Archaeologies of Austral: Australian Identities from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene

Sven Ouzman, Archaeology and Centre for Rock Art Research + Management, The University of Western Australia M257, 35 Stirling Highway, Perth, Western Australia 6009, Australia. Tel: +61 (0)8 6488 2863 Email: sven.ouzman@uwa.edu.au

and

Rock Art Research Institute, School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, Origins Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa

ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9379-2996

Abstract

Most Australians are unaware of the deep Pleistocene human history of their continent. Coining the phrase “archaeologies of austral” to refer to the deep time histories of a changing southern continent, this article challenges present assumptions about “Australia” and its identity. It considers archaeology’s contribution towards understanding Australian identity, as a form of translation incorporating Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges. It starts with the continent’s oldest-known rock art painting – fittingly, of a kangaroo - and then broadens its focus to position the familiar shape of Australia as a geofact of the last 6,000 years. Placing the kangaroo painting within its environmental and human contexts shows how rock art functioned as a means to manage social and environmental change by making, maintaining and sometimes changing human–human and human–world relationships. This work reveals ambiguities in archaeological narratives of “deep histories”, such as reifying things, dates and people, which in Indigenous traditions are fluid and omni-temporal. An archaeological perspective may challenge shallower histories of Australia and reveal much longer processes of identity-making that enhance our understanding in the present. It also explores legacies in the present, and how socially-engaged archaeological research may continue to be useful in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, archaeology, Australia, identity, Indigenous
Most Australians are unaware of the deep Pleistocene human history of their continent, in part because of the persisting legacies of colonialism, and the problem that “Indigenous culture [has] remained for so long outside the national gaze, creating a blindness”. For a minority of Australians, news reports of archaeological discoveries such as once-terrestrial Aboriginal sites now found underwater, >50,000-year-old rock shelter human habitation dates, as well as more recent evidence of long-term landscape and fire management by Aboriginal people, are both exciting and confounding. Many Aboriginal people find the “scientific” framing of this work alien while most non-Aboriginal people are largely unaware of this deep history and make no effort to incorporate it into their sense of identity. Those who are aware of it struggle to integrate it into their world view as they tend to be relatively recent immigrants with barely a century’s experience of being “Australian”. The question “What is identity?” is impossibly large and vexed, working on multiple scales from the individual to the planetary, and deriving from a creative tension between our biological and social selves. There are also markedly different academic and public perspectives on identity evident in the global “north” and “south”, Here I consider what the archaeology can contribute towards understanding identity in the past by functioning

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1 The Pleistocene is a geological epoch dating from about 11,700 years ago until 2,580,000 years ago. For Australia, Pleistocene human occupation dates back at least 65,000 years ago based on archaeological evidence. The Holocene refers to the last 11,700 years, with the Anthropocene a more debated topic, possibly beginning in the 1950s, through recent archaeological research suggests it may have had its roots more than 10,000 years ago. See Lucas Stephens et al., “Archaeological Assessment Reveals Earth’s Early Transformation through Land Use,” *Science* 365, no. 6456 (2019): 897–902.


as a form of translation that incorporates Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges.\(^5\) I also explore how identity and archaeology have been understood and linked to the present, and how this approach may continue to be useful in the future. I use the phrase “archaeologies of Austral” to refer to the deep time histories of a changing continent located geographically in the Southern Hemisphere but economically and politically part of the “Global North”.\(^6\) This differential positioning creates a tension that leads to a “postcolonising” rather than a “postcolonial” condition.\(^7\) I suggest that an archaeological perspective may challenge shallower histories of “Australia” and reveal a much longer and more grounded process of identity-making that enhance our understanding in the present.

Archaeology cannot provide a completely satisfying or inclusive narrative of the past, in part due to the fragmentary nature of material evidence, and in part to archaeology’s close and often complicit formation within a colonial context.\(^8\) The discipline has often been guilty of ossifying human “cultures” through its static representations; preventing change and human agency from being fully expressed. But certain artefacts seem especially clearly authored, agentive and visually accessible to people in the present and therefore become cynosuric markers of identity. Figure 1, for example, shows a visually arresting, almost two-metre-tall rock painting of a kangaroo (macropod) from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, which has been dated to c. 17,300 years old.\(^9\) This is, for now, Australia’s oldest

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\(^5\) For this approach see, for example, Timothy Insoll, ed., *An Archaeology of Identities: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007).

