

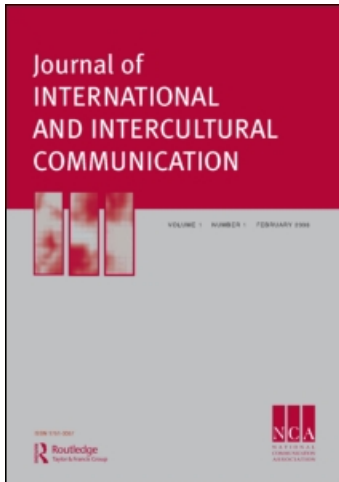
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# “Your Guess is as Good as Any”: Indeterminacy, Dialogue, and Dissemination in Interpretations of Native American Rock Art

Richard A. Rogers

*This essay examines the theme of the unknown meanings of Native American rock art in interpretive materials at rock art sites in order to explore the rhetorical constitution of indeterminacy in neocolonial contexts. The implications of indeterminacy are explored through Peters’s (1999) discussion of dissemination and dialogue as normative models of communication. This analysis demonstrates that indeterminacy is used to license appropriations and polysemic interpretations of the traces of indigenous cultures, thereby enabling the projection of Western cultural imaginings onto the rock art and discouraging engagement with the interiority of indigenous others.*

*Keywords: Dissemination; Indeterminacy; Interiority; Neocolonialism; Primitivism*

At Klare Spring in Death Valley National Park, an interpretive sign highlights the petroglyphs pecked into nearby rocks:

## Petroglyphs

Indian rock carvings are found throughout the western hemisphere. Indians living today deny any knowledge of their meaning. Are they family symbols, doodlings, or ceremonial markings? Your guess is as good as any. Do not deface—they cannot be replaced.

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This piece of interpretive rhetoric posits the meaning of its subject matter, petroglyphs, as indeterminate, presenting three possible interpretations for the indigenous rock art at Klare Spring in the form of a question and then providing an answer: “Your guess is as good as any.”

Although this statement can be interpreted as a flippant dismissal of rock art interpretation, this seems unlikely as the sign’s purpose would be to introduce the topic of rock art interpretation only to dismiss it. In addition, the sign’s closing line, “do not deface—they cannot be replaced,” implies that petroglyphs are a valuable resource. A more plausible interpretation of “your guess is as good as any” is that it refers to the many potential barriers to discovering the meaning of petroglyphs in the (pre)historic cultures that produced them. At least one of these barriers is referenced in the sign: A lack of knowledge on the part of living Native peoples due to a lack of cultural continuity with the (pre)historic cultures that produced the petroglyphs or, possibly, reluctance on the part of contemporary Native groups to share what they do know. Most literally, “your guess is as good as any” can be interpreted as a leveling of authority, granting the interpretations of visitors a degree of insight that is equivalent to anyone else’s, including contemporary Native Americans of the region, anthropologists, and archaeologists.

Signs, pamphlets, and other materials offering information to visitors of Native American rock art sites make up an interesting body of rhetorical artifacts: A body of symbols whose subject matter is another body of symbols whose interpretation is posited as problematic. On the one hand, the Klare Spring sign licenses polysemic interpretations of rock art, taking the (apparent) lack of knowledge about rock art as a basis for empowering contemporary visitors to make their own diverse meanings. On the other, the sign announces the indeterminacy of rock art’s meaning, the futility of interpretation in the face of an (apparent) indigenous denial of relevant knowledge. Examined constitutively, the sign’s rhetoric establishes a particular relationship between the petroglyphs’ producers and their contemporary viewers, a relationship of cultural and temporal separation that consigns the petroglyphs’ meaning to the realm of the indeterminate while leveling interpretive authority, licensing a proliferation of interpretations inspired by the material traces of (pre)historic indigenous cultures. Paradoxically, as the relationship between the rock art’s (pre)historic producers and contemporary viewers is constituted as one of profound separation, the distance between contemporary visitors and the rock art itself is collapsed through invitations to interpret the rock art through their own frameworks.

Although indigenous rock art imagery is itself an interesting case study of indeterminacy and polysemy, this essay examines not rock art but the theme of the unknown meanings of (pre)historic Native American rock art in interpretive materials associated with rock art sites in the southwestern United States. This focus on the interpretive materials enables exploration of the rhetorical constitution of indeterminacy and the licensing of polysemic interpretations of the material traces of indigenous cultures. To explore the implications of this neocolonial rhetoric of indeterminacy, I begin with a review of the role of representations of Native Americans in constituting them as a primitive Other, which provides a framework for

understanding the significance of the contemporary interpretation of rock art. I then identify the types of claims involving the unknown meaning of rock art present in interpretive materials at rock art sites. Next, I turn to a brief discussion of polysemy and indeterminacy to clarify the operation of these claims. John Durham Peters's (1999) metatheoretical examination of dialogue and dissemination is then used to identify the complex operations of this rhetoric, specifically the rhetorical and ethical implications of posited indeterminacy and licensed polysemy in neocolonial contexts. Finally, a contrary case, in which interpretive materials do not posit indeterminacy or license polysemic readings of Native American rock art, is used to further clarify the relationship between this rhetoric of indeterminacy, neocolonialism, and indigenous interiority. This analysis demonstrates how licensing polysemic readings of rock art imagery enables the remaking of the (actual) indigenous other, creating an abstracted Other that justifies and enacts neocolonial relations not only through compensatory projections but also by a refusal to access indigenous interiority.

### Indians as Other

The neocolonial relationship between Euro-American and Native American cultures is maintained, in part, through the construction of dominant images of the "Indian." Scholars have examined the development of dominant images of Native Americans through a variety of media representations (e.g., Bird, 1996). Edward Curtis's photographs (1896–1930) depicted the "vanishing race" (Lyman, 1982) and James Fraser's 1915 sculpture "The End of the Trail" cemented the idea that Native Americans were at the end of their cultural journey (van Lent, 1996). Films and television programs from the Cowboy-and-Indian genre dominant from the 1930s to the 1960s highlighted Indians as uncivilized savages while films such as 1990s *Dances with Wolves* reflected a shift toward more positive representations and Western identifications with the noble savage (Torgovnick, 1996). With the rise of the counterculture and environmental movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Native Americans became strongly associated with environmental stewardship, an association further developed in films such as *Dances with Wolves* and Disney's 1995 animated *Pocahontas* (Buescher & Ono, 1996; Torgovnick, 1996). New Age commodities and ideologies extend this image, often linking Native spirituality to environmentalism as a primitivist cure for the "dis-ease" of Western civilization (Torgovnick, 1996). New Age practitioners, the mythopoetic men's movement, and professional sports teams and universities appropriate Native American myths, symbols, spiritualities, and costumes, continuing a long Euro-American tradition of "playing Indian" (Churchill, 1994; Deloria, 1998). Consistent with the "vanishing race" theme, dominant images of Native Americans remain rooted in the past, with few prominent representations of contemporary Indians.

