CHAPTER 1

Rock Beats Paper

'Prehistory', Rock Art, and Archives

> [Australia's history] goes way back. Very long time, from the beginning, I don't even know, but that's how we've been told, from the Ancestors, the creation time, when we were living on the rocks, and painting on the rocks, telling stories to their kids, to everyone.[1]

Peoples Pushed Outside History

First Nations histories are the oldest of any in the world. Until recently, though, many academics deemed that the pasts of Australian Indigenous people did not really count as history. These pasts were of some other quality; they were not the kind of pasts that determined world events and shaped the future as history does.[2]

It might seem strange today for some peoples' pasts to consist only of 'myth' or 'memory' but others to have the dignity of 'history'. But, back in the nineteenth century, when the academic disciplines we know today were taking shape, writing became the dividing line between those whose pasts were studied by which academic experts. The historians took writing. Archaeologists took the rest.[3]

In a way this division made sense, at least from the perspective of European scholars. The study of written records held in an archive requires one kind of expertise and method, the study of material culture requires another. The written record was the domain of historians and what came before writing fell to archaeologists. Historians called their times 'history' and archaeologists – except for 'historical archaeologists', who applied archaeological methods to contexts and cultures that could also be known through a written archive – studied the newly coined '*pre*history'.[4]

'Prehistory' covered the entire past of human species until Mesopotamians started writing things down about 5,200 years ago.[5] After that, it becomes

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complicated, as different peoples in different parts of the world adopted written literacies, or not, at various times. Even across Europe, history 'began' at different times. In southern Europe, the ancient empires had 'history' that stretched deep into antiquity. In northern Europe, however, early historians assumed that history commenced with the introduction of Christianity.[6] 'History' had different start dates, depending on the particularities of whether and why people wrote, or encountered others who wrote about them.

Of course, this implicitly meant, for many peoples, that 'history' began when European colonisers arrived on their lands and shores, bringing their writing with them.[7] In the Americas, 11 October 1492 supposedly marked the end of 'prehistory'; Rodrigo de Triana saw land and history, apparently, began. In the same way, until recently, much of settler Australia considered Captain Cook's 1770 charting of the country's east coast as the beginning of Australia's history.[8] Such periodisations did not consider that the peoples of these continents had their own methods for recording and remembering the past that pre-dated and then co-existed with the European scripts. Without writing, their pasts were classed as being before or beyond history.[9] And so cultures that used literacies other than written script to know their pasts – oral traditions, art, song, dance, monuments – were mistakenly deemed not to have history at all, when, in reality, it was simply that European historians did not know how to interpret them. Our intention in this book is to tear down the divide between those deemed to have historical records and those deemed history*less*. We are finding archives of a different kind.

Claiming that 'history' only started when Europeans turned up sounds ridiculous now, but it was plausible for those who adhered to the Eurocentric beliefs associated with social Darwinism. In this understanding, just as 'savage' or 'primitive' cultures supposedly develop into 'civilisations', so oral societies gradually and inevitably embrace written literacies.[10] The view assumes a hierarchy of knowledges that places Indigenous knowledges (and material culture) at the bottom.[11] According to such a view, orality is unreliable and overly emotional; it is believed to lack an archive that might be consulted to establish the facts of the past.[12] The 'primitive' culture, therefore, is assumed to have no real memory of the past apart from 'myth', unlike literate 'civilisation' that self-consciously writes its own history and plans its destiny.[13] That assumption about writing and history continues to reverberate in the legal systems of settler societies, with devastating consequences for First Nations peoples seeking to use oral tradition to prove their claims to land and sovereignty in settler courts.[14] It is for good reason that many Indigenous Australians today consider the use of the label 'prehistory' to describe their pasts to be offensive.[15]

Historians and archaeologists know about these problems.[16] Archaeologists have been talking about it for over a generation (and sometimes quite heatedly too).[17] Many scholars in both disciplines are working hard to unpick the racist assumptions and the colonial heritage at the core of their disciplinary practices, and First Nations historians and archaeologists themselves are leading the charge.[18] Choctaw archaeologist Joe Watkins writes of the tension between his belief that archaeology is a powerful and effective method for understanding the past and his feelings of betrayal from other archaeologists who, he felt, did not take the concerns of Indigenous people about his discipline more seriously.[19] Another archaeologist could never forget the challenge from a Tanzanian co-researcher: 'why do you whites say our history is prehistory?'[20] These are old habits. For archaeologists working in settler-colonial contexts, the 'historical' period remains more or less interchangeable with the 'colonial' or 'contact' period. 'History' often still starts with, and is defined by, the presence of Europeans.[21]

