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EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND DEEP PRESENCE: ETHNOGRAPHY AND ROCK ART PLACES IN YANYUWA COUNTRY

John Bradley, Amanda Kearney and Liam M. Brady

Abstract. This paper explores the complex and challenging relationship between archaeology, rock art studies and ethnography. It examines how particular sites that may be deemed archaeological, because they contain rock art, are still part of the ethnographic present in regards to what continues to be known about them by Indigenous people. In this paper, we present a case study of rock art from Yanyuwa Country in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia. This is a context in which a Dreaming and kincentric ontology determines the presence and nature of imagery and shapes this imagery as an element of Country which carries its own agentic will. In this instance, the imagery is not rock art, but something altogether more richly configured through a relational ontology that stretches through time, past, present and future. The Yanyuwa example presses us to consider how our research of 'rock art' can be led through ethnographic understandings, rather than seeking ethnographic insights to support already constituted disciplinary understandings.

Introduction

This paper explores the challenging relationship between archaeology, rock art studies and ethnography. It builds on existing Australian and international literature in this area (e.g. Blundell and Woolagoodja 2005; Colwell and Ferguson 2014; Flood and David 1994; Keyser et al. 2006; Morwood and Hobbs 1992; Merlan 1989; McDonald 2013; Young 1988; York et al. 1993) and offers new insights into how particular sites that may be deemed archaeological, because they contain rock art, are still part of the ethnographic present. The geographical, cultural and temporal range over which rock art studies are undertaken requires culturally attuned, often sensitive methodologies that can move with, be led by and responsive to the specificities of landscapes and seascapes, identities and political motivations.

In the context of this paper, it is Yanyuwa people from northern Australia's southwest Gulf of Carpentaria (Fig. 1) who own the land upon which the rock art and rock art sites discussed here are found. It is their lives, thoughts, personalities and memories that populate the ethnographic present. This ethnographic present is not a 'distinctive hyper cultural space', it is everyday life. It is the profoundly relational contexts in which meanings in and of the world are made, sustained, refashioned and changed. The gloss of meaning that comes with the expression 'the ethnographic record' must be countered, and the reader reminded of the everyday nature of ethnographic encounters. These

encounters are conversations and moments of practice and friendship shared with and by cultural insiders. They involve visiting sites of importance and those of the everyday, attending funerals, lamenting the loss of lands and waters, participating in ritual life, and also the simple tasks of going to the shops, smoking a cigarette, visiting people in hospital, or fishing down by the river (Fig. 2). The ethnographic present is a dynamic space, which once entered into, enriches any understanding of the Yanyuwa world, and challenges researchers to understand all myriad of cultural expressions, in ways that require recognition of existing ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies at work.

Ethnography in rock art research is an opportunity to 'unflatten'. The term 'unflattening' is elaborated by Sousanis (2015) who describes it as an 'insurrection against the fixed viewpoint', a process that reveals and asserts perception as an active process of incorporating and re-evaluating different vantage points. It is through listening to, and learning from, Yanyuwa that we have been able to cultivate a practice of 'unflattening', that is not only 'looking at' rock art, but 'looking up', 'through', 'with', and 'looking anew' at the places which hold rock art across Yanyuwa Country. Rock art is held in relation to an impressive number of elements and presences in Country, from people and other places, to Dreamings (also known as Ancestral Beings), spirit beings, and non-human animals. One cannot claim 'to know' something in Yanyuwa culture until