These representations do not stand in for specific individuals or Native cultures, even when they appear to do so (e.g., Chief Seattle and Pocahontas). Elements from specific cultures are appropriated and combined into images and meanings that obscure and distort the existence of distinct Native tribes, identities, and cultures

(Kadish, 2004; Stuckey & Morris, 1999; Whitt, 1995). Euro-American representations of Native Americans cue as well as contribute to an *abstraction* called “Native American” or “Indian,” embodying barbarism, nobility, stoicism, the inevitability of disappearance, harmonious spirituality, environmental stewardship, and other shifting and contradictory themes driven by Euro-American cultural dynamics. Despite the multiplicity and dynamism of Western representations of Native Americans, “the essence of the White image of the Indian has been the definition of Native Americans in fact and fancy as a separate and single other” (Berkhofer, 1978, p. xv). The primitive Other has long been a site for the projection of Western fears and fantasies, for working through tensions and anxieties while maintaining an illusion of the integrity of Western cultures and identities. The Other symbolizes what is desired yet forbidden, attractive yet repulsive, lost but yearned for (Gilman, 1985; Torgovnick, 1996).

Primitivism is the belief that noble savages live in a highly desirable state of purity and harmony, and offer an alternative to problematic aspects of Western civilization (Hays-Gilpin, 2004; Kadish, 2004; Torgovnick, 1996). By living “close to nature and the natural state of things,” primitive Others retain “a moral purity lost to most of us” when we were “corrupted by civilization” (van Lent, 1996, p. 211). The Southwest is a particularly powerful symbol of primitivism, strongly linked to Native American cultures, ethnography, tourism, Native arts and crafts, and, most recently, “New Age” commodities and practices. As Dilworth (1996) writes in *Imagining Indians in the Southwest*, “it is a region of imagination . . . on which Americans have long focused their fantasies of renewal and authenticity . . . The Native American inhabitants of the Southwest have always been central to these imaginings” (p. 2; see also Bsumek, 2008). As Dilworth’s analysis of discourses and practices surrounding the region from the 1880s to the 1920s demonstrates, representing southwestern Native Americans as primitives “was part of the rhetoric of empire building and colonialism” (p. 6) and constituted “textualized or objectified Indians that disappeared as human subjects” (p. 8). While the use of rock art imagery in promoting tourism and constituting the indigenous cultures of the Southwest as (re)sources for the rejuvenation of Westerners is a relatively recent development, such uses have become pervasive throughout the greater Southwest in the last 25 years (Rogers, 2007a; Tisdale, 1993). Indigenous rock art has become an important source of imagery used to represent Native American culture in general, especially Native cultures of the Southwest. Many Southwest tourist destinations expose visitors to a large amount of rock art-derived imagery and, in some instances, direct tourists to specific rock art sites.

### **Native American Rock Art**

*Rock art* is a generally accepted though contested term referring primarily to petroglyphs (marks made by pecking, engraving, or incising rocks) and pictographs (marks painted on rocks) made by indigenous peoples in “historic” and “prehistoric” contexts.<sup>1</sup> Native American rock art has become increasingly visible in commercial art and literature in the southwestern U.S. and beyond, especially in tourism contexts

(Hays-Gilpin, 2004; Rogers, 2007a; Tisdale, 1993; Whitley, 2001). This increasing visibility parallels the growing activities of rock art enthusiasts who visit sites and circulate their own interpretations (Hays-Gilpin, 2004). Additionally, many people not particularly interested in rock art encounter it in the course of visiting a variety of southwestern national parks and monuments, state parks, and developed sites managed by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other agencies. The popularity and commercial appropriation of rock art imagery are evident upon entering almost any visitors' center, tourist kitsch store, or Native American arts and crafts outlet in the Southwest, where rock art imagery is endlessly reproduced on clothing, jewelry, sculptures, pottery, key chains, light-switch covers, and kitchen towels (Hays-Gilpin, 2004; Rogers, 2007a). Such rock art-derived imagery has largely displaced earlier metonyms for marketing the Southwest, such as the saguaro cactus and howling coyote (Tisdale, 1993).

Explanations in the rock art literature for the meaning and function of rock art in the greater Southwest include representations of mythic and historic narratives, clan identification, territorial markers, route markers, astronomical observation, hunting magic, fertility rituals, rites of passage, vision quests, and shamanism (Hays-Gilpin, 2004). In many (if not all) cases, these and other interpretations of rock art reflect Western cultural biases such as conceptualizations of gender (Hays-Gilpin, 2004; Rogers, 2007a) and secular versus sacred (Schaafsma, 1997; see also Deloria, 2003). Specifically, interpretive models often perpetuate Western primitivism: constituting indigenous cultures as exemplars of earlier stages of human development, projecting Western fears and fantasies onto the rock art and its creators, and highlighting their intimate relationship to nature, spirituality, and communal orientation as cures for the ills of Western civilization (Hays-Gilpin, 2004). While the specific theme I focus on in this essay, the unknown and possibly indeterminate nature of rock art's meaning, would seem to bypass these projections, I argue that the lack of interpretive content in claims about rock art's indeterminacy enables a rhetorical shift in the relationship between contemporary visitors, the rock art, and the (pre)historic cultures that produced it. This shift licenses individual interpretations of rock art that are likely to draw upon dominant cultural codes and stereotypes.

The stakes in the interpretation of rock art are substantial. Interpretations of (pre)historic rock art's original meanings and functions, especially when passed on to the public through guide books, museum displays, and interpretive materials at rock art sites, have the potential to shape perceptions of Native Americans, challenging or reinforcing dominant perceptions of indigenous cultures and histories (Whitley, 2001). Non-Native interpretations can also feed back into contemporary Native cultures, shifting the social locations from which authoritative statements about Native cultures can be made, delegitimizing Native authority over Native culture and history, and potentially introducing distortions into Native self-understandings (Bury, 1999). The interpretation of the material remains of (pre)historic cultures articulates structures and discourses of power, including cultural authority and identity claims (Smith, 2004). The rhetorical constitution of the relationship between material culture (rock art), its originating culture (the rock art's producers), and the

interpreting culture (contemporary Westerners) shapes what kinds of claims can be made, by whom, and with what authority, thereby contributing to the contemporary status of indigenous cultures and enabling (or constraining) ongoing neocolonial relations.