Historians, meanwhile, have paid less attention to the colonial assumptions that mark the boundaries of their discipline and beginning of 'history', somewhat oblivious to the debates going on down the corridor in archaeology. But historians have been rethinking their archive and turning to oral and Indigenous knowledges as sources of history. In the United States, the New Indian History, driven by Native American historians, sought to bring First Nations voices into the writing of history and make their perspectives core.[22] In Australia, the field of Aboriginal history exploded from the 1970s, with the *Aboriginal History* journal seeking to draw on knowledges from linguistics and oral history to produce a fuller understanding of Aboriginal pasts. And the plural – 'pasts' – is deliberate. These movements drew attention to the multiple ways of understanding and conceiving the past, challenging colonial histories that aspired to be definitive, comprehensive, and universal. Reading the archive 'against the grain' is now commonplace for identifying First Nations experiences and perspectives within the archive.[23] Archivists, likewise, have pointed out that there are other repositories of records and documents beyond the dusty boxes if we are looking for evidence of the past.[24] As Eric Ketelaar famously proclaimed, 'everything is an archive' if approached in the right way.[25] Historians increasingly understand that all peoples have histories, and that these are known, understood, and shared in rich and manifold ways.[26]

Some historians have responded to history's temporal limits by turning to 'deep history', that is, histories that stretch as far back as the human story might be told.[27] Deep history transcends the prehistory and history divide, drawing together oral, written, and material sources. Most, however,

remain wedded to a 6,000-year time frame for the discipline at the most, and, therefore, at least implicitly, to the presence of written documents.[28] Nevertheless, historians are increasingly accepting that there are ways of knowing the past that are beyond the traditional archive; there are other kinds of archives, other 'houses of memory', beyond the repositories of written documents built, often, by colonial authorities.[29]

Where Are First Nations Archives?

European colonisation in Australia began only around 250 years ago. The bulk of the Aboriginal past, stretching millennia before, was left out of 'history' partly due to historians' blinkered focus on writing. Even if historians wanted to study these Aboriginal pasts of times before, where are the records and archives that historians might investigate? In this book, we want to follow the pathways of Australia's First Nations people who have been saying repeatedly, and for some time, that they *do* have archives. They have vast repositories of knowledge of the past, if only historians cared to listen and understand them as such.

It is important that historians do this because Aboriginal voices in the written colonial archive, to which historians usually turn, are rare (although, as leading First Nations historian Lynette Russell points out, it is important we properly acknowledge knowledge about First Nations people held in public archives as Indigenous knowledge).[30] Aboriginal people have left other kinds of historical records of their experiences. One such record is art, and rock art in particular (Figure 1.1).[31]

Our co-author, Gabriel Maralngurra, explains that rock art 'tells us about the history of the painting, because it's been painted there for a long, long time'.[32] This is not only the case for Bininj people of west Arnhem Land (Gabriel's people) but also has been insisted upon by knowledge-holders from across the continent.[33] As Carol Chong, Wakaman elder said:

> Rock art is our record and our keeping place of our knowledge, lore and culture. Rock art is a powerful link between our country, our past and our people, and we want to protect and preserve it for future generations.[34]

Maung elder R. Lamilami likewise explained that rock art sites are his people's 'libraries': 'it tells stories … from father to sons, to their sons'.[35] Continuing the metaphors of writing and script (or is it a metaphor at all?), Leonard Lamilami described his clan's paintings as 'like a dictionary for us, like a bible'. Again, his brother Patrick Lamilami explained in 2016 that rock

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FIGURE 1.1 Rock art from Injalak Hill, west Arnhem Land. Photograph: Sally K. May, courtesy of Traditional Owner Julie Narndal Gumurdul.

art is 'our library, it holds our stories'.[36] Patrick Lamilami continued: "Our rock art sites are like history books to us that have stories to pass on to future generations. This is why it is important to protect these places. By playing the didjeridu, telling traditional stories and visiting rock art sites I help keep my cultural life and heritage strong for my people."[37]

