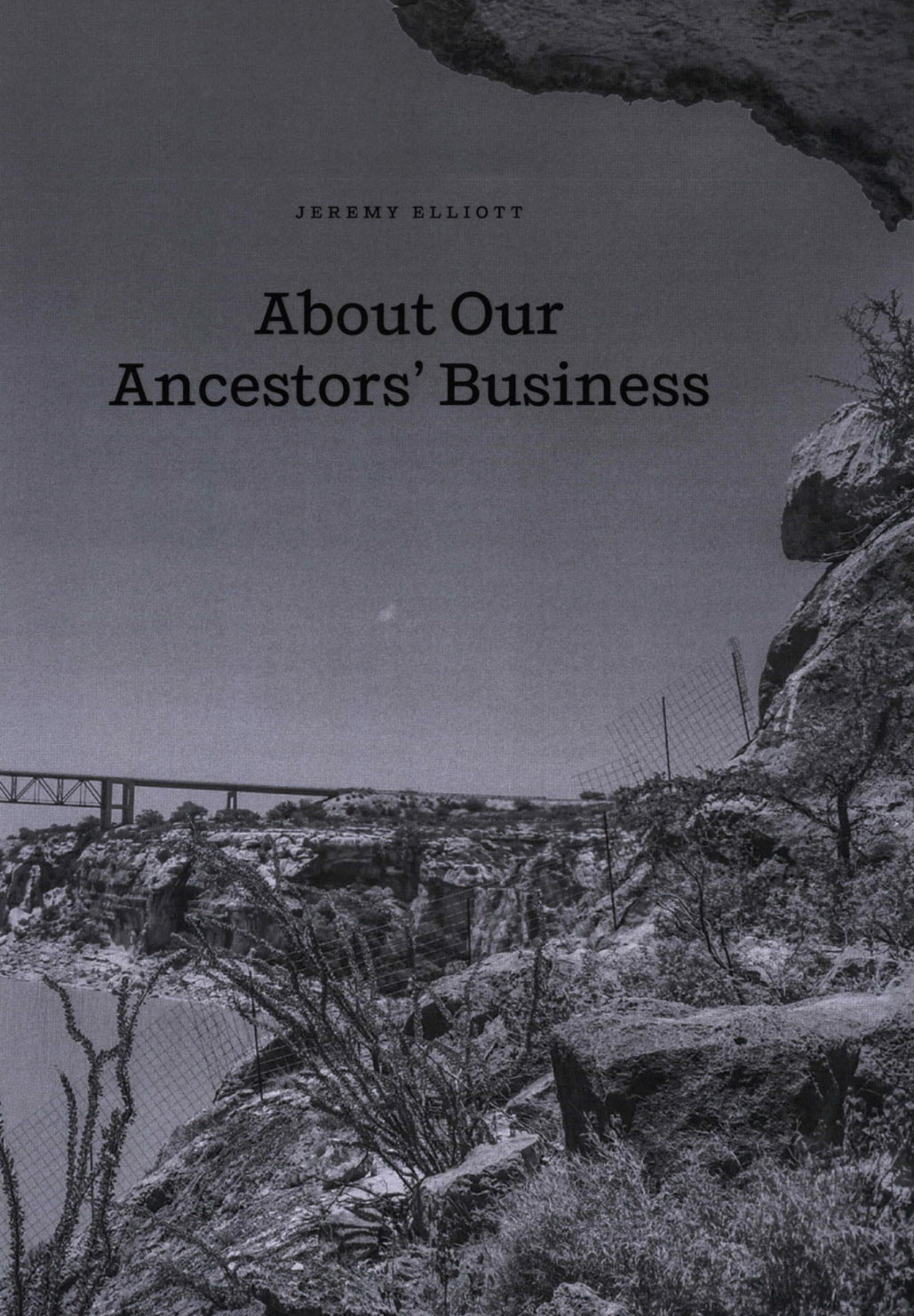

JEREMY ELLIOTT

About Our Ancestors' Business

Here's the scene: it's hot. There's a steady wind, which feels great, but these are the kind of conditions that make you keep an eye out for grass fires. We crunch our way across the desert, threading between huisache and cactus. We're on the east side of the Pecos, just a bit upstream from its confluence with the Rio. It's late May. Lechuguilla and sotol pick at our clothes. Ahead of us, there's a canyon. As we descend into it, limestone riprap makes the jingling sound it does as it clinks around under our feet, an arrhythmic soundtrack as we step. There's a path, but it's pretty steep.

