Archaeologies of Listening
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Scholars acknowledge that all cultures contain both tangible and intangible heritage. So far, discussions of appropriation and repatriation have principally focused on tangible objects, those items held in museum and private collections. Here I address the issue of appropriating and repatriating that which cannot be seen, the intangible cultural heritage. Specifically, I discuss repatriation of the spiritual connection associated with the making of rock art. My personal experience with the proactive relationship between the Blackfoot community and Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park/Áísínai’pi National Historic Site is my case study.

My first encounter with Áísínai’pi took place when I was 16 years old. My father took my brother and me to see a pictograph called the Thunderbird, located in a cave among the sandstone cliffs of Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. As we drove through the main entrance of the park, I was immediately awestruck by the landscape that Iihtsipáítiyo’pa (creator) created. The prairie broke into a beautiful, lush riparian environment surrounded by sandstone cliffs and oddly shaped hoodoos (rock spires with an eroded narrow column and a cap resembling a mushroom), backdropped by the Sweetgrass Hills dominating the southern horizon (Figure 3.1). We proceeded into the campground area and found a trailer labeled “Interpreters.”

A woman in a park uniform walked out of the trailer, and my father began speaking to her in Blackfoot, essentially telling her that he was looking for an interpreter. She wore a large grin and replied, “Oki, I am Bonnie Moffett.” My father seemed pleased that she knew the basic greeting in Blackfoot. He explained that he heard about the Thunderbird pictograph and brought his children to see it. She said that it was located in an area of the park known as the Restricted
Area. I immediately thought that there would be no way they would allow us to see it, at least not that day. Bonnie went on to give my father directions on the best access point for us to enter the Restricted Area with some privacy and kindly asked if we would return after our trip to let her know that we had made it back safely. I remember feeling impressed by the level of respect and trust that the park staff had shown us that day.

My father, brother, and I followed Bonnie’s directions and after some searching came upon Ksiistsikómiipi’kssii. The impressive image is made of red ochre and measures 1 m across. Immediately my father pulled out his cigarettes and began rolling out the tobacco in his hand to leave as an offering; we were instructed to do the same. My brother and I sat and rested as my father explained the symbols and interpreted the rock art image for us. That day made me realize the importance of rock art to Sikساikitsitapii (Blackfoot people) and our way of life. After spending some time exploring and searching for rock art, we returned to the Interpreter trailer, where my father had a short visit with Bonnie. I had no idea at the time that I would one day work as an interpreter at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi.

In June 2015 I began an Indigenous Internship Program provided through the Indigenous Relations Ministry of the Alberta Government. Due to my cul-
tural and academic background, I was pleased to be placed at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi. This provincial park is located in southeastern Alberta, Canada, along the Milk River. Áísínai’pi is central within traditional Blackfoot territory, which, my Elders tell me, runs from Ponoka’sisaahta, the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton, Alberta, to Otahkoitahtaa, the Yellowstone River in southern Montana and northern Wyoming. West to east, the territory runs from Miistakistsi, the Rocky Mountains, to Omahksspatsiko, the Great Sandhills in southwestern Saskatchewan. Blackfoot Elders assert that the people have occupied this land since time immemorial. Áísínai’pi is not only a geographical center for Siksikaitsitapii but also a significant ceremonial center.

The area is well known for its dramatic landscape, which is part of the Canadian Badlands, and has one of the harshest climates in southern Alberta. Approximately 85 million years ago, the Bears Paw/Western Interior Sea sat over most of what is today the interior of North America. In this ocean environment began the depositional processes of the sand grains that would become the sandstone cliffs of the Milk River basin. These cliffs, which now contain thousands of individual rock art images, are more than 35 m high in some areas (Campbell 1991).

My work at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi has made me a witness to the fact that the rock art is heavily affected by natural transformations. Campbell (1991) describes the Milk River formation as a very weak, closely jointed and fractured, Cretaceous sandstone composed mainly of quartz grains weakly cemented in a clay matrix. When walking along the interpretive trails, visitors can easily see the effects of the wind plucking sand grains from the cliff face, especially at higher elevations.

Moisture is also an issue. At a certain point along the Main Rock Art Cliff, I would point out a unique feature in the rock that looks like the profile of a bison face. While giving a tour one day in September 2016, I noticed that the high rate of rain received in one week had caused part of the bison nose to fall off. Not only does the water runoff wash away loose particles of rock, but the increased moisture allows for the growth of lichen, which, in turn, speeds up the breakdown of the sandstone.

