

Wandjina, graffiti and heritage

The power and politics of enduring imagery

Ursula Frederick and Sue O'Connor

Introduction

Figure 10.1 A Wandjina-style figure amid graffiti in Perth.



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2007.

This article explores the re-purposing of rock art imagery in contemporary graffiti. We examine a particular case study from Perth, Western Australia, whereby graffiti resembling Wandjina rock art figures appeared throughout the metropolis (Figure 10.1). The power of this graffiti drew considerable attention from the public and the media. It also, however, drew attention to the complexities of representing cultural heritage and the custodial responsibilities faced by the Indigenous people of the Kimberley region (Figure 10.2). The appearance of Wandjina in Perth, outside their place in the remote north-west of Australia, was enjoyed by many as an appreciation of the power and beauty of the Wandjina. For others, including those with the rights and obligations of looking after Wandjina, it was also an unsettling occurrence. In light of past

debates about what is vandalism and what is culture, the Wandjina of Perth present interesting insights into the power of images and living heritage.

Throughout the world, thousands of rock shelters, boulders, mountains, caves and riverbeds have been inscribed by the human hand. These marks take the form of paintings, petroglyphs, murals, prints and stencils, incisions and grooves. Many were made several millennia ago and only partial traces remain. Some are figurative depictions of animals, people and material goods, while others are abstract shapes and designs such as concentric circles, zigzags or herringbone. These sites and their vast iconography, how they were arranged and where they occur, tell us something of how the people of the past engaged with the surfaces of the Earth. Although their meanings remain largely obscure, the very presence of these marks demonstrates an enduring human impulse to mark the world.

Ethnographic records reveal much more detail about the motivations for such marking practices. Some accounts reveal their didactic purpose, their role in communication, as narrative and as entertainment or for increase rituals. The oral testimony of Indigenous peoples also indicates that rock art could be multivalent components of a broader dynamic culture. As such, these marks on rock walls are regarded as key integers in the maintenance of social, cultural and cosmological connections. Certainly, many Indigenous accounts from Australia suggest that the rock art we view today is the ancestral law, stories of life and cultural beliefs made tangible.

In our present-day lives, graffiti is one extension of our human mark-making legacy.¹ Graffiti reveals how people occupy space and how they choose to express their experiences. It shows how individuals elect to move through, interact with and communicate via the fabric of their environment. Archaeologists, rock art specialists and amateur enthusiasts have dedicated considerable time and effort to documenting, analysing and interpreting the traces of the past. With few exceptions,² however, the study of contemporary mark making is outside the domain of most archaeologists. As other scholars have noted,³ graffiti research to date has largely been the work of sociologists, criminologists, psychologists and geographers.

There are, we believe, sufficient resonances between the rock art of the past and the graffiti of today to warrant exploration of their intersections. An archaeological eye towards the human made, a range of methods and an understanding of deep temporal trajectories offer archaeologists a unique perspective on graffiti studies. Similarly, the results of graffiti researchers provide locally situated accounts and evidence for archaeologists to consider in theorising about the past.

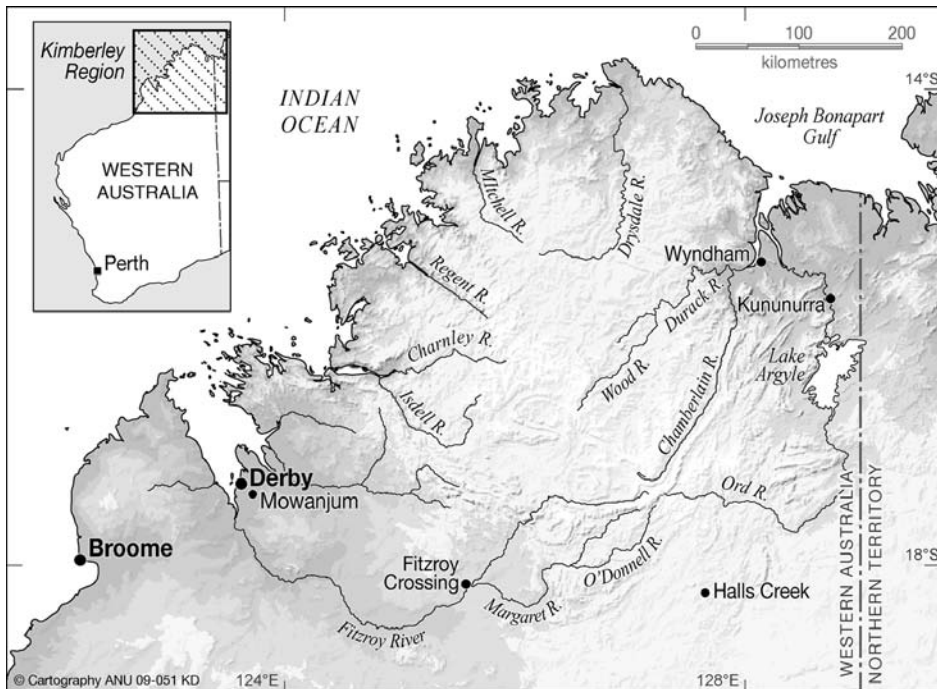
As archaeologists with a special interest in visual cultures, we are particularly intrigued by the way graffiti artists employ cultural heritage in their activities. In this article, we focus on the unique Wandjina figures of Western Australia.

In doing so, we explore the re-purposing of the past by graffiti artists in the context of a living tradition of Indigenous cultural practice. Set against an Indigenous history of repainting Wandjina in rock art and other media, the emergence of Wandjina graffiti offers unique insights into the power and politics of enduring images.