Traditional Owner Ron Marks from the Barengi Gadjin Land Council in Victoria also spoke of rock art as a repository of knowledge: "Here, this is our library – this is our art gallery. It warms the heart to know that for thousands of years – stories have been written on rock on sites such as this."[38]

Similarly, Dharawal elder Shayne Williams explained: "It's important to protect [rock art] because *that's where our literacy is*. Our literacy mightn't be in the form of books, but it's physically manifested into the land, like the rock engravings, for example, and paintings. This platform . . . is *like a big book to us* . . . And they're like our libraries: we go there and that's where we learn about our culture and heritage so, to destroy them, is like pulling down the British Library or the State Library of New South Wales or the Australian National Library, for example. Can you imagine how devastated people would feel if that happened?"[39] As these knowledge-holders

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proclaim, rock art is an archive abundant in sources, documenting a long Aboriginal history that stretches back millennia.[40]

Many non-Indigenous archaeologists who have been working closely with Aboriginal Traditional Owners in their study of rock art have already embraced rock art as an archive, full of historical records. Archaeologists Paul S. C. Taçon and Liam M. Brady describe it as 'an archive of deep-time human experience'.[41] Robert Layton calls it 'a record', created 'to be remembered'.[42] Anthropologist Howard Morphy also describes rock art as a 'tangible record' and laments the failure of others in his discipline to engage with it – not to mention historians.[43] Whereas other kinds of repositories of memory such as song and music, although surviving and reviving, have been threatened by the devastation of colonisation, much rock art remains through the millennia. Morphy, therefore, calls it 'the most durable . . . record of all'.[44] Taçon writes of rock art as a uniquely 'enduring' historical source, with rich insights into past lives.[45]

In this book we frame rock art as more than 'texts', regarding it instead as *documents*.[46] We suggest that, as documents created by observers of happenings or participants in activities, it can also provide evidence about the past.[47] That is, rock art can become a *record*.[48] The stunning galleries of art, curated and preserved in rock-shelters or across plateaus, are therefore also *archives*. They are collections of records, selectively created and curated.[49] Like written archives of paper documents, rock art is produced, preserved, curated, and valued through various historical processes.[50] It has its own authors, archivists, conservators, and interpreters, each of whom play a role in the keeping of historical memory for the community. It can be 'read' by those who understand the literacies of such a text. Like a written archive, it reflects the interests, priorities, and concerns of that community.[51] Indeed, we suggest that, in many ways, these records might be considered a better archive.

Meanwhile, the colonial archive that many academic historians predominantly rely upon has not always been a welcoming space for First Nations people, although many are finding ways to turn its power to suit Indigenous interests.[52] Colonial archives buttressed colonial constructs of child 'welfare' and Indigenous criminality. They have been an integral technology of surveillance and control of Indigenous lives by settler-state authorities.[53] They served to establish Western systems of knowledge as powerful and effective on Indigenous land, subjugating Indigenous knowledges and authorities.[54] Although they contain records of Indigenous knowledge and culture, these knowledges are

often dislocated from Indigenous people themselves, both physically by their removal from Country to faraway institutions and legally as they became (supposedly) owned by governments and holders of collections under Western intellectual and copyright laws.[55] Indigenous people were made to be 'subjects of the record and not the owners'.[56] As First Nations legal academic Terri Janke explains, 'we are captives because we do not own the archives, written records and documents about our lives. Our stories are not told by us.'[57]

Indigenous people are subverting and transforming all this. The colonial archive once used as an instrument to separate Indigenous families has now become the means through which Indigenous people are finding kin, restoring culture and connection and, importantly, seeking redress.[58] Nonetheless, colonial archives remain sites through which colonialism has been and continues to be enacted.[59]

But alternative archives such as rock art have been a way for Indigenous peoples to control the nature and terms of their own representation and to represent others. Severin Fowles and Lindsay Montgomery describe the indigenous rock art of the American West as a 'counter-archive' for the way its narratives challenge colonial accounts through the first-hand testimonies of Native American peoples.[60] In Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory, Bininj recorded their own interpretations of visiting Macassans and invading Europeans.[61] And so archaeologists studying colonial and contact contexts are learning to interpret rock art as an alternative archive that counters those of Europeans.[62]

