Anthropologica

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Book Review

Burke, Paul. *An Australian Indigenous Diaspora: Warlpiri Matriarchs and the Refashioning of Tradition.* **New York: Berghahn Books, 2018, 222 pages.**

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An Australian Indigenous Diaspora is a book written by a lawyer-turned-anthropologist for other Australianist anthropologists. The author presents a niche subject to a niche audience. Although Burke states that he is "committed to revising traditionalist ethnography" by taking an intercultural approach, and that he views the intercultural approach "as a critique of the continuation of radical domain separation (Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal) in anthropological accounts of contemporary Aboriginal people" (5), the book displays a tendency to write culture in traditionalist ways.

With an ethnographic gaze firmly set on the Warlpiri of the Tanami Desert in central Australia, the book presents the reader with a traditional ethnography filled with highbrow anthropological jargon and nomenclature to describe an "exotic Other" that is typical of the earliest literary standards that came to signify anthropological expertise. The book acknowledges that Warlpiri—one of the more remote Aboriginal peoples with a history of lesser and later contact with settlers—have been treated as ideal subjects for the anthropological gaze, but it seems that the book continues the tradition of documenting, analyzing, and presenting every aspect of their lives in the fashion of his anthropological forefathers and foremothers, many of whom are referenced throughout his literature review as benchmarks for authenticity and, by consequence, ethnographic validation or amendment. The author tells us who the Warlpiri are based on anthropological accounts of them, uses his research to produce a census of the Warlpiri at "home and away," collects their life stories, and traces their movements. I suppose that in this mode of surveillance one naturally reports in similar fashion. In this way, the book participates in and perpetuates what Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014, 70) refers to as a standardized

research loop that seeks to reinforce an established cultural pattern, a cultural pattern that, "has been assembled into a regulatory body of literature, a rigid *canon* of literature whose shape and content is defined according to the disciplinary taste and practice of its early, key contributors." While I understand the attempt to demonstrate to anthropologists that Warlpiri lived social realities are more intercultural than typically presented in the anthropological canon—a canon that marks their alterity in binary fashion—the writing of Warlpiri culture in this book works to reinforce particular stereotypes about Warlpiri and other Indigenous peoples, even as it attempts to evade that epistemic trap. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, one must wonder why anthropologists studying Indigenous peoples, cultures, and societies, are not engaging with and including the valuable research paradigms and scholarship of Indigenous Studies or Critical Race Studies.

An Australian Indigenous Diaspora speaks from an anthropological standpoint and engages the fields of migration and kinship studies. The central question of the book is if, according to anthropological theorizing, Warlpiri people who live "on the fringes of their traditional country" remain tightly bound to kin and country, then "how is it that some of them make a life for themselves in distant towns and cities?" (7) The research is based on 18 months' worth of multi-sited fieldwork over a five-year period (2009-2014) focusing on Warlpiri culture, tradition, personhood, mobility, and networks, with a special emphasis on the role of middle-aged Warlpiri women as pioneers of the Warlpiri diaspora. The book is divided into five chapters and structured according to what the book identifies as three broad phases of any process of diaspora: original displacement from the homeland (Chapters 1 and 2), dealing with an uncertain welcome in a foreign location (Chapters 3 and 4), and reconfiguring the relationship with the homeland and the traditional culture it represents (Chapter 5). The conclusion ends with a few characterizations of the Warlpiri diaspora.

The book claims that forms of Warlpiri social embeddedness, such as enforcement of traditional law or spiritual power and emplacement, become increasingly attenuated for Warlpiri migrants as their geographical distance from the settlements increases. This suggests that the opportunity and ability to expand their personal social networks beyond kin, especially with White people, is critical to the success of Warlpiri matriarchs in the diaspora, and by extension the functioning of matrifocal households and the stability of diaspora locations. The book assesses the degrees of cultural transformation in Warlpiri personhood that amounts to what it describes as the "refashioning of tradition"

in diaspora locations, and briefly considers how it figures into controversial Aboriginal policy considerations in the Northern Territory. Finally, after testing the usefulness of the concept of diaspora as the primary framing device for the study, the book concludes that it has been useful because the theoretical implications it raises underscore the importance of an intercultural approach in "settlement ethnographies" to provide a more comprehensive account of Warlpiri after over 80 years of cross-cultural contact.

Taken altogether, Burke has demonstrated that Warlpiri culture is, after all, quite dynamic, that Warlpiri people adapt in cross-cultural settings, that Warlpiri lived social realities at home and away are varied, that Warlpiri are not confined to static time/space backdrops that anthropologists and others love to define for them, and that, dare we say it, Warlpiri can leave their homelands and still be Warlpiri. In 2020, why is there still a need to be convinced of their cultural dynamism or of their modernity? Why can't the anthropological gaze be firmly set on White Australians or the settler state instead of on the romanticized Warlpiri? And do White folks who gain access to Indigenous peoples, and who call them their friends, have to become anthropologists and authors of their existence? Can't they just be your friends?

Reference

Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.