Background

Before the mid-1990s, graffiti, as it is currently practised, was relatively uncommon in Perth, Western Australia. In recent years, however, graffiti art⁴ has become an increasingly popular activity, as it has in so many other places throughout the world. Along with the racist slogans and vernacular scribble that have always existed, the city now exhibits the sophisticated wild-style tags, elaborate wall pieces, paste-ups and stencils that characterise the creative diversity of twenty-first century graffiti as urban art. This increased diversity, coupled with the undeniable artistic ability, imagination and wit evident in much contemporary graffiti, has played a strong role in generating public interest and in urging many people to overlook the illegality of the action to ask ‘How can something so good be so wrong?’

Figure 10.2 Map of the Kimberley showing places mentioned in the text.



Courtesy Cartography ANU.

While the public acceptance of graffiti art has grown with it, there remains strong opinion about who has the right to mark our streets. This question of authority lies at the heart of debates about the production, policing and removal of graffiti. There have been progressive attempts within some sectors of Australian government to commission murals, establish legal graffiti sites and even promote and protect street art as cultural heritage.⁵ Still, most local and state governments within Australia continue to define graffiti as antisocial behaviour and legislate against its practice. The WA Government and Perth city councils have developed a particularly tough stance by Australian standards and maintain strict anti-graffiti policies and penalties.⁶ Despite the implementation of police task forces, the threat of legal prosecution and even jail time, graffiti art continues to flourish in Western Australia.

Even as the artistic merit of graffiti receives renewed validation from art quarters around the globe, the legitimacy of graffiti as an art practice remains tightly bound to its standing as a criminal act. The challenge of what is right and what is wrong is a consistent theme in contemporary graffiti art practice. Some graffiti artists draw inspiration from this prohibitive status and the risks they take, often reiterating the roles of rebels, outlaws and revolutionaries in the work they produce. UK graffiti artist Banksy is renowned internationally for his play on the legal rights (or lack thereof) of graffiti producers. In Australia, such commentary is manifest in similar ways (Figure 10.3), but occasionally with the inclusion of local legends, such as the Victorian bushranger Ned Kelly. Perhaps in partial protest against their own lack of rights to public display, graffiti artists also have long been critical of other legal communication strategies such as corporate branding, mass media and advertising. Clearly, graffiti artists state their case in this debate through their continuing defiance of the law and in their choice of content and form.

What are missing in much of the public discussion and state-centred concerns about legal authority are vital issues of cultural legitimacy, ownership and property. As Rob Cover⁷ points out, the majority argument against graffiti really concerns a contest about 'ownership', which for Cover includes the fabric of the public sphere in which graffiti commonly operates, but it also incorporates the right to speak and the ownership of fixed signification.⁸ Indeed, much of the power within contemporary graffiti resides in the slippages in signification that occur through the remixing of popular or iconic imagery. Graffiti artists are well aware of this power and regularly utilise remixing as a form of play and as a tactic for voicing their opinions.

Often the graffiti that plays with words and existing imagery to create new meanings is directed at corporations and governments as a form of culture jamming. It has, however, also become something of a convention and means of conversation within the graffiti community. The prevalence of image remixing

as a device of contemporary graffiti, while related to other arts of sampling, signals a significant development in its practice. Concerted graffiti artists now achieve notoriety through stylistic innovation and by outwitting one another with clever image play rather than merely by tagging. While the appropriation of images is an acceptable method in making graffiti, originality in the selection and application of those images is important. In short, few graffiti artists want to see another Che Guevara stencil unless it is treated in a particularly unique way. This is not because the image is derived from another person's photograph (Alberto Korda's) but because the image itself is overexposed to the point of cliché. Although it is ostensibly anonymous, a graffiti design or a tag, in its particularity, can act like an artist's brand,⁹ linking their mark to their identity—albeit codified. Graffiti as a kind of autographical writing¹⁰ offers some explanation for why graffiti artists seek to stamp their individuality and why ripping off another's image might be perceived as weak. In these respects, graffiti art offers insights into more nuanced notions of 'copying', authenticity, originality and creative imagination. This leads us to our interest in graffiti as an act of remixing the past for the present. If the challenge is to find something that is recognisable without being passé, where do graffiti artists find the images they appropriate?

Figure 10.3 A large stencil piece in Melbourne, Australia.



Photograph courtesy of Katie Hayne and Ursula Frederick, 2007.

Figure 10.4 Representations of Ned Kelly in contemporary Melbourne graffiti.



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2007.

Re-purposing the past

Print media, television and advertising provide graffiti artists with plenty of material to hijack. The Internet has made these and other sources easily accessible. While the Web provides a portal to the saturated stuff of the twentieth century, it also offers contact with more obscure images held in digital archives and databases. A vast portion of the world's rich legacy of visual arts and cultural traditions is now online for us to 'visit'.

By cultural heritage, we mean archaeological and historical material, such as the architecture of ancient civilisations and frescoes of art history. Other examples might include rock art, statuary or a particular decorative style evident in material culture. Most of the cultural heritage we have observed in graffiti art comes from a pantheon of popular art and archaeology motifs. The iconic Tutankhamen has appeared, along with Easter Island Moai, Aztec ruins¹¹ and Michelangelo's *David*. Many stencil artists have drawn on the strong film and photo-media heritage of the twentieth century to re-picture historically significant figures and cult classics. In Victoria (Australia), this has acquired a local flavour, with the re-presentation of the nineteenth-century bushranger Ned Kelly (Figure 10.4). Other graffiti artists observe a link between themselves and the anonymous 'artists' who painted on walls thousands of years ago. Banksy's Peckham Rock¹² and Lascaux-inspired mural¹³ reveal how the cultural traditions of the past can be re-purposed for contemporary use.