Of course, rock art is not the only archive that holds records of long Aboriginal histories. In Australia, rock art is actually only a surface manifestation of the richer archive that is Country itself.[63] As Aboriginal Australians declare, the landscape itself holds the songlines and stories of the continent.[64] Rock art simply makes this deeper record visible: it is a manifestation of the knowledge held in Country. As Shannon Faulkhead points out, some records cannot be stored in institutions. Sometimes they are embodied in people themselves. Sometimes they are kept in the landscape.[65]

Rock art's materiality – on rock rather than paper – is perhaps why it has long been neglected by historians. Yet in this book, we emphasise its content rather than its materiality. This is because we want to show how it might be, like the paper records most non-Indigenous historians are used to, a document: the stuff of archives. Nonetheless, we will point out here that the archives of both paper and rock share affective, sensory qualities despite their distinct material forms. The material form of a document shapes sensory responses to it as much as what the written

text of the document says.[66] For instance, Peter Lester described the reverence for calligraphy, illuminations, and seals of the paper documents of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville in Paris. The documents were designed to provoke a sense of awe.[67] They might also be performative, enacting relationships or statuses through their very existence, with aesthetic flourishes guaranteeing their authenticity and authority.[68] The aesthetic and sensory qualities of rock art do not disqualify it as document or archive; these very qualities are part of archives' memory-holding power.

Where archives are located matters. Archives are memory houses in place.[69] In many parts of the world, there is legislation mandating that records remain in the towns in which they were created. In Massachusetts, for instance, even the smallest of towns has its own archive.[70] Baptismal, marriage, and funeral records are still held in the churches and parishes where they took place. The digital revolution has democratised archives to some extent.[71] Nevertheless, to read the majority of records and documents of national histories, one must still travel to national archives and capital cities.

The archives that are rock art are memory houses in place in the fullest sense. These archives are literally crafted into the landscape. In Australia, more than just located in the place whose memories they hold, their stories belong in and arise from the Country itself. They are part of the land and the land is part of the story. Sometimes we know who the artist was. Sometimes it is the work of the Ancestral Beings who lived and live in a kind of time, not fully grasped by disciplines of history and archaeology. Sometimes it is the work of Spiritual Beings such as the *mimih* in west Arnhem Land.[72] In the Kimberley, birds are artists too: there, the Kujon, a little grey sandstone shrike thrush bird (*Colluricincla woodwardi*), created rock art.[73] The Country listens and speaks.[74] The art on the rocks not only conveys evidence about the past through images, it communicates. It knows.[75] Treating images carelessly or disrespectfully can provoke spiritual attacks, leading to sickness or death. Where art is not visited, maintained, and cared for, the land and its people might become sick.[76] This kind of knowledge confounds academic knowledge. It goes beyond what scholars are trained to perceive and understand.[77] As Morphy points out, these modes of 'narrating and preserving history' through art on the rocks 'pose a genuine challenge to the form, content, and character of history as it is understood in the Western tradition'.[78] Rather than excluding these sources as ahistorical, we suggest they be used to reframe how we think about history itself.

History and Rock Art

Rock art was not always excluded from the study of history. The separation of rock art scholars and archaeologists in university corridors is a by-product of the development of the disciplines back in the nineteenth century. Before there ever was a discipline called 'archaeology', European scholars viewed and interpreted rock art in light of written and oral sources.[79] For centuries, scholars used the Bible as their source to explain the creation of the world and its content. Then, the rediscovery of texts about northern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Cornelius Tacitus's *Germania* from the first-century AD, broadened the source base from which scholars developed their ideas about the deep past.[80] 'Discoveries' and translations of Icelandic sagas followed, witness to times before written literacies in Scandinavia.[81] But how could these histories be known?

Rock art was one such way. In 1748, a pair of unsuspecting Swedish farmers uncovered a Bronze-age tomb packed with engraved stone slabs. This was the spectacular Bredarör cairn on Kivik.[82] Some interpreted the engraved procession of human-like beings and the war chariot depicted on the slabs as a reminiscence of a triumphal Roman ceremony, arguing that Roman forces once must have reached far beyond the northern limes of the empire, a bold statement that could not be evidenced from written sources.[83] Scholars started to realise that studies of rock art could complement scant written sources, revealing histories of times without writing.[84]

Recent research has tended to overlook these early scholarly efforts to use rock art as a historical source.[85] However, there is merit to the early modern approach to its interpretation. It reflected an appreciation of the continuation of history before written sources and was an example of exploring new historical methodologies, drawing on alternative sources, that is, sources without writing. In the late nineteenth century, however, this older relationship between history and rock art studies was obscured and even lost altogether with the rise of the discipline of archaeology. Rock art, as material culture, became understood largely as evidence of 'prehistory' – the domain of archaeologists – rather than as an historical source. In this book, therefore, we want to help restore a largely forgotten dialogue connecting rock art, archaeology, and history.