\(^6\) For example, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Patricia Daley, eds., *Handbook of South–South Relations* (London: Routledge, 2019), especially chapter 3.

\(^7\) Indigenous intellectual Aileen Moreton-Robinson uses the term “postcolonizing” to describe the situation for Indigenous people whose homelands have not been decolonised: Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 10.


known example of rock art still in a rock shelter. This painting is located on the Traditional Country of the Kwini people, who are part of the Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation. This iconic image embodies the way that the deep past may erupt in the present and engage all Australians.

Insert Figure 1 about here: Montage of 39 photographs and accompanying illustration of c. 17,300-year-old, ≈2-metre-tall iconic kangaroo rock painting from the Kimberley, Western and Northern Australia. “Ages for Australia’s Rock Paintings, p. 314” and Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation.

Rock art provides an engaging and useful focus for a conversation about being and identity. For example, we need consider the seemingly unproblematic word “art”, which is a Western intrusion that leads to a fundamental understanding of what “rock art” is and does. Almost certainly, the Aboriginal creators of the kangaroo did not consider it to be an “image” or two-dimensional representation, but rather to constitute an entity in itself, closely networked into people’s sense of self and place—at least, this is what historical and ethnographic sources and interviews with Aboriginal people indicate, as do they. In other words, this kangaroo would have had its own identity, agency, history and interactions with humans, other paintings and the wider landscape. Intriguingly, this kangaroo is visually similar to a recently dated c. 45,000-year-old rock painting of a “warty pig” (Sus celebensis) from Sulawesi—both share the same distinctive infill “style”, called Irregular Infill Animal Style or IIAP. Such comparisons create a wider temporal and geographic perspective that allows us to use archaeological

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science to imagine what Pleistocene “Australia” was like for people before and after the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), or ice age, which took place between approximately 27,000 and 19,000 years ago.\(^{14}\)

**Australia?**

It is salutary to note that the familiar shape of Australia we know from maps, satellite images and other surveillance technologies is a “geofact” of only the last 6,000–7,000 years, when ocean levels stabilised. Thus, for most of Australia’s human history, measured in linear Western chronology as beginning more than 50,000 years ago, the landmass was up to 2.12 million square kilometres larger, when sea levels were at least 120 metres lower than today (Figure 2).\(^{15}\) This 8,000-year-long ice age would have challenged and shaped human identity. Much of this now-submerged landmass was in the north, so that the First Australians were most likely part of an extensive northern cultural bloc covering what is today the extended northwest continental shelf, Papua New Guinea and the Aru Islands. This region constituted the northern reaches of Sahul—the Pleistocene-era continent that consisted of Australia, New Guinea and Tasmania. The term “Sahul” is not commonly used today by most Australians, despite its use since at least the 17th century of the Christian Era (CE).\(^{16}\) Indeed, what we call Australia is simply a modern locative artefact that derives from second-century CE legends of an imagined southern land, *Terra Australis.* The term was most famously used by Matthew Flinders in 1804 and became official usage only in 1817.\(^{17}\) Understanding toponomy, the place names of a region or language, is key to

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\(^{15}\) Even “western” scholars acknowledge there are multiple temporalities within Western time including cyclical, interval and the like. But the linear “time’s arrow” mode is most commonly used, particularly by Earth Sciences as a direct temporal bridge to the past, especially the deep past. See Gavin Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time* (London: Routledge, 2005).


\(^{17}\) Lindsay Perry, “I Call the Whole Island Australia” (paper presented at the Mapping Sciences Institute, Australia 400 Years of Mapping Australia conference, Darwin, 23–25 August 2006).
understanding particular human senses of belonging, and their shifts, as people move across ever-changing land and sea. Figure 2 provides a useful visualisation of this process\textsuperscript{18}—and how it is likely to occur again. While the end of the LGM represented a period of land loss occasioned almost entirely through natural factors, the *National Geographic* visualisation takes land loss, this time through a combination of natural and human-induced climate change, literally to a new level that will require Australians once again to adapt socially and technologically.