Wandering Wandjina

In 2006, a remarkable graffiti phenomenon swept the streets of Perth. A unique figure known as a Wandjina appeared as graffiti—more than 1000 kilometres south of its Kimberley home. Within months, the Perth Wandjina had multiplied significantly, with more than 100 examples evident across the city's surfaces (Figure 10.1). Its distinctive form emerged in car parks and on freeway flyovers as well as on rubbish hoppers, apartment buildings, trees and laneway walls. The graffiti appeared in a variety of iterations: as stencils, freestyle paintings and ground sculpture, ranging formally from the solitary bust of conventional rock art representations to more imaginative renderings, such as the depiction of a Wandjina driving a pink car.

By early 2007, the Wandjina graffiti had developed something of a following among Perth locals. 'Wandjina watching', as it came to be known, involved 'spotting' new Wandjina, photographing it and then uploading the image with location details to the website flickr.¹⁴ By geo-tagging the images, a map of Wandjina graffiti sites was created for others to view and visit on the ground. The documentation of graffiti is a popular pastime conducted by artist/writers and other appreciative observers as well as police and graffiti removalists. The phenomena of making and watching Wandjina, however, led to a much larger

community response and media spectacle that yielded insight into important issues of authority, power and display.

What are Wandjina?

Wandjina are the supreme spirit ancestors of the Indigenous people of the Kimberley. They are found in painted form on the walls and ceilings of rock shelters in the clan estates of the Worora, Ngarinyin and Wunambal language groups,¹⁵ although visually similar figures can be found in Bunuba country in the central Kimberley and on Koolan Island in the Buccaneer Archipelago—traditionally part of the territory of Umiida people.¹⁶

Wandjina have names and some display individual characteristics, which identify them; however, all Wandjina share certain features that make them instantly recognisable. Their faces have eyes and nose but never a mouth. Their anthropomorphic forms are frontal and often imposing in scale, sometimes extending up to 5 metres across the walls or ceiling of shelters; however, very small examples also occur (Figure 10.5). Their heads are surrounded by a semicircular band of solid colour or radiating or dotted lines that give the impression that they are wearing a helmet or headdress.¹⁷ The radiating lines from the head are said to represent the lightning that foreshadows the wet season rains.¹⁸ Wandjina are often shown as a full body, or at least head, shoulders and torso, but some have only the head and shoulders represented. The body lacks anatomical detail and is filled with visually powerful decorative designs such as dotted and striped lines over solid pigment. An oval shape on the chest placed centrally beneath the shoulders is said to represent the 'Wanjin's heart, in others its breastbone, and in yet others, a pearl-shell pendant'¹⁹ (Figure 10.6). Most Wandjina are upright but some are depicted horizontally where they 'lay down' in the shelters. Some are painted in groups and others individually. Most Wandjina are drawn in outline onto a matt-white pigment background, which is created by blowing the pigment from the mouth. The outline is often in black or red and the decorative infill is applied over the white background in red, yellow, orange or black pigment. Most significantly, Wandjina are luminous and imposing, their dark eyes gazing out from their white face mesmerise, appearing to rise out from the rock surface.

Figure 10.5 Detail of small Wandjina faces painted at Saddlers Springs, Iminji, WA, November 1973.



Photograph courtesy of Kim Akerman.

Figure 10.6 Wandjina with black-cockatoo feathers painted in Otiliyalyangngarri Cave, Mount Barnett, WA, 13 April 1985.



Photograph courtesy of Kim Akerman.

The Wandjina was intrinsically linked to the mythological life, social organisation and seasonal movements of Indigenous Kimberley peoples. Kimberley people believe that the Wandjina undertook 'creative journeys which left the land and all living matter in its present form'.²⁰ Each Indigenous group or 'clan' had its own territory or 'estate' and, following the creative journey, Wandjina 'lay down' in a shelter within each clan estate. 'Each Wandjina has a name, a moiety and a set of totemic symbols from which each clan is directly descended'²¹ and for which the members of that clan are responsible. Frequently associated with the Wandjina are myriad other motifs portraying mythological beings and a wide variety of plants, animals and items of material culture. These motifs are often linked to events that occurred in the creative journey of the Wandjina with which they are associated.

Figure 10.7 Wattie Karrawarra, painting the *Wanjina Kalerungari*, Derby, WA, 7 April 1975.



Photograph courtesy of Kim Akerman.

Figure 10.8 Decorated bark bucket—*karaki*, height: 460mm. Artist: Lily Karedada, Wunambul. Lily Karedada produced this work for Waringarri Arts. She has decorated it with two Wandjina figures, one of which is shown here.



Photograph courtesy of Western Australian Museum, Anthropology Department A26508.

While Wandjina are the anthropomorphic representations of spirit ancestors, they are not seen as 'art' and it is believed they were not originally painted by people. They *are* the powerful creative beings who put themselves onto the rock after the creative process was completed.²²

Mowaljarlai encapsulates this in his description of them as

IMAGES with ENERGIES that keep us ALIVE—EVERY PERSON, EVERYTHING WE STAND ON, ARE MADE FROM, EAT AND LIVE ON.