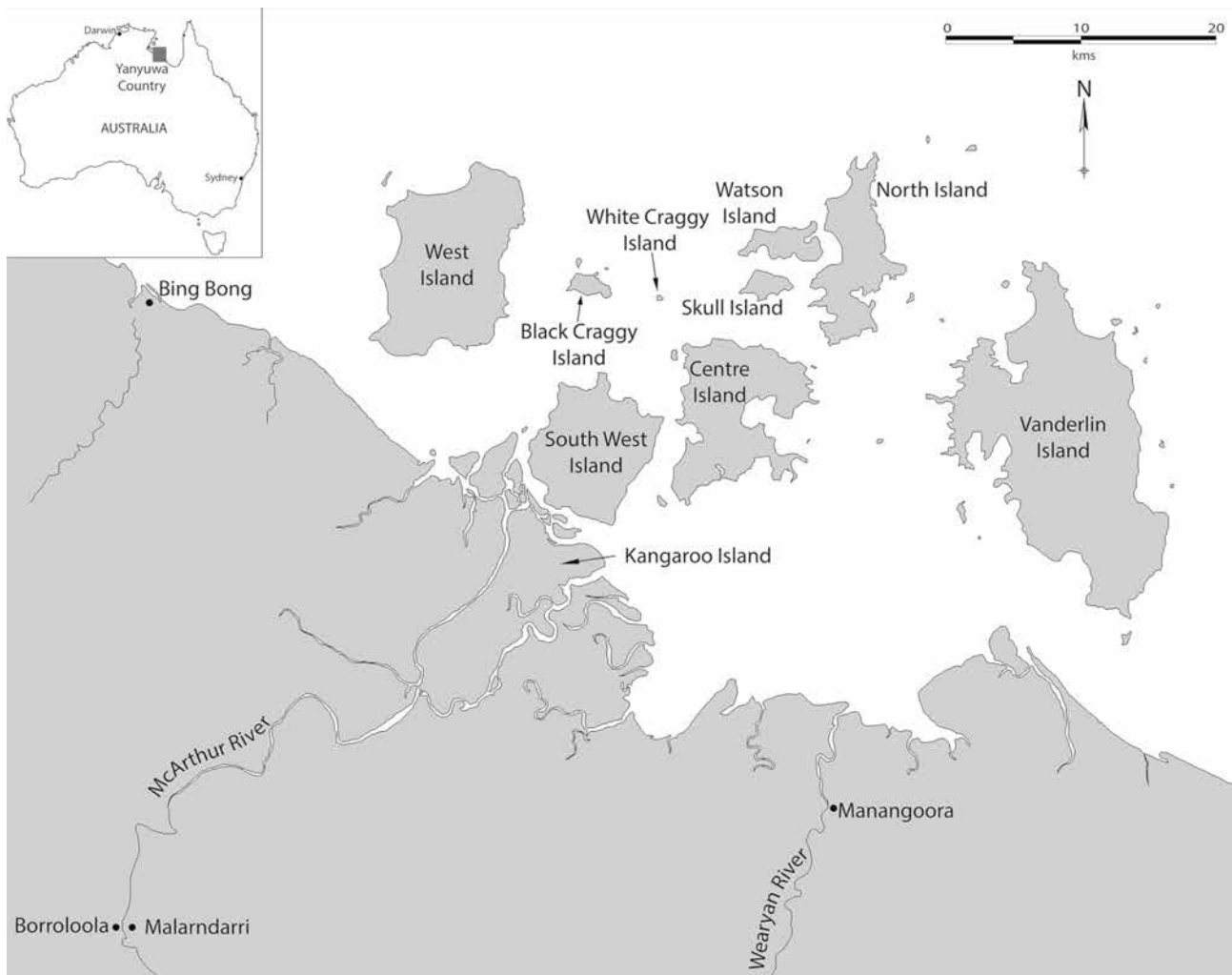


Figure 1. Map of Yanyuwa Country in northern Australia's south-western Gulf of Carpentaria region.

such time as that which is knowable has been experienced. This view is a prevailing and pre-eminent rule in a Yanyuwa epistemology, whereby a claim to know something is heavily politicised and may be contested. In a Yanyuwa sense, real knowing is about the experiential. For example, as will become clear throughout this paper, 'to know' the rock art of a Yanyuwa place can only be claimed if one also knows the Dreamings responsible for that place, their travels and links to other places, the form their actions and bodies take in the Dreaming and in the present, and also the names of those people intimately linked to such places and ancestors through their paternal and maternal lines of descent (see Brady et al. 2018)¹. In this case, the rock art itself is but one component of a richly configured kincentric ecology, it does not exist as rock art alone (Kearney et al 2019; Salmón 2000).

¹ In saying this, we also acknowledge the capacity for meaning, knowledge and relationships with/about rock art and other cultural sites and features to change in the past and present (e.g. David 2002; Gunn 2003; Taçon 1989). We have also previously shown how change is accommodated in terms of changes to the motifs themselves and how they are (re)interpreted in light of a community's health, and visitations to country (Brady et al 2016).

In writing this paper, it is important to also recognise the perspectives from which we approach the subject matter described below and the contexts that frame our experiences of encountering and coming to know Yanyuwa rock art: Bradley is an anthropologist and linguist who has worked alongside Yanyuwa for over 40 years on land claims, zoology, and natural and cultural resource management, and is fluent in Yanyuwa men's and women's dialects. As part of his research he has spent many years traveling across the Pellew islands and listening to men and women describe the rock art they encountered. Kearney is an anthropologist who has worked with Yanyuwa over the last 20 years, focusing on community and familial experiences of cultural wounding, healing and generational knowledge exchange, and Brady is an archaeologist who began documenting rock art with Yanyuwa men and women in 2010. Together, our experiences in Yanyuwa Country are used to communicate the complexity of these networks.

Ethnography and translatability

As ethnography is written of in the context of this paper, it is most substantially about relational encounters and knowledge sharing. It is both a methodology



Figure 2. Senior Aboriginal Owners for the sites discussed from Vanderlin Island (l-r) Graham Friday Mudaji, Warren Timothy Walala, Joanne Miller a-Yulama, Mavis Timothy a-Muluwamara and Ruth Friday a-Marrngawi (photograph by AK).

and a method. Ethnography is an iteration of social life from the perspective of the researcher, carried out through collaborative participation in experiential life. For Jackson (2009: 241, citing Bourdieu 1996: 22), 'the ethnographic method demands not merely an imaginative participation in the life of the other, but a practical and social involvement in the various activities, both ritual and mundane, that contextualize and condition the other's worldview'. He further notes that, '[t]his imposes great demands not only on an ethnographer's linguistic and conceptual abilities, but on his or her emotional and bodily resources' (Jackson 2009: 241).