Insert Figure 2 about here: Australia thought the Pleistocene, Holocene, and Anthropocene. Left: Sahul at 65,000 years ago. Middle: Australia at 6,000 years ago. Right: Australia if sea levels rise 70 metres. Images: Monash Sahultime (http://sahultime.monash.edu.au/explore.html) and National Geographic “If all the ice melted” (https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/rising-seas-ice-melt-new-shoreline-maps). Reproduced by permission of Matthew Coller and National Geographic

Stepping back from this challenging future, if we return to the “remote” rock shelter shown in Figure 1, our research shows that this area was never remote. It exists in a landscape with up to 25 archaeological sites per square kilometre and was likely part of a concatenation of places along a major waterway, the Drysdale River/Marraran (Kwini for “river”).\textsuperscript{19} Around 17,300 years ago, Sahul was coming out of the end of the LGM, and sea levels were up to 106 metres lower than today’s. This rock shelter, which is today within two days’ walk from the coast, would then have been at least another 200–300 kilometres further away from the coast.\textsuperscript{20} The climate was cool and dry, and this tail end of the LGM probably represented


\textsuperscript{19} It is important to note that these archaeological sites are not all from a single time but span at least the last 45,000 years. However, most sites have multiple habitation episodes through time. To date, the *Kimberley Visions* project has found over 1,300 archaeological sites (rock art, quarries, ochre sources, stone arrangements, historic campsites, and so on) and conducted 11 archaeological excavations in this landscape, a small percentage of the true number of sites; see also Harper, Veth, and Ouzman, “Kimberley Rock Art”.

\textsuperscript{20} Williams et al., “Sea-Level Change”.


the end of an extended arid period. Flora and fauna would have differed markedly from today’s tropics. Despite these challenging conditions, the archaeological evidence suggests people living at this time were probably not merely surviving, but thriving. Rock art was produced in quantity and variety. The *Kimberley Visions: Rock Art Style Provinces of Northern Australia* collaboration with Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation and colleagues from Melbourne, Monash and France, in which I participate, has documented dozens of sites with this IAAP style in the same area since 2013, suggesting this was a nodal point on the landscape for human activity and the expression of human and more-than-human identities. Making the kangaroo painting—one among tens of thousands of images—would have required people to journey to source ochre, which would then have needed to be mixed in specific ratios with binders, loaders and extenders (some of which could contain human DNA such as blood, sweat or saliva). People would also have had to make containers, paint-preparation tools and brushes and then paint at the socially mandated time or occasion. In this way, the painting we see today is the visual residue of a multi-person activity that involved participants with different or specific ages, genders and on. This painting was likely polysemic (having several different meanings) in function, probably signalling a group or localised identity within the larger cultural bloc. But rock art is not simply an after-effect of a multi-phased performance or a recording of fauna in the wild. It has a life both before and after the painting event in which people use the landscape and their ingenuity to express their relationship to the world around them and to one another. In other words, rock art functioned as a means to manage social and environmental change by making, maintaining and sometimes changing human–human and human–world relationships.

As the LGM lessened and the continent moved into the Holocene (the last 11,700 years), changes continued to implicate climate, topography, vegetation and fauna, with concomitant social and technological adjustments by Aboriginal Australians. Using rock art as a proxy, we glean some insight

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21 See acknowledgments at the end of this article for a full list of project funders and supporters.
into changing people–place relationships. For example, plant depictions hint at sophisticated ecoscaping\textsuperscript{23}, or recursive human–environmental relations, and other paintings show human figures with new technologies such as spear throwers, which helped them extract a living from this changing landscape.\textsuperscript{24} Understanding land as a “scape” or artefact that is constantly changing through both natural and social vectors, albeit at different rates, informs our understanding of human identity and how it may be shaped through human interactions with one another and their ensapped world.

Again, Kimberley rock art provides useful insight. As we moved from the end of the Pleistocene into the Holocene, the iconographic trend was towards fewer animal depictions and more human figures, in sharp distinction to the animal-dominated IIAP style. The most famous examples are the Gwion Gwion anthropomorphic figures (Figure 3a), who tend to be shown in a very uniform, almost regimented way, suggesting an idealised or proscribed identity. Some figures are shown with material culture and elaborate dress, visually identical to artefacts used in ethnographically recorded times. This similarity suggests that elements of identity can either be surprisingly long-lived or recur when particular social and environmental conditions of possibility intersect.\textsuperscript{25} Against this continuity, the next major phase of Kimberley rock art has been argued to have had a very sudden inception, and it is also distinctive in expression.\textsuperscript{26} Wandjina (also “Wanjina”) rock art (Figure 3b) is multispecies in focus and characterised by bright colours, prepared backgrounds, and a high degree of individualism within a

\textsuperscript{23} See Sven Ouzman et al., “Plants before Animals?”.

