McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King

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with contributions from
Ceri Ashley, Alexander Antonites, Michael Chazan, Per Ditlef Fredriksen, Laura de Harde, M. Hayden, Rachel King, Nessa Leibhammer, Mark McGranaghan, Same Mdluli, David Morris, Catherine Namono, Martin Porr, Johan van Schalkwyk, Larissa Snow, Catherine Elliott Weinberg, Chris Wingfield & Justine Wintjes

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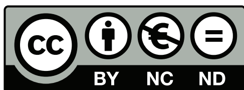

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Chris Wingfield
John Giblin
Rachel King

Chapter 8

Birds, beasts and relatives: animal subjectivities and frontier encounters

Rachel King & Mark McGranaghan

In southern African rock art, depictions of animals are often treated as indices of subsistence strategies and, by extension, as markers of identities associated with those strategies. Sheep and cattle are perhaps the best examples of this: the former are linked to the arrival of pastoralists in the sub-continent around 350–150 BC, and the latter to material culture associated with Bantu-speaking agropastoralists arriving as early as AD 253–453 (Orton *et al*. 2013; Orton 2015; Sadr 2015; but see Lander & Russell 2018).[1] Rock arts featuring these animals have been interpreted as disclosing relationships between indigenous hunter-gatherer painters and livestock-keeping newcomers (Manhire *et al*. 1986; Campbell 1986, 1987; Morris 1988; Dowson 1994; Loubser & Laurens 1994; Jerardino 1999; Jolly 2007). In these interpretations, and amidst the serious weight given to the cosmological potency of the livestock depicted, these animals are also read as a sort of technology: as mechanisms enabling new means of subsistence, of interaction with other humans and the environment, and of transforming notions of property and ownership. There is further chronological value to considering these figures as signalling socio-economic change: the earliest faunal remains of sheep and cattle in southern Africa, and archival evidence suggesting that horses introduced into the subcontinent in the seventeenth century AD had arrived in the Maloti-Drakensberg by the first decades of the 1800s (Challis 2009; Swart 2010, 31–4, 41–2), mean that paintings of these animals can serve as a *terminus post quem* for some of the art.

However, interpreting this art often puts rock art scholars in something of a bind with regard to the ethnographic data that we draw upon. Iconography in the art directs us to the suites of ethnography that best 'fit' the imagery in question, and to constructing analogies between the two bodies of evidence. Depictions of nasal bleeding and non-real somatic sensations are cues to link these paintings with 'trance' dances documented in the Kalahari and elsewhere in southern Africa, notably in Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd's ethnographic archive of interviews with |Xam Bushmen (San) (Lewis-Williams 1981, 2002; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004). Women painted wearing bandoliers and participating in ecstatic performances have been seen as indicating divination practices common amongst southern Nguni-speaking communities (Prins & Hall 1994; Hammond-Tooke 1998, 1999; Jolly 2005). Rock arts featuring sheep and cattle amidst well-established iconography such as bees and eland direct us to hunter-gatherer ethnographies to identify the paths through which domestic(able) newcomers may have been connected to more familiar biota (Lander 2014; Russell & Lander 2015).

The interpretive process thus begins with an inference about the painters' identity, albeit on a broad scale. If iconography leads us to a particular corpus of ethnography, we tend to stay within that corpus for the course of our interpretation. There are exceptions to this: Sam Challis (2012, 2014, 2016) and Pieter Jolly (1996, 2006), for instance, have suggested that we should not be so narrowly-focused on a small selection of ethnographies and instead broaden our scope, observing that there is no one-to-one correspondence between makers of rock art and the people described in the literature. We should be willing to follow iconographic cues throughout multiple ethnographic corpuses, bearing in mind the dangers of creating false equivalencies or essentializing cultural features as we move across diverse bodies of evidence. We should also be prepared to interrogate our basis for excluding some ethnographic material from our interpretation.

These suggestions force us to confront the problems with approaching pieces of iconography as refracting identity, acknowledging that in reality there

is very little in much imagery to indicate that it was exclusively the preserve of one distinct group of people in the past. For instance, Khoekhoe art has been treated as distinct from 'traditional' San and Bantu-speaker arts – despite the historical, anthropological, and linguistic evidence that clearly establishes far-reaching cultural connections between Khoe-speaking pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. Instead, the partitioning of Khoekhoe art is based on its perceived 'stylistic' distinctiveness – especially the presence of often engraved geometric motifs – from fine-line art, although the two styles can exist within the same panel. This interpretive relationship between identity, art, and ethnography may indicate where rock art scholarship is vulnerable to accusations of essentialization: the analogical reasoning employed here looks as though the art is being taken as representative of identity, and particularly of an identity contained by the parameters (historical or geographical) of a given ethnography.[2]

As one means of circumventing this bind, we put aside questions of identity in this paper. Instead, we focus on relations between humans and non-humans depicted in rock arts of the last two millennia. This was a long era of frontiers – domesticate, economic, colonial, and so on – in which humans were accompanied by animals newly arrived in the sub-continent or shifted from long-standing ecological roles. We suggest examining how relationships between humans and non-humans were disclosed iconographically *without* first recourse to establishing ethnographic analogy. Of course, this is not to undermine the work already done on frontier rock art, nor is it to deny the value of analogies such as the shamanistic model in rock art studies. Inasmuch as rock art interpretations attempt to recover statements about what it meant to *be* a 'Bushman', Khoe pastoralist, farmer, and so on, we ask whether there might be other ways of *being* that we can glimpse without an ethnographic lens – or at least without a narrowly-defined one. Thus, we dwell at length on the relationships disclosed through imagery and iconography, and resist interpretation through formal ethnographic analogy.

Our approach draws on the recent anthropological and archaeological turns toward animal subjectivities. We consider whether these approaches emphasizing the relationships between animals and their humans can offer a way of describing past painters without resorting to subsistence-based identities that reaffirm economic partitions among contemporary populations. We suggest that although some rock arts and specific panels may index identity, this is not the only useful analytical framework available.

