Relating to rock art in the contemporary world: navigating symbolism, meaning, and significance

Liam Brady and Paul Taçon (eds) 2016

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This captivating compilation of chapters authored by experts from different fields and backgrounds examines the role of rock art for contemporary people, communities and cultural resource management agencies. The book advances and broadens work that addresses how professionals can understand and engage with indigenous descendant groups whose ancestors created rock art, and with landowners and other stakeholders, and how that can be understood and developed into archaeological protection, curation and interpretation (see Keyser et al. 2006; McCleary 2015; Swidler et al. 1997). Rock art is generally thought of as an archaeological artefact that has vague meaning from past cultures. The focus of most rock art research has been to determine when it was created and by whom. Through these efforts researchers hoped to be able to interpret or explain probable meaning of the images. In contrast, this volume looks at various facets of the complex relationship between living people and rock art.

In the first chapter the editors provide general definitions of rock art and the conceived notions about production and placement in space and time. They point out that with the permanence of some rock art and its place within the landscape, knowledge and meaning could be shared within groups, with enemies and friendly neighbours. Nonetheless, as time passed and some societies replaced others or internal cultural changes occurred, the significance and meaning of rock art changed — and contemporary narratives speak as much about present people and communities as they do about the past. The subsequent chapters provide intriguing examples of how this occurs at various places around the world.

All the chapters address the larger concept of rock art as cultural and historic heritage, but can be placed into three basic categories — first, how contemporary descendant communities perceive their relationship to their ancestors’ rock art and governmental agency efforts to include these concepts in preservation policies. For example, the Yanyuwa of northern Australia, now removed from the areas where they historically resided, see fading and even the disappearance of some of the images as a result of their inability to interact with the sacred beings who inhabit the landscape. Or Ojibwa elders in the Upper Midwestern United States who still maintain and engage with the rock art and petroform images their ancestors created. Another chapter explains how even the management of intrusive species can be problematic from native perspectives, since they are related by category to creatures from the time of creation and pictured in rock art images.

The second category might be seen as chapters describing how rock art panels have become part of larger political issues — such as those interpreted to suit needs or interests of particular groups who are not related to the people who created the images. For example, in Northern Uganda the Ugandan Museum has trained members of the present population to interpret rock art for tourists — the images were likely created by the ancestors of Pygmies who have been removed from the area — or prehistoric rock art on the Iberian Peninsula, of which the meaning and significance is unknown to the contemporary residents but has been dated through scientific research and subsequently interpreted. The chapter describes how these sites have been managed and the negotiations with present-day land owners and pastoralists to create heritage sites. Another describes how Bedouin in Israel marked prehistoric rock art sites in the Negev Desert over the past 200 years. This action claimed ownership and proprietary rights, but recognition of those claims by the Israeli government will likely be unrecognised due to the marginalisation of the Bedouin.

The third category comprises chapters that describe how rock art has been used by contemporary artists and governments, such as in the case of South Africa, where San rock art images have been
appropriated as national imagery. Or the historical process by which some Australian Aboriginal artists have continued traditions of rock art imagery by applying them to portable surfaces, primarily bark, and how they have entered the Western realm of modern art. Another chapter speaks to how rock art from around the world has been utilised by Native and non-Native contemporary artists and the associated issues of propriety and appropriation surrounding that activity.

The final chapter draws together the significance of the preceding chapters as situating archaeological heritage in a contemporary context and considers the importance of examining and positioning the complex contemporary social dimensions of rock art from indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives.

Overall, the chapters are clearly written and nicely illustrated with photographs, graphs and maps. Professionals in archaeology, anthropology and cultural resource management will find the theoretical points and specific studies absorbing. Applied anthropologists and policy makers involved with public heritage will find it a valuable resource. The book will also appeal to students and scholars of art history, race relations and identity, legal and public policy, cultural engagements and consultations. The general public will also find the book accessible as the writing is not laden with professional jargon.

REFERENCES
Keyser, James D, George Poetschat and Michael W Taylor (eds) 2006 Talking with the past, Oregon Archaeological Society, Portland, OR.
Swidler, Nina, Kurt Dongoske, Roger Anyon and Alan Downer (eds) 1997 Native Americans and archaeologists: stepping stones to common ground, Society for American Archaeology, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

‘Against native title’: conflict and creativity in outback Australia
Eve Vincent
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Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 212pp, ISBN 9781925302080 (pbk)

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‘Against native title’ is an ethnography of one community’s rejection and partial re-engagement with the legal determination of native title over their country.

Author Eve Vincent (self-described ‘greenie hippie’) sets off by car from her then Melbourne hometown towards Ceduna, South Australia, in support and solidarity with Aboriginal community opposition to a proposed uranium dump on their land. Once there, she is warmly taken in by Aunty Sue, a self-styled outlaw, and is soon drawn into the more complex intra-community dispute over a native title claim. Her informant and dear friend, Aunty Sue, and the group Vincent describes as the ‘Aunty Sue mob’ are positioned in the story as outliers fiercely resisting the constitutive effects of the native title process.

In this account, a beautiful, rich and sympathetic story unfolds of the resistance to the social effects of the native title process that, through a range of means, forces applicant Aboriginal people to adopt particular identities, assume particular prominent knowledge, deny aspects of themselves, and demonstrate strong and fixed affiliations to place that delimit the everyday experiences of being Aboriginal.

We come to know Kokatha woman Sue Haseldine — and the coalition of kin and community she so effectively draws together and sustains — respectfully as Aunty Sues. As an application for native title commences in the mid-1990s, Aunty Sue and her mob find themselves confronted with new details of belonging and identity through the process. Aunty Sue, her sisters and others were deemed in the native title process to be from a place other than where they had lived out their