\textsuperscript{24} Ouzman, “Plants before Animals?”; Grahame L. Walsh and Mike L. Morwood, “Spear and Spearthrower Evolution in the Kimberley Region, N. W. Australia: Evidence from Rock Art,” \textit{Archaeology in Oceania} 34, no. 2 (1999): 45–58.

\textsuperscript{25} Harper, Veth, and Ouzman, “Kimberley Rock Art”. Note that Gwion Gwions, formerly “Bradshaws”, were—and continue to be in some quarters—a flashpoint of colonial racism in denying their authorship. For a comprehensive discussion of this colonial pathology, see Ian McNiven, “The Bradshaw Debate: Lessons Learned from Critiquing Colonialist Interpretations of Gwion Gwion Rock Paintings of the Kimberley, Western Australia,” \textit{Australian Archaeology} 72, no. 1 (2011): 35–44; David Welch, “Bradshaw Art of the Kimberley,” in \textit{Rock Art of the Kimberley}, ed. Mike Donaldson and Kevin K. Kenneally (Perth: Kimberley Society, 2005), 81–100.

larger belief system. The anthropomorphic imagery is clearly more-than-human. Wandjinas are understood as particular sentient and powerful creator, and other beings, currently resting or residing in or on particular rock shelters. Significantly, Wandjinas have always been routinely repainted as a recurring place-centric embodied activity that people know is essential to the maintenance of their world. Wandjinas literally scape the land and its people. Our oldest known scientific date for Wandjina rock art goes back at least 5,000 years, and it is tempting to link this visually prominent style to the rise in sea levels that led to the present outline of Australia. Such a change would have caused widespread social dislocation, culminating in the loss of over 500,000 square kilometres since the 17,300-year-old IIAP kangaroo was painted.

Insert Figure 3 about here: Two contrasting presentations of the human and more-than-human body. On the left (a): large c. 1.2-metre Gwion Gwion human figures that are probably about 13,000 years old. On the right (b): Wandjina figures painted on the ceiling of an excavated rock shelter and dated to 100–600 years ago. Reproduced by permission of Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation and University of Western Australia.

Australians?

The coinciding timing of Wandjina and sea-level rise is seductive but raises the question of what an archaeological date actually is. Dating is best understood as a particular historically constituted socio-scientific chain of operations that produces a set of provisional numbers, which then have to be translated into a date and linked to other datasets such as palaeo-environmental and geomorphological

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27 Valda Blundell and Donny Woolagoodja, Keeping the Wanjinas Fresh (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2005).

28See June Ross et al., “Into the Past: A Step towards a Robust Kimberley Rock Art Chronology,” PLoS One 11, no. 8 (2016): 19 for the oldest known date on a Wandjina—5100 ± 240 BP (≈5,000 years old, BP standing for “before the present”, which is determined as 1950 when atmospheric carbon was altered by nuclear testing and atom bombs, affecting radiocarbon dating.
data, archaeological excavations, DNA evidence, ethnography, and historical events. This is a negotiated and contingent process. The emphasis on process is key. For example, the 17,300-year-old kangaroo rock painting is in a seemingly stable and unchanging geological feature – a rock shelter (Figure 1). But that rock shelter does not remain the same. The topography and human geography around it changes over time. This change is brought about by inevitable planetary processes and by human agency—such as the hitherto unrecognised but widespread practice of people physically altering or scaping rock shelters, often substantially, which has been identified at nearby sites through the study of archaeomorphology.29