We focus on corpuses of rock art in two different regions of southern Africa – the Strandberg and the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains (Fig. 8.1) – and specifically on conflationary images there: depictions of, for instance, ostrich-horse hybrids and human-cow therianthropes. These arts are in many respects very different from one another (one engraved and one painted, one very recent and one perhaps older, focused on a different range of species), but they both contain useful insights into the ways in which different materials, physicalities, and beings interacted on southern African frontiers. As such, we consider these arts as describing past communities whose identities may have referenced relationships other than those contained in current considerations of economic or ethnic affiliations.

Relatives and relativism

John Knight's (2005, 1, emphasis original) statement that animals are '*parts* of human society rather than just *symbols* of it' encapsulates the anthropological turn towards human-animal subjectivities: the argument that animals have agency and active social roles, rather than being just resources or representations. This perspective resonates with previous southern African rock art studies, which have long suggested that painted animals not only indexed the worldview of the painter(s) but were also actively involved in creating it. The efflorescence of interest in how 'personhood' in the present and past could be accorded to humans and non-humans – constituting the 'new animisms' within a broader interdisciplinary 'ontological turn' – encourages taking these observations further (Bird-David 1999; Descola 2013 [2009]).

Among the most compelling calls to take 'seriously a plurality of worlds and not just of worldviews' (Candea 2010, 243) are those that have come from anthropologists specializing in hunter-gatherer and horticulturist societies of South America and the circumpolar north (Descola 1992; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Willerslev 2007). This scholarship has focused on how these groups attribute personhood status and agency to non-human actors, commonly through the circulation and exchange of a similar core 'vital force' shared among beings (Ingold 2000, 113). In these ontologies, animals are particularly well-suited to personhood: their capacity for willful, independent motility affords them a major means of inter-species communication (Hoffmeyer 2008, 15–6), and hunting emerges as a primary means whereby humans can acquire animals' vital forces, or interact with non-humans more generally. The reverse exchange – from humans to animals – has been described in terms of 'shamanic' practice, with 'shaman' serving as a term for a specialist who conducts relationships with non-human beings and

Figure 8.1. *Regional locator map showing the Strandberg Hills and Maloti-Drakensberg study areas, also indicating the wider area of historical rock engravings around the Strandberg.*

regulates the forces that flow between human and non-human society (Harvey 2010).

These 'animic' ontologies – and in particular their intersection with shamanic practices – almost beg comparison with southern African hunter-gatherer and rock art studies, not least because of the prominent position that shamanism has occupied in the latter. David Lewis-Williams' (2002) seminal interpretive work in the region has cast hunter-gatherer art as essentially religious, concerned with the actions of specialists who mastered trance experiences to regulate flows of potency from animal sources. However, proponents of animic ontologies and shamanistic interpretations have both emphasized that these models should not be applied in a simplified or universalized manner to hunter-gatherer societies (Dowson 2009; Descola 2013 [2009], 129): in formulating generalized ontological models, Ingold and Descola both allow for differences *between* hunter-gatherer ontologies and, conversely, similarities shared by groups practicing markedly different subsistence strategies (Ingold 2000, 69, 112–3). Indeed, Descola (2013 [2009], 121–2) divides his ontological types by how they describe combinations of the interiority and physicality of beings rather than by the socio-economic relations between them. In other words, ontological differences come from the biological and immaterial 'stuff' that exists within a unique actor, and where this interfaces with the surrounding world; subsistence and economic differences come from how different actors apprehend this interface and seek to control it. In this, Descola's schema resonates perhaps more strongly than other animists with the posthumanist or anti-anthropocentric suggestions of, for instance, Giles Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari 1980) and Donna Haraway (1997): we should consider where ontologies are characterized by transition and process, by their suspension between categories such as nature/culture and human/non-human, which in turn help to show how unstable those categories really are (Braidotti 2006, 199–200).

This last point is especially important for our discussion because we explore rock art corpuses pertaining to animals that can be described as wild, domesticated, and something in between. Elsewhere (McGranaghan & Challis 2016), one of us has argued that animic or relational ontologies offer a useful conceptual vocabulary for understanding how southern African rock arts disclose notional associations of 'nice' behaviours and tame relationships between humans and non-humans. This taming framework – drawn from an understanding of animal ontology rooted in detailed linguistic analysis of relevant ethnography – offers a way of overcoming a longstanding dualism between shamanism and hunting magic in southern African rock art studies, a dualism that ultimately describes a debate over how to understand *control* of animals in the art and in the past. Taming rejects control as a governing relational ontology in favour of right conduct, describing specialized knowledge of how 'to inculcate or maintain desirable relationships between human and non-human persons' (McGranaghan & Challis 2016, 580; cf. Hill 2011).

This ontological shift indicates a way beyond another enduring dualism: wild/domestic, describing both the ethological, genetic, and physiological distinctions between animal species, and the economic distinctions between agropastoral and hunter-gatherer economies (Ingold 2000, 61–76; Oma 2010; Mlekuž 2013). Again, these shifts in thinking about the nature of humans and animals urge us to explore a new conceptual vocabulary to describe not just how wild and domestic economies differed, but how they coexisted. This, in turn, refers us to the African continent's 'moving frontiers' (Lane 2004; cf. Kopytoff 1986), places where different populations and economies encountered, accommodated, and clashed with one another, and how these encounters were felt over varying durations.

The arrival of domesticates (cattle, sheep, goats, and cultigens) and associated technologies (metallurgy and pottery) in southern Africa, associated with several migration episodes between *c*. 350 BC–AD 400, has spurred lively debate over the nature of the relationships between these 'newcomers' and 'firstcomers' (Whitelaw & Hall 2016; Russell 2017). Two major archaeological debates over the nature of hunter-gatherer interactions with new pastoralists implicate questions about whether the former were capable – physically, technologically, socially – of incorporating new, domesticated animals into their economy and worldview more broadly (Solway & Lee 1990; Wilmsen & Denbow 1990; Hall & Smith 2000; Mitchell 2004; Fauvelle-Aymar & Sadr 2008; Mitchell *et al*. 2008).[3] Archaeological evidence distinguishing between forager and pastoralist signatures in the western subcontinent is ambiguous, and more often than not leads to the conclusion that, materially speaking, hunting, gathering, and livestock transhumance all *looked* broadly similar (Arthur 2008; Sadr 2008). Meanwhile, historical ethnographic work on nineteenth-century communities of hunter-gatherer-pastoralists in the interior Karoo suggests that, in terms of technological and cosmological knowledge of animals, there is not enough difference between wild and domestic beasts to separate these into two distinct lifeways (McGranaghan 2015; cf. Russell 2017). Looking to the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains, archaeological evidence from the late first and early second millennia AD demonstrates that people living in the highlands (a space that challenged crop cultivation and was better-suited to hunting game) were capable of keeping cattle and sheep. These finds have fuelled discussion of more 'networked' relations between farmers in the lowlands and more mobile highland dwellers, perhaps of an assimilationist nature (with farmers subordinating or absorbing foragers) or (as more recent scholarship supports) something more supportive and symbiotic (Mitchell 2009a, 2009b).