Those IMAGES were put down for us by our Creator, Wandjina, so that we would know how to STAY ALIVE, make everything grow and CONTINUE what he gave to us in the first place. We should dance those images back into the ground in corroborees. That would make us learn the story, to put new life into those IMAGES.²³

This is not to say that the Wandjina images are not repainted or retouched as they age and lose their lustrous quality. Because the Wandjina put their own images on the cave walls before they returned to the spirit world, keeping the images fresh and strong is a responsibility of the living and repainting them is an integral part of the process of ensuring the regeneration of all life forms.²⁴ Senior men of the clan would retouch or restore the Wandjina in their clan estate at the end of the dry season. This would ensure the coming of the north-western monsoon and the rains that replenished the land.²⁵ Because of this, Wandjina representations are not static but show stylistic changes over time and space.

Ian Crawford, who produced the first major study of the Wandjina motifs in the Kimberley, relocated several Wandjina that had been recorded historically. He was able to document how their form changed with successive retouching episodes. For example, Crawford²⁶ reports that the Wandjina at Langgi, which was repainted between January and February 1929, is not just a

restoration of an earlier painting, but a completely new one covering earlier paintings. The old men are very secretive about restoration of paintings, claiming...that the originals are the work of the Wandjina, not of men. They do admit that these paintings are cleaned and restored occasionally, but it is clear...that they sometimes disregarded the old paintings altogether.

The new painting at Langgi differs slightly in style from such older paintings as are visible. This allows us to form some idea of the changes in style which have occurred.²⁷

Antiquity of the Wandjina

The antiquity of the Wandjina painting tradition is still uncertain. As the historical account above and studies of the successive layers on the painted rock surfaces indicate, some Wandjina have been repainted or retouched over many generations. Technical examinations carried out on cross-sections of rock crusts have found evidence for upwards of 40 distinct paint layers within a single painting.²⁸ If, however, Wandjina were retouched annually to ensure the coming of the wet season rains, it would take only a few generations to accumulate this number of paint layers. Interestingly, Watchman's²⁹ research on the cross-sections demonstrated that multiple painting episodes were evidenced in some cross-sections but not in others, and supported Clarke's³⁰ suggestion that the degree of repainting could have been motivated by the significance of the underlying image.³¹

A recent dating program on the pigment taken from 'classic' Wandjina indicates that the tradition might be no more than 1500 years old.³² Crawford³³ documented the regional variability in 'archaic' Wandjina painted beneath the more recent forms and argued for a trend towards increasing homogeneity over time. Further recording of the range of variability and dating of 'archaic' forms is needed to gain a better understanding of the origins of the Wandjina tradition.

Contemporary Wandjina art movements

Today, Wandjina are painted by Indigenous Kimberley artists on a variety of media, including bark, hardboard and canvas, and are produced for the national and international art market (Figures 10.7 and 10.8).³⁴ They are also carved out of pearl shell, on baobab nuts and painted onto utilitarian objects such as baskets.³⁵ Although art in this new media is produced largely for sale, O'Connor et al. have recently argued that it is still intimately connected to country and landscape and

represents a continuation or transference of traditional practice. Stories about the travels, battles and engagements of Wandjina and other Dreaming events are now retold and experienced in the communities with reference to the paintings, an activity that is central to maintaining and reinvigorating connection between identity and place. The transposition of painting activity from sites within Country to the new 'out-of-Country' settlements represents a social counterbalance to the social dislocation that arose from separation from traditional places and forced geographic moves out-of-Country to government and mission settlements in the twentieth century.³⁶

Wandjina are also still occasionally repainted in rock shelters by traditional owners of the country.³⁷ Blundell and Woolagoodja³⁸ record how Sam Woolagoodja repainted a coastal rock art site at Raft Point, near the entrance of Doubtful Bay, during a filmmaking expedition with Malcolm Douglas in the 1970s. 'Sam took advantage of his filmmaking trips to repaint' and to fulfill other obligations to his country and kin. Woolagoodja had been given custodial rights and responsibilities for this country and the site by a clan known as Umbrewewal before the last of their old people had 'finished up'. Rock cod portrayed in the Raft Point site were totems for the Umbrewewal clan. Refreshing the paintings was a 'way for Sam to care for this country and thus fulfill the responsibility that had been given to him by his Umbrewewal relations'.³⁹

Woolagoodja handed the responsibility of the upkeep and repainting of Wandjina images in rock shelters and caves in this area to his son Donny Woolagoodja. As recently as 2005, Donny, a well-known contemporary Kimberley artist from Derby, repainted a very important Wandjina named 'Namarali' as well as other motifs at the rock shelter known as Karndirrim in the western Kimberley (Figure 10.9). The process of repainting, and the spiritual and physical journey it involved, was documented by Blundell and Woolagoodja in their book *Keeping the Wandjinis Fresh*. Donny has also created many paintings of Namarali and other Wandjina on canvas. These paintings follow closely the artistic conventions of the images on the shelter walls (Figure 10.10).