### **Interpreting the Unknown**

For many visitors to the American Southwest, one of the most exciting moments occurs when one comes face to face with a panel of rock art; executed by a people we know little of, for reasons we do not fully comprehend . . . Significant research has resulted in the identification of numerous regional styles, common design motifs and even relative ages for certain panels. Yet, for all we know of this subject, the most compelling questions remain unanswered: Why was this work created, who was meant to see it, and for what purpose? While answers to these questions may ultimately be found, for many visitors/observers it is the mystery of the unknown that is perhaps most appealing. (*Art on the Rocks: A Wish You Were Here Postcard Book*, n.d.)

To explore the rhetorical constitution of the indeterminate quality of the meaning of (pre)historic indigenous rock art in contemporary contexts, I begin by examining interpretive signs and pamphlets associated with 11 rock art sites in the Southwest. These sites were selected from over 120 I have visited in the greater southwestern U.S.; at 28 of these sites interpretive signs were present or related interpretive materials were readily available. These 28 sites were reduced to 11 after removing sites not publicized by land management agencies, visitor's centers, guide books, websites, or roadside signage and those whose interpretive materials did not posit rock art's meaning as unknown or inaccessible. These sites range from roadside attractions on paved roads to those accessible only by isolated dirt roads or substantial hiking or backpacking, but all are well publicized.<sup>2</sup> Given the idiosyncratic nature of this sample, I do not claim that these interpretive materials are necessarily representative or that radically different interpretive rhetorics are not present elsewhere. Nevertheless, I do hold that the theme of rock art's unknown meanings is prevalent in interpretive materials at southwestern rock art sites as well as in museum displays, books, and other media (such as the postcard book quoted above). Interpretive materials at some rock art sites do explicitly diverge from the theme of rock art's unknown meanings; later in the essay I will explore a major case of this divergence in order to clarify the implications of the rhetoric of indeterminacy present at the 11 sites to which I now turn.

There are five recurrent ways that the indeterminacy of rock art's original meanings is articulated in the interpretive texts associated with these 11 sites: unknown meanings, lost meanings, imprecise meanings, scholarly debate over meanings, and individual impressions.<sup>3</sup> The first type of statement establishes the meaning of rock art as unknown. A sign at Grimes Point, Nevada, titled "Unanswered Questions" states, "whether the artist was depicting stars in the sky, hunting, ritual practices, or something entirely different is unknown," while another at the same site titled "Ancient Artists—What Were they Saying?" concludes, "nobody knows for sure."

Many of these statements posit possible interpretations, but emphasize uncertainty as to their applicability. A sign at Parowan Gap, Utah, states, “while the meaning of the figures may never be known, they probably portray such tribal pursuits as religion, hunting and gathering trips, family history, sources of water and travel routes.” A Nevada State Historical Marker for Toquima Cave states, “there are no known specific meanings attached to the particular design elements. Presumably, these people created the designs as ritual devices to insure success in the hunt.” While the signs at Parowan Gap and Toquima Cave follow statements about the lack of knowledge with probable or presumable hypotheses, a sign at Newspaper Rock, Utah, presents possibilities without any endorsement: “Unfortunately, we do not know if the figures represent story telling, doodling, hunting magic, clan symbols, ancient graffiti or something else.”

Second, the interpretive materials also characterize rock art’s meaning as lost. A sign at Buckhorn Wash, Utah, states, “the stories are lost with the people who made the images.” This invocation of loss raises the possibility of recovery, potentially relating to the need for more research. The brochure for the V-Bar-V Ranch site in Arizona explains, “these petroglyphs were made centuries ago, by people who had a culture and value system that was quite different from ours as well as those of modern Indian cultures. Consequently, we may never know exactly why they were made or what they mean.” However, this statement about the possibility of a permanent lack of knowledge is followed by another implying hope: “Much research remains to be done in order to better understand the importance of petroglyphs to the people of the past.”

A third type of statement references not the lack of knowledge about rock art’s original meanings, but a lack of certainty or precision. Interpretive texts at rock art sites often link statements about the unknown quality of rock art’s meanings with general interpretations such as hunting magic, clan markers, or doodling. As a sign at Mount Irish states, “Indian rock art in Nevada is often interpreted as having magical or religious significance. However, the precise purpose of these petroglyphs remains a mystery.” Similarly, a sign at Parowan Gap states, “although several theories have been expressed, the exact meanings of the designs is still unknown.” These statements qualify interpretive models (e.g., hunting magic) as both generalizations and hypotheses; a distinction is drawn between the applicability of general interpretive models, such as clan symbols or shamanism, and the inability of those models to assign specific meanings to all rock art images. These statements indicate that some knowledge exists, thereby qualifying the universal characterization of the meaning of rock art as unknown.

An additional facet of these first three, closely related types of statements (unknown, lost, and imprecise meanings) is that the value and significance of rock art can be based on an understanding of its meaning and function in the (pre)historic cultures that produced it. Therefore, emphasizing its indeterminate (unknown and possibly unknowable) nature could undermine rock art’s perceived value. This potential tension is resolved in some of these interpretive materials by constituting rock art as a reflection of ancient cultures, even if we do not know what it reflects



about them. A sign at Atlatl Rock in Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada, makes this compensatory move explicit: “Ancient drawings are a reflection of the past and the lifestyles of Native American cultures. Although we don’t know exactly the meaning of the images, this art reflects the thoughts of these people.” Such statements can be interpreted as maintaining the value of rock art in the face of a (possibly permanent) lack of knowledge about its meanings.

A fourth type of statement related to indeterminacy in these interpretive materials involves the role of scholars. At Grimes Point, two signs emphasize ongoing scholarly debate, one stating that “scholars and archaeologists still debate the mystery and meaning of the rock engravings.” Interestingly, signs at Grimes Point (and many other sites I have visited) make no direct reference to knowledge gained from Native peoples, either historically or in contemporary times. The interpretive sign at Newspaper Rock states, “scholars are undecided as to their meaning or have yet to decipher them” and links the rock art to living Native peoples only through the statement that “in Navajo, the rock is called Tse’ Hane’ (rock that tells a story).” These statements center scholars as the most suited investigators of the meaning of rock art despite their apparent lack of success. “Scholars and archaeologists *still* debate” and “have *yet* to decipher” cue a view of the knowledge of rock art’s meaning as an ongoing project and leave open the possibility that its unknown status does not mean it is inherently unknowable.