Brink (2007:66) points out that running water also carries with it a variety of chemicals and minerals derived from local soils, from the bedrock itself, or from the water source. The chemicals and minerals brought with the water are deposited on the rock art surface and can leave deposits, which, over time, obscure the artwork. He also mentions the effects of the freeze-thaw cycle. Seasonal tempera-
tures at Writing-on-Stone are known to be extreme. During my employment in the summer of 2015, I recorded a temperature reading, done at panel 14 of DgOv-2, of an astounding 67° Celsius (152.6° Fahrenheit), whereas a winter temperature below -30° Celsius (-22° Fahrenheit) is common. These temperature extremes likely induce thermal expansion and contraction of the sand grains and the cementing clay particles, which ultimately results in mass wasting (Brink 2007:64).

Áísínai’pi is an associative cultural landscape that can be understood in the Siksikaisitapiiksi deep history of the land. The horizon south of the park is dominated by the presence of the Sweetgrass Hills, in the United States just south of the 49th parallel. These landforms are considered part of the larger landscape of Áísínai’pi and are said by Blackfoot to be the place that spirits often travel to. The hills began their formation nearly 45–50 million years ago, when magma from earth’s core began to rise and collect under the surface. Eventually, this magma cooled and solidified, becoming porphyry. The Blackfoot know these features as Kaatoyis, which means Blood Clot. This is the name of a hero in Blackfoot oral traditions.

Like most First Nations cultures in North America, the Blackfoot have an impulsive, foolish character, named Napi. It will be no surprise to hear that Napi was notorious for mischief and wreaking havoc in our world. Eventually, Napi left the people, leaving the world in disarray. At this time, Creator sent Kaatoyis to the people. This person was born from the blood clot (miscarried fetus) of a bison, hence the name. He was a strong young man described by some today as a superhero. Kaatoyis walked the earth, ridding the land of evil spirits and making this world a safe place for Siksikaitsitapii to live.

Nearly 2.6 million years ago, the earth’s temperature began to decline and the ice age began. The Cordillera and Laurentide ice sheets covered all of what is today Canada, with the glacial maximum reaching the present-day northern United States. With a height of 2,128 m, the tops of the Sweetgrass Hills stood above the glacier, creating an island in the sea of ice. Global temperatures began to rise approximately 13,000 years ago, causing the glaciers to retreat. Meltwater emitted from the glacier in huge amounts carved out the coulee systems and river channels that characterize southern Alberta today. Most importantly, the meltwater created the Milk River basin, cutting through layers of sandstone and exposing the cliff faces where rock art is found today and forming the hoodoo formations for which the park is well known.

The hoodoos were created when water entered the top layer of ironstone and eroded the softer sandstone below at a relatively more rapid pace. The re-
sult is many oddly shaped formations, some of which seem to take on human forms. The Blackfoot refer to these formations as Maatapiiksi, which means “the people” or “the beings.” One oral tradition speaks of a bad spirit coming to the people and teaching them bad habits. What really worried the Elders was that young mothers were not taking proper care of their children. The young mothers and fathers were leaving their children alone most of the time, and they became unruly when they grew up. Creator told the people they needed to revert to the traditional ways and take proper care of their children or they would be punished. Those who followed the good ways chased out those who did not. Some went to the area where the Badlands are today and were never heard from again. It is said that those disobedient parents were transformed into hoodoos as their punishment.

Another type of spiritual land formation that occurs at Áísínai’pi is a clay bentonite mound. These are referred to as spirit lodges by the Blackfoot people. Blackfoot Elders have explained that spirits dwell within these mounds during the day. Once the sun has gone down below the horizon, the spirits come out from these lodges and walk along the river valley. In some cases, the spirits are the ones who have left rock art for Siksikaisitapii to find and interpret at a later time. In one written account by Roland H. Wilcomb, an Elder from the Blackfeet in Montana, describes the multicolored conical butte as the “painted lodge of the Earth Spirits responsible for the ‘writings’” (Klassen, Keyser, and Loendorf 2000:194).