Indeed, the suggestion that past people were capable of incorporating new technologies and new beings into worldviews finds support from rock arts pertaining to the last few centuries. Sam Challis' (2012, 2014, 2016) work on rock arts of the Maloti-Drakensberg incorporating horses (introduced to the region in the early 1820s) has demonstrated that cohorts of cattle raiders – with constituents from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds – forged cohesive communities around the functional utility *and* spiritual potency of horses. Pieter Jolly (2007) has likewise argued that we should not view economy as a fixed predictor of the role that animals could have in the past, drawing on archaeological and modern ethnographic evidence to deploy a range of case studies illustrating how cattle and their associations could be mobile across time and socio-economic contexts.

The debates over how human-animal entanglements emerged and varied in southern Africa have taken on different tenors and shapes, implicating analytical frameworks that alternately emphasize rupture, adaptation, assimilation, creolization, or coercion to describe the ways in which past people 'figured out' non-human newcomers. For us, these debates foreground a need to nuance our discussions about the precise nature of the relationships between humans and non-humans rather than grouping these under the broad rubric of economy. By this, we mean recovering the sorts of intelligence and technical knowledge necessary to manage relations with animals, as well

as the ways in which people could figure out their non-human colleagues, acknowledging that these experiences were not wholly new but rooted in other understandings of landscapes and animals. In the two examples that follow, we highlight how animals could be embedded in human life and thought while still occupying ambivalent positions. In doing so, we reject a common dualism in discussions of animals in the past: whether we should treat them as technologies or agents. Instead, we suggest (following Candea 2010 and White 2011) that part of the power of ontological insight is that it can illuminate where animals may remain inscrutable but provoke reflection on value and personhood.

Horse-ostriches of the Strandberg

Of all the rock arts of southern Africa, the historical rock arts of the Northern Cape Karoo may, on face value, appear best suited to the application of interpretations drawn from historical ethnographies. After all, the Bleek–Lloyd interlocutors – whose testimonies have been so influential in shaping our understanding of southern African rock arts – originally came from this area (Deacon 1986). However, by comparison with the painted sites of the Maloti–Drakensberg, these engraved rock art sites have not featured prominently in rock art studies in the subcontinent (Deacon 1994; McGranaghan 2015); here we focus on one of these sites, the Strandberg hills (Fig. 8.1) (Deacon 1986, 1988, 1997; McGranaghan 2016).

One reason for this relative lack of attention is probably that historical rock art sites are just that – defined by the presence of historically attested forms of material culture and the inclusion of dates or inscriptions in Afrikaans and English. Historical contextualization provides a wealth of potential authors for the art. From the late eighteenth century, the Northern Cape Karoo became home to a diverse array of groups: colonists of European (or mixed indigenous–European) descent moving up from the Cape; Xhosa expanding northward from the frontier conflicts of the eastern Cape; southern Tswana agropastoralists looking southward across the Orange River to trading networks with the colony; in addition to numerous indigenous pastoralists and foragers (Penn 1995, 2005; Legassick 2010 [1969]; Zachariou 2013). In such a milieu, it can be difficult to formulate a case for including or excluding people of specific backgrounds from image production; for an interpretive paradigm that relies upon linguistic, socio-economic and ethnic identification to discriminate between competing readings, this inability to definitively assign authorship poses a clear problem.

Historical context provides a broad framework within which to consider rock art; particular suites of imagery may allow for narrowing this. For example, some facets of the Strandberg art appear largely contiguous with the visual tropes of putatively hunter-gatherer rock art found elsewhere on the subcontinent; one of us (McGranaghan 2016, 164–6) has previously discussed a Strandberg panel that consists of snakes, a possible rain animal, and a reclining human figure within the analogical context of Bushman rain-making, as described in the Bleek–Lloyd archive. We return to this point below when discussing hybrid figures (composite animals or human–animal conflations). By contrast, one detailed scene on the Strandberg, which makes use of Westernized (almost cartoon-like) forms of visual literacy to convey motion and perspective and uses a form of 'speech bubble', involves a diatribe in Afrikaans about the jackal as a 'bokker wat die skaap so vang' ('a bugger that catches sheep') (Fig. 8.2). This panel clearly relates to the frustrations of livestock farming in the Northern Cape, and was produced by someone who – at a minimum – was drawing more heavily on European, colonist traditions of image composition than is typical at the Strandberg site as a whole.

Ostriches form a major component of the historical rock art of the Strandberg, and were equally important to the nineteenth-century Cape Colony in general. Following the British acquisition of the Cape at the beginning of the nineteenth century, ostrich feathers emerged as an important export commodity for European markets (Keegan 2013, 40–1); this initially involved hunting wild birds, and was broadly contiguous with the extraction of other animal resources such as ivory or hides (van Sittert 2005, 274). At this stage, feathers represented high-value goods extracted in relatively small numbers by specialized hunting parties, or as a by-product of colonial cattle-purchasing expeditions or commando raiding parties; the availability and quality of the feathers was governed by the season (Sampson 1994, 396). There was considerable scope for indigenous participation in this earlier form of trade, especially because these groups already possessed the necessary ethological and technological knowledge to successfully hunt this wary, fast prey, particularly when combined with colonial technologies such as horses and firearms: ǁkabbo's discussions of ostrich hunting strategies with Lucy Lloyd, for example, records |Xam participation in this trade, exchanging feathers for tobacco with itinerant colonial pastoralists (McGranaghan 2012, 236, 333–4).

