



COMMENTARY

Reading the Sun

Indigenous Rock Art and Changing Woman's Perpetual Story

JEREMY ELLIOTT

Department of Language and Literature, Abilene Christian University, USA

The bluff on the north bank of the Concho River in Paint Rock, Texas, is home to around a thousand Indigenous paintings, ranging from around two thousand to two hundred years old. Many people passed through here—Comanche, Apache, Jumano. A Coahuilteco friend says the paintings were made by “ancestors,” which is probably the best answer as to who left them here.

While the meanings of some of the paintings are lost to the living, this isn't universally so. (Moreover, the insistence on the part of some scholars that Indigenous rock art cannot be read is baffling—when was the last time you heard someone make a similar claim about the stained glass of roughly contemporaneous medieval European churches? In both cases, the religious traditions and peoples that produced these works are alive and well.)

I want to discuss a painting at the east end of the bluff. The interpretation I will offer of it is a collaboration with two Indigenous scholars: Matilde Torres and Mary Weahkee.¹ The painting is maybe one thousand years old and shows a woman that's just given birth to twins, her head to the west, feet to the east. Her hairstyle suggests that she's unmarried. There's a medicine man praying for her as she labors, smoking a pipe, lifting the prayers upward, but her dark face tells us that she didn't make it. There's afterbirth between her feet, stretching down and to the east, and a twin

1. Matilde Torres is an Otomi Indigenous Mexican cosmologist and environmental advocate. Mary Weahkee is Comanche/Santa Clara Pueblo and an archaeologist and lithic analyst. For a 3D rendering of the painting, see Jeremy Elliott, “Birth Scene No Blend,” Sketchfab, February 26, 2022, <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/birth-scene-50mm-no-blend-6a9a131e172149bf87c47bfe95004c2e>.

underneath each arm. The infants, afterbirth, and darkened face are all painted with the same pigment, mixed more orange than the red ocher of her body and the medicine man, suggesting this pigment was added at a different time. When I asked Torres why she thought this might be, she looked at me like I was crazy and told me I had to give Changing Woman time to be pregnant before she gave birth. Part of the scene is composed of etched lines. These include her facial features and vulva, as well as a line that tracks along the aforementioned painted line that starts between her feet.

The painting matches a common scene in mythology in the American Southwest—the birth of the Hero Twins or War Twins.² Versions of the story are found nearly all the way up the Arctic Circle. Stylistic elements of this particular painting suggest an Uto-Aztecan origin. The woman shown here has many names—Changing Woman, Tonantzin, Estsánatlehi, Xquic, Blood Moon Woman. Commonly, she ages as the year processes, young in the spring of every year, and growing old by the fall. In some, she dies in labor; in others, she survives. In almost all, she conceives the twins via intercourse with the sun.

Solar interactions with Indigenous rock art are relatively common in the Southwest, including at this site.³ It seems likely that the remarkable frequency with which rock art panels are south-facing in this region is precisely to afford opportunities for solar interactions. Thus, we suspected that this painting may likewise have some interactions and began watching for them.

We first noticed an interaction at sunset on equinox—a shadow starts as a vertical line at the top of Changing Woman’s abdomen and rolls down her body like a contraction, ultimately settling along the bottom of the afterbirth line that begins between her feet, aligning nearly perfectly with the etched line, as pictured in figure 1.

Recall again that the afterbirth, infants, and darkened face all share the same distinctive pigment, suggesting that they were painted at the same time, later than the rest of Changing Woman’s body. This was, given the shadow line, presumably at sunset on equinox—the painters waited for equinox to scribe the line of the shadow, and they painted the twins at the same moment. Torres deduced that if the twins are born on equinox, then we were likely to see some interaction showing their conception nine months prior, on winter solstice.

