1

Setting

The only true voyage of discovery . . . would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes.

— Marcel Proust, *The Captive*

Southern African rock art research is at a crossroads. The productive journey that brought us here began some forty-five years ago by recognising mutually illuminating and empirical connections between southern San[1] rock paintings and San ethnography, further enhanced by documentary sources (Lewis-Williams 1977a, 1981a). Since then, the relevance of ethnographic and documentary sources to the interpretation of San rock art has been demonstrated time and again (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978; Lewis-Williams 1980a, 1981a; Yates *et al.* 1985; Yates & Manhire 1991; Ouzman 2001; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004b, 2012b; Challis 2005; Rifkin 2009; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011; McGranaghan 2017).

The advance in the interpretation of San rock paintings has had several profound ramifications. For a start, it was part of the impetus behind the paradigmatic shift from seeing rock art comprehensively as 'the art' of idle and primitive peoples to seeing it as the religious and political imagery of specific indigenous societies in particular social and historical circumstances (e.g. Vinnicombe 2009a [1976]; Lewis-Williams 1977a, 1981a; Dowson 1994; Challis 2008). Recognition of the religious and political nature of the art allowed for more nuanced studies of the role of rock paintings in processes of contact and interaction between different southern African peoples (e.g. C. Campbell 1986, 1987; Jolly 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2005, 2006a, 2007; Eastwood 2003; Challis 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Pinto 2014; Hollmann 2015; Challis & Sinclair-Thomson 2022) as well as related changes and historical processes evidenced by the art (e.g. Vinnicombe 2009a [1976]; Mazel 1992, 1993; Dowson, 1993, 1994; Loubser & Laurens 1994; Blundell 2004, 2021; Mallen 2008; Challis 2008, 2009, 2012; Henry 2010; Skinner 2017; Mullen 2018; Sinclair-Thomson 2020).

Rock art researchers' use of ethnography and anthropological theory directly influenced interpretation in southern African archaeological research (e.g. Ouzman & Wadley 1997: 286; Deacon & Deacon 1999: 166, see also Bradfield *et al.* 2019; Bradfield *et al.* 2021). Much effort, therefore, has gone into establishing both relative and absolute chronologies (Chapter Seven) with the aim not only to match dates from rock paintings to those from excavated sequences but also to integrate research about the two different contexts (e.g. Burkitt 1928; Battiss 1948; Pager 1971, 1973; van der Merwe *et al.* 1987; Loubser 1993; Mazel & Watchman 1997, 2003; Mguni 1997; Russell 1997, 2000, 2012; Pearce 2002, 2006, 2010; Swart 2004; Mazel 2009a, 2009b, 2022; Vinnicombe 2009a; Bonneau 2016; Bonneau *et al.* 2011; Bonneau *et al.* 2012; Bonneau, Pearce *et al.* 2017; Bonneau, Staff *et al.* 2017; Witelson 2022a).

Social theory has been a key component in the production of diverse knowledge about the art over the last half-century. This includes grand theories of society such as structural functionalism, structural Marxism and structuration, as well as smaller-scale theories of aspects of society such as embodiment, art history, gender studies, identity, cultural creolisation and new animism. However, no one social theory or approach to southern African rock art can pay equal attention to all the topics that researchers have addressed.

What is needed now is some way of uniting otherwise diverse information about the practice of image-making. How can we combine the many insights about San rock art derived from researchers' varied theoretical frameworks? How are we to move beyond debate about the nature of San rock art and the knowledge produced about it (Chapter Six)? How do we coordinate disparate ideas and questions about San rock art?