The ethnographic method thus requires reflection on how we structure our consciousness as researchers, and how we organise and describe our perceptions as they occur in relation to others. Ethnography embraces the researcher as the primary instrument for data gathering and the interface for learning and gathering is an undeniably relational encounter with other people and other places. The prevailing question then, as addressed throughout this paper, and by others in Australia and international settings (see below), is what does this actually mean in studies of rock art? How can we lead our research through ethnographic understandings, rather than seek ethnographic insight to support our own understandings?

In Australia, studies drawing on ethnographic data in rock art studies have a long history — over 100 years — and have shown how rock art has a complex multidimensional and referential nature, and is made meaningful across time and space (see Brady et al.

2018b for a recent review of rock art and ethnography). Information about rock art comes from many sources (e.g. anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists) although not all had rock art as their main focus of study. In addition, the nature of relationships between researchers and Indigenous communities are variable, with some based on several decades of participant observation and close partnerships covering a variety of topics (e.g. language, worldviews, kinship and social organisation), while others are of shorter duration and may target specific aspects such as the nature of graphic systems or subsistence techniques. However, where ethnography about rock art is collected, it is typically related to interpretation, meaning, significance and symbolism. This data has also been used to address multiple themes including (but not limited to) identifying specific motifs as representing Dreamings or spiritual entities (e.g. Arndt 1962; Blundell and Woolagoodja 2005; Lewis and Rose 1988; Spencer and Gillen 1899; Trezise 1971); recollecting events such as hunting, sorcery (e.g. Brady and Bradley 2016; Haskovec and Sullivan 1989; Mulvaney 1996; Turner 1973), and the symbolic or referential qualities of images (e.g. the colour(s) used in paintings and their relationships to Dreamings) (e.g. Taçon 2008; Smith 1999). Our intention here, like others such as Merlan (1989), Rose (1992), and Blundell and Woolagoodja (2005) is to use our ethnographic footing to expand on this material and take the ethnographic conversation further, that is, to learn about the web of relationships that motifs and sites exist within, and the complex relational

frameworks used by Indigenous people to make sense of the images.

Places of rock art in Yanyuwa Country can be spoken of in the past tense and may be read to reveal a complex archaeological story (e.g. Brady and Bradley 2014a; Sim and Wallis 2008). However, they also have a deeply-held particular presence that speaks to understandings of ongoing relationships to kin — both human and non-human, the land and sea. How do these multiplicities come together to make sense, or to coexist in ways that do not swamp the existing Indigenous ontology of rock art and rock art places? This is framed as a *tension of translatability*, and here we explore issues of translation, not just of language but also of the political content of knowledge. As Vasquez (2011: 29) reflects, '[t]ranslation brings to view epistemic borders where a politics of visibility is at play between erasure and visibility, disdain and recognition'. Often there appears to be an epistemic dislocation in what might be said in the field (ethnographically) and what then is translated into various academic fora such as publications and lectures. The primary practical problem of ethnographic writing lies in transferring an embarrassingly private thing such as personal sensory perceptions into the public sphere of scientific communication (Hirschauer 2006: 422; Kearney and Bradley 2020). Ethnographic insights are leaned into, often for the archaeological purpose of solving 'the problems of the voiceless, the silent, the unspeakable, the pre-linguistic, and the indescribable. Ethnography puts something into words, which did not exist in language before' (Hirschauer 2006: 413). However, ethnography is not merely a matter of presenting a body of facts; it has much more to do with the author's ethos, and with the power of representations. In turn all texts derived of ethnographic learnings are rhetoric, a form of mutual construction (by the Indigenous participants and researchers) (Geertz 1973).

By exploring and detailing the knowledge surrounding a series of places and images from Yanyuwa Country, we break open the illusion of Descartes' (1637 [2001]) emphasis on a 'thinking head', that is, the tendency to theorise life in semi-abstraction, without challenging ourselves to look at the relational webs which hold any aspect of social and cultural life in suspension. This means rendering place as a deeply relational and complex presence in social and cultural terms, connected to and interwoven through a kin-centric order (see also David and Lourandos 1999). In order to do so, we focus on the sphere of interaction involving Dreamings, Spirit Beings, rock art and sites spread across the Yanyuwa landscape and seascape and into the Country of neighbouring language groups, delving into the complex relational encounters that exist between these entities.

Yanyuwa Country

Yanyuwa Country extends north from the township of Borroloola in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria and

spreads over the vast savannah land and includes the lower reaches of the McArthur, Wearyan and Robinson Rivers and the Sir Edward Pellew Islands. It is the islands in particular that are the focus of this paper. On modern topographic maps, there are five key named islands and a scattering of smaller named islets in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria all labelled with Western names (e.g. South West Island, Vanderlin Island). Other named places on these maps typically include the major river and creek systems such as the McArthur and Wearyan rivers, and large freshwater sources such as Lake Eames (Walala). In contrast, the Yanyuwa have over 1500 placenames for their Country that are spread over the islands, the sea, reefs, the savannah lands of the mainland, the rivers, creeks, lagoons, freshwater springs, sometimes the inners waters of a lagoon, and rockshelters. Place-naming over Indigenous lands has been well explored by anthropologists and linguistics (e.g. Koch and Hercus 2009; see also Kearney and Bradley 2009) and plays a crucial role in understanding our case study.