We're walking toward the White Shaman mural. Somewhere between four thousand and two thousand years old, the painting is thirteen feet high and twenty-six feet long, and shows what artist and anthropologist Carolyn Boyd argues is a creation myth. We don't know what the people who painted it called themselves, but for years archaeologists have called them the Lower Pecos people. There are four colors in the painting: red, yellow, black, and white, presumably chosen because of their availability. These are all local pigments, but the hues work together exceptionally well, especially against the stone of the shelter. The palette is limited, but there's a minimalistic clarity in its efficiency. The solvent for the paint, Boyd's team has discovered, was bone marrow from an ungulate (presumably a deer) and boiled yucca root.[1] Harry Shafer, in his book *Painters in Prehistory*, discusses what archaeological evidence has to say about the diet of the people in the region around the time of the painting: it's shockingly omnivorous. Snakes, bats, really almost anything in the region that could be digested was part of the diet.[2] And here we see thousands of calories' worth of very nutritious, easily digestible, and difficult to obtain bone marrow, smeared on a wall. Whatever this painting means, it was worth someone struggling just that much more to stay alive. A widow's mite of expression, on the edge of the Chihuahuan Desert.

Standing here is like waking up in the middle of someone else's dream. Some things in the painting are easy to see and recognize—an undulating white line stretches across the length of the painting, switching to black at the far-left end. There's a caterpillar in a rampant pose on the far right. There's someone riding a deer in the lower right-hand corner, and a similar-looking deer toward the upper left of the painting, this time with no rider and with a spear in its ribs instead. There are five large humanoid figures—faceless, black bodies with red heads, oriented along the white and black line—spaced roughly evenly across the twenty-six feet. Common to this style of painting, the arms and legs of the figures are proportionally short, with arms outstretched. Arcing down above the two leftmost figures are some much more ambiguous, though clearly distinct, inverted bipedal figures. Above the third is something that looks like a combination of a catfish and a snake, and close to the fourth figure (if we're counting from left to right) is the white figure for whom the painting is named. This figure features a skeletonized frame—a white outline with a blue-black rectangle centered in the torso. Curved red lines make their way down the white portions of the figure. A red line goes right across the top of the figure's neck. And significantly, this figure has been decapitated. Almost no one still interprets this figure as a shaman.

Canyons and rivers both have disorienting ways of bending sound. I remember as a kid playing with this fact in a dry streambed in the Appalachians, where, for reasons unknown to me then and now, a creek had shifted its course. We could talk at near whispers in the dry creek and be heard by our friends a fair distance away. The same sound-bouncing mechanisms are at work at the White Shaman Shelter. You can stand in the shelter and hear a raven flapping its wings halfway across the canyon. This is not an exaggeration. Occasionally, you hear road noise from the Highway 90 bridge, but there's not a ton of traffic here. (The next paved road to the east is in Comstock, ten miles away; to the west, not till Langtry, twenty miles away. Neither town features a stoplight.) The primary sounds you hear are the sounds of the canyon—birds, winds, the footsteps of the people with you.

Gary Perez is serving as our guide. Adopted out of St. Peter-St. Joseph's in San Antonio, Gary is from a tribe the Spanish called Coahuiltecans. His hair is pulled back in a braid, the rest of it tucked under a ball cap. Both of Gary's grandmothers were curanderas, something between faith healers and folk medicine practitioners, which is to say that he has always been surrounded by pre-imperialist interpretations of the natural world. He's a longtime member of the Native American Church. After the death of Amada Cardenas, the peyotera who was central to federal-level fights to re-legalize peyote use for religious ceremonies, Gary's family was asked to maintain the peyote gardens that she had tended for the majority of her one hundred years on this earth. This is the first time I've met Gary in person, and his love for this place is evident. He met me here simply because we asked him to,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HANNAH JOHNSON

driving down from San Antonio on a day off simply for the pleasure of showing us around.

He calls this mural a "hunter-gatherer's manual to the world," and uses the information in it to guide his ceremonies with the Native American Church. To Gary, the White Shaman painting is an elaborate astrological calendar, predicting planetary conjunctions and eclipses thousands of years out, guiding the migrations of the people around Texas. His interpretation isn't broadly shared by the anthropological community, but it's hard to ignore his perspective.