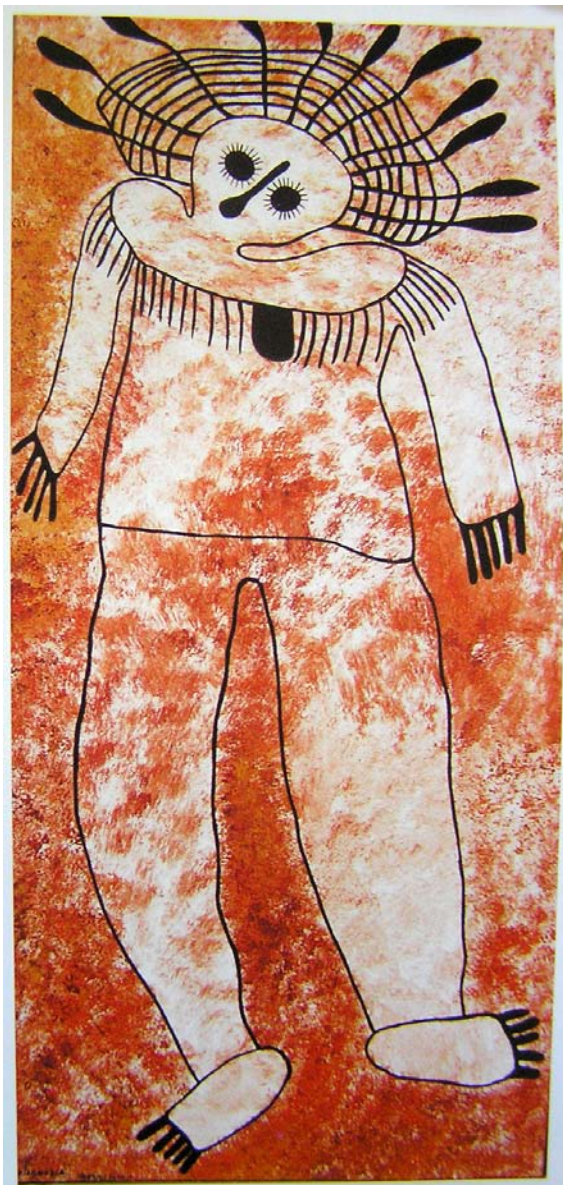
The origins of portable art portraying Wandjina are even less certain than those of the Wandjina rock art. Ryan and Akerman⁴⁰ report that the earliest bark paintings collected date from the 1930s. They note, however, that while it has usually been assumed that the Wandjina barks were produced in response to a commercial demand from Europeans, the German anthropologist Helmut Petri records 'a stone shrine-like construction with an associated arch made of bark painting of two Wandjina figures'.⁴¹ This observation would suggest that barks were produced in a traditional framework for use in ceremony or ritual and might have operated alongside Wandjina rock art.

Figure 10.9 *Namarali* at the Karndirrim rock shelter after repainting by Donny Woolagoodja in April 2002.



Photograph by Sahyma Lachman, reproduced with permission of Donny Woolagoodja.

Figure 10.10 *Namarali at Rest*, contemporary painting of the Wandjina Namarali by Donny Woolagoodja, 2004. Acrylic on Canvas; 1802 x 881cm.



Photograph from Blundell, Valda and Woolagoodja, Donny 2005, *Keeping the Wandjinas Fresh: Sam Woolagoodja and the enduring power of Lalai*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, p. 192, reproduced with permission the artist.

Who has the right to make Wandjina imagery?

Although there is a wealth of ethnographic data to attest to the practice of repainting of Wandjina and other rock art within rock shelters, contemporary repainting has met with considerable controversy. For example, when in 1987 a group of Ngarinyin people from the western Kimberley repainted some of the rock art sites in the Gibb River area, a longstanding public debate ensued. The repainting was done by young men and women from the western Kimberley who were engaged on an Australian Federal Government employment scheme. The debate is briefly touched on here as it has strong contemporary resonances, revolving around ownership of Indigenous imagery and who has the right to reproduce it.⁴² In brief, critics of the Ngarinyin repainting argued that it was not undertaken in a traditional context, was not executed by the appropriate aged and gendered members of the community, involved the use of non-traditional materials and did not conform to traditional style. The most vocal of the detractors were non-Indigenous rock art experts, who argued that the Kimberley painted sites were a *universal* heritage and Indigenous people should not have the *sole* right to make decisions about their repainting.⁴³

On the opposing side of the debate were those like the Indigenous cultural leader Mowaljarli, who argued that the Wandjina paintings were not 'art' and therefore the concerns about aesthetics were irrelevant. Others commenting on the political subtext of the debate stated that 'all human art is part of a dynamic experience and if we are going to oppose repainting we are condemning Aboriginal art to the status of cultural relic'⁴⁴, and that contemporary Indigenous livelihoods and cultural continuity should take precedence over 'heritage'.⁴⁵ The argument that repainting was undertaken by people of inappropriate age and gender was also shown to be a contentious one. Early anthropological records demonstrate that women could, and did, participate in painting and retouching of rock art in the Kimberley. Most early ethnographic work was carried out by male anthropologists, who not surprisingly documented painting as a male pursuit; however, Kaberry, one of the few female anthropologists to undertake field-based research into women's roles in Indigenous Kimberley societies,⁴⁶ specifically referred to women's ceremonies and women's involvement in repainting.⁴⁷

Today, Wandjina art is produced by men and women of all ages and production and sales are coordinated through artist cooperatives such as the Mowanjam Spirit of the Wandjina Corporation.⁴⁸ Indigenous artists working within such cooperatives and individually are also protected to some extent from unfair appropriation of images by copyright law.⁴⁹ Indigenous artists have successfully pursued claims for damages against those infringing copyright.⁵⁰ This has been particularly clear-cut when an individual's paintings have been directly reproduced on commercial products. Less straightforward are cases where styles or designs that are regarded as collectively owned are reproduced. In the case

of Wandjina art, where the contemporary artists are taking inspiration from images that are believed to have created themselves and where they are reproduced to reinforce Indigenous customary law rather than for individual benefit, issues of copyright are less clear-cut.⁵¹ It is, however, generally agreed within the Indigenous community that only Indigenous artists who claim descent through one of the linguistic groups traditionally associated with the Wandjina should be able to reproduce these images. Reaction to the emergence of the Perth Wandjina graffiti exemplifies this moral response to 'rights'.