Too often, the dates assigned to rock art paintings are reified and rendered in isolation. For example, the great age of certain artefacts may not be as significant to Indigenous people as they are to Western scientists. From a Western perspective, the “oldest” dates are typically what make the headlines (the press seldom promotes “the world’s most recent rock art”). This is part of what I suggest is an androcentric urge, coupled with a dominantly linear conception of time, which seeks to establish an authoritative progenitor or origin entity from which subsequent events proceed. But from an Aboriginal perspective, it is often the most recent dates that matter because they are socially meaningful in the present, linking to known individuals, histories and places. For example, Traditional Owners working with the Kimberley Visions project were distinctly unimpressed by a c. 50,000-year-old habitation site (“It is a good place to fish” was one comment), but were delighted by a site where rusted metal objects from “Station Times” were linked to known individuals and events.30 Indeed, an unexpected lacuna in archaeological theory is the lack of theorisation of time and change—despite a

plethora of work on dating and associated technologies, and the desire to find the oldest example of a particular type of artefact or site.\footnote{Laurent Olivier, \textit{The Dark Abyss of Time: Archaeology and Memory} (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011); Martin Porr and Jacqueline Matthews, eds., \textit{Interrogating Human Origins: Decolonisation and the Deep Human Past} (London: Routledge, 2019).}

Even well-intentioned commentators such as author Tim Winton fall into the trap of over-valuing the “deep past” times. When speaking on Western Australia’s Murujuga Aboriginal rock engravings, which were recently nominated for World Heritage Site status, he says: “The scale of time just completely redraws your notion of antiquity. If this was an antique World Cup, we’ve won before we get off the bus.”\footnote{This is a first for Australian rock art, but many other countries have had rock art sites inscribed for decades. “Murujuga Cultural Landscape, UNESCO,” \url{https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6445/} (accessed 18 February 2021); Susan Standen, “Tim Winton Joins Push for World Heritage Listing of Ancient Rock Art on WA’s Dampier Archipelago,” \textit{ABC News}, 5 August 2018, \url{https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-06/tim-winton-joins-push-for-world-heritage-listing-of-rock-art/10071998}.} This competitive privileging based on a certain formulation of numbers does not always accord with Aboriginal ontological and phenomenological knowledge, where people often state simply that “we have always been here”.\footnote{See Woolagoodja, \textit{Yornadaiyn Woolagoodja}, chapter 3.} This thinking even challenges “out of Africa” evolutionary narratives, rendering less potent the archaeological emphasis on “old” dates. This is no bad thing, as all dates matter. To a degree, non-Aboriginal knowledge systems can accommodate a \textit{sui generis} notion of identity by unproblematically accepting Aboriginality as a unique product of this southern landmass, which was scaped into a home by the people who travelled here and lived through its many transformations. This tension in our understanding of origins as either an event or as a process ultimately stems from a locational sense of identity—you are where you are.\footnote{Porr and Matthews, \textit{Interrogating Human Origins}.}

However, locating people’s senses of identity in the land can come at the cost of othering and fossilising some people—especially indigenous peoples. Although the word “indigenous” applies to all people (everyone comes from or originates in/on a “place”), it has become associated with a politics of
marginality. The term must also negotiate a tension between the politics of land and blood. In Australia, for example, can any non-Aboriginal person ever be indigenous to Australia, even when the ice melts approximately 5,000 years from now and the outline of the continent changes once again (see Figure 2)? What does length of tenure on a landscape count for in the identity stakes, especially for a continent where everyone has come over the waters from somewhere else, at least within a historical and evolutionary narrative? Shifting to identity-by-blood, a popular tool of investigation is DNA, which is often considered in close association with archaeological discoveries DNA is a new and dynamic study based on an evolving set of assumptions. It employs a language of finitude, especially towards Indigenous peoples, for whom any mixing with other groups is considered as “diluting” their genetic make-up and, by association, their identity. This is why many researchers urge caution, even equating DNA work as a new formulation of biological “race”. Such an approach to identity obscures the necessary tension within ourselves as both biological and cultural beings, captured nicely in physical anthropologist Alan Morris’s comments about an Indigenous and African group. He points out that “biological history gives us a very clear picture of the genetic events of past generations. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is the cultural identity of a group and is not determined by genetic origins. The two are parallel pathways that sometimes interconnect but need not have any direct relationship. 

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even change from generation to generation and be redefined or entirely reconstructed within a very short period of time”.

Blood-belonging identity perspectives can powerfully bring to light unknown genetic heritage—for good or for bad. Even in this approach, one’s belonging to a group necessarily entails belonging to a place, or even multiple landscapes. This acknowledgement of multiplicity, change and endurance offers a multi-scalar dynamism essential to successful negotiation of often-vexed identities today as well as our species’ survival through the Anthropocene. Yet mobility and the tendency to mix with other humans is a characteristic of our species.