Over the course of the nineteenth century – and particularly after the discovery of the mineral wealth of interior of southern Africa from the 1860s – colonial control over the Northern Cape solidified and

Figure 8.2. *Jackal hunting scene with Afrikaans text. Digital re-drawing Mark McGranaghan.*

brought with it magistracies, expanded road and rail networks, and an increasing alienation of private land from indigenous ownership (Penn 2005). For ostriches, this consolidation was also accompanied by major transformations, as feather extraction shifted from the exploitation of wild populations to the establishment of domestic ostrich herds. This shift underpinned a marked rise in the quantity of feathers exported, as ostrich farming permitted the maintenance of ostrich populations at high densities – primarily in better-watered regions of the Karoo (particularly in the Klein Karoo around the town of Oudtshoorn), which could support fields of lucerne (alfalfa) that could be used as a high-quality supplement to wild forage. These better-watered regions therefore became hubs that dominated the feather trade, and set the terms of price and quality for ostrich feathers. In more arid regions, ostrich farming was possible but required populations to be kept at a lower density on larger areas of land (Sampson 1994, 397). This effectively marginalized some areas (such as the Strandberg) in terms of ostrich feather production, as it affected the quality and quantity of the feathers produced; ostriches needed to be corralled before feathers were removed (with overcrowding damaging feathers) and arid regions could not produce supplementary forage to maintain feather condition (Archer 2000; Beinart 2003, 220).

Although Strandberg rock art contains a wealth of ostrich imagery, it is not an indiscriminate reflection of ostrich appearance and behaviour – no images of nesting or feeding behaviour, for example, have thus far been identified in the area. Instead, the images concentrate on a restricted suite of visual tropes that disclose the interests of image-makers, and their attitudes toward these birds. First, these image-makers (whoever they may have been) paid an obvious attention to ostrich feathering, particularly of the wings and tail feathers – precisely those feathers that (in male ostriches) were the primary focus of nineteenth-century trade in ostrich products. Figure 8.3 provides a sampling of these feather-focused depictions, which hint at a desire on the part of the engravers to specifically indicate male ostriches; they are reminiscent of the courtship displays of these birds. Second, historical Strandberg ostrich imagery also evokes the cursorial prowess of these birds, focusing on sprinting postures or otherwise emphasizing the powerful, muscular legs of this formidable runner. Even when stripped down to their very simplest form (in which the form of the ostrich is limned using only two or three strokes), these birds are shown with legs outstretched and convey a palpable sense of alacrity (Fig. 8.3a). Connected with this, running ostriches are also often shown pursued by mounted horse riders who are carrying or firing guns (Fig. 8.3b).

Third and by contrast, the Strandberg also contains a distinctive suite of ostrich images that emphasize the bulk and fat of the ostrich body (Fig.

8.4), characterized by an in-filling scraping technique and by a relatively more-patinated condition that possibly reflects a greater age.[4] These ostriches are found in panels that include eland (notably fat game animals; Fig. 8.4), and together convey a different way of thinking about ostriches and their characteristics to that disclosed in the pursuit scenes. It is tempting to assign these differences a chronological and socio-economic significance, in which the fat ostriches reflect an earlier, hunter-gatherer focus on the gustatory qualities of ostriches (an observation that has substantial ethnographic backing in the Bleek–Lloyd archive, McGranaghan 2012, 235–7) or, following the analogical reasoning of shamanic interpretations, the numinous potency of the fat they contain (Lewis-Williams 2002, 81). However, even if we refrain from applying analogical interpretations, the images themselves support at least the notion that two forms of ostrich ontology – two ways of thinking about 'ostrichness' – are conveyed in the Strandberg art.

Without drawing conclusions as to the identities of nineteenth-century image-makers, we can thus see that the more-obviously historical aspect of ostrich art at the Strandberg depicts a confluence of feathers, horsemanship and firearms that is closely tied to the expansion of global mercantilism, and the ontological repercussions this engendered even at a marginal colonial frontier. Whether we are speaking of the ways in which indigenous individuals adopted and adapted new technologies to deal with familiar animals, or colonists attempted to control the new environments and biota they encountered, the leggy, feathery ostriches

Figure 8.3. *Historical-period ostrich engravings showing feathers on wings (a); tail feathers (b); and pursuit or 'driving' of ostriches (b, c). Digital re-drawing and photographs Mark McGranaghan.*

Figure 8.4. *'Fat' ostriches in a panel with eland. Photograph McGranaghan.*

of the historical period embody the ways in which this species was valued, managed, cared for and mobilized as the market for ostrich feathers exploded in the late nineteenth century.

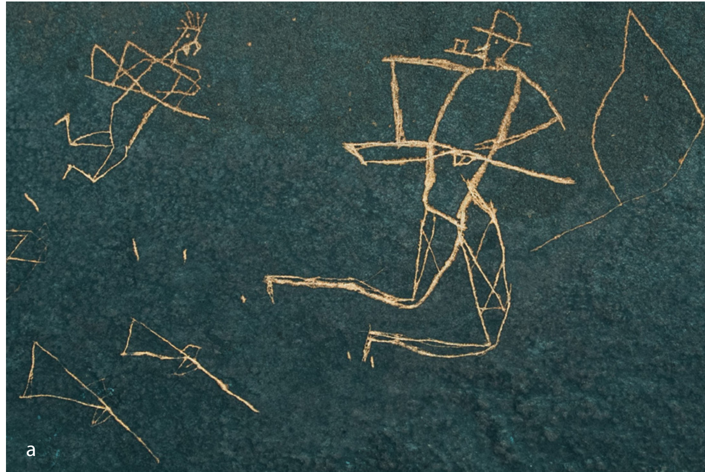
We have already seen that some elements of the historical Strandberg art may be amenable to interpretation within ontological frameworks derived from Bushman ethnographies; it is tempting to group with these several hybrid figures that conflate either multiple animal species, or humans and animals. Animal–human conflations (therianthropes) in Maloti-Drakensberg rock art have generally been interpreted within shamanistic models as statements regarding the acquisition of particular kinds of spiritual potency on the part of ritual specialists (Pager 1971; Lewis-Williams 1981; Jolly 2002; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004, 166–75). Conflations between indigenous antelope (especially eland) and horses or cattle have been read as part of a process whereby domesticates came to replace or supplant the cosmological and socio-economic potency of wild fauna (Campbell 1987; Dowson 1994).

