationship to other sites but by the unique assemblage of topographic features that surrounds them. For example, on one occasion I visited a soakage with some women who had discovered it while digging for bush potato and firing the country as they moved through it. At first unable to remember its name, one of the elders, Lucy Nampijinpa, recalled it by singing Jukurrpa verses associated with the snake Dreaming track that travelled through the area. To me the site was imperceptible in the landscape from a distance. When I asked the young woman who had originally found it how she relocated it, she replied that she knew where it was by "measuring up" surrounding features. She remembered that an anthill stood a short distance to the north-west of the soakage and a dry bean tree to the south. Additionally, she pointed out that the vegetation surrounding the soakage was green as a result of having been fired when first found (see figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Cecilia Martin sets fire to area surrounding a rediscovered soakage to the south-west of Willowra. The position of the soakage is marked by the green grass (to her immediate left), a nearby termite hill and a tree. Although not visible in this photograph, Pawu (Mount Barkly) can be seen on the horizon from the soakage. Photo by author.

As the earlier example indicates, sites can be lost and found. Sites close to roads that are visited frequently are more likely to be remembered than those that are in remote locations and difficult to access (see also Lovis this volume).<sup>16</sup> Although named in Dreaming narratives, it is through people's interactions with them over time that they emerge as places in their memories. Older Warlpiri tend to mark events in their lives by reference to place rather than abstract categories of time (see Swain 1988; cf. Aporta this volume). For example, places are remembered that mark transitions in a person's life cycle such as place of birth, where a relative died or ceremonies such as initiation were performed. When visiting places people also recall more mundane happenings and associations. For example, on one occasion when I visited a soakage to the west of Willowra with Teddy Jupurrula, we came across old cattle yards and the remains of a shelter constructed by a White settler who had sunk a well in the soakage. Teddy recounted the Dreaming narrative associated with the site and then described how he used a windlass to obtain water for cattle as a young man when he worked for a pastoralist. Moving on to another soakage in the dry river bed, Teddy pointed out fresh

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<sup>16</sup> In June 2015 the important rain Dreaming site of Kurlpurlunu was "rediscovered" by two Warlpiri elders during a prescribed burning trip organized by Central Land Council. One of the elders, Molly Tasman Napurrula, recognised the waterhole from a helicopter. The waterhole, which is distinctively shaped, is marked by an assemblage of features including a single desert walnut tree at the end of a sandhill, a rock and a stand of paperbark trees. The identity of the site was confirmed when elder Jerry Jangala Patrick, who was overcome with emotion and cried, sang the song describing it. Located in a remote area to the north of Willowra, the site was "lost" for several decades, during which time various expeditions were mounted to find it. The discovery of the site is so important to Warlpiri that they allowed film footage shot by the local Indigenous media organization to be screened on national television. The Jukurpa for the site describes how it was created when smoke from a large bush fire turned into a cloud and rained. On the film Molly authoritatively states "I know that Kurlpurlunu. Yes. That place raised my father, grew him up. Dad belonged to Kurlpurlunu" (La Canna 2105; Wild 2015)

tracks of emu, porcupine and feral camels<sup>17</sup> (see figure 3) around the waterhole and then pointed out an old grinding stone that his mother had used when he camped there as a young boy.



**Figure 3.** Animal tracks (feral camel, emu and porcupine) leading to a soakage in the Lander River. Warlpiri are expert at reading such tracks on the ground. Photo by author.

Evidence of recent habitation such as campsites and hearths generally elicit animated discussion concerning the identity of the owner(s) and the events that occurred at the site. However, material traces of long past lives such as grindstones, shelters and hearths are treated with circumspection. As Jampijinpa Ross remarked to me, “we leave it out of respect. We know it’s our families’ and that we are being watched by *milarlpa* [ancestral country spirits]. One of our elders will talk language to the spirits, telling them who we are.” Such a response contrasts with that of non-Indigenous people who, as Jampijinpa notes, typically “have a different reaction—they are fascinated and want to take it [objects] away”<sup>18</sup>.