It is axiomatic in post-processual archaeology that material culture is meaningfully constituted (Hodder & Hutson 2003); few kinds of material culture reveal their meaningful constitutions as readily as rock art. Indeed, however alien the meanings of rock art may be to researchers, it goes without saying that it was meaningful to those who made and viewed it. We could easily assume that, simply because rock paintings are often intelligible images of people and animals, we can understand them without further intellectual work. If not visually impaired, most of the human population navigates the world using primarily visual information. Today, in addition to taking in their surroundings, the eyes of a person who lives in a cosmopolitan metropolis will see countless letters, images, photographs, icons, logos and digital media of all

[1] The body of rock art discussed in this book is usually referred to as 'San rock art' because of the demonstrable historical and ethnographic ties between the art and southern African San peoples. However, both 'San' and 'Bushmen' are pseudo-collective terms which enter the written record only when Europeans arrive in southern African. They have specific historical meanings that go beyond economic and language groups (e.g. Barnard 1992). By using these terms in this text, I explicitly reject their pejorative connotations and do not suggest unchanging social circumstances between the distant past and the present. When I quote from historical sources, I retain historically contingent terms and give accepted terms or modern spellings in square parentheses. Not to do so would risk homogenising nuances in meaning and whitewash the realities of the past (Parkington 1984).

kinds — all designed to be regular, consistent and easy to understand. This global, highly social visual 'language' is comfortably familiar to most of us but sufficiently different from the San practice of rock painting to have nothing to do with it.

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that far more is needed to decipher and comprehend the meanings of San rock art, painted or engraved, than an ability merely to recognise images and relate to them in some way. The appropriation of San imagery for use in commercial contexts is a well-known example of de-contextualisation (e.g. Dowson 1996; B. Smith 2016), and the classification of rock art under the umbrella term 'art', despite several merits, risks oversimplifying the peculiarities of *this* art.

When working with San rock art, it is necessary to recognise that it comprises fundamentally religious imagery (concerning interaction with the spirit realm and the beings who dwell there) with complex and layered sets of socially significant associations that operate at numerous levels across several social contexts. In that sense, it is less like most of the images we see daily and more similar to other religious visual arts, such as the imagery in European illuminated manuscripts. Splendid, brilliant and beautiful as they are, the manuscripts' images are incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with European Christian languages, history and belief (Binski & Panayotova 2005; Keene 2019). There is more to be understood from the pictures in Figure 1.1 than the story of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will bear and give birth to Jesus. For example, a halo of holy light surrounds Mary's head, and she is touched by rays of sunlight representing the Holy Spirit. The composite human-animal creatures that surround the illustration derive from sirens and centaurs, beings that, in turn, derive from overarching concepts about the relationship between humans and the divine. Collectively, they 'form a warning against being deceived by the allurements of the world' (Baxter 1998: 36).

Figure 1.1: A medieval French illuminated manuscript made by an associate of Georges Trubert (active Provence, France 1469–1508 CE). 'The Annunciation', ca. 1480–1490 CE. Tempera colours, gold leaf, gold and silver paint, and ink on parchment. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles Ms. 48 (93.ML.6), fol. 21. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

In addition to drawing attention to meaningfully constituted material culture, post-processual archaeologists also drew attention to meaning *in action*. Traditionally, archaeologists ask questions about what rock paintings depict, their makers, chronology, materials, techniques and what they might mean. Such questions take a narrow view of 'the art' as mere evidence of past peoples' activities. They imply that the relevance of rock art imagery lies exclusively in the part it plays in a much broader context, perhaps as an expression or reflection of some now unknowable social institution.

In contrast, focusing on meaning in action forces our attention to the practices and processes associated with image-making. It forces us to confront otherwise tacit assumptions about what rock art itself evidences. Is it enough to recognise that a rock painting of an animal represents a living species? Or should we first recognise that the image is necessarily more than mere representation? Thinking about practices and processes leads to different questions that directly confront the relationship between rock art's content (motifs, subject matter, symbolism) and context (social and physical setting, landscape, associated material archaeology). Much previous research has necessarily and overwhelmingly emphasised the images themselves and their meanings. Though it was not ignored, research has not focused on the practices and processes surrounding the images because San rock painters are no longer observable.