Figure 8.5. *A 'swan-necked' horse. Digital re-drawing and photograph Mark McGranaghan.*

Figure 8.6. *Horse-ostrich conflation. Photograph Mark McGranaghan.*

Setting aside these ethnographically informed interpretations of conflationary animals or animal–human hybrids, we can also consider the visual conventions used at the Strandberg to depict these entities. At a basic level an amalgamation of this kind reflects some form of equivalency, in the bringing together of two visually distinct entities into a common frame of reference. We have already seen that in the historical Strandberg art, compositional and stylistic traits provide a general link between ostriches and horses; the abovementioned scenes of mounted pursuit both relate the particular technological skills required to manipulate ostrich behaviour to particular ends, and (directly or indirectly) comment on the shared physical capacities of each species for swift movement. In stylistic terms, we might look to the arching and exaggeratedly long necks common to horse depictions in this area as an echo of similar features in ostriches themselves (Fig. 8.5). A horse–ostrich conflation (Fig. 8.6), which was produced at the site of Witpits (Arbeidsvreugt; Deacon 1997) about fifty kilometres north of the Strandberg, may be seen as the apogee of this kind of stylistic association, and lends credence to the notion that Northern Cape rock artists chose equids as a suitable referent for understanding and thinking about ratites (and vice versa) – whether from a playful, spiritual or some other motive.

Examples of similarly hybrid imagery from the Strandberg itself include a man with clawed feet juxtaposed with a toothy, maned lion, as well as a human with the head of a bird (Fig. 8.7); both of these panels are of an historical date (the bird-headed man carries a gun, while the lion scene contains lettering as well as armed horse riders). By drawing on ethnographically restricted historical contextualization, it is possible to suggest plausible motivations for some of these inter-species juxtapositions – the Bleek–Lloyd archive, for example, provides ample evidence that nineteenth-century |Xam Bushmen used lion referents as a way to discuss social propriety and to castigate anti-social Others (McGranaghan 2014), which would (if we had some way to ascertain authorship) seem to offer an obvious interpretive frame for the lion panel. However, even without turning to these ethnographic specifics, the wider historical context allows us to draw some broader conclusions. The lion panel, for example, strongly emphasizes the predatory mouth and teeth of the felid, and includes both horses and guns. From at least the late eighteenth century onward, these latter two constituted technologies of violence in the Northern Cape; violence that was waged against indigenous pastoralists and foragers, and against local fauna.[5] In this context, the juxtaposition of a leonine



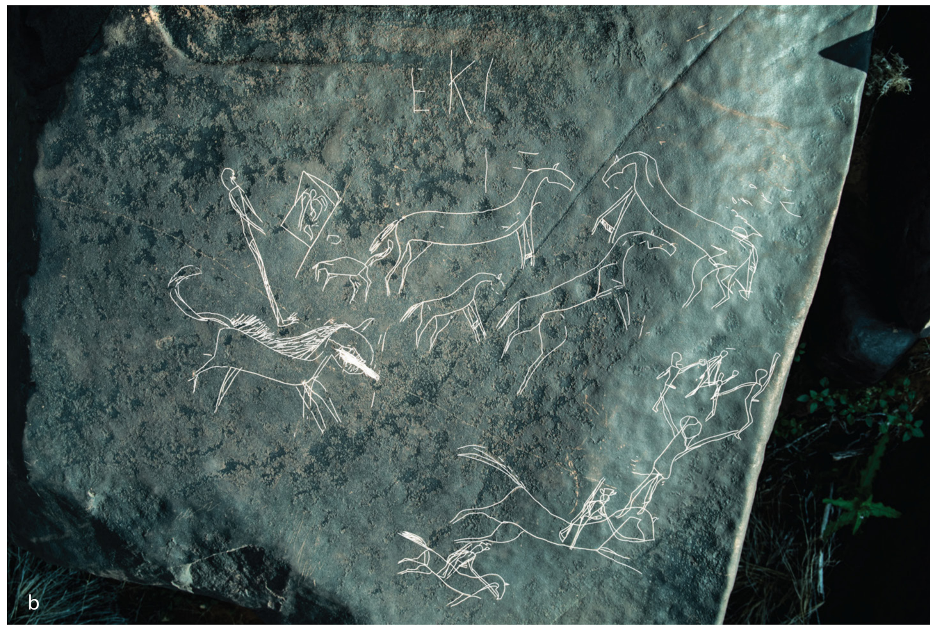


Figure 8.7. *Bird–human conflation (a) and lion juxtaposed with a man with clawed feet (b). Digital re-drawing and photographs Mark McGranaghan.*

predator, armed riders and clawed human may be read as some form of commentary on the inter-related nature of violence perpetrated among, and between, human and non-human agents.

Between beasts and goods in the Maloti-Drakensberg

Turning now to the Maloti-Drakensberg, we described above that sheep and cattle bones dating to the late first and early second millennia AD were recovered from sites attributed to hunter-gatherers in the highlands there (Fig. 8.8). These finds (derived from Sehong-hong and Likoaeng) represent the earliest evidence of domesticated animals in the mountains, appearing roughly 500 years after agropastoralists implanted in the lower-lying midlands to the east (Mitchell *et al*. 2008). A third highland site (Pitsaneng) yielded the largest known assemblage of domesticated fauna in the Maloti-Drakensberg, including cattle, sheep/goats, and dogs and dating to the mid-second millennium AD (Hobart 2004). Taken in combination with other montane sites containing metals and domestic crops – finds associated with agropastoralists but here not always found in a coherent 'package' – from the last two millennia, we are left with the impression that the Maloti-Drakensberg were home to people who could selectively incorporate animals and other elements

of new domestic technology within an environment that was somewhat hostile to settled farming (Mitchell 2009a, 2009b).

Rock arts in the Maloti-Drakensberg can elaborate on this picture somewhat, but suffer from a lack of chronological precision, especially with respect to the older end of this sequence. Interpretations of arts featuring cattle often emphasize the stress of this period of contact, suggesting that the appearance of painted cattle points to fundamental changes in hunter-gatherer society and economy. Campbell (1987) has argued that the arrival of cattle – physically and in art – signalled the transformation of forager life from one of egalitarianism to hierarchy, as cattle represented a form of 'exotic good' that created a path for skilled cattle raiders and shamans to distinguish themselves in a new, livestock-driven order. While Campbell maintained that painters likely did not keep or herd cattle for any length of time, Loubser & Laurens (1994) argued that art featuring cattle in the Caledon River valley pertained to painters who *had* achieved a measure of technical knowledge around keeping livestock, albeit on an *ad hoc* basis. Ouzman (2003) has similarly posited that paintings of cattle superimposed on or otherwise conflated with eland illustrates some contiguity between pastoralist and hunter-gatherer cultures.