The Blackfeet in Montana signed the Lame Bull Treaty on October 17, 1855. The Blackfoot Tribes in Canada signed Treaty 7 on September 22, 1877. Within 10 years of each signing, the tribes were placed on separate reserves. During this early reserve period, First Nations people were not allowed to leave the boundaries of the reserve unless they had written permission by the Indian agent (Barron 1988). As a result, by the 1890s, Siksikaisitapii use of the site known as Writing-on-Stone was greatly diminished, although by no means entirely discontinued (Klassen, Keyser, and Loendorf 2000, 196).

During the early twentieth century, the Euro-Canadian population increased in the west. The land now known as Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi became privately owned by the O’Hara family. Recognizing the significance of the rock art, they decided to sell the land to the government of Alberta, giving Writing-on-Stone the status of a provincial park in 1957. Currently there are 94 registered rock art sites within the park, many of which contain multiple panels as well as multiple faces, equating to over two thousand single images.
In addition to this quantity, Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi also exhibits one of the best cultural records of the Blackfoot over millennia. The oldest known rock art within the park boundaries is referred to as En Toto Pecked, which was accomplished by using percussion tools to strike the cliff face and remove small chunks of sandstone. The image depicts multiple male and female human figures and is the earliest remnant of a tradition that has existed for thousands of years (Brink and Blood 2008).

Shield-bearing warriors are a common motif at Áísínai’pi, occurring in both pictograph and petroglyph form (Figure 3.2). These human figures are often depicted in conjunction with the bow spear, a weapon attributed to the prehistoric period (Keyser 1977:39). Other rock art images depict the arrival of Europeans with the presence of horses, guns, and wagons. Through the images left behind, we can see the culmination of an account of a whole people. Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi was, and still is, considered a place for guidance from the ohkotoki-tapiiksi (rock beings). If warriors were brave enough to seek the outcome of a battle or another life event, they would make the voyage to Áísínai’pi and interpret the images that have been left behind by these beings.

Another form of guidance was exercised through a vision quest. This required an individual to sit in isolation in a sacred spot for four days and nights with no food or water. Blackfoot Elders have shared that after completing a

Figure 3.2. Pictograph telling the story of a battle. Photo by author.
vision quest the person would travel to the cliff face and leave a record of the experience in the stone. There are multiple vision quest sites within the park boundaries that are known to staff and registered with the Government of Alberta Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The locations are kept confidential, with restricted access.

During the first two decades of the park (1957–1977), visitors had unfettered access to the main rock art area (DgOv-2). People could freely walk up to the sandstone cliffs and inspect the rock art images. Unfortunately, some of these people decided to leave their own mark behind, sometimes on top of existing rock art. Recognizing that the cultural material was threatened, the provincial government rezoned an area and closed it to the public, declaring it an archaeological preserve, and has since restricted access.

Fortunately, people have always recognized that the impressive art should be viewed and appreciated and the associated stories should be shared. With the designation as a provincial park, this can now take place through public programming. To assist with the development of an interpretive program at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, an inventory of the rock art was conducted in the summer of 1976 (Keyser 1977:15).

Today paid interpretive tours to the cliff face take place three times a day during the peak summer months (May–August). The park provides employment opportunities for Blackfoot descendants, who are often the ones providing these tours. All interpretive staff members are encouraged to use Blackfoot traditional knowledge and the culmination of Western scientific knowledge to help the visitors gain a deeper understanding of the ancient images they view. As an acknowledgment of respect for the long history between the Blackfoot people and Áísínai’pi, the park does not charge visitors of First Nations ancestry to view the work of their ancestors.

**Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi: A Case Study in Listening**

My position at the park has allowed me not only to learn the relationship between the Blackfoot and the landscape but also to learn about the relationship between the Blackfoot and parks management staff. Since 2001 the park has worked with and consulted the Mookaakin Cultural Heritage Society, a group of Elders from the Blood (Kainai) Reserve. This not-for-profit society was created as a response to repatriating ceremonial items. According to the Province of Alberta’s First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act, a First
Nation may apply for repatriation of a sacred ceremonial object. The specific wording of this policy states that items being repatriated cannot be given to an individual but can be passed into the care of an organization. Elders from the Kainai community created the Mookaakin Cultural Heritage Society and became the entity that allowed the homecoming of many sacred and important items (Conaty 2015). Today the Mookaakin society continues to meet with Writing-on-Stone staff and offer guidance and support in regard to the management of the park.