In this endeavour, performance theory (Schechner 1988, 2013, Chapter Two) provides a means to consider practices and processes adequately. In theorising a universal feature of human (and indeed animal) behaviour, it has the power to coordinate disparate ideas and insights about rock art research. 'Performance' does not refer merely to actors playing characters in the theatre: performances feature in every aspect of human life, from personal interactions to play, ritual, sports, business and education (Schechner 1988: x). In this book, which considers a range of predominantly ritualised cultural behaviours related to making, viewing and using rock paintings in southern Africa (Chapters Five and Six), I investigate rock paintings as the material traces and products of

previously performed activities. But images are only part of the story. As others have suggested, image-making 'was a performance that may have been more important than the images that resulted' (Turpin & Eling 2014: 189). The images themselves are components of something larger and more complex (Chapter Fourteen).

1.1. The Wodehouse District

To illustrate the efficacy of performance theory, I draw in this book on a study of rock paintings at 190 sites in (or just beyond) the Wodehouse Magisterial District[2] ('Wodehouse District' hereafter) of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province (Figures 1.2 and 1.3, Appendix One). This book therefore makes novel theoretical as well as empirical contributions concerning, in particular, the relative sequence of rock paintings in the northern parts of the Eastern Cape (Chapter Seven); change in that sequence (Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten); the area's abundance of feline images (Chapter Eleven); performances of rainmaking (Chapters Twelve and Thirteen); and the larger, complex whole to which image-making performances belonged (Chapter Fourteen).

The Wodehouse District was named after Sir Philip Edmond Wodehouse, Governor of Cape Colony from 1861–1870 (Pettman 1985 [1931]: 124). Dordrecht is the biggest town in the Wodehouse District, with the much smaller village of Rossouw lying some 31 km to the northeast. Dordrecht is known for its frigid winters (Rosenthal 1973: 160; Raper 1987: 85) and was founded in 1856 (Raper 1987: 95) or 1857 (Rosenthal 1973: 160; Pettman 1985: 100) by Rev. Andrew Murray of the Dutch Reformed Church (Rosenthal 1973: 160) after 'the people living in the region of Boschrand [farm] requested the church council of Aliwal North to found a new parish (22 Dec. 1855)' (Nienaber 1965: 89) because 'Bushmen and [amaXhosa]' made the journey to the Aliwal North church too treacherous (Aucamp 1971: 22; Wallace 1975: 23, see also Ellenberger & Macgregor 1912: 160, 195; King 2014). Boschrand farm was subsequently bought, and the new town was named by its founding Dutch community after Dordrecht in Holland, where, during 1618–1619, a historic Synod of Reformed churches had taken place (Nienaber, 1963: 20, 1965: 89; Raper 1987: 95).

The Wodehouse District encompasses roughly 3,000 km^2 of the Maloti-Drakensberg's southwestern foothills that extend toward the southern coast. The northeastern part of the Wodehouse District encompasses the western edge of the Witteberg (or *Wittebergen* as the mountains are named in Afrikaans) and Drakensberg ranges. In the southern part of the Wodehouse District is the Stormberg mountain range (or *Stormberge*), which stretches east-west between Molteno and Dordrecht.

Confusion surrounds the origins of the name. Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Collins reports in his 1809 *Journal of a Tour to the North-Eastern Boundary, the Orange River, and the Storm Mountains* (Moodie 1838, part V: 1) that his party travelled to the 'Storm Mountains,' but they did not travel in the Stormberg: the party crossed the Stormbergspruit, a stream (confusingly) to the northwest of the Stormberg range, and then followed the Kraai River into the *Wittebergen* rather than the *Stormberge*. These two ranges are, however, essentially continuous and form the southern extent of the Great Escarpment of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg (Hutton 1887: 41, Figure 1.3).