Underpinning this body of rock art research, then, is the implication that the arrival of cattle in the subcontinent was a fairly calamitous event for aboriginal hunter-gatherers, precipitating economic and social transformations that usually ended in their assimilation, marginalization, and/or subjugation, and which was exacerbated during the colonial period (Dowson 1994). Certainly, the view that mobile cohorts of mountain-dwellers existed at the periphery of large agropastoralist chiefdoms and colonial governments is not inaccurate, as demonstrated by both pre-colonial archaeological finds, and colonial-era rock arts and historical evidence (King & Challis 2017; King 2019). However, characterizations of these early encounters among hunter-gatherers, farmers, and cattle as pernicious are based in large part on generalized economic models of farming and foraging rather than on direct evidence. Indeed, finds from Sehonghong, Likoaeng, Pitsaneng, and (across the Escarpment) Moor Park disclosing a mixture of foraging and farming resources illustrate that relations among these constituencies may have been more supportive or collaborative, especially during times of climatic stress (Whitelaw 2009). What is necessary, then, is a greater focus on the nature of the relationships between humans and domestic animals,

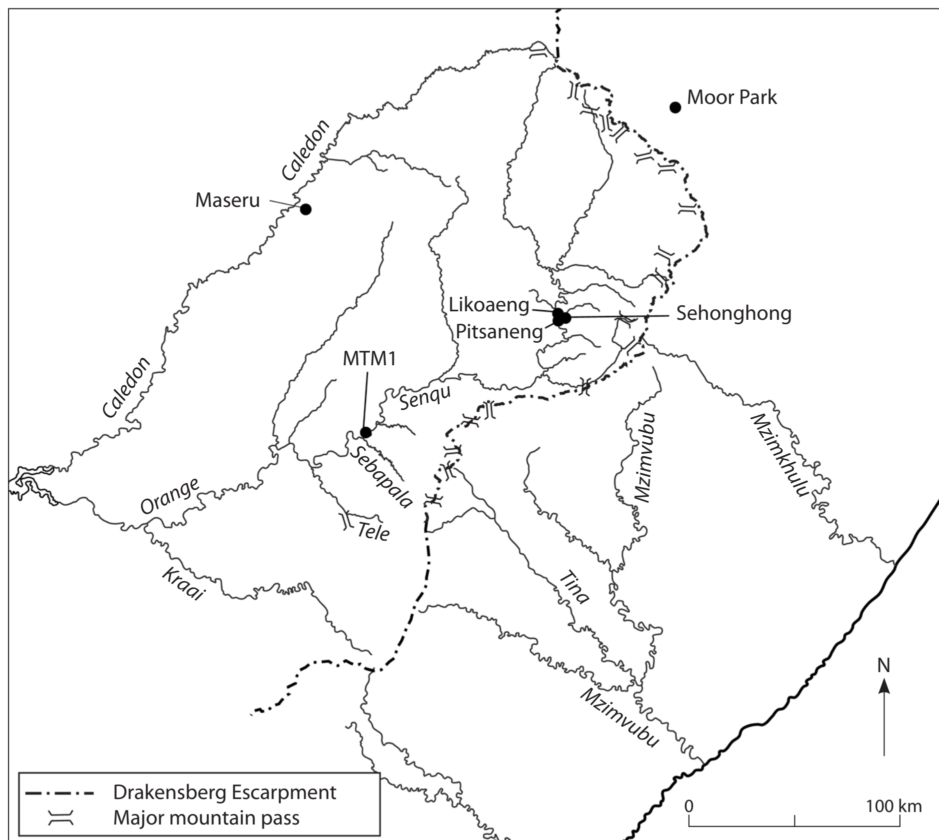


Figure 8.8. *Map showing significant archaeological sites in the Maloti-Drakensberg.*

Figure 8.9. *Re-drawing of MTM1 Panel. Image courtesy and copyright The Rock Art Research Institute, South Africa, www.sarada.co.za. University of Witwatersrand. South African Rock Art Digital Archive Ref No. RARI-LES-MTM1-1R & 2R.*

both as economic resources and as agents capable of instigating social change. The past ten years have seen arguments along this line from zooarchaeology, particularly highlighting the need to take greater cognisance of animal behaviour when attempting to describe herd management strategies (e.g. Badenhorst 2002, 2010). While animal ethology has long been a major concern of rock art studies, this has not been extended to domestic stock.

We explore these ideas through one rock art site in the southern Maloti-Drakensberg, designated MTM1 (Fig. 8.9).[6] MTM1 consists of one major vertical panel featuring over 130 distinct images and a second smaller panel with only a handful of painted figures. While MTM1 contains an impressive array of material culture, and human and non-human figures, none of these offer much evidence to give a tight chronology. The presence of painted cattle in combination with

