

Kimberley Rock Art : ‘Living Heritage’ in a Contested Landscape

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The rock art of the Kimberley region in the far north of Western Australia draws continuous attention from tourists, scholars and public media. Especially in its two most prominent traditions of *Wandjina* and *Gwion Gwion* paintings, rock art unites various issues instigating the dynamics of a network of actors. In this paper, I focus on the construction and negotiation of rock paintings as ‘heritage’ and ‘art’ in order to present the region as a contested landscape due to the interests of 1) traditional owners (to keep culture strong), 2) researchers (ranging from archaeologists and anthropologists to geochronologists), and 3) resource industries (in particular mining and tourism).

Caves, rock escarpments and overhangs painted with ochre are sites of ‘caring for country’ and related conservation practices. These sites, where Indigenous environmental knowledge materialises (copiously combining tangible and intangible aspects of caring for country), attract attention from a wide audience. In this presentation, I argue that the recognition of rock art as ‘living cultural heritage’ has the potential to counter-narrate the deferral of indigenous heritage to distant pasts, because it is the visible evidence of Aboriginal presence and belonging to country.

Bio

Juliane Breiffeld is a PhD candidate in the Junior Research Group “The Transcultural Heritage of Northwest Australia: Dynamics and Resistances” at Heidelberg University. Her project focuses on the collaborative and contested negotiation of knowledges about Indigenous rock art in the Kimberley region (Australia). She has conducted fieldwork in Colombia, the US-American south, and Australia. Her research projects reflect her general interests in art & anthropology, processes of subjectification, and (symbolic) transgressions under consideration of the construction and negotiation of knowledges and perceptions.

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