During my time as a staff member of the park, I have been privileged to meet with and learn from these Elders. One visit in particular stands out in my memory. We took a group of Elders to a new section of the park recently purchased. They stood at the crest of a coulee looking down on a group of three or four hoodoos that stood at the bend of the meandering river (Figure 3.3). Speaking in Blackfoot, they discussed how the position of the hoodoos meant that those Maatapiiksi had the responsibility of watching over that bend in the river. Listening to their words and watching their gestures, I could see the deep spiritual connection that they felt to the land. In addition to repatriating tangible items, Mookaakin contributes to, practices, and fights for the repatriation
Continuing Writings on Stone

Continuing Writings on Stone

of the intangible as well. This is most evident when Mookaakin and the park staff discuss the management/preservation of the rock art images.

“Rock Art Conservation Research at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, Alberta” (Brink 2007) summarizes experimental research done to help preserve the rock art. Two methods of conservation have been employed over 15 years. The first was a passive method where rock art was protected but with no direct contact with the ancient images (Brink 2007:66–75). This included drip lines that diverted running water, spot welding, which reinforced sandstone veneers separating from the underlying bedrock, and roof capping/rain diversion. The other method was active, making irreversible changes to the rock surface, such as applying the chemical Conservare OH, which replaces “lost” cementing agents, producing a chemically inert, strong grain-to-grain contact. On average, the chemical penetrates 2.5 cm into the rock (Brink 2007:75–82). This method has been tested on samples of local sandstone but has not been applied to natural surfaces in situ.

These conservation experiments were deemed necessary because the park was inevitably losing rock art, sometimes slowly, other times quickly and dramatically. However, Birks et al. (1988:8) state that conservation of the cultural landscape is not solely nature conservation, as it requires preservation of traditional land use practices. Writing-on-Stone is an associative cultural landscape, which recognizes a continuing relationship between people and the land, expressed through spiritual and other associated means. Klassen (1995) describes the act of creating rock art as not only a means of storytelling and recounting important events but also a means of communicating with the spirit world. Brink and Blood (2008) draw attention to a Blood Tribe Elder’s concern that the hardening of the rock surface with Conservare might prevent the spirits from continuing to create rock art for Siksikaitisitapiksi. This concern highlights the relationship between the Blackfoot people and the spirit world that is still alive today and continues to be practiced at Áísínai’pi.

When I entered the Indigenous Internship Program, I was introduced to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I felt that many of the articles had already been practiced by Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi for decades. As part of the Heritage Appreciation section of the 1997 Management Plan, the park included providing “opportunities for the Blackfoot people to visit the rock art sites in a manner that is in accordance with their own ways and to provide means to permit ongoing ceremonial and spiritual use of the site” (Prairie Region Natural Resources Service Department of Environmental
Evidence of continued ceremonial and spiritual use is seen in the various offerings found throughout the landscape. Every year, the park receives requests from Blackfoot members to access restricted areas of the park, such as table rock and/or Thunderbird cave. There are also requests to conduct certain ceremonies within the park, such as a bundle-opening ceremony held by Blood Tribe Elder Pete Standing Alone in 2006, and requests to conduct sweat-lodge ceremonies, as on September 11, 2015.

My cultural background allows me to understand fully, and to appreciate, the level of spiritual connection that Siksikaitsitapii feel with the landscape and the rock art that is left behind. I respect, and agree with, the Mookaakin Elders’ opinion that we should not interfere with the natural processes of such a spiritual place. In addition, my archaeological background allows me to understand the threat of everyday erosional processes and their effect on the irreplaceable rock art. As a Blackfoot archaeologist, I can come to only one conclusion: in order for rock art to continue guiding Siksikaitsitapii, and for archaeologists to continue studying it, we must begin to encourage the continued creation of rock art. This understanding is ultimately what led me to begin crafting the Ceremonial Access Protocols document, which is intended to be implemented into Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi management practices.

When requests to hold a ceremony within the park are made, they are often passed on to the seasonal frontline staff. To create consistency among the ever-changing seasonal staff of Áísínai’pi, the Ceremonial Access Protocols will be implemented in visitor services staff training. The document lays out step-by-step actions for park staff to assist applicants and encourages collaboration among all park teams. Protocols have been established for managing requests for sweat lodge ceremonies, bundle-opening ceremonies, collecting (plants and/or minerals), vision quests, making rock formations/effigies, and making new rock art.