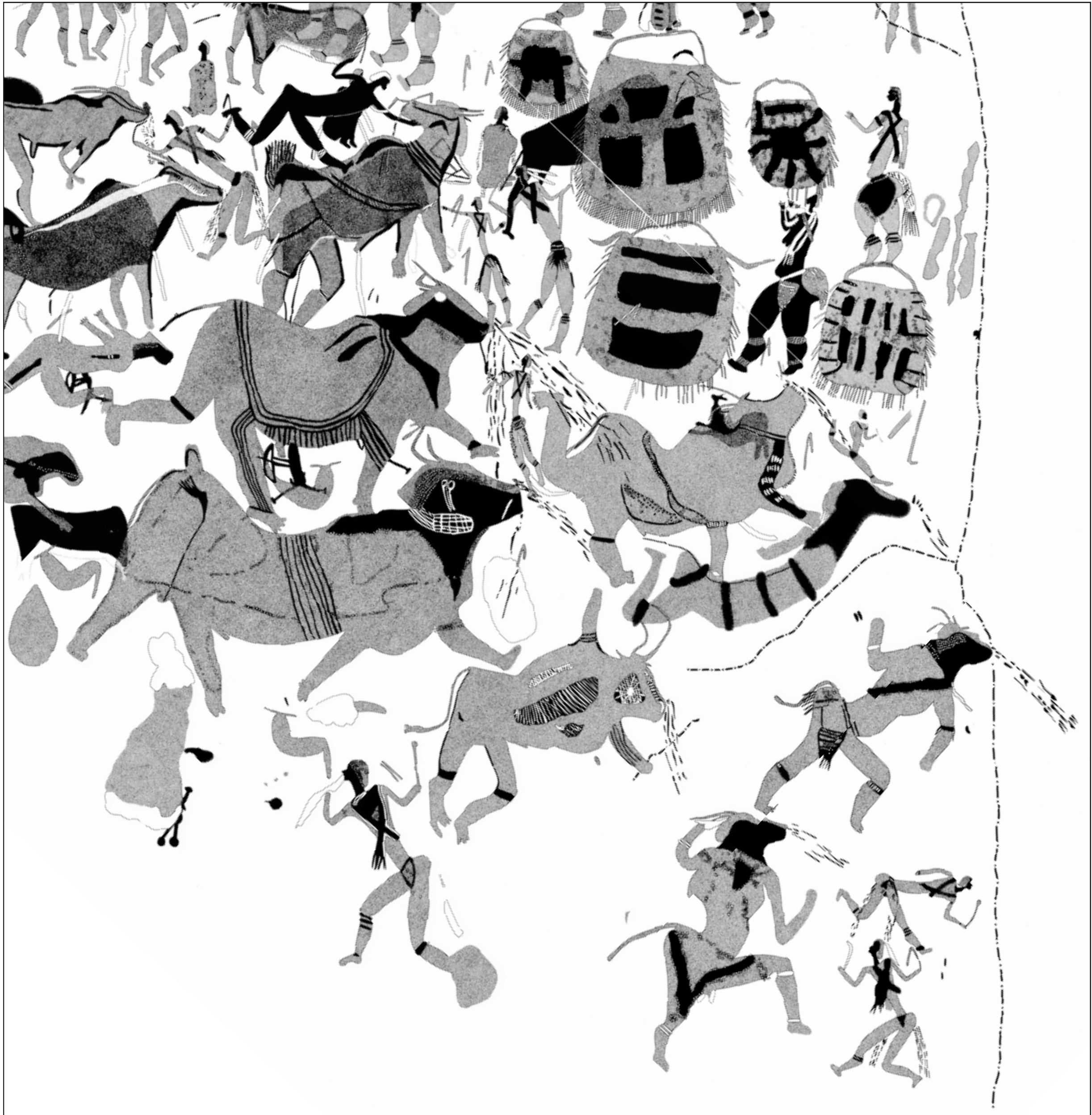


Figure 8.10. *Detail of cattle therianthropes and bags at MTM1. Image courtesy and copyright The Rock Art Research Institute, South Africa, www.sarada.co.za. University of Witwatersrand. South African Rock Art Digital Archive Ref No. RARI-LES-MTM1-1R & 2R.*

the earliest known archaeological evidence of cattle from Sehonghong and Likoaeng allows us to posit that much (if not all) of the MTM1 main panel was painted in the last 1,000 years.

Among the most distinctive features of MTM1 are cattle therianthropes (Fig. 8.10). These therianthropes and other features of the panel – processions, seated figures, clapping, figures bent at the waist and bleeding from the nose – fit comfortably within shamanistic interpretations of rock art that link these images with trance-based spiritual practices (described in the preceding section). Similarly, the presence of human figures engaging with the therianthropes by touching their chins and holding lines emanating from their bodies reference gestures that McGranaghan & Challis (2016) have described as 'taming': behaviours that demonstrate respect, moderation, and competence and thereby engender docility or 'nice' actions in other beings. For the moment, however, we want to set aside this interpretation and the bulk of the ethnography underpinning it, and suggest that minimally we can treat these images as describing cattle situated somewhere between the 'real' and the 'non-real' – as ambiguous or ambivalent beings clearly capable of action within the space of the panel.

The therianthropes at MTM1 are covered in elaborate geometric designs, which are echoed in the bags painted throughout the panel (Fig. 8.10); the fringes on the bags and on the patterns of two therianthropes offer particularly compelling evidence of this. It is too reductive to read the visual linkage or analogy between bags and cattle as a statement that cattle are equivalent to bags or material goods more broadly: the therianthropes themselves have no material or physical counterparts, which precludes a neat equation between object and beast. Instead, we suggest that the sense communicated visually in this panel is that, for the image-makers and for many image-consumers, cattle were related in some fundamental way with material culture. Put differently, some innate quality or qualities of cattle could persist across material culture and therianthropes.

If one utilized McGranaghan and Challis' ideas of 'taming' as an interpretive framework, one could expand upon this to suggest that cattle (especially their 'non-real' associations) also demanded certain behaviours from humans, and that these relationships were somehow contiguous with the animals' transformation into a bag or a hide. But whether one subscribes to this theory or not, from an ethological perspective it is clear that managing and moving cattle requires a knowledge of cattle behaviour and ecology. Cattle 'retain instinctive traits around food and water procurement', and so controlling cattle is less a matter of getting them to move than of keeping them contained (Beinart 2007, 19). Herding cattle, then, at a minimum required an awareness of where palatable grasses and adequate water sources were, and vigilance to ensure the animals did not wander off into the veld or become vulnerable to predators or to other herders. Additionally, and especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century, moving livestock involved traversing territories of chiefs, settlers, and government entities, often requiring herders (as well as cattle raiders) to move livestock quietly without attracting notice (Beinart 2007, 20). This is before delving into the nuances of extracting secondary products; recent evidence demonstrates that people in the Maloti-Drakensberg highlands were capable of extracting and perhaps storing dairy products in the late first millennium AD, and raises the question of whether hide processing accompanied this practice (Fewlass *et al*. 2020).