While the Stormberg is known for its impressive summer thunderstorms with lightning strikes that regularly cause veld fires, it is also said by some that the range may have been named after a colonial-period San man whose Afrikaans name was *Storm* (*cf*. Steyn & Steyn 1962: 19). Complicating the matter is a single mountain, also called Stormberg, roughly 40 km north of the range (Figure 1.3). Other isolated mountains in this area, such as Pronksberg ('Pronk's Mountain') and Telemuchuskop ('Telemuchus Head'), suggest the possibility that the lone mountain rather than the range may be named for an individual (*cf*. Aucamp 1971: 152–53).[3] The Wodehouse District and the Stormberg range are practically synonymous, and, as we shall see, it is plausible that some of the rock paintings in the area are connected to stormy summer weather (Chapters Twelve and Thirteen).

The Wodehouse District has a deep and interesting past (e.g. Wallace 1975). Today, the Stormberg is well-known for its geological (e.g. Dunn 1873) and palaeontological (e.g. Broom 1911) riches and for events that played out during the Anglo-Boer war (e.g. Reitz 1929: 212; Pakenham 1979: 553). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, only a handful of colonists had ventured beyond the Cape Colony's eastern frontier and travelled near the Stormberg. Before Collins's party in 1809 (Moodie 1838, part V; Theal 1890; Hutton 1887), there was the colonial official Sir John Barrow (1801, 1806a) in 1797, and in 1801 the missionary Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp and the frontiersman Coenraad de Buys (London Missionary Society 1804; A. Schoeman 1933; Enklaar 1988). This book is, however, concerned overwhelmingly with the period before the eastward expansion of the colonial frontier into the Stormberg (*cf*. Sinclair-Thomson 2021).

The Wodehouse District is rich in rock paintings, many of which are considered in this book. The Wodehouse

[2] Mapping of rock art sites by the Rock Art Research Institute began and, for the sake of consistency, continues to use magisterial district boundaries. A list of the 190 sites can be found in Appendix One.

[3] The current owners of the Pronksberg hold that 'Pronk' was a 'Bushman'. Some farm labourers on farms around Dordrecht bear the surname 'Smit'. This family probably have genetic links to a San population, but are unlikely ethnic San (Jolly 1996b). A related film by Frans Prins and Richard Wicksteed *Indawo Zikathixo (In God's Places)* (1997, 52 min) is available from www.der.org. There is an exhibit in Dordrecht's Anderson Museum with portraits of several Smit elders taken and presented by the late Irene Staehelin (on another San descendant who lived on a local farm, see Ouzman 1997: 85).

Figure 1.2: Map of southern Africa showing the location of the study area, San groups and places mentioned in the text.

District's boundary marks the spatial limits of the study area and arbitrarily constrains the number of sites considered, but the Wodehouse District itself is not a distinct rock art region isolated from surrounding areas. It merely denotes a manageable and comprehensible piece of a larger whole. In this part of southern Africa, around the Maloti-Drakensberg massif, rock art research has tended to concentrate around Barkly East, Nqanqarhu (formerly Maclear), Lesotho, and the eastern Free State. Research in those areas forms the backdrop for this book, which focuses on the lesser-known art in the Wodehouse District.

Rock paintings from the Stormberg were first copied in the nineteenth century by the geologist George William Stow (1822–1882, Stow & Bleek 1930), and documentation continues in various forms today. Researchers have tended to revisit known sites and, as I show in later chapters, a great deal of the art that is highly significant to the area's plexus of performances (Chapter Fourteen) has consequently remained unknown. For the first time, this book presents a synthesis of the rock paintings, previously known and newly discovered, in the Wodehouse District using a novel theoretical approach.

Rock paintings in and around the Stormberg have long been known to southern African rock art research. The Cambridge archaeologist Miles C. Burkitt (1928: 135) wrote that '. . . in the districts round Molteno and Dordrecht we are touching the classic country, the art of which was described and copied by Stow and in part also most ably published by Miss Helen Tongue'. Researchers today no longer consider the Stormberg 'classic country': far more attention has been paid to sites along the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Escarpment (Figure 1.2). One reason is that the Stormberg is significantly farther from Johannesburg, where the University of the Witwatersrand's Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) has been based for many years. Another reason is that the Wodehouse District's rock paintings are generally not as well-preserved as those along the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Escarpment. While many factors may be responsible for differential preservation, one key difference between these two neighbouring areas is that Wodehouse District sites are typically in or on sandstones of the Elliot and Molteno Formations of the Karoo Supergroup. In contrast, those in the Drakensberg, which sits at higher altitudes than the Stormberg, are typically in or on Clarens Formation sandstone, formerly known as 'Cave Sandstone' because of the 'caves' that form in it as it weathers (e.g. Bordy *et al.* 2005).