As indicated places are imbued with material traces of humans who have inhabited them. Thus, when visiting a place that was last frequented by a deceased relative, people will keen and sweep the ground with eucalypt branches (see later discussion of mortuary practices) to erase the deceased’s tracks, lest they continue to remind people of their loss. Many places on the Lander River are indelibly marked in people’s memories as sites where their relatives were shot by a party of Whitemen in 1928. This event, known as the Coniston Massacre, is now the subject of an award winning film (Kelly and Batty 2012). As these example illustrate, Warlpiri places are associated with ancestral and familial events, which people recall when visiting them and, increasingly, for written oral histories and audio-visual recordings created for the Warlpiri archive<sup>19</sup>.

Today many Warlpiri undertake bush trips in concert with staff from the local land council during which they use “mud maps” in conjunction with cartographic maps, satellite photography and GPS technology to navigate their way through country and locate places of interest. This is frequently the case with Indigenous rangers who collaborate with visiting

<sup>17</sup> The camel tracks were a matter of some discussion as feral camels had only recently moved into the area.

<sup>18</sup> Pers. comm. Laughlin Jampijinpa Ross 19/7/2015.

<sup>19</sup> See for example *Every Hill Got a Story*, Central Land Council 2015.

land management scientists in looking after country. Country is also mapped. Elders from Willowra, concerned about the loss of knowledge of country resulting from deaths among the senior generation who walked the land, have begun a cultural mapping project, in order to transmit their knowledge of places to younger members of the community. Utilizing a large canvas on which topographic features are painted to scale, elders of family groups (comprising *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*, see earlier) are plotting sites in their country. The process is ongoing and involves the recording of elders recounting Jukurrpa narratives and singing Dreaming songs as they locate sites both on the map and during visits to country with younger people (figure 4).



**Figure 4:** “Country visit” to a sacred site near Pawu, Mount Barkly. Here women sang verses evoking ancestral events and told sacred Jukurrpa stories in order to teach young women about their country. Instructed by the older women, young women set fire to the grass surrounding the soakage in order to “clean it”. Photo by author.

In plotting sites on the map, elders employed techniques used in both “mud maps” and wayfaring. For example, sites were called in sequential order of the path of travel of a Dreaming being. The position of the site was determined on the basis of an associated topographical feature and in relation to surrounding sites. Sites upstream on the Lander River were named before those further down. Comparison of known GPS positions of sites with the location given on the map revealed great accuracy along the Lander River and at prominent topographical features but less elsewhere. Unlike sand-drawing and “mud maps” described earlier, the intention of the map is to record and preserve information to be displayed in the community cultural center (see figure 5). However, the map does not pretend to be geographically accurate and in marking people’s relationship with country it is essentially performative, albeit highly political. As a new form of inscription, it raises interesting questions about how it will mediate people’s relationships to the land and each other.



**Figure 5.** Assisted by Doris Napaljarri, Cecilia Martin draws topographical features and plots sites on a “map” prepared during the Willowra cultural mapping project. Photo by author.

### 2.3 Inscribing country with fire

Earlier in this essay I alluded to Warlpiri use of fire as a marking practice and I now elaborate. Vaarzon-Morel and Gabrys (2009) have discussed Warlpiri use of fire in detail elsewhere, and in what follows I draw heavily upon this material. Fire is central to Warlpiri Dreamings and is of symbolic significance in rituals that mark different stages of the life cycle, such as birth, initiation and death. Additionally, fire plays a central role in ceremonies concerned with the resolution of conflict and the reproduction of life. It continues to be employed symbolically and economically in ways that intensely mark the landscape and are perceived to “look after country”. Today, Warlpiri burn country for a variety of reasons, which include announcing their presence to ancestral spirits, encouraging plant growth, attracting animals such kangaroos to fresh shoots, and facilitating hunting of smaller animals like lizards. People also use fire to clean undergrowth from country, for better visibility and accessibility, and to signal vehicle breakdown (Vaarzon-Morel and Gabrys 2009).