Country and the relational

The meanings that Indigenous people apply to lands and waters across Australia are multivocal and dependent on context to make sense of their meaning at any one time. The Aboriginal English term 'Country' is often used to describe places important to Indigenous Australians and distinguishes place as emotionally bound, responsive and capable of 'giving and receiving life' (Rose 1992, 1996). Working with Hand's (1989) reading of Levinas, Rose (1996) explores the concept of *espace vital*, the vital place, and leads us to an understanding of landscape as a 'nourishing terrain'. Rose (1996: 7) expands, remarking that 'country is a living entity, with a yesterday, today and a tomorrow with a consciousness, and a will toward life'. Nothing in or of Country is inert.

In our ethnographic fieldwork and travels with the Yanyuwa we have been drawn to similar conclusions as Rose (e.g. Bradley 1997, 2001; Bradley and Yanyuwa Families 2010; Bradley and Kearney 2018; Brady and Bradley 2016; Kearney 2017; Kearney 2018; Kearney et al. 2019). When Yanyuwa use the term Country they often speak with intimacy, love, and at times even fear, but always of a deep and abiding concern for their Country². People speak about Country in the same way that they talk about human and non-human relatives, people cry for their Country, they sing passionately and with fervour about their Country. People also listen to Country and in return, Country is said to listen and respond to people, it can hear, think and feel about its human relatives, it can be hard or easy, forgiving or unforgiving, just as people can with each other.

2 For examples of specific Yanyuwa responses to all facets of Country including rock art, stone tools, visiting certain rockshelters see e.g. Yanyuwa Families et al. 2003; Bradley 2008; Bradley and Yanyuwa Families 2010; Brady and Bradley 2016; Kearney 2018: 6).

Close relatives will often address each other as Country, and when people see animal or plant species that form part of their non-human kin they will often call out, 'Hello Countryman!'. Country also communicates loss and pain, especially over the course of colonial history. Rose (2004) calls these 'wounded places' of a contemporary landscape, that in turn, impacts people's identity. This process is what Kearney (2014) describes as 'cultural wounding', that is, the violation of persons and their cultural lives through insult and injury, motivated by the desire to destroy or significantly harm this culture and its bearers (Cook et al. 2003: 18; Kearney 2014).

While Indigenous understandings of Country as described above are powerful in intent and emotion, it is in many ways only part of the story (see also Porr 2018). Far less attention has been given to the language that is used to describe the physicality of Country, particularly in regards to what might be called the geography of the places that people call home. Bella Charlie, a Yanyuwa elder commented to Bradley in 1989, when viewing the geographic area of her Country called *narnu-ruluruluwanka*:

Oh I look north and see this Country, this is the Country of my old people, of my family, I would walk this Country when I was young, and we would camp on the little islands, you can see them there to the north; my mother would burn them and get goannas and blue tongue lizards, my father would find the fresh water wells that are there too. All through the day we would play on the salt pans, and sand flats and slide across the clay pans; we were such silly children. Oh dear I have tears in my eyes, this is beautiful Country. Further north is *burrumurriya awara* (samphire heath) and that is where the saltwort grows on the sand, that is Country with a beautiful feel. It is close to the sea and we would get shellfish such as *bakarla* (*Terebralia palustris*), *a-yaka* (*Telescopium telescopium*) and *a-warnduwarndu* (*Neverita* sp.) and we would get *aajundu* (wild honey) from the mangroves, it is saltwater Country and it gives to us its smell, it is beautiful (Bradley 1997: 114).

What Bella demonstrated in this statement is that Country is all about responding to what might elsewhere be referred to as geography, and yet at the same time it is an emotive response to the understanding of Country, kin, social memories and the ancestral Law that it contains.

Indigenous languages such as Yanyuwa are repositories of knowledge about Country that include specialised vocabularies that detail the land and sea. Just as old men and women who know the stories and songs for their Country, there have been those for whom the very physicality of their Country has been a source of inspiration, pride and deep knowing. To enter into Yanyuwa Country fully is to leave English behind and become attuned to a language that is derived of the land and sea itself. This process is difficult because there is often a misconception (largely held by English-only speakers), that there is always a 'literal translation' of words in Indigenous languages such as Yanyuwa to

English. This understanding assumes that different cultural perspectives are bridgeable by related concepts in English. In the context of this paper, Bradley's 40 years of working in Yanyuwa Country and fluency in Yanyuwa has helped him come to understand the conceptual underpinnings of many Yanyuwa words and phrases (see Bradley and Yanyuwa Families 2010; Yanyuwa Families et al. 2003).