As a Navajo version of Changing Woman’s story recounts, from Paul G. Zolbrod’s *Diné bahane’*: “She lay upon it, face up, with her feet to the east and her legs spread comfortably apart. That way she could relax as she observed the sun make its path across the sky. That way it could shine its warmth fully upon her.”⁴ Euphemisms vary across mythic variants, but a central and repeated fact of the story is Changing Woman’s intercourse with the sun as the year begins.

2. See sources like the *Popol Vuh*, or Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends*, for instances of their story, among many others.

3. See Sofaer and Solstice Project, *Chaco Astronomy*, and Boyd, *White Shaman Mural*, among many others. And, for all her faults as a scholar and a person, see Elsie Clews Parsons’s *Pueblo Indian Religion*.

4. Zolbrod, *Diné Bahane’*, 181.



Figure 1. Changing Woman at the equinox. Photograph by Joshua Alkire.

As per most tellings of the story, this painting of Changing Woman depicts her with her feet to the east, toward the rising sun. So, armed with a compass, we estimated where the sun would rise on winter solstice, trying to gauge whether our theory had any merit. It would, apparently, be rising directly behind a mesquite tree that had spent the last eighty years or so clawing a living out of a limestone slope. And so, with the assistance of recent alumna Madison Whitley, a chainsaw (the unsung heroes of literary criticism?) was deployed, the mesquite felled, and the solstice awaited.

The morning of winter solstice was cloudless, cold. Turkeys roosting in the pecans by the Concho jabbered. The sun rose, and Matilde's intuition proved correct. The line of light drew a clean line across the etched vulva, and Changing Woman conceived. Graduate school had not prepared me for narratives this complex.

I want to draw a distinction between the functions of solar interactions observed by Anna Sofaer and Elise Clews Parsons and the ones that we see in this painting.⁵ Far and away the most famous of these interactions is the spiral calendar Sofaer noticed in Chaco Canyon. It deserves its fame—the petroglyph marks winter solstice, equinox, and the 18.6-year full moon cycle with an incredible accuracy. It's an astronomical calendar of potentially unique complexity.

This painting is different, though. While the interactions occur on significant days in the solar calendar, they don't do so with the precision of the Chaco spiral or solstice marker just a few hundred yards to the west of the birth scene, both of which feature a sun dagger pointing to their centers at exactly solar noon. On the other hand, the shadows and light the birth scene interacts with aren't pointing at abstract lines, they're adding to the narrative of the painting.

5. Sofaer and Solstice Project, *Chaco Astronomy*; Parsons, *Pueblo Indian Religion*, vol. 1.

Figure 2. Changing Woman at the winter solstice.
Photograph by author.



So how should we read these, if not calendrically? What tools do we even need to start asking the right questions? First, we need to step way back in our study of how humans make meaning. Saussure, in *Course in General Linguistics*, suggests that signs only have meaning in context. While he mostly means temporal context, he gives the briefest of nods to the spatial context that a sign can occupy, noting that “In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time.”⁶ While I’d nuance that point (“fire” has profoundly different meanings when uttered in a pottery studio, HR office, or war zone; signifiers change their meaning based on spatial context as well as temporal), I think that Saussure is broadly correct: meaning is created by context, and that context is both temporal and spatial.

Key to understanding how this painting works, then, is understanding how it makes use of both space and time. The story this painting tells is fixed in both space and time. That is, this narrative can only exist in one place. Any effort to move the painting would wholly destroy it, not because of the logistic difficulty of moving a limestone bluff but because the solar interactions would literally not be the same any other place on earth. Even changes to the place, like the mesquite tree mentioned above, produce significant alterations to the narrative. At a fundamental level, this text is reliant on place to produce meaning. More than a story about the place, it’s a collaboration with the place to tell the story.