In some sense, this painting isn't terribly unique. Across this part of Texas, there are quite a few sites painted in a similar style (anthropologists refer to it as the Pecos River style, as opposed to the typically simpler Red Monochrome, Red Linear, and much more recent Historic categories suggested by W. W. Newcomb Jr., and Bold Line Geometric, described by Solveig Turpin); almost all are on private property. The Rio is a modern boundary, and while we are certain that the style extends into Mexico, there's much less certainty about how far south it goes, or what the density of sites is like. Moreover, given the concentration of sites near the Pecos River, it seems exceedingly likely that some of them were destroyed with the damming of the Rio to create Lake Amistad, which caused water levels to rise along the Pecos as well as the Rio. Seminole Canyon, just a mile away from the White Shaman Shelter, is a fantastic example of the region's rock art. Unlike White Shaman, though, there's a great deal of diversity in the style of rock art there—something seven thousand years old may be directly next to something several hundred years old. And while some of the panels at Seminole offer a few figures interacting (such as the frequently cited panel in the Fate Bell Shelter, which seems to show three shamanic figures), by and large, the figures represented are individuals.

White Shaman, contrastingly, offers complexity. It seems to have been completed all at once. While there are a few scattered figures across the canyon in an earlier rock art style, the primary panel is a single, cohesive story, with over twenty interacting figures. Carolyn Boyd refers to the painting as the New World's oldest book[3], and while we could quibble about whether there's a difference between a narrative and a book, in a sense, she's right. Bryan Bayles, an anthropologist with the Witte Museum in San Antonio, agrees: "These paintings are clearly narratives. Carolyn likes to call them books, and I

think she's right on. These aren't the scratchings of passersby. Maybe fragmentary or episodic. But they provide insights into ideas of creation, life, and death."[4]

Boyd is now the primary interpreter of the mural, with two books on the topic—*Rock Art of the Lower Pecos* and, more recently, *The White Shaman Mural*. She reached out to Gary in 2009 because of his experience with peyote ceremonies, which she saw reflected in the painting. She reads the painting primarily through the art and mythology of the Huichol—a native people group located along the Pacific coast of Mexico who call themselves the Wixáritari ("the people")—and she offers compelling reasons to do so.[5]

There are two Huichol myths that Boyd sees in the mural—the Birth of the Sun and the Birth of Peyote. These stories are frequently, if not consistently, associated in Huichol storytelling.[6] It's not hard to understand why they might be connected. The Birth of the Sun is about the coming of order to the world, and the use of peyote is how a connection to the world is maintained—the two imply one another.

Here's my attempt at presenting the blended stories, drawing primarily from anthropologists Robert Zingg and Johannes Neurath:

Before peyote and the sun, the world was chaotic, like it is at night. All kinds of dangerous animals prowled around. There were only two sources of light: the moon and fire. The moon wasn't entirely trustworthy, as it constantly changes size and doesn't always rise at the same time. There weren't any human people, just the animal ancestors—wolves, snakes, rats, turkey buzzards, eagles, etc. The animal people went to hunt a deer, and found one, but they had a hard time killing it. The deer, wounded, ran away from the animal people, until Buzzard found it. Buzzard pulled the arrows out of the deer and told it to keep running, while Buzzard then continued to sit where he was, playing his flute. When the animal people tracked the deer up to where Buzzard was sitting, Buzzard sent the animal people off course. The animal people eventually figured out that they'd been tricked and became pretty upset with Buzzard. They tied him up, but he managed to get away, and he announced that he was going to go warn the deer again.

The animal people went back down to the earth, where they were from, to think about how to track the deer, and Buzzard flew off to find the injured deer. When Buzzard found him, though, he'd already died. Buzzard cleaned him up again and brought him back to life. Buzzard encouraged the deer to run farther to the east, to the upper world, and the deer started to do so. (The deer's parents lived in the upper world, apart from the other animal people; none of the sources explain why.)

Meanwhile, Grandfather Fire gave guidance to the animal people in their hunt. They fasted for five days as they tracked the deer, all the way up into the upper world in the east. Some of the hunters couldn't keep up or maintain their fast, and they were left along the way. When they finally found the deer in the upper world, they encircled it. As they began to close in on the deer, all of the deer's track became peyotes. The hunters shot the peyotes with arrows. Just as the hunters came into range of the deer, he turned into an enormous multicolored peyote: green (the color of the earth they left behind to track the deer), black, yellow, white, and red.[7] The hunters painted themselves with these colors and began to gather peyote for everyone else.

There's a divergence in versions of the story at this point: in some, the sun simply rises for the first time. In others, a parentless child sacrifices himself by jumping into either a volcano or the sea in the west, and then is reborn, rising in the east.

Commonly, though, after the sun rose, everyone was confused by what it was. When it went down again, night came back, just as chaotic as it had been before, with only the light of the moon and fire. Grandfather Fire then explained to the animal people what rituals they needed to perform to ensure that the sun rose again, and that the world could remain mostly orderly. The hunters returned to their families and performed the peyote rituals with them. After the rituals, the animal people were transformed into the deified ancestors, and were able to live as human people.