The example *narnu-ruluruluwanka* described above is a case in point. This term is often glossed in English by Yanyuwa speakers as 'you know like saltpan Country, down on the coast' (Don Miller, pers. comm. to Bradley 1986). The term is actually a specific descriptor for an element of the savannah lands that occupy a very large proportion of Yanyuwa Country. *Narnu-ruluruluwanka* might be best translated as 'a geographic land unit that consists of sand flats, salt pans, clay pans and further to the north samphire heath Country' (Yanyuwa Families and Bradley 2017: 382). This terrain also has numerous small, raised islets with sparse vegetation such as small melaleuca (*Myrtaceae* sp.) trees that provide good shade for resting and camping when moving through this Country. It is Country that is flooded on the 'king tides' or during wet-season cyclonic surges. In a Yanyuwa sense it is 'sea Country proper' (see Bradley and Yanyuwa Families 2010). This sea territory extends for some 13 kilometres from the sea, inland to a low rise that meets with the savannah grasslands.

The presence of the 'old people' (as deceased kin, and ancestral beings), *li-wankala*, is felt strongly on the islands and their spirits are still said to dwell in the Country. The spirits of the old people as Mussolini Harvey recalled: 'are there, listening, watching, hunting, singing just like we are' (Bradley 1997: 179). The islands and coastal regions are strong in the presence of the old people, and the islands are often described as *wunungu awara*, 'strong Country' as it is a place, unlike other mainland locations, that has not been weakened by the continual imposition of Western ways of thinking, management and use. Yanyuwa Country is also strong in the presence of other Spirit Beings — *ngabaya* — that have been present since the time of the Dreaming ancestors and are in fact Dreaming ancestors but act and behave in ways that are human-like. It is these *ngabaya* that are central to our discussion, namely how images of *ngabaya* appear across Yanyuwa Country.

Rockshelters and rock art in Yanyuwa Country

The sea is an important and central part of Yanyuwa identity which is often described by Yanyuwa families as *li-Anthawirriyarra*, the people whose spiritual origins and culture comes from the sea. It is on the islands that one finds many rockshelters that contain extensive shell midden deposits, human bone bundle burials, other material culture objects, and rock art. Yanyuwa are very careful about how they approach rockshelters that might contain rock art left by the old people. The rockshelters that exist on the islands are all called by the general term *na-ajinja* (cave/rockshelter), a par-



Figure 3. Kammandarringabaya site and its rock art (clockwise from upper left: shell midden spilling downslope from the shelter; hand stencils made by the Namurlanjanyku; hand prints made by the Namurlanjanyku; painting of a Namurlanjanyku (photographs by LMB and AK).

ticularly large rockshelter will be known by the term *na-mirlibarnku*, and a smaller rockshelter referred to as *narnu-jaburr*. Those rockshelters that were once known for, and show evidence of, their long-term occupation by the old people are called *na-wuthuwarr*. There are times too when all of these names can be used to describe various aspects of one rockshelter.

Perhaps the best example of this kind of rockshelter is on the central west coast of Vanderlin Island on the eastern end of Victoria Bay. This place is central to an account of Yanyuwa life and Law, which implicates neighbouring language groups and brings to life an entire region, a sequence of important places, rock art, human relationships, and non-human relationships. At a place called *Kamandarringabaya*, there is a large rockshelter, the walls and roof of which are covered in rock art (mostly hand prints, hand stencils and some paintings), and a large and dense shell midden strewn across the shelter floor (Fig. 3). Old Yanyuwa men and women alive in the early 1980s remembered using this rockshelter during intense wet season periods of their childhoods (Yanyuwa Families et al. 2003). *Kamandarringabaya* is also important as a Dreaming place for a particular kind of Spirit Being called *Namurlanjanyngku*. The *Namurlanjanyngku* are human-like, though tall and very skinny and deep red in colour. They live within the rocks of this shelter and easily slip into the rocky crags and crevices that are in the area. They do no harm to people, and they belong to Country. The images present in this rockshelter are seen by Yanyuwa not as the work of human beings, but rather they were

placed there by the *Namurlanjanyngku*. In a small crevice near the rear of the rockshelter is a white *Namurlanjanyngku*. As Johnson Timothy, a senior owner for Vanderlin Island, once put it to Bradley (ethnographic fieldnotes, 1985), '[w]hite people look and they see a cave, that's all, they look and might see that painting, that hand, then they go away. They think they know this Country, but you know that caves not just a cave, he's something else, lot of meaning for this Country.'