However, MTM1 should give pause before drawing a straight line from thinking of cattle as agents entangled with humans to cattle as material culture. At MTM1, the therianthropes can certainly be interpreted as placing humans and cattle within the same ontological frame, suggesting some sort of innate relationship between the two. But, visually and compositionally, this does not extend to bags: the bags are kept distinct from the therianthropes, and there are no instances of humans or cattle transforming into bags. This is not to deny a connection linking these three entities at some level, but rather to underscore that the connection does not take the form of human = cow = bag, therefore human = bag. In the panel's imagery, something puts a distance between hybrid beings and material culture but something else works to bridge that distance. The aesthetic, affective qualities of the cows' hides – their patterns and possibly even their colouring – relates beasts to bags but on terms that are visually different from hybridization.

This is the sort of ambivalence or ambiguity described at the beginning of this chapter: at MTM there is enough information to suggest that the ontological relationships among humans, cows, and material culture are uneven, but perhaps not enough to understand the point where beasts became goods. Of course, the wide array of ethnography surrounding cattle and the 'bovine mystique' in southern Africa could provide a pathway to complete this picture (Ferguson 1985; Comaroff & Comaroff 2005; cf. Hoag 2018). But the point here is, in part, to return to earlier discussions of the wild/domesticate dualism in southern Africa. If this dualism is reaffirmed by economic models that keep hunter-gatherers separate from pastoralists and agropastoralists, and if this separation is based largely

on understandings of cattle as short-term resources *versus* durable goods in a pastoralist or agropastoralist economy, this re-framing of cattle as serving socially significant roles that *do not* rely on relationships of exchange or value may offer a way to shift the terms of the wild/domestic debate.

Conclusion

Our two case studies demonstrate the potentials of framing southern African experiences of new domesticates in ontological terms. In a sense, this involves closing off some familiar lines of enquiry in order to open new ones: setting aside subsistence-based identities like 'hunter-gatherer' and 'pastoralist' and the packages of language and technologies that they connote, and choosing not to follow these designations into their respective ethnographies and formal analogies. Making these interpretive choices helps to keep a focus on context-dependent relationships between humans and non-humans, newcomers and first-comers, and the agencies involved in negotiating or experimenting with these actors in changing circumstances. This is not to say that understanding frontiers through the lens of subsistence and economy is incorrect. Instead, we suggest that changing markets and resource availabilities entailed transformations in how animals and their humans circulated, valued, and were managed – and thus to their conditions of being.

In this, we join conversations both within southern Africa and the continent more broadly that seek to understand frontiers as places not just of assimilation, accommodation, or conflict, but as places where personhood itself was re-shaped (e.g. Monroe & Ogundiran 2012; Ogundiran 2014). These discussions have largely been confined to mercantilist hubs in West and East Africa; we suggest that the views from the Strandberg and the Maloti-Drakensberg can offer some enrichment. To the extent that coping with new materials and beings on frontiers often demands that people re-examine their tastes, their historical self-awareness, and their desires for the future (Stahl 2002), the ontological glimpses of ambiguity and environmental change described here represent a useful vocabulary to bring to our discussions of encounters and exchanges.

Finally, and turning to the historical aspect of our discussion, this paper sits suspended between two compelling but somewhat oppositional disciplinary forces. On the one hand, Africanist scholarship in history and anthropology has encouraged critical revision of how we conceptualize different forms of consciousness, personhood, and spirituality in past African populations (e.g. Coplan 2003; Schoenbrun 2006; Straight 2008). These critiques have interrogated the degree to which our ability to examine these sorts of consciousness is limited by the disruptive roles that religion and belief have played on the African continent over the last few centuries: as instruments of power, as epistemologies, as schema that sought to supplant or obscure indigenous ways of conceiving personhood (Landau 1999; Crossland 2013, 2014; Arndt 2016). On the other hand, archaeology is moving in what can appear as an almost oppositional direction increasingly concerned with developing a more-detailed picture of how past people experienced the world around them by exploring the natures and capabilities of a broader range of actors, including non-humans. This necessitates interrogating the relationships between humans, biota, and the collection of agents that together make up environments – which lead us squarely into discussions of where the dividing lines between humans and non-humans lie, and in turn are questions that tread close to the terrain of consciousness and spirituality. Our argument here is that within this terrain there is space for both historical awareness and ontological possibility, and that rock arts – their content and materiality – afford a valuable means of navigating or even bridging these disciplinary debates. Without wading into a discussion of religion or belief and their impacts on African material and spiritual life (see King 2018; King & McGranaghan 2018, 638–9), we have illustrated a way of recovering some senses of being and personhood available in peoples' domestic worlds, and the non-human actors that helped to shape these worlds.

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Notes

1. At the time we write this, the authors of a 2012 paper reporting early sheep remains from Leopard's Cave have announced that this identification was mistaken, and the date of *c*. 2200 BP for the arrival of sheep is invalid; see Pleurdeau *et al*. 2012. Earlier cattle remains dated to *c*. 149 BC–AD 51 in Botswana are not associated with this package of agropastoralist material culture, see Lander & Russell 2018.

2. Although it bears noting that where 'Khoe' rock art has been postulated as a corpus distinct from hunter-gatherer art, the suggested distribution area for this art has no associated Khoe ethnography; see comments in Smith & Ouzman 2004.
3. Climate events such as the Little Ice Age (*c.* AD 1500–1800) provide some of the most compelling evidence for this while also describing an extreme set of circumstances. Particularly in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, Iron Age scholarship has suggested that cyclical drought during the mid-second millennium AD, coupled with declining overall temperatures, made crop agriculture untenable and forced otherwise settled agropastoralists to re-locate to higher elevation, including higher into the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains and on the southern Highveld. Once here, archaeologists have hypothesized that accommodating relationships with hunter-gatherers would have facilitated the now-mobile agropastoralists' transition to less settled economies that relied more heavily on game and gathered foods (Whitelaw 2009).
4. Dating engraved rock art is notoriously challenging, and patination can be affected considerably by local micro-environmental factors (e.g. Morris 1988). Nonetheless, this difference remains suggestive.
5. Indeed, campaigns of eradication of mammalian predators in the Northern Cape drew heavily on tropes established by the 'total extinction confidently hoped for' of local forager groups (Beinart 2003, 196, 205–7; Storey 2008, 80–1; Adhikari 2010).
6. The site's full name on the African Rock Art Digital Archive is LES MTM1, but it has also been referred to in the literature as 'Mount Moorosi' (Mokhanya 2008). Its archaeological deposit has been called by yet another name: 'Woodlot'.

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The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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