The unknown meaning of rock art culminates in the fifth type of statement, which encourages individual interpretations by visitors. In addition to the “your guess is as good as any” sign from Klare Spring, other interpretive materials move from the unknown meanings of rock art to an appeal to individual imagination and subjective impression. The sign at Grimes Point titled “Ancient Artists—What Were they Saying?” follows its statements that “nobody knows for sure” and “the meaning of the rock art is still debated by scholars” with this question: “What stories do you see etched on the rock?” Similarly, the Newspaper Rock sign states that “scholars are undecided as to their meaning” and lists a variety of unconfirmed possibilities before concluding, “without a true understanding of the petroglyphs, much is left for individual admiration and interpretation.” Interpretive texts frequently use the lack of knowledge to license individual interpretations presumably devoid of any indigenous cultural knowledge or scholarly expertise. Naïve individual interpretations are necessary because they are all that remain; according to the rhetoric, contemporary Native Americans have no or only limited knowledge (mostly, they are just absent from the rhetoric), and scholars are engaged in ongoing debate with no foreseeable resolution. Another validation of individual interpretations is the subjective and affective nature of such engagements, as is made clear in a pamphlet provided to visitors to Utah’s Grand Gulch: “Because the drawings do not represent a written language as we know it, their meaning is left to our imagination. When viewing rock art, it is important to keep in mind that the real importance is not found in literal meaning, but in the feelings that result from the viewing.” In this case, individual, naïve interpretations are valued not only because they are all we have, but because they are more suited to the nonliterate and nonliteral nature of rock art, possibly

reflecting the frame of the primitive in its assignation of nonrational mindsets to indigenous cultures (Whitley, 2001).

### **Polysemy and Indeterminacy**

In contemporary times, scholars, avocationalists, and others propose various interpretations of indigenous rock art. This essay's purpose, however, is not to explore the dynamics involved in or between each of these interpretations,<sup>4</sup> nor to examine (pre)historic rock art itself as inherently polysemic or indeterminate. Instead, I focus on a body of rhetoric whose subject matter and claims are about the indeterminacy of rock art in contemporary contexts in order to explore the rhetorical constitution of indeterminacy (regardless of whether the meaning of the rock art itself is indeed indeterminate). Therefore, I briefly turn to conceptualizations of polysemy and indeterminacy as a means of clarifying the rhetorical operation of claims to rock art's unknown meanings.

Polysemy has been explored by rhetorical and critical media scholars, with the primary focus being debates over the extent and social force of resistive readings of texts produced by the culture industry (Ceccarelli, 1998; Cloud, 1992; Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986). These scholars have primarily focused on polysemic texts and polysemic readings of texts, not on texts that posit other texts as polysemic or indeterminate. Nevertheless, of relevance to this analysis is the distinction between polysemy and indeterminacy. Ceccarelli defines polysemy as divergent interpretations of a text's denotative meaning. Following Jacques Derrida's distinction, "with polysemy, distinct meanings exist for a text, and they are identifiable by the critic, the rhetor, or the audience; with dissemination, meaning explodes, and the text can never be reduced to a determinable set of interpretations" (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 398). Polysemy involves multiple but identifiable meanings while indeterminacy, reflecting its poststructuralist origins, questions identification of any stable meaning(s), implying limitless interpretive possibilities or the impossibility of interpretation. Indeterminacy in the poststructuralist sense applies to all texts, whereas polysemy applies to specific texts in greater or lesser degrees (Condit, 1989).

Both polysemy and indeterminacy are partly applicable to claims of the unknown meaning of rock art. The interpretive rhetoric examined here often posits a range of possible interpretations (e.g., hunting magic, clan identification, or doodling) followed by indications that one cannot necessarily be chosen over another with any certainty. That is, multiple interpretations are identified (polysemy), but the ability to choose between or from them is presented as problematic (a kind of "weak" indeterminacy). This is expressed in the Klare Spring sign, where three possible meanings for the rock art are presented in the form of a question, immediately followed by "your guess is as good as any." However, the rhetoric of these interpretive materials can also be understood as proposing that indeterminacy exists but is potentially solvable. This latter form is reflected in the brochure for the V-Bar-V Ranch site, which states that rock art may be unknowable, but follows this with the possibility of determinacy being achieved via more research.

In this rhetoric, polysemy blurs with indeterminacy, for even if a range of possible meanings can be identified, whether or not that range of meanings is adequate is unknown, nor can one necessarily be chosen over another with confidence. Nevertheless, pure indeterminacy in the poststructuralist sense is not posited in this rhetoric: The assumption is that while “we” do not and may never know the meaning of any particular rock art motif or site, there was a meaning attached to the motifs and panels in their originating contexts. The producers of the rock art are presumed in most interpretive signs and pamphlets to have encoded a single meaning in or enacted a single function through the rock art. The interpretive texts often present a list of possible interpretations in the form of “it could be x, y, or z, but we do not know for sure,” implying that there is a single answer. Similarly, the emphasis on a lack of precision in contemporary knowledge of rock art’s meaning presumes a precise purpose and an exact meaning. Indeterminacy, therefore, is not posited as an inherent quality of rock art but results from historical and cultural gaps between its producers and contemporary viewers, and hence the possibility of determination exists by bridging those gaps. Polysemy remains relevant, however, insofar as the unknown meaning of rock art is used as a basis for licensing diverse interpretations of the meaning of rock art by visitors. This analysis, therefore, raises questions about texts that constitute other texts as polysemic or indeterminate, specifically those that use such indeterminacy as a basis for licensing polysemic readings of the material traces of indigenous cultures in neocolonial contexts.

### Dialogue and Dissemination

Additional insight into the cultural, ethical, and political dynamics of rock art’s posited indeterminacy and licensed polysemy is offered by Peters’s (1999) *Speaking into the Air*. This analysis of the opposing ideologies of dialogue and dissemination identifies these normative models as the source of much of the celebration of and anxiety over communication. Through an examination of the development of the idea of communication and historical responses to new media, Peters decenters dialogue as the normative model of communication, claiming that dissemination, more than dialogue, promotes an ability to acknowledge and address difference. The interpretive rhetoric analyzed in this essay articulates these two models; by analyzing this rhetoric via dialogue and dissemination, the neocolonial implications of the interpretive rhetoric are clarified and Peters’s elevation of dissemination over dialogue is qualified.

As presented by Peters (1999), dialogue is exemplified by face-to-face interaction and in this pure form is characterized by embodied co-presence, mutuality, reciprocity, and a tight coupling between sender and receiver via messages addressed to and designed for a specific recipient. Dialogic communication, therefore, is unique, nonreproducible, symmetrical, and private. Peters (1999) identifies as part of the dialogic view of communication “the dream of identical minds in concert” (p. 241) and the “angelological tradition of instantaneous contact between minds at a distance” (p. 24). Embedded in dialogue is the desire to access the interiority of the

other, wedding two souls into a harmonious whole. With the development of means for communicating across time and distance (e.g., writing and, later, radio, telephony, and phonography), this dialogic impulse became an “expression of desire for the presence of the absent other” (Peters, 1999, p. 180). This model drives much of the anxiety over and criticism of mass media, exemplified by print and electronic broadcasting, insofar as one-way, disembodied media scatter messages, addressed to anyone, invariant in content and form, to diverse audiences who are loosely coupled with the sender. These media are dehumanizing because their messages are not fitted to individual recipients, and as such cannot achieve authentic human-to-human coupling and care for the other’s soul.