Fire and smoke index people’s activity in country. As Nash notes, smoke from purposive patch burnt fires is thought of as being “‘Aboriginal radio’, and the burned areas (*wini*) are regarded as a kind of calling-card” (1990: 2). Scars from patch burning are often identified with the individuals who made them, and people can tell from the growth of surrounding vegetation when a fire was made. People feel sorry for country that has not been burnt for a long time, as it signals a lack of engagement—being unmarked in this way is thus a negative value. Although I cannot elaborate here, decisions about who burns, when and where are governed by a combination of complex cultural protocols involving people’s customary affiliations to land, spiritual considerations, factors such as seasonal availability of food, and spatial prohibitions on burning areas or things deemed to be of spiritual significance such as trees<sup>20</sup>, burials places and sacred sites (Vaarzon-Morel & Gabrys 2009).

### Death and burial

Throughout Aboriginal Australia, the elaborate practices that traditionally surrounded death and mourning resulted in the physical marking of places. While customs varied between

<sup>20</sup> Warlpiri do not mark significant trees, but in other parts of Australia, such as NSW, Aboriginal people elaborately carved sacred trees.

areas, there were also similarities, including the belief that the spirit of a deceased person troubled relatives who stayed nearby, and the practice of erasing traces of the deceased's persona.<sup>21</sup> In the past, a person was buried where they died (or placed on a mortuary platform for later interment, or in some regions, eviscerated and mummified and carried from camp to camp) immediately after death. Their belongings were destroyed or given to distant or maternal relatives and their footprints were ritually swept clean from the ground on which they had recently walked. Commonly, the earth on graves was compacted and kept free of vegetation to signal the location, and in some places graves were covered with heavy logs and/or gypsum widow's caps (Sutton, pers. comm. 20/04/2014). Sometimes an object such as a piece of clothing was hung in a nearby tree. Among Lander Warlpiri, strange marks appearing on the grave in the days following the burial indicated that the grave had been visited unlawfully and/or indicated the identity of the person suspected of causing the deceased's death. That such marks could be left by non-human entities such as birds, lizards and wind in addition to people indicates the intrinsically relational nature of Warlpiri ontology.

Warlpiri practices of burial and mourning relate to those of memory. It was and remains important to remove unique identifying marks of the deceased from view in order to facilitate their re-incarnation as ancestral spirits in country and prevent relatives from sorrowing too deeply lest they become ill. A taboo was placed on the use of the deceased person's name and, until recently, all photographic images were destroyed. Songs and country associated with the deceased were closed for a period of a year or more. Such prohibitions inevitably impacted on the political power of the deceased's family in social life. After sufficient time was deemed to have passed, cleansing rituals involving the use of fire were performed for widows, and the patrilineal country of the deceased was fired in order to erase lingering traces, regenerate life and ritually "re-open" country.<sup>22</sup> This example illustrates how spatial interdictions may symbolically conjoin social and biophysical aspects of the Warlpiri world (death/life, cosmology, and country) to delimit a particular, emotion saturated "spacetime" (cf. Munn 1996: 449).

While there is continuity between past and present burial practices there are also transformations.<sup>23</sup> Among Warlpiri, tracks continue to be erased and smoke and fire continue to be employed in symbolic ways; however, European laws concerning burials and autopsies, the use of morgues, and Christian beliefs and practices have all transformed burial practices. People are now buried in elaborate graves adorned with plastic flowers, featuring crosses and/or headstones on which the deceased's name and date of birth and death are inscribed. In some areas there is a tendency to bury people in country where their relatives can claim rights and interests (Sutton pers. comm. 10/4/2014). Less commonly, funerals take place in churches in towns, where large, intercultural services may be held. Such services signal the status of the deceased and their wider circle of power and influence. The high incidence of car accidents on public roads means that it is no longer always possible to avoid places of

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<sup>21</sup> Among Wiradjuri in central NSW, for example, trees were ringbarked in a circle so that the spirit would "go from marked tree to marked tree, returning back to where it started rather than following the other people" (Moore and Davies, 2001: 120).

<sup>22</sup> Sutton also notes that among Wik from Cape York the deceased's country was closed for a year or more and later ritually opened with the smoke of burning ironwood leaves. Somewhat similar to Warlpiri practices, houses were closed after a death and marked off with tape until the day came for the ritual opening, when houses were bedecked with streamers and balloons and smoked.