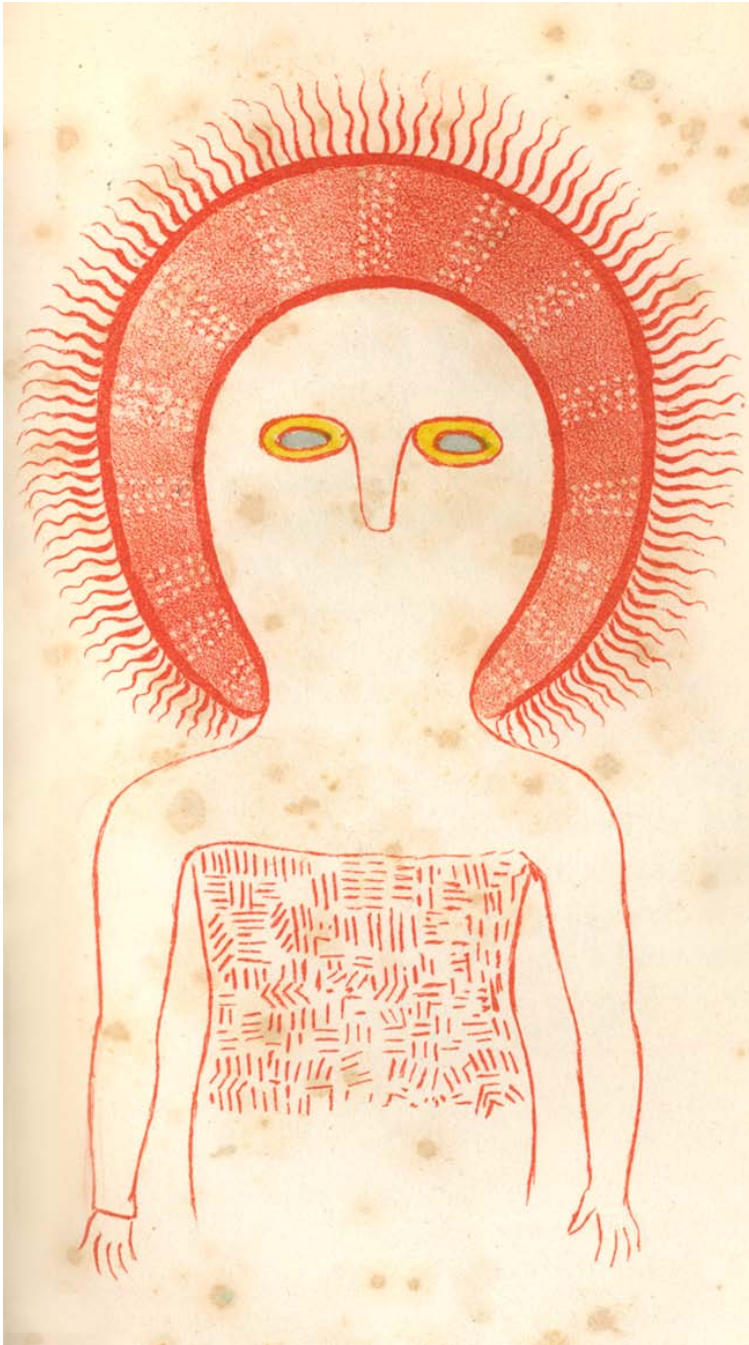
The Wandjina mystique

Outside the Indigenous community to whom they belong, Wandjina have long been the subject of speculation. Their mystique can be traced to the earliest European recording of Wandjina rock art by George Grey, during his expedition of 1838–39.⁵² Grey questioned the derivation of the Wandjina paintings: 'Whatever may be the age of these paintings, it is scarcely probable that they could have been executed by a self-taught savage. Their origin, therefore must still be open to conjecture.'

By calling into question the origins of the Wandjina paintings he saw in the Kimberley, Grey initiated a kind of conjecture that has continued to this day.⁵³ Grey's initial belief in the non-Indigenous external origins of Wandjina took firm sway among the interpretations that followed. His illustrations and the creative licence they entailed (Figure 10.11) played a part in seeding further speculation. Some commentators were convinced they could translate ancient script from the headdress detail of Grey's drawing.⁵⁴ Later, Erik Von Daniken⁵⁵ famously used the Wandjina as evidence of humanity's ancestral connections to outer space. Magazines and web sites supporting celestial evolution theories continue to interpret Wandjina figures in this way. The characteristic semicircular headdress is often referred to as an extraterrestrial's helmet.

As these examples indicate, one aspect of the Wandjina's contested heritage envelops the views of alternative archaeology and hidden-history theories.⁵⁶ The other trajectory of debate regarding Wandjina concerns the cultural and intellectual property of Indigenous people and their rights to repaint the Wandjina image. This controversy revolves around a division in how Wandjina are perceived either as culturally situated tradition or as part of a collective universal heritage. Both lines of debate distance Wandjina figures from the Indigenous people to whom they belong. Their effect is to question Indigenous ownership and their custodial rights and obligations in mediating how Wandjina are represented and in managing the powers that they carry. This context of mystery, controversy and speculation adds an important dimension to the appearance and reception of Wandjina in Perth and in understanding the full gamut of reactions that were conveyed.