The rockshelter at *Kamandarringabaya* exists within a complex relationship of other rock art sites over the Pellew Islands and with other named sites beyond the Pellew Islands into other parts of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria (Fig. 4). In the Dreaming, the *Namurlanjanyku* left *Kamandarringabaya* and travelled northeast to *Liwingkinya*, a rocky range of hills that fringe the southern edge of a large freshwater lagoon on Vanderlin Island called *Walala* (Lake Eames) (see Yanyuwa Families, Bradley, and Cameron 2003; see also Sim and Wallis 2008). There is also rock art at *Liwingkinya* that the *Namurlanjanyngku* painted, which, again, is not seen as the work of human agents (Fig. 5). They stood on this rocky range and looked north to *Muluwa* (Cape Vanderlin) and decided to travel there. On arrival at *Muluwa* the *Namurlanjanyngku* looked far to the northwest where they saw other Spirit Men and began to call out to them. They called out because they were aware that a ceremony was soon to happen, a *Kunadwira* ceremony (see Kearney and Bradley 2006) — a particular ceremony of great authority that is associated with the Dugong Hunters and the White-bellied Sea

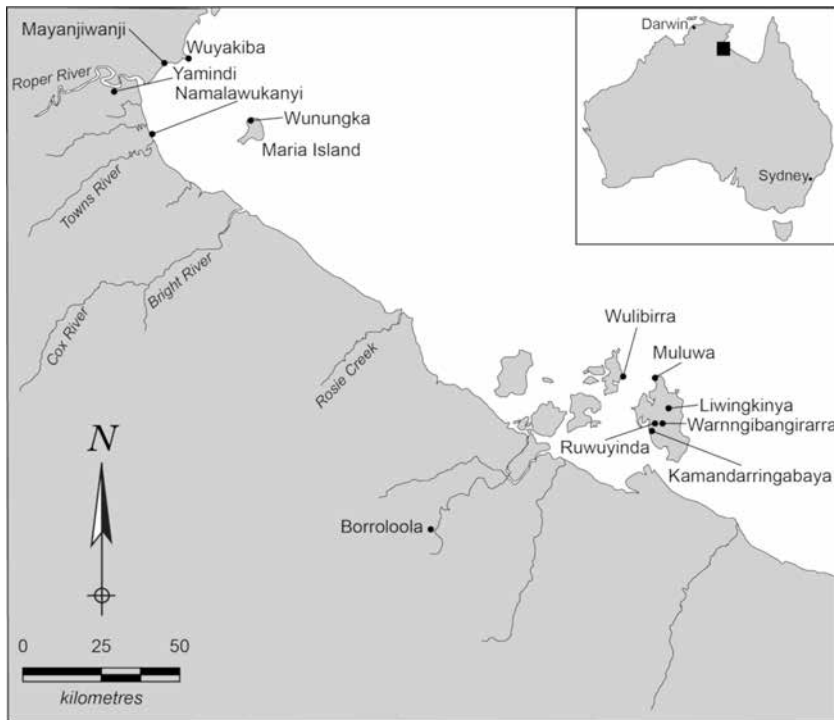


Figure 4. Map of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria region showing locations associated with the travels and actions of Namurlanjanyngku, White-bellied Sea Eagle, and other named and unnamed Spirit Beings.

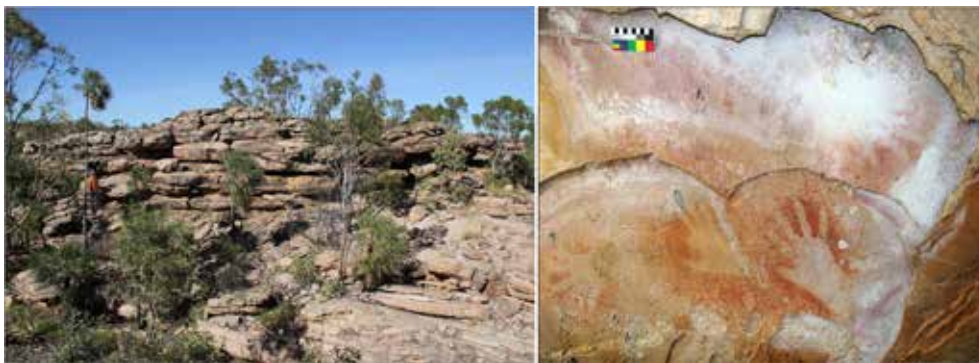


Figure 5. The Liwingkinya landscape where the Namurlanjanyngku travelled to after leaving Kamandarringabaya; they also left images of their hands in many of the rockshelters here (photographs by LMB).



Figure 6. The three Spirit Beings — Jawajbarrangka, Burrunjurdangka and Wurrunthurnambaja — at Wulibirra (North Island) that were brought into existence by the White-bellied Sea Eagle. After performing in the Kundawira ceremony, the three Spirit Beings placed themselves on the rock wall at Wulibirra (left: original photograph; right: enhanced image; photographs by LMB).

Eagle Dreamings. These Dreamings are also associated with *Muluwa* and other parts of the Pellew Islands. The *Namurlanjanyngku* then called out to the Spirit Men in the Country of the Marra and Wandarrang people to the west. There was a Spirit Man at *Namalawukanyi* just north of the Towns River mouth in the Limmen Bight, another Spirit Man at *Wunungka* on the northwest coast of Maria Island, another on the Roper River at a place called *Yamindi* and yet another Spirit Man at *Mayanjiwanji* just to the south of *Wuyakiba* which is north of the Roper River mouth (see Fig. 4). The Spirit Men at *Muluwa* were calling out to all of them. This calling out creates relationships with other language groups and clans and extends the social and ceremonial reach of the *Kundawira* ceremony through a shared *ngalki* or essence with Marra and Wandarrang people who also exist as kin to the Yanyuwa owners of the ceremony (see Brady et al. 2018a). In addition, the White-bellied Sea Eagle had

also been at *Muluwa*, but she had flown 11 km to the west and landed on North Island at a place called *Wulibirra*. She performed her ceremony at *Wulibirra* and brought three other Spirit Beings into existence. The three Spirit Beings carry personal names, *Jawajbarrangka*, *Burrunjurdangka* and *Wurrunthurnambaja*. The three Spirit Beings then called out to the *Namurlanjanyngku* at *Muluwa* during the performance of the *Kundawira* ceremony. On the completion of the ceremony the three Spirit Beings placed themselves into the rock of a large rockshelter where they can still be seen today (Fig. 6).