<sup>23</sup> For example, in the past secondary burial involving intense marking of the land via the use of cremations on specific mounds shared by members of allied clans was practised by Wik in the past but no longer (Sutton pers. comm. 10/04/2014).

death; instead road accident sites are marked off by elaborate memorials, which are realised through the placement of a cross, flowers, items associated with the deceased such as a football jersey, solar lights and edging to mark the boundary of the site on the ground. Although roadside memorials are not unique to Aboriginal people (see Clark 2008), the cultural logic underpinning them is distinctive.<sup>24</sup> Here brief mention must be made of the memorial erected by Warlpiri in 2003 in remembrance of relatives who were killed during the Coniston Massacre, which I mentioned earlier. The memorial consists of a plaque set in stone with an inscription in Warlpiri and English noting that “In 1928 near this place the murder of Frederick Brooks led to the killing of many innocent Aboriginal people. We will remember them always”<sup>25</sup>. Although the erection of the monument suggests a radical change in Warlpiri memory practices, the event which accompanied its unveiling had significant customary resonance: it involved descendants of both the murdered Whiteman, Brooks, and murdered local Aboriginal people in what was essentially a conflict resolution ceremony.



**Figure 6:** Children pointing out familiar sites on the unfinished cultural map, which was displayed for a community barbeque. Photo by author.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion I want to consider further changes in Warlpiri practices of marking the land. As my discussion indicates, while customary ways of marking country endure in the contemporary period, transformations have also occurred as a result of factors such as sedentarization and people’s adoption of new technologies and thus new modes of inscription. To take some examples: in the wider Warlpiri region bush roads are sometimes signposted with car doors propped against sticks that name a person’s outstation or “block”. The bodies of old station trucks parked near the old mechanics workshop at the entrance to Willowra signify the communities’ pastoral history (see Vaarzon-Morel 2014). Children now often paint surfaces such as water-tanks and walls of houses with graffiti which reference their families and totemic country or else themselves and friends. Sutton (pers. comm. 10/04/2014) pointed out to me that children’s use of graffiti is a departure from past practices when marking (for example, on rock surfaces) was the privilege of those in authority (see also Smith 2013: 219). However, in the Lander Warlpiri area graffiti occur on introduced surfaces, not on country itself<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> See Langton 2002 for a relevant discussion of “memorialisation of place” in eastern Cape York.

<sup>25</sup> See Vaarzon-Morel 1995 and 2014 for background to the massacre in the Lander region.

<sup>26</sup> Kral (2012: 20) notes that at Warburton in the Western Desert youth scribble on and mark a variety of surfaces including trees “with written expressions of the self”. Interestingly, she implies that the youth were also

It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate in any detail the variety of changes that have resulted from modifications to the landscape made through the establishment of European infrastructure and from innovations in practices of memory and mobility. But it would be a mistake to conclude that new modes of marking necessarily mean ontological change. Here I note that the way locational devices such as the mobile phone and GPS systems move with the actor resonates in some ways with the actor-centred mobile spatial field Munn discusses. And as Sutton recently commented in relation to the Wik people's use of film "film can be used as story, as a telling, but also as an act of marking, in a similar way to totemic identification" (2014: 4). This is related to the fact that "In Aboriginal thought generally, simulacra are inherently and powerfully meaningful. Likeness is power. Representation is reality." Yet, while some innovation in marking practices is at the level of representational form only, other changes index significant shifts taking place in Warlpiri society.<sup>27</sup> For example, there is a tendency toward creating static boundaries both materially and socially. Although land tenure is patrilineally based, as indicated earlier, in the past people also acquired interest in country through conception, by being incorporated into a kin group and growing up in, and learning Jukurrpa for, country. Thus, social relations and place were constituted interdependently and could not simply be delimited by maps or genealogies based on biological descent, which carve the world into discrete, concretized parcels.

Warlpiri spatial perception is, to conclude, both multidimensional and "sociomoral" (Munn 1996:448), as I have attempted to illustrate here through an account of Warlpiri practices of naming and marking the landscape. The factors that constrain the ways in which the country is or is not marked provide important insights into how the landscape is culturally mediated in the "figured worlds" of Warlpiri people. Warlpiri customary practices of landscape marking involve an embodied, dynamic process of creating meaning in time and space, and Warlpiri live the experience for the sake of enlivening ancestral histories.

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<sup>27</sup> See for example David and Wilson 2002.

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