Figure 10.11 Drawing of a Wandjina by Sir George Grey, 1841.



Discussion: Wandjina watching and other responses

To some extent, the appearance of Wandjina graffiti and the responses that followed extended its enigmatic history into a new chapter. The mystery surrounding its spontaneous emergence and replication, as well as the anonymity of the graffiti artist(s) involved, lend weight to the speculative atmosphere that surrounds the Wandjina. Moreover, the range of responses to this graffiti reflects the difference in perspectives in other debates linked to this striking figure.

It would be fair to say that many Australians—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—are familiar with Wandjina as represented through contemporary paintings and exhibitions, as rock art images in the public domain or as a centrepiece installation at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. Undoubtedly, many people might share an appreciation for the Wandjina figure as a visual form without knowledge of its socio-cultural and cosmological importance within the Kimberley. Perhaps the visual gravitas of these figures goes some way towards explaining the fascination many non-Indigenous people have with Wandjina—a fascination that has also found expression as speculation and contestation about the origins and maintenance of Wandjina paintings.⁵⁷ To some extent, this speculative tone resurfaced when Wandjina graffiti first began to appear in Perth. The sudden occurrence and anonymity that graffiti art upholds fed into the mystique that Wandjina have long held for those who do not understand them. As they multiplied in different guises (stencils, paintings, ground sculpture) and on various surfaces (walls, plants, trees, rubbish hoppers), they were also reproduced on blogs, flickr and in media reports. Commercial television sensationalised their presence as if they had come out of nowhere.⁵⁸

The formal qualities of the Perth Wandjina contributed to this impression. The figure was often depicted rising out of the ground or coming around a corner (Figure 10.12). The striking features of the rayed headdress and the large eyes combine to give the Wandjina graffiti a spontaneous, almost startled appearance (Figure 10.13). It is difficult to know whether this sense ‘of being caught out’ was among the artist’s intentions. In any case, it presents a nice allusion to the risk-taking artist who must remain anonymous and to the elusive trickster nature of spirits that live and appear on rocks in northern Australia (see, for example, Mimi). The presence of stencils that are similar to so-called ‘Mountford figures’⁵⁹ alongside Wandjina at two sites might suggest the graffiti artist(s) had some degree of rock art literacy. Even if the author of the Wandjina graffiti was familiar with Australian rock art, however, it is difficult to know if s/he knew anything of the Wandjina’s significance.

Figure 10.12 Wandjina freestyle painting.



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2007.

Before long, the Perth Wandjina, rather than the graffiti artist responsible, had acquired a personality, a degree of local celebrity and a fan base. The sensation that Wandjina were spontaneously popping up only fuelled the desire, among admirers, for discovering more of them.⁶⁰

I knew it was sort of a special and sacred symbol, something not normally seen out there on a car yard wall...I do actually get a little bit excited now because I think ooh am I the first person to photograph this one in the group that's been putting them on the web.⁶¹

Rosemary Lynch was only one of many enthusiastic locals who appreciated finding the Wandjina within the city. In part, it was the fact that Wandjina seemed out of place in the urban setting that piqued her initial interest: 'it struck me as really unusual to see that image by the street.'⁶² With others, she began documenting the graffiti and posting updates online in her blog and a dedicated Wandjina thread on flickr. Another Wandjina watcher, Nic Beames, described the activity as follows:

Figure 10.13 Wandjina head stencils.



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2007.

We've got a group set up where there are about ten or 11 people watching and observing and some of those people are contributing...we would probably have somewhere between 60 and 80 of these images.⁶³

This small collective played a large part in bringing the Perth Wandjina to the attention of others. A flurry of media reports and articles followed that placed as much emphasis on the group's activity as on the graffiti itself. An interesting aspect of this media spectacle was the discourse that developed around the idea of the Wandjina as mysterious and different to other graffiti. In short, the Wandjina were admired as 'artistic' and 'high quality' by way of contrast with tagging.⁶⁴ What is also evident in these accounts is recognition of the Wandjina

as an Indigenous symbol and ancestral being. Many observers saw the positive side of the Wandjina as raising awareness of Indigenous culture.⁶⁵ One online commentator put it this way:

I have been chasing these wandjina images all over perth, they are a beautiful way to reclaim and recolonise the urban sprawl with indigenous art. The image is haunting, as if the spirit itself is watching over the new people of the land, or perhaps reminding us to acknowledge the traditional people.⁶⁶

These remarks and the overall take on the Wandjina graffiti demonstrate an important shift in the popular understanding of Wandjina's origins as entirely Indigenous, not external or alien. This marks a difference from past episodes of speculation and controversy. The question still revolved around the origins of the Wandjina, but the inflection and tone had changed. Focus shifted away from whether Indigenous custodians should refresh Wandjina to whether the graffiti artist had the right and ability to handle the Wandjina's power as a Kimberley elder would.

One way of thinking about the Wandjina watching response is that it mirrored the actions of the graffiti artist. In effect, Wandjina watchers were appropriating the original graffiti to create their own remixed versions. One individual created their own video by animating photographs of the Perth Wandjina against a soundtrack of a crackling campfire and a didgeridoo playing. Furthermore, their blogs, image threads and videos emulated the replication strategies of graffiti, only this time they were extending the circulation of images via the viral networks of the Web. Ultimately, the Wandjina had come full circle, as the graffiti were observed online from the Kimberley.