Neurath adds this explanation of some of the dynamics of these stories in his article "Shifting Ontologies in Huichol Ritual and Art": "During the deer hunt, initiates identify with the deer voluntarily giving in to the hunter. During the pilgrimage to the semidesert of Wirikuta . . . peyote seekers turn into peyotes, and one may say 'reveal themselves to themselves.' Peyote gives in to the peyote-seekers as deer to the hunter. Both rituals are about cosmogonic self-sacrifice. Initiates transform into their own ancestors and, at the same time, into the objects of their visions: peyote, deer, rain, and the sun."[8]

Thus, the journey of tracking the deer is not simply a matter of pursuing the once-injured and

resurrected deer, it's also a matter of the deer leading the hunters to the upper world, where they can find the peyote they need for the world to begin in earnest. The deer is as much a guide as it is prey, and the hunters as much the deer as the hunter. The deer isn't caught and killed; it sacrifices itself to the people. The peyote isn't found and harvested; it shows itself to the gatherer. Likewise, many versions of the creation story involve a self-sacrificing child throwing himself into fire, and then being reborn as the Sun.

In the White Shaman painting, Boyd identifies the five black-and-red humanoid figures as the hunters / peyote seekers, processing toward the primordial upper world / mountain in the east. The deer with the rider in the lower right of the painting guides the pilgrims to the upper-left portion of the painting, where he's been killed. Boyd interprets the bipeds interacting with the pilgrims as the specific deities that they transition into upon the performance of the ceremonies: the leftmost pilgrim is directly next to a figure that fits every Wixáritari depiction of Grandfather Fire. Above the second leftmost is a figure that fits the description of Great-Grandfather Deer Tail, who is among the hunters in the story. Above the third is the catfish/snake figure, who looks a lot like the earth goddess expression of an important deity known as Great-Grandmother Growth. Above the fifth is another inverted figure, one who seems to have an atlatl dart sticking out of his side, as well as possible sun rays surrounding his head. There is not as clear an analog for this figure in the myths that we have received as there are for some of the other figures in the painting, but Boyd takes him to be both one of the hunters of the deer as well as a god of the setting sun.[9]

Above the fourth pilgrim, though, is the figure for whom the painting is named. But Boyd sees this figure as the moon goddess expression of Great-Grandmother Growth rather than a shaman. Recall that the sun had not yet risen while the hunters were seeking the deer; thus, the only light available to them came from the moon, and from the guidance that Grandfather Fire offered. While the moon's light is not nearly as reliable as the light from the sun (the moon rises and sets at different times each night and offers varying levels of light depending on its phase, meaning the moon goddess wasn't entirely trustworthy), she was an essential part of the success of the hunt. Still, the moon is part of the night, and the night is a recollection of the chaos that used to rule the earth. She isn't without goodness (in another myth, she instructs a human to construct a boat in order to survive a flood), but she is associated with darkness, cold, and the winter solstice. Commonly in Mesoamerican mythology, though it does not occur in Huichol mythology, the moon goddess has been decapitated. There is no consistent explanation for her decapitation across Mesoamerican mythology, but she has clearly been decapitated in this depiction.

Moreover, at sunset on the winter solstice, her decapitation is reenacted by the play of shadows coming through the rocks at White Shaman Shelter. Just at the moment of sunset, her body is covered in light, while the line of shadow perfectly covers the red line at the top of her neck. Perhaps, then, this is the moment in the year when her powers begin to diminish? Night is shorter after this point—maybe we are moving away from her season, back toward sun and summer, and her decapitation shows us this?

What other interplays of light and shadow are hiding in this painting? What astrological connections would have been clear to the original audience? Does the light play tricks while certain constellations or planets are rising? Once we see this decapitation being played out by the sun, see the goddess of the moon being dethroned as nights grow shorter again, we have to start wondering what else there is in the painting that we don't understand.

Bryan Bayles agrees that this is the next logical phase of research in rock art. "I do think that one of the bigger advances in the coming decades of rock art research is going to be archaeoastronomy. The correlations and possible constellations, how the sites interact with their landscapes. There's something about that that's really significant that hasn't been looked at very deeply yet."[10]

One thing is clear about this painting: it's an embodied story. If the shelter shifted a few degrees, the astrological elements of the painting would fail. It's a story about this environment that can only be understood exactly where it is. This is not merely a story about a place—this is simultaneously story and place.