Dissemination involves invariant and openly addressed messages indiscriminately scattered to diverse audiences. Dissemination is one-way, asymmetrical, and, as exemplified by print and broadcast media, public. While dialogue centers senders as responsible for carefully coupling messages to their intended recipients, dissemination empowers recipients to determine what messages mean. Dissemination involves “uniformity in transmission but diversity in reception” (Peters, 1999, p. 52), and is closely linked to both hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts when no reply is possible, and polysemy, specifically resistive readings of mass media texts. Peters argues that while dialogue centers love, care for others’ souls, dissemination centers justice, representing a fundamentally democratic impulse in its equal (indifferent) treatment of diverse recipients and its empowering of audiences to make their own meanings out of indiscriminately scattered messages.

Dialogue, with its desire for a meeting of minds, for transparency and shared meanings, constitutes polysemic interpretations as a problem, indicating that the other has not melded with the self and the message was not sufficiently coupled with its recipient.<sup>5</sup> Diverse reception of well-crafted dialogic messages indicates that messages have strayed from their intended recipients and coupled with unintended audiences. Such “illegitimate couplings” are multiplied by communication media that make messages accessible to unintended audiences (Peters, 1999, p. 51). Time- and space-binding media such as writing and broadcasting lead to promiscuity, and polysemy can be understood as an illegitimate product of such couplings.

However, resistive readings by marginalized and oppositional audiences are enabled precisely by the processes of dissemination and media that fail to meet dialogue’s “strenuous standard” (Peters, 1999, p. 34). The impersonal and dehumanizing technologies and techniques of mass media enable democratic resistance to the dominant ideology. “Once ‘inscribed,’ an utterance transcends its author’s intent, original audience, and situation of enunciation. Such removal is not just an alienation; it is a just alienation. Inscription liberates meaning from the parochial and evanescent status of face-to-face speech” (Peters, 1999, p. 150). The flipside of this is Peters’s negative evaluation of dialogue’s ethical and political potential. In dialogue Peters sees not a meeting of minds, but a making over of the mind of the other in the image of the self. Dialogue demands both responsiveness and transparency, opening the interiority of the other to the (dominating) meanings of

the self. In short, “dialogue can be tyrannical and dissemination can be just” (Peters, 1999, p. 34).

### **Rock Art as Dialogue and Dissemination**

The models of dialogue and dissemination are integral to the framing of rock art’s meaning by interpretive materials. Rock art, whatever the reasons and conditions under which it was produced, operates today as dissemination, demonstrating “the inevitable promiscuity of any intelligence committed to permanence” (Peters, 1999, p. 143). Pecked into or painted on rocks, rock art motifs can last for hundreds or thousands of years. The repeated indication in the interpretive materials that “we” do not know what rock art means, and may never know with any certainty or precision due to temporal and cultural distance, is based on the assumption that it did mean something, that it was addressed to someone. However, the radically “loose coupling” between the sender and message of the rock art on the one hand and contemporary visitors on the other means that a “meeting of the minds” is not possible. As the Klare Spring sign states, when “Indians living today” can or will not provide inside knowledge about rock art’s meaning, then any interpretation is as good as any other. A dialogue exists, but “we” (the presumed non-Indian readers of these signs) are not part of it. Nevertheless, as a basis for rock art’s appeal, its mystery and the attempted resolution thereof seems a clear case of the desire for contact with an absent and inaccessible other (Peters, 1999). These interpretive materials emphasize that the dialogue is incomplete, the coupling too loose, the chasm between self and other too large.

The move these interpretive materials offer in response to this dialogic failure is individual interpretation. Since the coupling of contemporary visitors with rock art’s messages is presumably unintended, the dialogic tradition would seem to encourage the marginalization of rock art interpretation: Such attempts are illegitimate, promiscuous, a kind of eavesdropping (Peters, 1999). The creators of rock art as well as those for whom it was presumably intended are often assumed to be long dead or otherwise inaccessible (due to precontact extinction, postcontact genocide, or assimilation), establishing dissemination as the only applicable context for interpreting the rock art. Nevertheless, a desire for contact with the vanished primitive Other, for communication over enormous cultural and temporal distances, is strong. The broader social context—one that the ideology of dialogue characterizes as dehumanizing, alienating, and socially fragmenting—shapes this desire for the primitive Other, to connect with the thoughts of an “authentic” people who presumably possess the antidote to the alienations of contemporary Western culture (Dilworth, 1996; Hays-Gilpin, 2004). This may be an exercise in hermeneutics, not dialogue, but the motivating impulse can still be a meeting of minds. Rock art, after all, “reflects the thoughts of these people.” However, since we cannot know what the rock art “really” means (dialogue), the reading of traces (dissemination) is all that is left. Therefore, the solution to the (possibly unbridgeable) gap posited in the interpretive rhetoric at rock art sites is quintessentially disseminatory: “Your guess is

as good as any.” For “without a true understanding of the petroglyphs,” that is, due to a failure of dialogic coupling, “much is left for individual admiration and interpretation,” that is, the empowered recipient of dissemination carries the burden and authority of interpretation. When dialogue fails, visitors are left not only with the unknown, but an interpretive democracy: “What stories do you see etched on the rock?”

### **Petroglyph National Monument: A Contrary Case**

Boca Negra Canyon in Petroglyph National Monument, New Mexico, offers interpretive texts that are quite distinct from those associated with the 11 sites analyzed above. These signs characterize the monument’s petroglyphs as largely part of a living, not a dead, tradition carried on by modern Pueblo peoples, and emphasize the need to respect these cultures and their expressions on rocks.<sup>6</sup> Examining this contrasting interpretive rhetoric through Peters’s (1999) frameworks of dialogue and dissemination helps to clarify the implications of the rhetoric of indeterminacy present at many other rock art sites and points toward an alternative interpretive framework informed, at least in part, by consultation with Native Americans.

A Petroglyph National Monument sign states, “there were many reasons for creating the petroglyphs, most of which are not well understood by non-Indians,” implying that Indians do understand. Signs at the monument reference the knowledge of Native peoples of the region and their relationship to the petroglyphs and the landscape, indicating that some of the monument’s petroglyphs “have direct meaning to modern tribes.” However, any knowledge passed from these Natives through the Park Service to visitors at the monument remains rather vague, as in this direction: “Note each petroglyph’s orientation to the horizon and surrounding images, as well as the landscape in which it sits” as “today’s Pueblo Indians have stated that the placement of each petroglyph was not a casual or random decision.” By instructing visitors about what to pay attention to, information has been provided without offering any necessary reduction in uncertainty as to the petroglyphs’ original function or meaning.