For Yanyuwa, much like many other Indigenous communities around the world, they do not identify images found on rock walls to

be 'rock art'. In fact, a Yanyuwa reading of the images of these three Spirit Beings tells us that these images are but one part of a 'teeming place world' (see Casey 1996: 17). The movement of Spirit Beings in the narrative continues. The original *Namurlanjanyngku* then left *Muluwa* and returned south but they did not return to



Figure 7. *Namurlanjanyngku* at Warrngibangirarra on Vanderlin Island (left: site view; right: close-up of the *Namurlanjanyngku*) (photographs by JB 1982).

Kamandarringabaya. Instead they came to a place some three kilometres to the northeast called *Ruwuyinda*. Here, they were tired and weary of travelling, so they placed themselves on the rock wall of a shelter called *Warrngibangirarra* (Fig. 7). Again, as with the other Spirit Beings described above, they are not paintings. They are the actual physical presence of the *Namurlanjanyngku*. There are Yanyuwa men and women who call the images on the rockshelter walls at *Wulibirra*, *Kamandarringabaya* and *Warrngibangirarra* kin; they are images of relatedness (e.g. Brady and Bradley 2014a, 2014b; Brady et al. 2016; Brady et al. 2018a). This is not 'kin as metaphor' but actuality. What also perhaps is of interest is *Muluwa* — it has no rock art at all, possesses no rockshelter and is dominated by a huge sand dune, that is at the crux of the relational between the rock art sites discussed above.

How we might come to appreciate these rich ethnographic accounts is worth reflecting on. As outsiders, we often come to learn such knowledge, and often knowledge is shared, before arrival or approach towards a place like *Kamandarringabaya*. Often, one is prepared for a place, well in advance of arrival, because there is risk in approaching a place unknowingly and in the absence of some understanding of its Law. For example, as three senior men, Johnson Timothy, Whylo McKinnon and Steve Johnston approached the site at *Wulibirra*, the most senior of them shouted out in Yanyuwa, long before we even got to the site;

Hey! I am here a senior owner for this place, I am kin through paternal descent to this Country, as this old man standing to the west of me. This other man who follows behind is related to this Country through his maternal kin. I have seen your bodies before in this place, my father showed me. I was given eyes to see you. I know your names *Jawajbarrangka*, *Burrunjurdangka* and *Wurrunthurnambaja*. Do not stand in ignorance of me! (Johnson Timothy, in Bradley ethnographic fieldnotes, 1985).

Without the ability to hear this oration in Yanyuwa, much of the knowledge concerning such place would not be known or would be shared in potentially 'simple' terms, due to untranslatability of meaning into English for older Yanyuwa. Similarly, when old men were describing the images of the *Namurlanjanyngku* at *Warrngibangirarra*, it was explained as follows:

This is not a painting, this is their bodies, bodies for the *Namurlanjanyngku*, they placed themselves into the rock. They can see, they can hear you. They can come out from the rock and walk around, they can go back to the south west to their Country of *Kamandarringabaya* and look around. That's their Law, they have Law, they have ceremonial songs, they are not paintings (Steve Johnston with Whylo McKinnon, Bradley field diary 1985).

The spiritual beings whose images are in the rockshelters are in fact related through joint ceremonial performance at *Muluwa*. It is *Muluwa* that allows these sites to still speak to each other because of the convergence of events that took place in the Dreaming. However, the Dreaming is present, it is of the now, because the images of the *Namurlanjanyngku* still look down from the rock walls where they exist. The images contain their own life force, though there are certain events that can weaken this force. On seeing the images of the three Spirit Beings at *Wulibirra* the men were somewhat saddened to see that they were not as clear, their images were blurred and broken from where pieces of the rock face had peeled away. This, they said, was due to the fact that the three Spirit Beings were in a co-dependent relationship with the *Kundawira* ceremony and that ceremony had not been performed for many years. In addition, the senior men who owned and performed the ceremony had all died. The Spirit Beings were fading away because they were 'too sorry' mourning for that which was absent, the ceremony and the men who once performed it (see also Brady et al. 2016).