About This Book

Rock art is very much alive as a 'house of memory' for First Nations people today, and, as such, this book is produced in collaboration with the keepers of such memories.[86] We turn to the artistic record of west Arnhem Land in

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Australia (Figures 1.2 and 1.3), in particular its rock art, to explore how understanding images as documents and records, and galleries as archives, might open new ways to approach Aboriginal histories. The First Nations people of west Arnhem Land refer to themselves as Bininj, so that is the term we also use.

Drawing on the oral histories of present-day artists and their families, and created in partnership with artists and their families, this is also a collaborative project.[87] Each chapter features an artist or family of artists and their work, drawing out the ways in which their art tells history. These artists worked before the emergence of much-celebrated Aboriginal art movements in the latter half of the twentieth century, so their names and their art are largely unknown beyond their communities. But their work provides a vital record to Aboriginal experiences in recent and deep time. Through their stories and their art, this book, therefore, shows how rock art might rewrite the limits and assumptions of academic ways of understanding and knowing the past, expanding ideas of history itself.

FIGURE 1.2 Map showing the location of west Arnhem Land and key townships. Map by Joakim Goldhahn.

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FIGURE 1.3 West Arnhem Land landscape. Photograph: Sally K. May.

Each chapter also features a work of art created by co-author Gabriel Maralngurra. Gabriel is himself Bininj, born in Gunbalanya. He learned to paint and gained much cultural knowledge from his uncle, the master painter Thompson Yulidjirri, and his father-in-law Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek. His authorial contribution to this book is artistic and intellectual. He also has an important role as a senior culture man enhancing and authorising the content of this book. Gabriel has guided the intellectual development of the book through interdisciplinary and cross-cultural discussions as pertaining to the west Arnhem Land context. His ideas and words are woven throughout the book.

Gabriel's artworks demonstrate in themselves the core ideas and themes of the book. He created these works for the book; they correspond to each chapter and reflect his process of conceptualising and communicating key themes from the book. The works variously depict the concepts of tradition and change, biographical experiences, writing and literacies, intergenerational knowledge, multilayered temporalities, as well as broader questions

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of history and memory. An interpretation of each of these paintings and their significance for the written chapter are explained in his words. This book makes use of both painted images and written literacies to convey our argument because we want to demonstrate the power of First Nations artistic practices to convey knowledge, alongside more traditional academic forms of chapters, figures, and endnotes.

In the discipline of archaeology, the creation of rock art is often viewed through the lens of society or community, gender, clan or group identity, culture, cosmologies.[88] Archaeologists have tended not to look at the creators and curators of these records, their lives and inspirations. Most of the time, no single individual can be identified as the artist responsible for a particular artwork. But sometimes this is because no-one was looking for them. In Australia, the chronology and chorology of rock art assemblages are often the focus of major research projects, rather than the social or cultural context. Studies of rock art also often focus on how to interpret rock paintings depicting traditional subject matter, and how an emic informed perspective is necessary to be able to relate specific images to Indigenous perceptions and lifeworlds.[89] These studies' main interests have almost always been the cultural aspects of Indigenous lifeworlds, whereas questions about individual artists, their lives and histories remain unexplored.[90] At the directive of First Nations artists and elders themselves, this book considers rock art as more than a generalised cultural phenomenon but as historical and biographical.[91]

A number of scholars have lamented the way that the study of rock art has been divorced from other academic disciplines and called for an opening up of rock art research. Livio Dobrez, for instance, described rock art studies as unnecessarily tied to 'a historical methodology' borrowed from archaeology.[92] Decrying what he considered 'disciplinary territoriality', he asked rock art scholars to consider insights from art history but also from beyond 'historical' disciplines: anthropology, philosophy, cognitive sciences, and neurophysiology.[93] Despite Dobrez's suggestion that archaeological approaches to rock art are rather limited, his observation did not consider that historians might have something to offer. Likewise, art historian Susan Lowish and rock art scholar Robert 'Ben' Gunn pointed to the exclusion of rock art from art history, calling for a 'collaborative effort' between archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians.[94] This same disciplinary trio was also suggested by Morphy, who lamented these scholars' failure to talk to each other about rock art.[95] Historians, again, were presumed to be entirely absent from the conversation. Not that this is the fault of archaeologists; historians also presumed that rock art was

beyond their field. We hope that historians, and others, might consider rock art as a key archive to human history.