The only direct explanation offered at the sites I have visited for the indigenous inability or choice not to resolve “our” lack of knowledge also occurs at Petroglyph National Monument, where visitors are told that Pueblo tribes have a direct relationship with and knowledge of some of the petroglyphs, but are constrained in revealing specific meanings. One sign reads, “Identification of some Petroglyphs is based on interpretations by today’s Pueblo people. We cannot say for certain what all the images represent, nor is it appropriate for today’s Pueblos to always reveal the ‘meaning’ of an image.” These interpretive materials, therefore, offer an apparently intentional and explicitly stated vagueness about those meanings and are silent about why revealing them would be inappropriate. At Petroglyph National Monument, there are major differences from the interpretive materials examined above: The insights and debates of scholars and archaeologists are not mentioned, visitors’

guesses are not as good as others', and the meaning of the rock art is not always *unknown* or *lost* but sometimes *undisclosed*.

In these interpretive signs a dialogue is posited, a meeting of the minds involving the petroglyphs, (pre)historic indigenous peoples, and contemporary Puebloans. But visitors are not told the meaning of that dialogue because such revelations are not "appropriate," only that the petroglyphs "have deep spiritual significance to modern Pueblo groups." With the exception of Pueblo peoples, who, visitors are told, still use this "sacred landscape" for "traditional ceremonies," visitors to the monument are outsiders whose engagement with the petroglyphs is presumably an "illegitimate coupling" (Peters, 1999, p. 50). The dialogue is private and visitors are merely eavesdropping, hence its meanings "are not well understood by non-Indians." The monument licenses this eavesdropping (i.e., visitors' presence), but not provision of the code that would allow an understanding of the dialogue. Significantly, the signs at Petroglyph National Monument do not respond to this inability to engage the dialogue by inviting individual interpretations, guesses, or subjective impressions. Instead, they emphasize "respect" for other cultures. This takes the form of appeals to consider the petroglyphs' "importance to both past and present cultures" and of moral admonishments: "Degradation of the images by thoughtless visitors is a permanent reminder of the lack of respect for the legacy of another culture."

### **Indeterminacy and Ownership**

Not only do many of the interpretive materials at the 11 sites analyzed above encourage disseminatory interpretations, they also frame the value of rock art differently than does Petroglyph National Monument. Another type of sign present at many rock art sites (indeed this type is often the only sign present at many sites, including many of those not specifically analyzed in this essay) encourages visitors to avoid behaviors that degrade the rock art, such as touching and climbing on it. They often use the stock phrases "take only photographs and leave only footprints" and "leave no trace." These "site etiquette" signs usually list relevant laws and penalties for vandalism, and often include phrases such as "please do your part in preserving our prehistoric heritage" or "please help protect your rock art." Rock art is often described as "part of our American heritage" that needs to be protected "for the benefit of all Americans." In contrast, of the 12 sites analyzed here only the signs at Petroglyph National Monument emphasize respect for *other* cultures.

These different appeals for protecting rock art—as part of "our" heritage versus as part of living indigenous traditions—parallels the difference between sites where visitors are encouraged to make their own interpretations versus those where the meaning of the rock art is posited as known by Natives but not revealed (e.g., Petroglyph National Monument). Whereas the dialogic rhetoric of Petroglyph National Monument is linked with appeals to respect others, the disseminatory rhetoric exemplified by "your guess is as good as any" frames the value of rock art in relation to visitors: Its value is grounded in its status as "our American heritage." The licensing of individual readings by visitors accompanies claims of those visitors'

ownership of the rock art. Dialogue centers senders or at least those for whom messages were intended (which centers senders via an emphasis on intent), positing rock art's value in terms of what it "reflects" about the cultures of those senders and intended recipients. Dissemination, on the other hand, centers receivers, intended or not, and posits rock art's value in terms of the standpoint of contemporary visitors, their heritage, and their enjoyment. The disseminatory rhetoric at other sites lacks calls for respecting others and invites visitors to make their own meanings. Significantly, unlike many (if not all) of the other rock art sites in this sample, Petroglyph National Monument's interpretive materials were (at least indirectly) developed in consultation with affiliated indigenous cultures (Ferguson & Anschuetz, 2003), and the resulting appeals to "respect" and "sensitivity" are linked to a view of the rock art grounded in dialogue.

### **Dissemination, Interiority, and the Primitive**

The dominant trend in the interpretive materials analyzed here is to posit a failed dialogue between the (pre)historic producers and contemporary viewers of rock art. The dissemination theme in this rhetoric appears to be the default position; that is, when dialogue fails, viewers are invited to make their own interpretations. Dissemination, in this neocolonial context at least, is an invitation to appropriation and projection. This invitation to appropriate rock art, to guess as to its meanings, to identify the stories seen in it from the standpoint of contemporary (and presumably Western) cultures, seems ethically problematic in a context in which widespread appropriations of Native symbols, rituals, sacred sites, and artifacts contribute directly to the felt distortion, disrespect, and exploitation of Native American cultures (Churchill, 1994; Stuckey & Morris, 1999; Whitt, 1995). The dialogic view articulated in the Petroglyph National Monument signs exhibits more concern for the other than the disseminatory licensing of individual interpretations on the part of visitors. "Your guess is as good as any," the exemplar of the disseminatory rhetoric identified here, seems grossly contrary to the concern for the other that Peters (1999) links to dissemination. Peters writes, "the task is to recognize otherness, not make it over in our own image" (p. 31), yet the disseminatory licensing of individual interpretations on the part of visitors enables making the rock art over in visitors' own image, not recognizing genuine otherness. Such an audience-centered polysemy enables neocolonial relations, specifically the appropriation of rock art for the purposes of projecting dominant meanings and ideologies onto indigenous others.<sup>7</sup> Following Condit (1989), there appears to be little about the rhetorical situation (e.g., Southwest tourism), other texts (e.g., dominant media representations of Native Americans), or the likely audiences (e.g., their access to oppositional codes such as Native American critiques of archaeology and anthropology) that would make resistive readings likely.