The making of contemporary rock art is still highly contested (Bowdler 1988; Mowaljarlai et al 1988; O’Connor, Barham, and Woolagoodja 2008; Sundstrom 1999). Writing-on-Stone Park is unique in that it is the only institution proactively looking at how this practice can be accommodated and continued. The idea seems to be supported by the local archaeological community, although not without apprehension regarding the integrity of the traditional rock art. The act of making new rock art at an archaeological site can understandably be a concern, especially for those who consider these sites to be the cultural heritage not just of one cultural group but of all humankind (Bowdler 1988). Although
the park would like to accommodate contemporary requests to make rock art, ultimately it is the park's responsibility to ensure that the integrity of existing rock art will not be compromised in any circumstances. The Ceremonial Access Protocols explicitly instruct staff to ensure that this is explained to and understood by the artist who is making the request.

A staff member will introduce the individual to the visitor experience programmer, who will become the primary contact. If the visitor experience programmer is not on site, a permanent staff member will become the primary contact. The first action of the primary contact is to notify the permanent conservation officer, who will assist with the process, as soon as possible. Individuals making the request will be asked if they would be willing to let the park record general information about their visit, including name, birth date, tribal affiliation, and clan affiliation if known.

To respect the relationship with the Blackfoot people, it has been suggested that any future making of rock art should be discussed with and supported by a Blackfoot Elder from the community. It would be ideal for the Elder to accompany the individual to the site; if this cannot be arranged, the individual will be asked for the Elder's contact information. It will be explained that, as part of the park's protocol, staff must personally contact the Elder in order to move forward with the request, which can take place over the phone if necessary.

If the staff members receive confirmation of the Elder's approval, the individual will be informed that the park needs to know in which area he or she intends to leave the image. If the individual has not already chosen a specific place, then the staff will point out the options in designated areas on a map. Regardless of whether the individual has chosen a specific place or not, it is the staff member's responsibility to ensure that the area chosen is void of traditional rock art. If it is not, the staff will explain that the integrity of the traditional rock art is of utmost importance and assure the individual that the staff will help to find an alternative space.

Once a place has been chosen (and designated on a map), the individual will be given a GPS system, to pinpoint the location of the rock art, as well as a satellite phone for safety. He or she will be instructed to return to the visitor center after the task and asked for an approximate return time. This is standard safety protocol for anyone who is planning to spend time in more remote areas of the park; if someone does not return when expected, a conservation officer or park ranger will be sent to look for the person to ensure that he or she is safe.

After the individual has returned to the visitor center, staff will continue
recording information on the coordinates of the new rock art site, a sketch of the image that was created, and, if the individual is willing, the story or the meaning behind the image. The individual is informed that all information is kept confidential and that it is being collected to assist park staff with improving management practices. The literal meaning of rock art images is an aspect missing from most traditional rock art; by explaining their image, the artist is helping researchers understand the cognitive reasoning of the art left behind. Education is the best way to get individuals to understand that human art is part of a dynamic experience, and if we are going to oppose the creation of new rock art, we are condemning Native art to the status of cultural relic (O’Connor, Barham, and Woolagoodja 2008).

It should be fully understood that these protocols in no way give a person the right to make rock art, which is an inherent right held by the Blackfoot people. The sole purpose of the protocol document is to assist staff with accommodating this inherent right. If we value the tradition of studying and appreciating rock art, there is no future except to encourage its continuation (Brink and Blood 2008).

Repatriating the Intangible

The Blackfoot consider every aspect of Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi to be imbued with spirit. This spiritual influence is seen in the animals, in the plants, and especially in the sandstone. One way the people consulted with these spirits is through the rock art, tangible evidence of the people’s long connection with the land. Although the earliest datable rock art (En Toto Pecked figures) is approximately 2,000 years old, the earliest in situ archaeological evidence at Áísínai’pi dates to approximately 4,500–3,500 years BPE (Brink 1979:19). My experience in listening to Blackfoot Elders had led me to realize that our ancestors have been leaving rock art on these cliffs for much longer, but many of these images have left this world due to the fragile nature of the sandstone. In essence, what we see and are able to study today is a small snapshot of what has been placed at Áísínai’pi over a long period. Siksikaitsitapii use of the site continued until the signing of the treaties in both Canada and the United States, when visitation was largely restricted but by no means entirely discontinued.