Moreover, unlike Western narratives, this narrative does not carry its own time around. Rather, it exists in a perpetual present—always existing in the exterior (or extradiegetic, as Gérard Genette dubs it) time of the reader. In that sense, it may be more

6. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 820.

akin to Western conceptions of liturgy.⁷ You might be able to speak about the birth of Christ at any point of the year, but the birth narratively occurs on December 25th, and as children are keenly aware, that date can't be hurried. And, in the painting, the conception and the birth only occur on winter solstice and equinox. There can't be any skipping ahead on the part of the reader. There is no interior narrative (diegetic) time to this text—the story and reader exist in the same time. Concomitantly, this narrative really doesn't have a conclusion. Changing Woman conceives and gives birth every year, just as buffalo calve and deer have their fawns. In short, this is a narrative that relies on a cyclical conception of time. Like the seasons, the story is never over, it just begins again.

Indigenous philosopher V. F. Cordova says in her *How It Is*, “Philosophical method, first and foremost, should be, in its application to comparative philosophy, a search for concepts that serve as foundational notions for other ideas and practices observed within a specific cultural group. . . . The questions here should be, ‘What *kind* of a world would it have to be in order to justify a claim . . . ?’”⁸

She's right. This narrative technique isn't a matter of aesthetics, it's a matter of ontology. The choice to attempt story telling methods that collaborate with landscape is necessarily a coherent one within the culture that produced this text. What must the world be like for stories to rely on the solar year? To understand why it makes sense to use the sun as both a character and narrator in a story, we need to move into regional Indigenous philosophy. While we don't know (and likely can't know) precisely which people group put this painting on the bluff, we can approximately know the ideological world out of which the painters were working because of the location, content, and style of the painting.

Let's move back into Cordova to address that. She writes, speaking broadly of Indigenous cultures of the American Southwest:

Motion and existence are necessarily interrelated for the Native American philosopher. What exists has motion; what has no motion does not continue to exist. The universe is one “thing,” that is, energy. . . . This “energy” seems to have a natural tendency to “pool,” that is, to gather in various degrees of concentration. This “pooling” causes the diverse “things” in the universe. Thus . . . there are not “things” but rather the world consists of “events”: *being, peopleing, mountaining*, and so on.⁹

James Maffie, in his *Aztec Philosophy*, concurs with Cordova's description and refers to the Nahua worldview (part of the same Uto-Aztecan language family as many of the groups that were present in the region) as “constitutional monism.”¹⁰ That is, there is one substance that comprises everything. This “substance” has many different names:

7. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 228–31.

8. Cordova, *How It Is*, 67.

9. Cordova, *How It Is*, 117.

10. Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 22.

usen to the Apache, *teotl* to the Nahua, *yīl* to the Nuyootecos. Maffie writes of the processes of *teotl* that they “are interwoven with one another like threads in a total fabric, where *teotl* is not only the total woven fabric, but also the *weaver* of the fabric, and the *weaving* of the fabric.”¹¹ Some translators have tended toward the word “God” to render this concept in English. This isn’t wholly wrong, but it also probably carries too much weight of European religious concepts to accurately reflect the meaning.¹² Rather, “*Teotl* is nonpersonal, nonminded, nonagentive, and nonintentional. It is not a deity, person, or subject possessing emotions, cognitions, grand intentions, or goals. It is not an all-powerful benevolent or malevolent god. . . . *Teotl*’s tireless process of flowing, changing, and becoming is ultimately a process of self-unfolding and self-transforming.”¹³

Returning to the earlier question Cordova suggests we ask, though: What kind of world would it have to be to justify the claim that there is one fundamental component of existence, and that one thing is motion? First, the claim requires that the world be made up not of discrete, distinct objects but rather an interdependent web. Seemingly individual things, like people, trees, rock, and animals, aren’t just related—they’re fundamentally the same thing. They’re energy/motion/*usen/teotl* that’s currently in the form of the objects they appear as. Thus, the subject/object relationship that’s so central to many understandings of the world is inconceivable here—any distinction or boundary between a subject and their environment is illusory. The common southwestern Indigenous concept of deer, trees, and other creatures as “people” stems from this ontological principle. And just as the boundary between the human and nonhuman is much less clearly marked in this ontological world, human identities are historically less centered on the individual, and more on being part of a group.