Concerning the tyranny of dialogue, Peters (1999) writes, "the moral deficiency of the spiritualist tradition is that the hope of doubling the self misses the autonomy of the other" (p. 266). Dialogue requires participants to "open up," make their



interiority transparent, accessible to the other. A “meeting of the minds” can take the form of one mind imposing itself onto the other. Especially in contexts of unequal power, opening up one’s interiority can be a dangerous thing, making it available as “an object of power” (Peters, 1999, p. 159) and enabling its appropriation and colonization. Hence, Peters calls for attention to the “majesty . . . of nonresponsiveness” (p. 57). The nondisclosure of Native knowledge described in the rhetoric at Petroglyph National Monument, therefore, while seeming to further enable polysemic and inaccurate readings of rock art by uninformed outsiders, could be understood via Peters as a refusal to make Native interiority available to the dominant culture. However, it is also probable that such nondisclosures stem from complex internal divisions and the associated compartmentalization of ritual knowledge in Pueblo cultures (Glowacka, 1998; Mills, 2004); while Native reticence in sharing their culture with outsiders has been present in the Southwest, nothing in the rhetoric at Petroglyph National Monument indicates whether the motive for nondisclosure is internal to Pueblo cultures or a result of (neo)colonialism.

In contrast to the possibility that Native nondisclosures are designed to deny the colonizer access to their interiority, the positing of rock art’s meaning as indeterminate and the licensing of polysemic interpretations by visitors can be understood as *a refusal by the dominant to access the interiority of the subordinated other*, a refusal disguised as a desire to access that very interiority. The projection of Western images and imaginations of the Native American Other is enabled by promoting “guessing” and “individual admiration and interpretation.” Following Peters’s (1999) characterization of the tyranny of dialogue (and the risks of dissemination), projecting Western fears and fantasies onto the other simply remakes the other in the image of the self. Such projections, in other words, ensure that “genuine,” autonomous others will not have to be engaged. The permission not to engage with actual others or even a radically alien otherness supports the reproduction of neocolonial relations with and oppressions of indigenous peoples.

The maintenance of neocolonial relations between Western and indigenous cultures requires obfuscation of the ongoing effects of colonization, genocide, dislocation, and/or assimilation (Buescher & Ono, 1996). The ability of the colonizing culture to define the culture of the colonized works to quell lingering dis-ease on the part of the colonizers, creating compensatory images and meanings, a well of resources to ease the dissonance of the colonizers. In short, neocolonialism relies on abstracting the colonized culture into the (imagined) Other, appropriating aspects of that very culture to facilitate that abstraction while also obscuring key elements of that culture and its history (Stuckey & Morris, 1999). Neocolonialism appropriates the culture of the other to create an abstract representation, both justifying and enacting the turning of the other culture into a resource to be metaphorically mined, shipped home, and transformed into a commodity (Whitt, 1995). This is what has happened with rock art imagery across the Southwest and beyond (Hays-Gilpin, 2004; Rogers, 2007a). The rhetorically constituted indeterminacy of these material traces of (pre)historic indigenous cultures enables the appropriation and redefinition of those cultures by dismissing what may be known

about their material traces by living indigenous peoples. The implications of such appropriations, however, extend beyond the rock art and its meaning, as they function to erase indigenous subjectivity via the logic of primitivism.

“The deep subtext of the adventures of ‘communication’ in modern thought, I argue, is confrontation with creatures whose ability to enter into community with us is obscure” (Peters, 1999, p. 230). Along with case studies of communication with the dead, extraterrestrials, and machines, Peters includes “primitives” in his list of enigmatic others with whom communication is both desired and problematic (p. 229), and the lure of both rock art and its interpretation is easily highlighted as another of the longed-for contacts with distant others that Peters deftly analyzes. In this context, the category of the primitive is both the expression of such a longing and the means by which the other is erased (i.e., displaced by the self). The interpretive materials analyzed in the first part of this essay symbolically kill the other, constituting the inaccessibility of precontact indigenous cultures and making the interpretation of rock art a case of communication with entities both unknown (mysterious) and absent (dead). Indigenous agency is rendered irrelevant while the interpretive agency of visitors is actively encouraged.

The parallels between the dominant themes in the interpretive materials analyzed here, the dominant themes in Western representations of Native Americans, and the ideology of dissemination highlight the role of interiority in neocolonial relations. The disseminatory rhetoric that licenses visitors’ diverse interpretations of rock art positions Native Americans as absent—either by literal omission, by reference to their lack of knowledge or willingness to share it, or by the implication of their demise. Living Native Americans are either obscured or overtly dismissed as relevant authorities. Without a (necessarily political) discussion of why Native Americans may refuse to provide knowledge to non-Natives about the meaning of rock art, this fits closely with the “vanishing race” narrative that has dominated representations of Native Americans for well over 100 years (Lyman, 1982). Edward Curtis’s photographic project and the “salvage” ethnography of the early 20th century were predicated on the presumption that Native Americans would either literally die or be assimilated, killing their culture (Clifford, 1988; Lyman, 1982). Under the doctrines of primitivism and the salvage paradigm, upon contact with Westerners primitive peoples are corrupted, losing their purity and authenticity (Clifford, 1988). This required the invention of the “ethnographic present,” the study of primitive peoples soon after contact, but enacted in such a way as to remove—as Curtis literally did in his darkroom—modern contaminants (Lyman, 1982). In other words, through sleight of hand, Curtis and the salvage ethnographers endeavored to contact cultures that they, by their own ideology, could not contact, for immediately upon contact (i.e., dialogue in a context of unequal power) those cultures would begin to degrade, losing their authenticity and all that was presumed to go with it: close ties to nature, social harmony, deep spirituality, and unalienated labor (Dilworth, 1996). The inaccessibility of primitive cultures posited by this ideological frame ignites the very dialogic longings for contact described by Peters (1999), but the cause for those longings makes clear the inevitability of dissemination: interpretation when no

(authentic) response is possible. In this sense, dissemination articulates with primitivism and the salvage paradigm to deny Natives their own interiority (for such an interiority is inevitably contaminated if Westerners have access to it) while shifting the authority for determining authenticity onto Western observers. The denial of indigenous interiority and/or the refusal to access it functions to shift the locus of authority and authenticity from indigenous cultures to the tourists and rock art aficionados who consume (interpret) their material traces.