To demonstrate this, we turn to Bininj communities of west Arnhem Land, who insist that their rock art tells us about their histories and lives. That is, it is biographical and historical and so rightly concerns historians. Artists today, for instance, often tell where their fathers and grandfathers painted. Rock art is still curated and inspires new artworks. Artists often explain where they add to or embellish their forefathers' work. And they continue to create new rock art in some places. Bininj understand rock art as intimately linked to the life stories of individuals, both members of the community of living recent memory and ancestors who may have lived long ago.[96] Following this lead, we approach questions of rock art and history through the lens of the life stories of artists, suggesting an interdisciplinary approach to rock art that includes history.

Our chapters each feature a biography of an artist or family of artists, drawing out the ways in which their art might challenge conventional histories. As mentioned, each chapter is followed by a new artwork created specifically for this book by co-author Gabriel Maralngurra. In this way, Aboriginal art itself becomes part of the long story of Aboriginal archives, interpreting art and retelling story, even within the pages of this book.

In Chapter 2 we introduce the reader to west Arnhem Land. Emphasising the cultural connectivity between rock art, history, culture, Ancestral Beings, language, and land, we introduce the cultural context for rock art creation as well as the paradox whereby an apparently conservative artistic tradition might also shed light on historical particularity and change.

Chapter 3 reveals how rock art sheds important light on individual lives as well as speaking more broadly to Indigenous experiences. We argue that rock art is created in social, historical contexts – and these contexts are evidenced in the art. Rock art is a fully situated historical source. Focusing on the story of artist Quilp, we demonstrate how rock art is a 'counter-archive' that can reveal important new understandings about Aboriginal experiences in colonial contexts.

Chapter 4 reveals how Aboriginal people adopted and integrated alphabetic script into their art, recognising the potential of this kind of knowledge transmission, and blurring the categories imposed on their pasts. We also see that writing was variously rejected and repurposed to suit the needs of rock art artists and their communities. Focusing on the biography of artist Narlim, this chapter reveals how he integrated alphabetic script into his art at times, experimenting with different forms of

communication. Ultimately, we conclude that rock art artists preferred to avoid alphabetic script, suggesting that that they found writing *too limited* for their purposes.

The fifth chapter turns to intergenerational historical memory and the function of rock art as both archive and mnemonic as the art's own communicative power. Through the biography of Josie Gumbuwa Maralngurra, daughter of artist Djimongurr, we reveal the art's function in passing historical knowledge to the next generation at its production, through its content, through evoking memory and its speaking to future generations. Rock art is a living means of transferring knowledge in the present to future generations – a living practice as well as an ancient record. We consider rock art not only as archive but also as of a site of memory in the landscape.

Academic disciplines, and especially history and archaeology, presume that a particular kind and experience of time is normal and universal. According to them, time is linear, homogenous and empty. It pushes relentlessly forward from past to future. This time has variously been called 'settler time', 'historicism', or simply 'modernity'. Although deeply concerned with history, rock art confounds 'settler time' and the temporalities assumed by academic disciplines. The sixth chapter considers the 'reappearance' of ever-present buffaloes in west Arnhem Land art, as well as the constant presence of seemingly 'disappeared' art to reveal how the knowledge on the rocks points to alternative ways of experiencing time. We suggest that rock art ultimately challenges the linear homogenous time of history and archaeology by evidencing alternative relations between past and present. In more ways than one, rock art puts history and its disciplinary assumptions 'on the rocks'.

We conclude that this First Nations archive is a repository of a different kind for a different kind of history, grounded in a different kind of time than the limited pasts that most academic historians and archaeologists are used to knowing, and that they will not know without deep partnerships with First Nations communities. So much the better. We hope that by finding history on the rocks, history itself might become ever richer.