The enforcement of the Indian Pass system, a political instrument of confinement, caused many Blackfoot to assert Indianness in opposition to forced assimilation (Barron 1988:31). Individuals and families continued to travel to
Áísínai’pi to visit and consult with the spirit world. One such visit was recorded by Roland H. Wilcomb, an engineer who was overseeing the construction of roads across the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. Wilcomb was friends with a man from the reservation named Bird Rattle, who told him where to find writings on the stone. Wilcomb was so intrigued by these stories that he planned a journey to Writing-on-Stone with three Blackfeet, Jack Wagner, Bird Rattle, and Split Ears, as well as two acquaintances from Great Falls, John Stevenson and O. I. Deshon (Klassen, Keyser, and Loendorf 2000:193).

The group arrived at Writing-on-Stone on September 13, 1924, and set up camp near the cliffs. The next morning, to mark the significance of the event, Bird Rattle and Split Ears donned full ceremonial regalia while inspecting and photographing the rock art (Klassen, Keyser, and Loendorf 2000). At one point during the day, Bird Rattle took a hard piece of quartz and selected a rock face to carve a record of his trip to Áísínai’pi, thus continuing the record of his people into the twentieth century. Klassen, Keyser, and Loendorf (2000, 195) explain that Bird Rattle demonstrated the relationship between narrative expression and the spirit powers of a sacred place. Bird Rattle’s petroglyph is a regular stop on the rock art tours today.

Both Canada and the United States are guilty of creating and enforcing oppressive policies toward the Native peoples of North America. Many of these policies suppressed traditional and sacred practices, making them illegal, and forced assimilation on the people (Barron 1988; Nicholas and Wylie 2012). As a result, much of the traditional knowledge about the landscape was lost when the people became physically separated from their traditional environment (Sundstrom 1999, 74).

Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi is a unique site because of the park’s close relationship with the Blackfoot community. Although the park has sectioned off the area that holds the largest concentration of rock art and declared it a restricted access area, First Nations descendants are given access to view and consult the rock art. Traditional ceremonial activities have taken place within the park, many of these occurring with staff support and/or involvement. Members of the park staff believe it is a matter of time before Blackfoot descendants travel to Áísínai’pi with the intention of leaving rock art in a traditional manner. Rock art is a symbol of the continuity of Native cultures and has a role to play in cultural revitalization (Sundstrom 1999:74).

The park exhibits signs notifying visitors of a fine of $50,000 or one year in jail for anyone caught defacing the cultural material. This policy is intended to pro-
tect existing rock art; many Native Americans generally agree that rock art sites should be protected from vandalism and desecration, but that is not the same as preservation (Sundstrom 1999:74). According to law, the continued traditional practice of recording one’s deeds and/or visions is illegal and subject to legal action. I would argue that this is a form of cultural appropriation; although this policy protects cultural material, it has also become another policy that oppresses First Nations peoples’ traditional rights, particularly the right to make rock art.

The topic of descendants making additions and/or changes to rock art sites is not only discussed in North America. Since the late 1980s, the act of repainting rock art sites has been a highly contested topic in Australia (Bowdler 1988; Mowaljarlai et al. 1988; O’Connor, Barham, and Woolagoodja 2008). This is largely due to the Western paradigm constraining nonindigenous people’s understanding of the intangible. Western priorities lie in preserving the images with an aura of antiquity. Aboriginal priorities lie in the spiritual power of the ancestral paintings, which, to remain powerful and meaningful to present and future generations, need to be spiritually recharged and freshened by repainting (Mowaljarlai et al. 1988, 693).

For the people of western Australia, repainting sacred sites is how the spirit within is renewed and rejuvenated. This innate, living, evolving spirit of the rock art is similar to the Blackfoot worldview of Áísínai’pi. Blackfoot Elders believe that the rock art images of Áísínai’pi are animate and can move their position. The images appear and carry a specific meaning and/or message for the individual who is looking at them. I have experienced this myself while working in the park. When standing in front of a rock art panel that I have visited countless times, all of a sudden I see images that I had not noticed before, some of which have not even been officially recorded.