Rock art in particular is ideal for accessing the inaccessible Other while avoiding contact with living others and claiming for the self total authority about the Other. Precontact (“prehistoric”) rock art is rhetorically constituted as a reflection of the thoughts of people with whom Westerners did not have contact. These people and their culture were pure, hence the rock art is a pure reflection of their thoughts. Rock art, as a trace, can thus serve as a bridge for the ideal of dialogic contact with a genuine other—this is its fetishized value. However, temporal and cultural gaps make accessing these thoughts problematic. The most obvious bridge for that gap—living Native people—is rejected insofar as they are degraded, contaminated, or uncooperative. In much of the rhetoric at the first 11 sites I analyzed, Natives are simply absent and, due to the dominance of the vanishing race narrative, their absence need not be explained. The disseminatory move then shifts the authority to the Western observer, much as the salvage paradigm shifted it to anthropologists and documentarians like Curtis. The interiority of contemporary Native peoples living under the conditions of neocolonialism is ignored, and their authority over their own cultural heritage is usurped. Rock art allows “us” to access their thoughts without contaminating their purity and authenticity through dialogic exchange. The result is the illusion of contacting otherness while only engaging the self, one’s own projections onto the rock art, and the peoples imagined to have produced it. This is literally “our American heritage,” not an other’s heritage. The temporal/cultural gap that prohibits dialogue, therefore, is not a problem or a failure—it is rhetorically constituted in a manner that furthers neocolonial relations through the widespread appropriation of indigenous cultural elements, primitivist projections, denial of indigenous interiority and authority, and an obfuscation of the material and cultural realities of contemporary indigenous peoples.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary visitation of (pre)historic indigenous rock art sites certainly constitutes the kind of “wildly asynchronous dialogic couplings” discussed by Peters (1999, p. 248). Time- and space-binding media not only lead to “speaking into the air” but also to painting and carving on rocks, resulting in a variety of hermeneutic moves that articulate diverse cultural politics. This analysis demonstrates the usefulness of Peters’s articulation of dialogue and dissemination in analyses of rhetorical artifacts and processes as well as the need to continue to explore the implications in neocolonial contexts of his critique of dialogue and elevation of dissemination. My evaluations of treating rock art as dissemination versus dialogue

challenge Peters's (1999) central argument that "dissemination is far friendlier to the weirdly diverse practices we signifying animals engage in and to our bumbling attempts to meet others with some fairness and kindness" (p. 62). While Peters examines the ethical and political dynamics of dialogue and dissemination in Western cultural contexts, this study extends his framework to neocolonial contexts involving at least two widely divergent cultures, and questions the universality of dissemination's greater capacity to acknowledge, cope with, and respect difference. The reliance on dissemination by neocolonial discourses of the primitive Other, involving the appropriation of and projection onto indigenous imagery as well as the denial of the other's interiority, culture, and history, challenges ahistorical claims of the liberatory potential of both dissemination (cf. Couldry, 2001) and polysemic readings (cf. Ceccarelli, 1998).

In the materials at Petroglyph National Monument, indigenous peoples are portrayed as living cultures—cultures with continuity, not radically alienated from their past. They are granted authority over the interpretation of their cultural heritage, including refusals to offer interpretations. Respect for others is requested while indigenous interiority is not forced open to be put on display. Significantly, the materials at Petroglyph National Monument were presumably developed in consultation with various Native American tribes, as the monument has from its inception highlighted such consultations in its management plans (Ferguson & Anschuetz, 2003). While their input is of course filtered through the institutional and discursive systems of the National Park Service, and is ultimately textualized and objectified, nevertheless at some point—to put it simplistically—someone talked with real, living peoples. The difference between Petroglyph National Monument and the other 11 sites analyzed here is manifested less in the types and amounts of information provided than in how the relationships between the rock art, living indigenous peoples, and contemporary visitors are rhetorically constituted.<sup>8</sup>

Dissemination is applied when no reply is presumed to be possible, when the reading of traces is all there is. But reply is possible. The reply—involving interaction with living Native peoples and all the implications thereof—is precisely what the disseminatory rhetoric licenses visitors to avoid, and along with that comes the denial of authentic subjectivity and indigenous authority. What is licensed by the disseminatory rhetoric is the refusal to engage, even indirectly, with real Indians (cf. Deloria, 1998). We are offered the illusion of engaging otherness by engaging ourselves, a relatively safe project compared to engaging genuine otherness (radical difference) and one fitted to further neocolonial hegemony. This is facilitated by a rhetoric of indeterminacy that embraces dissemination in its licensing of visitors' own interpretations. The appeal of rock art's mystery is not so much the possibility of engaging a radically other interiority as it is the creation of that interiority through projection. The rhetoric of indeterminacy analyzed here is not a rhetoric characterized by humility in the face of radical otherness, but a rhetoric that actively negates such otherness.

## Notes

- [1] The rock art literature distinguishes between prehistoric and historic periods in indigenous North American cultures. I conflate these periods into *(pre)historic* when possible insofar as the distinction is ethnocentric, graphocentric, and complicit in both (neo)colonialism and primitivism.
- [2] The 11 sites are Puerco Pueblo, Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona; V-Bar-V Ranch, Coconino National Forest, Arizona; Klare Spring, Death Valley National Park, California; Atlatl Rock, Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada; Grimes Point Archaeological Area, Bureau of Land Management, Nevada; Mount Irish Archaeological District, Bureau of Land Management, Nevada; Toquima Cave, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Nevada; Buckhorn Wash, Bureau of Land Management, Utah; Newspaper Rock, Bureau of Land Management, Utah; Parowan Gap, Bureau of Land Management, Utah; Grand Gulch Primitive Area, Bureau of Land Management, Utah. A site with contrary interpretive materials to be analyzed later in the essay is Boca Negra Canyon, Petroglyph National Monument, New Mexico.
- [3] I do not assume that the statements in these interpretive materials are “true.” Although many claims in these interpretive materials could be challenged using findings in the rock art literature, that is not my purpose. Since these interpretive materials were produced and placed over several decades by a variety of institutions, I am not analyzing them as a coherent expression of archaeological theory and practice or of the institutional processes of cultural resource management.
- [4] For critical analyses focused on specific interpretations of rock art, see Rogers (2007a,b) and Schaafsma (1997).
- [5] Important to note is that Peters’s (1999) discussion and re-evaluation of dialogue as a model for understanding communication does not necessarily apply to all dialogic perspectives and theories, such as those provided by and derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.
- [6] “Rock art” is not used at Petroglyph National Monument, reflecting Pueblo cultures’ (and some researchers’) dis-ease with that term, due in part to the narrow Western conception of “art.” A sign at the monument states, “petroglyphs are more than just ‘rock art,’ picture writing, or an imitation of the natural world . . . Petroglyphs are powerful cultural symbols that reflect the complex societies and religions of the surrounding tribes.”
- [7] The specific projections onto indigenous others by means of rock art interpretation are numerous but cataloging them is beyond the scope of this essay. For relevant discussions and examples, see Bury (1999), Hays-Gilpin (2004), Rogers (2007a,b), Schaafsma (1997), and Whitley (2001).
- [8] Although all of the interpretive materials analyzed here, including those at Petroglyph National Monument, were produced by or in cooperation with agencies of the federal, state or local governments, exploration of interpretive materials produced by (not merely in consultation with) indigenous communities would be an important extension of the current study. In addition, consultation with Native communities is increasingly common (and often required) in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and cultural resource management, and will presumably begin to affect (as it did at Petroglyph National Monument) the rhetoric of interpretive materials at rock art and other indigenous sites. Nevertheless, older interpretive materials will likely remain at sites such as Klare Spring and Parowan Gap for years or even decades to come.

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