REFLECTIONS ON ROCK BEATS PAPER

Gabriel Maralngurra

My name is Gabriel Maralngurra and I was born in Gunbalanya in Arnhem Land. I was born at the mission, but I am *Ngalangbali* clan. My moiety is *Yirridjdja* and my subsection is *Nawakadj*. My Country is near Kudjekbin

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FIGURE 1.4 History on the Rocks I. Artist: Gabriel Maralngurra.

outstation. I'm an artist and my paintings represent who I am, so I thought I better introduce myself first.

When I was a kid, old man Thompson Yulidjirri introduced me to rock art. He took me up Injalak Hill, showed me the rock art and told me stories as we looked. Old Thompson took us to Injalak Hill when I was a kid, when we were school kids. We used to go up. Old Thompson used to take us there, tell us the stories, and how it was done and how it was painted, and how people used to live up there during the wet and come down in the dry, and what they caught. They would paint up on the rocks. It was like a classroom, a big blackboard, and now it's still going, because we carry on our culture and telling stories. So, the story will never be forgotten. It will be there for more than a thousand years, and a bit more.

The Old People taught Old Thompson the same way: walking Country and painting the rocks. Probably his dad took him up Injalak Hill or maybe Paddy Compass. And they were travelling. In those days, when they were having ceremonies at Gunbalanya, Croker Island, Goulburn Island, there

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FIGURE 1.5 Creating 'History on the Rocks I'. Photo: Joakim Goldhahn.

was a base camp at Gunbalanya, and people used to go up the hill to see, visit family, and stayed there. And, they wanted to paint something, just to put their mark, or something, just to let people know that he was here, he done this painting. That's what it's about.

With my first painting in this book, I want to introduce rock art, I want to make everyone see how rock art is painted, how those Old People painted, way back. I've done this painting in rock art style, but it is from my head. Our people have made rock art forever. They painted different things: sometimes people, spirits, *djang*, fish, ceremony. Those artists left their mark.

Where I'm from, the rock art is mostly single hatching, not cross-hatching. It's very nice and neat, because it's just a single hatching,

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and that's what I like to do on paper when I paint now. I've painted two turtles, a long-neck turtle and a short-neck turtle, a magpie goose, a water goanna, a rock possum, some fish, eel-tail catfish, saratoga and barramundi, and a file snake with eggs. There are also some people, like *mimih* figures with dilly bags, digging stick, spears and spear thrower, and *Namarrkon*, Lightning Man. You see the short-neck turtle is a bit different, I've seen it on Injalak Hill. Someone from different Country maybe painted that. There were lots of people coming and going and painting and leaving their marks on the rock. This was before the mission. When the mission came it changed things. Some things, not everything. We still making rock art. Our culture is strong.

I've painted *Namarrkon* here too. *Namarrkon* is in the rock art. They are always being painted, rock art, in many galleries in Kakadu and west Arnhem Land. It's important, because we have six seasons, so when the wet season comes, that's when we normally hear the thunder. That's when *Namarrkon* or Lightning Man is about to turn, bringing big storms and rain and flood. So, we know it's wet season, it's near wet season. That line around him is the lightning. It strikes, and we see in the sky when he sparks. Some people are scared but we know when we see it, it is time for fishing, getting good fish.

The file snake with the eggs tells us something too, another season; she has eggs in the middle of the dry season. That painting means something to Bininj people because we all know that's when they start to lay eggs in the water, because that's when they lay. Old People used to go, when there weren't as many crocs, and get the file snake eggs. They're good eating. The young kids couldn't eat the eggs, only old people: cultural rules. If people would eat that egg early, he'd have grey hair early. Kids today they still know. Old People would tell them stories about the rock art, that's the rock art you see. See this, maybe file snake, got eggs. You can't eat that egg. You eat that, no, young people can't eat, only old ones.

There's lots of rules like that. You can't eat your Dreaming, no, it's not allowed. If you have catfish as your Dreaming, you can't eat it. I have Baby Dreaming, so I can't touch or hold babies. It is related to the rock art too. There's a painting in my grandfather's Country. I will talk more about my Baby Dreaming later in this book. If I want to paint Baby Dreaming I need to talk for that Country. I have to ask Nicodemus or Dulcie [Priscilla] if they can give me permission, or not. If they say 'no', well I can't. They're the *djunkgay*, it's their mother's Country. So they've got right to tell me if I can paint, or not. It's like a strict law for Bininj. It's complicated.