These answers to the questions of who we are and how we exist in relation to the things around us have massive implications for how we understand literally everything else about the world. For instance, what does time mean for cultures that don’t privilege the individual with the potency that European cultures have? That is, if I, individually, were to never end, what urgency would the world hold for me? Why would it matter how many years old you were if you didn’t anticipate an end to them? We don’t count things that are infinite. But what if instead of the world being understood as a composite of individual things, the world was understood to be an infinite process, where motion takes forms, and where the death of the individual in no way meant the end of the process? Where the individual doesn’t conceive of their existence as the edge of the world? Cordova address that question here: “‘Time’ means something different when it is based on a concept of an infinite universe. Time is merely a measure of motion: of the motion of the sun, stars, and moon through the sky, of changes that are visible and can be

11. Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 28.

12. For a wonderfully rich dismantling of European projections of religious ideas onto cultures where those ideas don’t apply, see Fowles, *Archaeology of Doings*.

13. Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 22–23.

predicted. Time, as a *measure*, is not a self-existing ‘thing’; it is not even a *dimension*—it is a *human construct*.”¹⁴

Her comment that “time is merely a measure of motion” is significant. Time does not exist in the abstract in this worldview, but only in the specific. Time is something that motion *does*, not something distinct from the rest of existence. As Maffie writes, “Time does not consist of a uniform succession of qualitatively identical moments; nor is it a neutral frame of reference abstracted from terrestrial and celestial processes. Time is concrete, quantitative, and qualitative. It is immanent within the rhythmic becoming of the cosmos and its contents.”¹⁵

So, given this understanding of time, so significantly different from Western culture’s, what then is the significance of way that time is utilized in this painting, both in its composition, and as a part of how it’s read?

Moving back into European theory, Genette observes that all but the simplest of narratives have multiple planes of time—storytellers use flashbacks in almost every story. But narratives also exist in the moment of composition and in the moment of reading—something that the narrative itself almost never addresses. Rather, there is an illusion that the narrative text simply occurs. As Genette writes, “One of the fictions of literary narrating . . . is that the narrating involves an instantaneous action, without a temporal dimension.”¹⁶ While readers may intuitively know that the composition of the text occurred in time, that plane of time has functionally nothing to do with the planes of time in which the narrative takes place (diegetic time), and the time of composition is not acknowledged within the narrative.

That’s not to say that the line between the time of composition and diegetic time is never blurred. It certainly is in some texts. In the second book of *Don Quixote*, for example, the title character becomes aware of the existence of the first book, and asks other characters if they’ve read it. Genette catalogs a handful of other examples, and each serve to demonstrate the oddness of this act in European lit. He describes these moments as “metalepsis,” and writes of them:

All these games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude—a boundary that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells. . . . The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative.¹⁷

14. Cordova, *How It Is*, 118.

15. Cordova, *How It Is*, 421.

16. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 222.

17. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 236.

His claim is a strong one. The collapsing of the gap between the mythic and the actual—between diegetic time and the time of the writer and reader—is profoundly destabilizing when found in Western narratives. It isn't just a matter of the narrative becoming confusing; it's an existential threat to our ontological concepts (If there is no gap between us and our stories, then what are we?).

What, then, is the difference with the Indigenous narrative of the painting? In the painting, the time of the composition is built into the painting in a fundamental sense—the reader of the painting only experiences the painting when they occupy the same solar time (observing the same solar interactions) that the painter did. The painting can only be experienced through metalepsis.

To the same point, one must be in the same space of the painters to encounter the painting. When you crouch to view it, your feet are where the painters' feet were. There's a trace of a fingerprint left in *Changing Woman's* face. Imagine getting a chance to see Picassos in his Left Bank studio. It'd matter, even if we couldn't explain exactly why. This painting of *Changing Woman* can only be seen in such a way. To combine the previous points on Saussure and Genette, we can only experience this painting in what one might call metaleptic space. Western scholars can dance themselves into positions somewhere at the edge of Western literary theory, as I've done here, and it's clear that we're still not properly equipped to understand the weight of this text.