The last few years I have enjoyed visiting with Elders from my community, sharing stories of my experiences at Áísínai’pi, and learning the history that they know. In one conversation with an Elder who is a Vietnam veteran I informed him of my place of work. He was immediately interested and told me: “You know what I always wanted to do? I want to travel to Áísínai’pi and leave some rock art that shows me in battle in Vietnam.” I began to tell him about the protocols I had developed and said that perhaps in a few years he could easily do that. He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, “I just thought of sneaking in there and doing it anyway.” I immediately recognized that this Elder did not consider it necessary to ask for permission, as he saw the making of rock art as an inherent right.
It is well known and documented that some of the most prominent people to leave markings at Áísínai’pi were warriors. The warrior spirit and the willingness to lay down their lives for their people and their land resonates with many indigenous peoples today. Blackfoot people have served in and fought in, both the Canadian and American militaries. Some of these veterans are still around today and hold prominent positions in their communities. Along with all veterans, once a year these Blackfoot warriors, both men and women, are honored by their countries and given thanks for the sacrifices that they have made. These warriors should also be honored in a traditional sense and be able to leave their mark in the cliffs of Áísínai’pi for many future generations to see and consult. The concept of making new rock art should not be a frightening one. At Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi adequate monitoring of the site would allow researchers easily to distinguish between ancient and more contemporary rock art images.

Managing the Living Use of Áísínai’pi

During my internship at Writing-on-Stone, I was responsible for managing the Rock Art Monitoring Program, which had been implemented since 2010. This comprehensive program requires parks staff and volunteers regularly to monitor registered rock art sites within the boundary of Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi. The main objective is to record and preserve the integrity of these ancient images. Using coordinates, baseline photographs, baseline tracings, and site inventory forms, park staff members are able to locate a specific site and determine the severity of natural and cultural transformations that have occurred since the last visit. Using site location and accessibility as factors, all sites have been placed on an annual, two-year, or five-year rotation for monitoring. The program not only helps in making management decisions in terms of protecting existing rock art but has also contributed to the discovery of new rock art sites/images. Monitoring teams use various computer software, such as Photoshop and DStretch (decorrelation stretch), to assist with monitoring less visible attributes of the rock art. The creation of new programs such as DStretch not only helps find these “new” images at previously recorded panels but also assists in finding images where rock art was not previously known and hence was not being protected (Brink 2016:12).

The Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi Rock Art Monitoring Program is managed and led by permanent park staff members, who are assisted by archaeology students from the University of Lethbridge and volunteers (Figure 3.4). Students
have the opportunity to participate in the program as an independent study course earning credits toward their degree. Rock Art Monitoring volunteers are mainly locals with a deep appreciation for archaeology. More recently, park staff members are looking for opportunities to include Blackfoot descendants in the monitoring process, to make the cultural material more accessible to members of all ages and strengthen the feeling of heritage responsibility. The biggest strength of archaeology, and arguably the least utilized, is the profession’s capacity to involve and inspire people at the community level. The best chance for the long-term preservation of rock art in its original setting lies in public education of potential visitors (Macleod 2000). Involving the public in programs like the Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi Rock Art Monitoring Program is the best way to educate and foster a sense of responsibility. According to traditional Blackfoot customs, education is a collective responsibility (Little Bear 2000:81).

Conclusion

The Blackfoot people have a long and powerful connection to the landscape of Áísínai’pi. This is evidenced in the archaeological history, the thousands of rock art images, and the continued ceremonial use of the site today. Writing-on-
Stone Provincial Park has been a leading example for creating and maintaining respectful and engaging relationships with descendant communities, enriching all parties involved. Blackfoot members are given employment opportunities to ensure that the appropriate cultural information is being shared in an appropriate way, creating a positive, enriching experience for thousands of local and international visitors every year. It also creates a trusting relationship between the Blackfoot community and the staff of Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi, leading to the park’s proactive measures in creating ceremonial access protocols. A section of these protocols lays out a step-by-step process to assist park staff with accommodating the making of new rock art images. Although this continues to be a highly contested topic, Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi has proven that engaging descendant communities in cultural education leads to deeper understandings and helps foster positive relationships.

Governments and entities all over the world need to look to this example to reevaluate their policies on rock art protection and learn to accommodate the inherent right of descendant communities to continue making rock art. The ceremonial connection that the Blackfoot people practice at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi is one example of how many First Nations groups are repatriating their intangible spiritual heritage. It is an example of the benefits to both indigenous and settler descendants accruing from postcolonial recognition of the nation-state’s mosaic of cultural realities.

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