We learn the rules through ceremony and things like that, and when we finish ceremony, we come down, they tell us some of the kinship rules, down the bottom, where we start from. Where we were born, like a little family tree. It's like a little creek, it spreads. A lot of branches, yes, that's what we follow. That's where the story is. From the beginning of the rock art, where the story came from. It's like you're drawing a line, and then the creek starts to spread. Our ways, law.

Kids can learn the rules and about painting at any age. If he's out bush, if he's with his grandfather, no worries, he can just pick it up. By sitting, learning, listening. Really by listening, by his grandpa telling him stories. If the kid doesn't listen, he can do something else. 'This is what I'm going to teach, if you don't want you can go back to your mum and dad. I'm here to teach you because you're my grandson.' That's how little Maath (Gabriel's son), I see him when he was a little kid, a boy, a baby. Now he can paint just like his grandfather, Lofty. He grew up with a lot of knowledge, that boy, history, his grandfather taught him the stories from way back.

That's how you know most stories about Bininj culture. How he's connected to land, and Dreamtime stories, really strong. The heart, it's like, don't break the rules, stick to the drill. It's just like government rules: same, but it's different, it's outside. Well, that's what painting is about. Sacred site, here you see rock art, don't touch it. And someone might go and touch, because he doesn't know. He thinks it's just a painting. It's not a painting, that painting have story. It goes with the story, our culture, law, you know, you tell each other. You can take photos, yeah, you think it's a simple painting, no. That painting can tell you the history of how it's been painted there.

Sometimes the rock art shows us things that happened too. Like the Dynamic Figures, Old People, probably been dancing, that's when they started, corroboree, getting together, celebrating, that's what these Dynamic Figures are about. Getting everyone all in one place. And all have a big corroboree, dance, all dressed up. That's what it is like. Saying at the end of the ceremony, saying farewell so everyone can go back to their home. Big ceremony, that's what maybe left their mark, they're going to paint, saying we had corroboree here in this place, and saying goodbye to the people of that Country.

I will finish now. There is a lot to say about rock art, about our paintings today too. Keep reading, keep looking at the paintings, and you will start to understand. Our culture. Our history. Sometimes I can't find the words to explain how important rock art is to us, how it is part of culture, part of life, everything, it teaches us and this teaching keeps us safe, helps us live. The Old People knew this forever, and we know it today.

Notes

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6. For example, Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology* (London: British Museum Press, 1996).
7. Severin Fowles and Lindsay M. Montgomery, 'Rock Art Counter-Archives of the American West', *Murals of the Americas* (2019): 101.
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10. Adele Perry 'The Colonial Archive on Trial', in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 333; Souvatzi, Baysal and Baysal, *Time and History in Prehistory*, 13; Ian J. McNiven and Lynette Russell, *Appropriated Pasts: Indigenous Peoples and the Colonial Culture of Archaeology* (Rowman Altamira, 2005), 11–49.
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15. Rhonda G. Craven, 'The Pre – (Whose?) – History Debate: Where Are Our Manning Clarks of Archaeology and Anthropology?', *Australian Archaeology* 49 (1999): 64; Mrozowski and Schmidt, *The Death of Prehistory*, 10; Ann Macdonald and Aron Mazel, 'Challenging "Prehistory" in South African Archaeology',

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16. McNiven and Russell, *Appropriated Pasts*, 5; Maxine Oland, Siobhan M. Hart and Liam Frink, *Decolonizing Indigenous Histories: Exploring Prehistoric/Colonial Transitions in Archaeology* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 1; Corfield, 'Primevalism', 265; Kent G. Lightfoot, 'Culture Contact Studies: Redefining the Relationship between Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology', *American Antiquity* 60, no. 2 (1995): 199–217.
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25. Ketelaar, 'The Archive as a Time Machine',579.
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40. See also Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 26.
41. Taçon and Brady, 'The Place of Rock Art in the Contemporary World', 4.
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44. Morphy, 'Recursive and Iterative Processes', 297.
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49. Morphy, 'Recursive and Iterative Processes', 295; Laura Millar, 'Touchstones: Considering the Relationship between Memory and Archives', *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 121.

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