Legacies in the Present

I return to a focus on place and identity by considering what we, as people of the South, may contribute to a postcolonising study of “Australian” identity. The entity “Australia” denotes a productively ambiguous landmass and society. Despite our geographical location, we are not considered part of the Global South because of our privileged economic position and political alignment. Our privilege often causes us to overlook our southern neighbours, from whom we have much to learn. For example, current, pointed discussion on what heritage means, and what the potentials and pitfalls of a shared

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40 This term was devised by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen in 2000, to signal a new epoch for the Earth in which humanity’s stamp has become too large to ignore. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene’,” Global Change Newsletter 41 (2000): 17–18. Opinion is divided on whether the term accurately gauges the magnitude and effects of our actions, or whether such periodisation constitutes human hubris. Multidisciplinary archaeological work has been able to extend its putative origins in the 18th century Industrial Revolution back at least another 10,000 years. Lucas Stephens et al., “Archaeological Assessment Reveals Earth’s Early Transformation through Land Use,” Science 365, no. 6456 (2019): 897–902.
41 For example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeha and Daley, Handbook of South–South Relations, chapter 3.
heritage are, remain underdeveloped by comparison with those in Africa. Australia has no clear notion of a shared heritage, and this is very apparent in our legal fabric pertaining to archaeology and heritage.

Federal laws routinely contradict state laws. Some states even have multiple, conflicting heritage laws. Western Australia, for example, has three heritage laws: the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972* (under revision), the *Maritime Archaeology Act 1973* and the *Heritage Act 2018*. Though not so intentioned, these Acts treat Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage differently, leading to a structural violence and, indeed, racism. For example, an offence under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act* carries a maximum fine of up to $40,000 for individuals and $100,000 for body corporates. The fine for a comparable offence under the *Heritage Act*, which deals largely with buildings and settler/invader heritage, goes up to $1 million for damage to a “registered place”. The deficiencies in both law and process were recently and forcibly brought to public attention by the destruction of the Aboriginal heritage site of Juukan Gorge in what is today Western Australia. This destruction was entirely legal in terms of the letter of the law, but certainly not in its spirit. In particular, it was the antiquity—46,000 years of human history—that sparked the outrage, as many more recent sites are routinely destroyed in the path of resource extraction. The remedial action for Juukan came first from civil society because the legal avenues were so manifestly deficient. Not only did the laws fail to protect Juukan; they enabled and legalised its destruction. These laws and their variable implementation are an impediment to any notion of a shared heritage and create a confusing and polarised compliance regime. The original lighthouse on Wadjemup (Rottnest Island), for instance, was built with Aboriginal labour and was operational by 1849, a

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44 *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972*, Western Australia. Please note: the proposed *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act* that will replace the AHA substantially increases these penalties by up to AUD$10 million, plus “stop work” orders. Even so, these fines still do not align with those in the *Heritage Act 2018*, perpetuating a differential treatment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritages.

contribution commemorated in a plaque that has been whitewashed in a very literal sense (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{46} However, were the remains of the original lighthouse to be damaged, there would be confusion as to which legislation should be activated: both the \textit{Aboriginal Heritage Act} and the \textit{Heritage Act} could be argued to apply. Legislation here impedes dialogue, and the coeval nature of heritage over the last 200 years is legislatively suppressed. Inadvertently, Aboriginal heritage is relegated largely to the past.

Insert Figure 4 about here: Whitewashed plaque commemorating Aboriginal labour for building the original 1849 lighthouse on Wadjemup (Rottnest Island), which was to the left of the 1896 lighthouse shown in this image. Reproduced by permission of Rentia Ouzman.