In Burkitt's day, copyists operated closer to the Stormberg. Stow travelled widely in southern Africa and copied paintings at two farms in the Wodehouse District (Rosenthal & Goodwin 1953), at a site in the Dordrecht Kloof (Stow & Bleek 1930: plate 19) and visited painted sites along

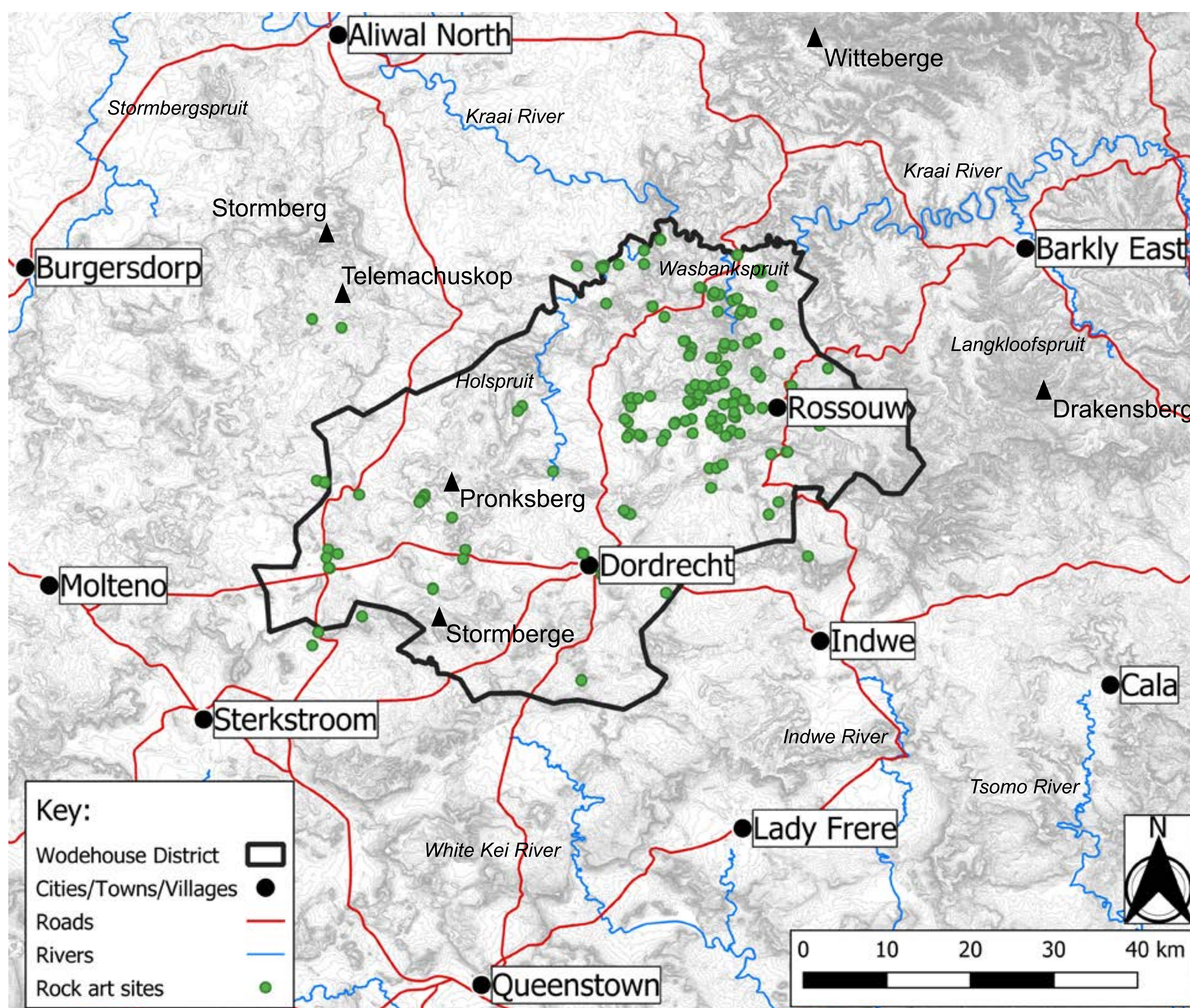

Figure 1.3: A map of the study area showing the spread of the 190 rock art sites considered in this book and places mentioned in the text.

the Washbank River (Stow 1905: 195–96). Helen Tongue, another copyist about whom little is known, was a teacher at the former Rockland Girls' High School in the Eastern Cape town of Cradock alongside her friend and colleague, Dorothea Bleek (Deacon 1996: 7; Bank 2006: 3). Both she and Dorothea were, therefore, based relatively close to the Stormberg and visited one of the Dordrecht sites at which Stow copied paintings and nine other sites in the Wodehouse District (Tongue 1909).

The initial visits made by Stow and Tongue paved the way for later copyists. These include Otto Moszeik (1910), Burkitt (1928), Martha McGuffie (Nelson 1937; F. Thackeray 1983; Woodhouse 1992a; D. Morris 1992), Walter Battiss (1948), Murray Schoonraad (SAAB[4] covers No. 64 Dec 1961, No. 150 Dec 1989, No. 160 1994), Reverend T. M. Wurts (SAAB cover No. 93 April 1969), Jalmar and Ione Rudner (1970), R. 'Ginger' Townley Johnson (1986 [1979], SAAB covers No. 134 1981, No. 156 1992, No. 159 1994), and the artist Stephen Townley Bassett (2001, 2008). All these workers copied images predominantly from the sites visited by Stow or Tongue and from only a handful of other Wodehouse District sites.

Another important name is Edward John Dunn (1844–1937), an Australian geologist who took an interest in the Stormberg's stone tools and rock paintings when he mapped coal deposits for the Cape government. Dunn (1880) contributed an important paper in the early days of South African archaeology that discussed stone tools he collected. Many years later, he wrote a book about the same material with added detail about San people (Dunn 1931). He removed several rock paintings (Figure 1.4) that are now at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, together with much of his collection of stone tools (P. Mitchell 2013: 21; Pearce & Hobart m.s.). Dunn is significant because, though he was a champion for the archaeology and rock art of the Stormberg, his influence waned when he returned to Australia in 1886 after fifteen years in South Africa. In the following years, his work was cited initially but gradually fell to the wayside because

[4] *South African Archaeological Bulletin.*

Figure 1.4: Rock paintings that Dunn removed from unknown locations in the Stormberg area. They were traced and redrawn by David Pearce in 2006. 2004.142.1–5. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

the relevance of the Stormberg was not re-established in tandem with contemporary developments in the discipline's questions and aims (Goodwin 1935; Ellerby 2003). None of his contemporaries boasted the Stormberg's archaeological riches or argued its value with the authorities of the time (P. Mitchell 2013: 22; see also Ellerby 2003).

Also noteworthy is Clarence 'Peter' van Riet Lowe, a South African civil engineer and pioneering archaeologist. Although he did not make rock art copies himself, van Riet Lowe (1952: 19, 30–31) published a list of Wodehouse District sites in his now-dated survey of South African rock art sites. In more recent decades, once colour photography had become a common means to record rock paintings (Willcox 1956), Willie and San Steyn (1962) published several photographs of Stormberg and Bamboesberg rock art in a little-known journal article that was later translated and republished as a book chapter without the photographs (Steyn & Steyn 1971). Better known is Neil Lee and

Hebert 'Bert' Woodhouse's 1970 book, *Art on the Rocks of southern Africa*, in which they included photographs of Wodehouse District rock art.[5] Woodhouse (1979) also published further examples in a later book. Today, avocationists such as Bassett (2001, 2008) and retired journalist and author Ben Maclennan continue to engage actively with the rock art in the Wodehouse District.