The response from the Kimberley towards the graffiti was one of concern. As Kimberley artist and elder Donny Woolagoodja put it: 'If the wrong person or people are using our image, it's possible that they will bring a very powerful energy to themselves which could harm them.'⁶⁷ Woolagoodja's statement underlines the importance of rights and respect for Wandjina and their power. It also reiterates the ownership of Wandjina by Kimberley people as central to Kimberley custom and law.

Despite this, Woolagoodja offered praise for the graffiti writer's ability: 'He can paint all right, he does the Wandjina just like us...I've seen that one of the Wandjina driving a car—I call that one "the pink lady".'⁶⁸

By all accounts, the authors of the Wandjina graffiti couldn't be discredited on either their aesthetic sensibility or effort. S/he captured the key attributes that made the Wandjina recognisable: large eyes, no mouth, pearl-shell ornament, radiating headdress and bust with decorative infill (Figure 10.13). A notable distinction is that the Perth figures appear as the conventional bust, never as a

full-length figure. This might suggest that the inspiration for the Perth Wandjina came from accessible, even popular, sources rather than the full breadth of Wandjina characterisations found in old or specialist texts,⁶⁹ contemporary art or in situ paintings. This is not to suggest that the stylisation evident in Perth Wandjina has limited the scope of its creative application: the Wandjina driving a car is one example; another has the head of a Wandjina and the crucified body of a black Jesus (Figure 10.14). Here again the headdress becomes a site for reinventing meaning, now doubling as the crown of thorns.

Figure 10.14 Wandjina Resurrection



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2008.

In many cases, the Perth Wandjina appeared as solitary figures, which contributed a sense of boldness. Less frequently, they appeared in pictorial scenes and on walls with large amounts of other graffiti. The latter case demonstrated how the Wandjina were reiterated successfully to be simultaneously diverse and emblematic. An archaeological analysis of one Perth graffiti site⁷⁰ showed that the Wandjina was the most frequent motif produced and employed a greater variation in size, technique and colour than any other graffiti present. At this site at least, the Wandjina show differences just like they do in the Kimberley. In fact, the Perth renditions are remarkably sympathetic to the 'real' Wandjina found in the north.

This likeness was precisely what made the graffiti powerful and disconcerting. For example, Perth-based Indigenous artist and arts administrator Glenn Pilkington worried that the imagery of Wandjina was being used without any

consultation with the traditional custodians.⁷¹ Pilkington's response reminds us that the Wandjina are cultural property, even though some people might not realise it. This point—that someone owns the Wandjina—was not lost on one member of the graffiti community. Their straightforward response was to repaint the Wandjina graffiti and thereby give it new meaning. A single stencilled word covered a number of Wandjina figures: 'STOLEN' (Figure 10.15).

Figure 10.15 Stolen Wandjina stencil.



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2007.

Figure 10.16 Wandjina graffiti in ruin.



Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick, 2008.

Conclusion

The Wandjina graffiti and the responses that it elicited were an exceptional phenomenon—a contemporary intersection between the art of the past and the art of the present. It was a thought-provoking discussion, played out in various media, on what is art, what is vandalism and what is authority—or who has the right to signification, as Cover⁷² put it, and who has the right to make marks and meanings in a public context?

Despite the veil of secrecy under which the graffiti community must operate, the individual making the Wandjina eventually came forward to discuss their actions with a select group. In her short documentary *Who Paintin' Dis Wandjina?*, Taryn Laffar⁷³ was able to incorporate the artist's perspective while protecting their identity from the viewer. And, after Kimberley elders expressed a desire to make contact with the graffiti artist, s/he complied. It is understood that they reiterated the power of the Wandjina and made a request for the artist to stop painting them. The graffiti artist agreed and, since that time, many of the figures that did exist have been torn down, painted over or are in a state of ruin (Figure 10.16).

There is something to be learned from the fact that the graffiti artist promptly responded to Indigenous elders' requests, when a punitive state law did not stop him/her from doing graffiti in the first place. It raises questions about whose

power and authority are heard within communities and how respect can be earned through consultation and negotiation rather than blame. Moreover, this study suggests that if we are to grasp what is right and wrong when it comes to evaluating graffiti, the influence of community and cultural legitimacy is as valid as the implications of legislation and legal authority.

Three years on, a few Perth Wandjina remain. Among them is the Wandjina with arms outstretched, like Jesus awaiting death and then resurrection (Figure 10.14). The significance of this scene is not lost on those who see the synergies between this spiritual symbol of renewal and the regenerative power of the Wandjina. As much as it invokes conceptions of suffering, redemption and spirit, the black Jesus Wandjina underscores the potential for images to transform and to communicate cross-culturally.

Finally, the story of the Perth Wandjina remains instructive even as their materiality fades. They demonstrate the ephemeral nature of our traces. They prove that of all the marks made by human hand, some endure the passage of time while the majority do not. It makes the Wandjina of the Kimberley all the more remarkable not simply because old paintings have been preserved but because their custodians have ensured, through insistence and despite contest, that the Wandjina spirit be kept alive, kept bright, kept strong.

Authors' note

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ENDNOTES

¹ Here we do not mean to imply that there is a direct equivalence between graffiti produced today and the rock art of Australia or elsewhere, either in terms of motivation or meaning. We do, however, stand by our suggestion that the locally nuanced and culturally specific processes of mark making that span human history might share certain resonances to be investigated.

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