As with so many things in Yanyuwa Country, rock art that is seen to be the actual images of the Spirit Beings is still responding to what they feel and observe happening on Yanyuwa Country. Older Yanyuwa men and women observe these 'paintings' with interest because they are able to provide evidence as to how the Country is responding to both the movement of living kin over the Country, but also to the movement of other people such as tourists, miners and fishermen who are ignorant to the deeper ways of knowing Yanyuwa Country. These people do not speak Yanyuwa, and thus it is even by the act of speech that things can become disturbed. Mavis Timothy, a senior owner for the sites where the *Namurlanjanyngku* reside, commented

that the hearing of English caused fear and that 'a whiteness has enveloped the Country and the spiritual entities of the land have retreated to the caves because they are only hearing English and they are dreadfully afraid' (Bradley 2017: 70).

Discussion

The following reflective discussion is divided into three parts. The first is a consideration on rock art's ontology, challenging the proposition of 'inertness' in and of rock art, irrespective of the ethnographic rendering of meaning. Second, we explore and offer something of a response to the question of how ethnography can facilitate richer understandings of rock art. Lastly, we reflect, in the wake of the Yanyuwa ontology and epistemology of rock art as outlined in this paper, on the question, how can we lead our research through ethnographic understandings, rather than seek ethnographic insight to support already constituted disciplinary understandings?

The Myth of the Inert

We accept the view that no rock art is inert. Certainly, in Yanyuwa Country, this is the case. Within the Dreaming ontology of the Yanyuwa, very little rock art is seen to be the work of human beings; furthermore, this category of what the West calls rock art can be divided into imagery that carries an agentic will, because simply put, it is not rock art (e.g. Creese 2011; Jones 2017; Porr and Bell 2012; Porr 2018; Robinson 2013). These are the actual images and presences of certain spiritual entities. From the point of view of the people to whom these paintings hold significance the images of the *ngabaya* and the stories that surround them do not represent another order of reality, but rather are of an order perfectly fitting with what Yanyuwa people believe and know their own Law to be.

Yanyuwa people working with anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists are quite capable of perceiving that there can be a range of interpretations given to these images. However, internally given, the logic of their own knowledge and the transference of such knowledge is also dependent on a gradual process of instruction. Thus, in the first instance, to outsiders the images might be easily classed as paintings, but as people become more attuned to the presence of knowledge throughout Yanyuwa Country then deeper understandings can be achieved. This may, in turn, reach a point where an outsider can appreciate that a 'painting' is actually not a painting. For the Yanyuwa men and women who understand and have experienced the Country associated with the images, their knowledge is of a dialectical order whereby meaning is by internal logic of discussion, ideas and opinions.

How ethnography can facilitate fuller understandings of rock art

As part of everyday life, the profoundly relational contexts in which meanings in and of the world

are made, sustained, refashioned and changed is a dynamic space. Once entered into, it enriches any understandings of the Yanyuwa world, and ultimately challenges the researcher to understand rock art in ways that require recognition of existing ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies at work.

As noted above, the research presented here builds on other studies targeting the role of ethnography in rock art research in Australian and international settings. In doing so it continues to offer insights and possibilities to enrich and enhance understandings of the rock art record, particularly in the archaeological space. For example, a core analytical component of global archaeological approaches to rock art assemblages is the identification of distinctive 'style zones', geographical areas that share specific design conventions (e.g. figurative motifs, x-ray designs) that are used as a means to understand how people made use of rock art to define themselves and relationships to others (e.g. Brady 2010; David and Chant 1995; McDonald and Veth 2013; Ross 2013). Yet the narrative we have described here shows how networks of social relationships are not defined by distinctive style-based design conventions but rather the actions and movements of the *Namurlanjanjanyngku*, White-bellied Sea Eagle, and other named and unnamed Spirit Beings (see also e.g. David 1992; Taçon 1993). There is nothing in the rock art described above to suggest or indicate that on face-value alone, the imagery represents a network of interregional interaction. Instead, ethnography is used to identify another type of network in operation, one underpinned by the actions and movements of Dreamings and spiritual beings, and features links between islands in Yanyuwa Country and further afield into Marra and Wandarrang Country. Thus, ethnography can play a vital role in reconsidering how archaeologists approach and engage with 'style' and networks of interaction as seen through the rock art record.

Leading through ethnographic understandings

Leading through ethnographic understandings compiled over 40 years of research in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria region has called upon us to write from an ontological premise that there are other ways to know and understand Yanyuwa rock art that are devoid of any sense of Western philosophical reasoning. Yanyuwa have shared with us richer meanings in and of the rock art that lives among their rockshelters than external readings could begin to configure. The Yanyuwa case calls upon us to fathom beyond what we might know and to see past the boundaries of our current frames of mind. Ethnographic renderings of the region's rock art draw into the account of life a multi-dimensional world of ancestral beings, places, events, descendants and responsibilities which ultimately allows us to argue the central existence of Indigenous ontologies.

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Dr John Bradley
Monash Indigenous Studies Centre
20 Chancellors Walk
Monash University
Clayton, Victoria, Australia 3800
John.Bradley@monash.edu

Dr Amanda Kearney and Dr Liam M Brady
College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
Flinders University
Bedford Park, South Australia, Australia 5042
Amanda.Kearney@flinders.edu.au
Liam.Brady@flinders.edu.au

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