In addition to the copies and photographs of avocationists, selected images from Wodehouse District rock art sites have been photographed or traced and redrawn by research teams. These include the members of the National Museum, Bloemfontein, under Sven Ouzman, and staff at the Albany Museum, Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown). Members of RARI, including David Pearce, Jeremy Hollmann and the former Rapid Response Team, Sam Challis and Jamie Hampson, also visited Wodehouse District sites.[6]

Ouzman published some re-drawings of Wodehouse District rock paintings, most of which are examples of selected images or motifs in thematic studies (Ouzman 1995: 11, 1997: 93, 95, 99, 1998: 35–37, see also SAAB cover No. 165 1997). More recently, Dawn Green has considered images of aprons and human figures from at least two sites in the Wodehouse District (Green & Eastwood 2008; Green 2020, 2022). Woodhouse produced chiefly thematic publications (e.g. Lee & Woodhouse 1970; Woodhouse & Lee 1971; Woodhouse 1979, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992b, 1994, 1997). Thematic studies are typical of the kind of research in which Wodehouse District rock art images usually feature (e.g. Willcox 1963: 26; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1999 [1989]: 86).

Prominent painted themes in the Wodehouse District's art include felines and leonine humans (Battiss 1948: 165; R. Johnson 1986 [1979]: 52; Woodhouse 1983, 1984, 1985b; Stroobach 1984), vultures (R. Johnson 1986, 40; Stroobach 1984; Woodhouse 1984), rain and rain-animals (Woodhouse 1985a, 1989, 1992b; Ouzman 1998), elephants (Burkitt 1928: 138; Woodhouse 1985a; R. Johnson 1986: 40), cattle and associated human figures (Lee & Woodhouse 1970: 150, 151; R. Johnson 1986: 48, 52; Woodhouse 1987), and sheep (e.g. Battiss 1948: 214–15; Willcox 1963; Cooke 1965: 284, 1969: 117; Manhire *et al.* 1986).

This book continues a long history of interest in the Wodehouse District's rock paintings, but it differs from previous work in three significant ways. First, it uses digital photography and digital enhancements only relatively recently adopted in southern African rock art research. Most of the photographs in this book were taken by the author. Unless stated otherwise, the images are the author's. Second, this book is concerned with two related scales of social activity with constant and consistent movements between them. One scale concerns acts of image-making, and the second considers collections of images at different sites and their relationships in time (even if relative) and space. This is novel because studies of southern African rock art typically consider the imagery of single sites or suites of sites in valleys, hills and ridges or from multiple sites in multiple valleys in a region. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it considers all the art in one study area from the coordinating perspective of performance theory. This theoretical perspective was first outlined in a previous publication (Witelson 2018a, 2019) and is substantially developed in this book using a corpus of southern African rock paintings.

1.2. Towards a plexus of performances

The rock paintings of the Wodehouse District demand study from a perspective guided by performance theory because of the many relationships implied by both the imagery and the sites themselves. How multiple rock art performances relate to one another is one of the new questions explored in this book. Though the Wodehouse District is the stage on which the rest of this book plays out, understanding the connections between the images, their makers, and the spaces in which they were painted requires that we switch from metaphors about performance to an in-depth consideration of the notion of performance itself.

[5] Lee's slide collection is now at the University of the Witwatersrand's Rock Art Research Institute. Woodhouse's slides are in the collections of the University of Pretoria.

[6] Digitised records are available from www.sarada.co.za. Hollmann's travel itinerary and field diary are filed in RARI's archive.