This brings us back to the idea of motion. It isn't that the reader of the painting is somehow sucked into the narrative in a destabilizing way. It's that the reader, the painting, the painter, the rock, and the sun are all part of the same substance—all motion. In this context, metalepsis isn't destabilizing because it's simply the presumed position. There isn't a distinction between the reader and the text, temporally or spatially. Both Matilde Torres and Mary Weahkee, when they first saw the painting, told me we should pray for *Changing Woman's* babies, as they'd lost their mother. Both spoke in the present tense of a story that was millennia old when the paint went on the wall. Because it's perpetually present tense.

In this ideology, there is no gnostic distinction between the physical and spiritual, between the tangible world and the world of meaning. If we insist that there are stories that merit our attention more profoundly than the cycles and patterns of our natural world, we're not likely to do right by it. The sun has been rising and setting on this bluff long before humans evolved, let alone set foot on this continent. This painting is a riff on that, a collaboration with natural process.

A couple of hundred yards down the bluff, a section of paintings is missing—someone thought the courthouse in town would be well served to have some limestone steps leading up to it, and blasted a portion of the bluff off with dynamite to get some. The Concho used to be lined with cypress trees, all of which are now gone. The old Methodist church in Paint Rock is made entirely from cypress. Eight miles downstream from the bluff, the Concho and Colorado Rivers meet up. The confluence is surrounded by sites of archaeological significance, and oral histories recount the presence of more paintings. In 1990, against the protests of archaeologists, the confluence was

dammed to create Lake O. H. Ivie. Construction was delayed to permit the moving of a handful of small settler cemeteries.¹⁸ Neither time nor money was found to move Indigenous graves or sufficiently document the significance of sites that are now underwater. The lake hosts a number of bass fishing tournaments.

If we want to do better, if we want to have a chance of not destroying our planet, we have to realize that there's not a distinction between us and our environment. If the center of our stories is always us, if our conception of time is always centered on our lifetime, if we always differentiate between the physical and sacred, then we're going to keep cutting all the cypress we can find.

On an 1845 map of Texas, John Arrowsmith labels the river that we call the Concho, on whose banks sits the site of Paint Rock, "Pisapejunova." Daniel J. Gelo translates this as "Red Paint Creek" in his *Comanches and Germans on the Texas Frontier*.¹⁹ Dr. Katherine Briner (pers. comm., March 14, 2022), director of the Comanche Nation Language Department, largely agrees with the translation, and suggests "Pisapejunova" is an attempt by Arrowsmith to anglicize "Pisapæ Hunubi," which translates as something like "red/shield paint river." Translation, as ever, is a challenging endeavor, and here it's made all the more so by trying to push through nineteenth-century documenting efforts and not being sure which dialect Arrowsmith was trying to transliterate from. A shield might receive red paint to give it more power, so there's not necessarily a distinction to be drawn between red paint and shield paint. But there also may be something to the idea that these paintings aren't simply (mostly) red.

If you can enlist the sun to tell stories for you, repeating annually a thousand years after paint dried on the rock, what's the difference between a story and a prayer? Perhaps paintings that tell people who they are at an existential level are something between stories and prayers—shields for people who need to know.

JEREMY ELLIOTT lives with his family on the Callahan Divide in central Texas, where he teaches in the Department of Language and Literature at Abilene Christian University. His most recent research centers on fostering functional relationships between academic archaeology and Indigenous communities, seeking to create opportunities for both Indigenous youth and academic researchers to learn from elders.

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18. Texas State Historical Association, *Handbook of Texas*, s.v. "O. H. Ivie," <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/o-h-ivie-reservoir> (accessed July 14, 2022).

19. Gelo, Wickham, and Castañeda, *Comanches and Germans on the Texas Frontier*, 100, 101.

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