This is a sign of an uneasy state, unwilling to implement inclusive framing and management of its heritage as part of its responsibility to all citizens. By contrast, many African countries acknowledge painful histories and treat them in a much more uniform legal way; they consider all heritage under a single, national legislation in order to foster truth-telling, nation-building and a common identity.\textsuperscript{47} Here again, dating and dates feature as an impediment to understanding cultural significance. Fortunately, Australian legislation does not provide differential protection according to relative age, but in theory treats all declared artefacts and sites equally. But the age of archaeological materials greatly affects the multiple Australian publics’ senses of belonging and identity. For example, the kangaroo rock painting dated to 17,300 years ago is an acceptable and interesting artefact to most people because it is so

\textsuperscript{46} Katherine Roscoe, “‘Too Many Kill ‘Em. Too Many Make ‘Em Ill’: The Commission into Rottnest Prison as the Context for Section 70,” \textit{Studies in Western Australian History} 30 (2016): 43–57.

ancient and because this date has been produced by “science”. Most Australians, however defined, can relate to the iconic image of a kangaroo. This universal acceptance of an ancient date contrasts with the acrimony surrounding celebration of 26 January each year as Australia Day—easily the most divisive, and historically inaccurate, date on our ordinal calendar. A southern perspective might again here be useful. Imagine going to all 53 African nations and saying, “We need a national day—let’s make it on the day the Europeans arrived/invaded.” You can imagine the derision or anger this suggestion would invoke among Africans. Why then is the use of a comparable date for Australia justified simply because we have an Indigenous minority? The past is largely unknown in any detail, even for archaeologists. We constantly use and manipulate it, especially with nationalistic endeavours. As archaeologist Ian McNiven observes: “Manipulation of the past is a powerful weapon of the coloniser. Whenever we move into a period of political conservatism, such as Australia experienced in the 1990s and 2000s [and today], such ideological views will be given a privileged position and unprecedented media attention.”

There have also been many hopeful moments in Australia, such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where Yorna Woolagoodja’s Wandjina creation stood as a unifying national symbol. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 “Apology to Indigenous Australians” signalled a potent, but as yet unfulfilled, intent, which the 2017 “Uluru Statement from the Heart” progressed. School curricula now include Indigenous knowledges and more representative histories, countering the idea that Australia’s history began in 1788. At an abstract level, the classic archaeological metaphor of the past consisting of multiple strata or laminations is useful. We are but a very thin layer of people in place in the here-and-now. We are following on from many layers before us, with hopefully many layers to come. These laminations are not innocent because each comes with its own politics. But at least such a conception allows people both to


acknowledge personal histories and identities while also considering their relationship with the
continent’s deeper history. Western Australia is an ideal place for us to reconsider what it means to be
Australian from the perspective of a species that is grappling with a possible posthuman future. Climate
change affects us just as it affected the people who painted the kangaroo 17,300 years ago. Humans are
increasingly realising our many obligations to the more-than-human world around us. Crafting our
identity in step with the world around us is a necessary survival skill as the social and physical firmament
shifts. Despite its geographic extent, home to some of the country’s most important archaeological and
historical sites including being one of the likely landing areas for the First Australians, Western Australia
is often cast as being marginal to national discourses. Yet it is central to conversations that seek to
recast Australian history and map its future. As we proceed into the Anthropocene and renegotiate our
identity, all Australians need to be able to draw on the full range of evidence of human endeavour on
this southern landmass. An archaeology of austral is not simply an exercise of looking into the past; it is
a way of imagining how we might inhabit the future and, indeed, whether we have a future.

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Figure 1: Montage of 39 photographs and accompanying illustration of c. 17,300-year-old, ≈2-metre-tall iconic kangaroo rock painting from the Kimberley, Western and Northern Australia. “Ages for Australia’s Rock Paintings, p. 314”. Reproduced by permission of Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation and University of Western Australia
Figure 2: Australia thought the Pleistocene, Holocene, and Anthropocene. Left: Sahul at 65,000 years ago. Middle: Australia at 6,000 years ago. Right: Australia if sea levels rise 70 metres. Images: Monash Sahultime (http://sahultime.monash.edu.au/explore.html) and National Geographic “If all the ice melted” (https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/rising-seas-ice-melt-new-shoreline-maps). Reproduced by permission of Matthew Coller and National Geographic.
**Figure 3:** Two contrasting presentations of the human and more-than-human body. On the left (a): large c. 1.2-metre Gwion Gwion human figures that are probably about 13,000 years old. On the right (b): Wandjina figures painted on the ceiling of an excavated rock shelter and dated to 100–600 years ago. Reproduced by permission of Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation and University of Western Australia.

**Figure 4:** Whitewashed plaque commemorating Aboriginal labour for building the original 1849 lighthouse on Wadjemup (Rottnest Island), which was to the left of the 1896 lighthouse shown in this image. Reproduced by permission of Rentia Ouzman.