These questions are, in part, Gary Perez's work with the painting. To Gary, the painting is more than a story. It's a myth, sure, but Gary sees not only elements of an astrological calendar, he sees a map of certain places in Texas as well. Putting these things together, Gary sees a painting that, through the movement of the sun and stars, shows people when to migrate where. In 2009, Carolyn Boyd,

knowing Gary was locally involved with peyote ceremonies, asked for his help in interpreting the White Shaman mural. "At first," he says, "I didn't understand it. But eventually I began to recognize patterns in it. Circles."[11]

Gary points to a series of black circles, connected with a red line, just to the right of the moon goddess. "These," Gary says, "are springs. Barton Springs at the top, then San Marcos, then Comal, then Blue Hole on the Incarnate Word campus."[12]

How does he know this? Broadly, Gary's understand of the painting comes to him through his experiences with peyote ceremonies. He knows what things are valued in the language and rituals of the ceremony. Water is paramount during the fast, marking both midnight and first light. Moreover, intuition can tell the modern anthropologist something of the value of sacredness of safe, clean drinking water in a preindustrial world. So, in general, his work starts with his ceremonial understanding of the people that made these paintings. In this particular interpretation, he refers first to an interview with twentieth-century anthropologist C. D. Orchard, who encountered members of the Ponca tribe at the Blue Hole spring in April 1924. Orchard relays that the tribe members told him they were on a pilgrimage to gather peyote, and that they stopped at four sacred places along the way, of which Blue Hole is one.[13]

Second, Gary and a geologist named Joe Tellez approach the idea of a native understanding of geography and landscape. Without modern measurements, distance between places would have been understood through time: How long does it take me to get there? Accordingly, they began to look for springs that might be about a day's walk from Blue Hole, and found Comal Springs. Repeating the process, they came to San Marcos, and then again, to Barton Springs. They turned to GIS mapping processes (working with Gregg Eckhardt and Andrew May), and overlaid a map of the springs onto the painting—the dots and springs align.

Gary can point to nearly any spot on the painting and offer some understanding of what specific place it represents—the earth goddess forms part of the Colorado River, and the undulating path of the hunters is another part. The crenulated hill on the left side of the painting is Twin Buttes, near San Angelo.

Tellez agrees with the possibility that the painting could serve as a map of some kind. "The scale would be off by our standards, yes, but this could be more of a resource map. What was important to these people would be bigger than the less important things."[14]

There's a lot about this interpretation of the world that's just gone. The language spoken in the peyote ceremonies is remembered only as a religious language; it's not a first language for anyone at this point. "We start our ceremonies with an apology for not using the language correctly," Gary tells me. Moreover, there's a lot about the peyote ceremonies that explicitly exists only as an oral memory. Not everything about the ceremony is for everyone to know, even within participants of the ceremony. Some mysteries remain. In short, some of the meaning of the painting won't be discovered again. We don't remember.[15]

What does this mean to Gary now? Unlike Carolyn Boyd, Gary is not an anthropologist. He's an electrician. He refers to himself as a modern-day hunter-gatherer—hunting up those electrical contracts. What the painting means to him is that his people understood the movements of the stars, understood mathematics. He says, "This math is something we can teach to our children. That way our children grow up with a sense of identity, rather than have who they are be taken away by this industrial education. We can take them to these places [shown in the painting]."[16]

The circle patterns that Gary sees in the painting, connecting it to the peyote ceremonies, aren't strictly visual. Time is cyclical in his cosmos, everything is in a cycle. And while he doesn't migrate, chasing the herds or ripening fruit, ceremonies are still performed in accordance with the cycles he sees in the painting. "We're still using the panel to dictate how we're going to move forward, into the future," he says. "Everything happens over and over again. We're living through some amazing times. The painting is alive."[17]

Evidence is a strange thing in anthropology. Claims are almost never proven. In this case, Gary and Boyd are discussing something that looks like it may be nearly impossibly complex. Boyd identified how the sun reenacts the decapitation of the moon goddess, and that, as well as the knowledge we have of the astrological understandings of Mesoamerican cultures, suggests that there are almost definitely other interactions between the sun, moon, stars, and painting. It's almost as though we've been studying a harp as a sculpture and just realized that something happens when you pluck the strings. We can't even imagine music theory.

What Gary has to say about the White Shaman isn't just a contrasting idea held in tension with

anthropological claims. It's an illuminating perspective, functioning completely on its own, revealing aspects of the work that most of us can't see.

Whoever painted this mural, millennia ago, is long gone. Our process is like what St. Augustine says about interpretation: we're tracking an animal through the snow. We may know what type of animal we're tracking and the direction it was going, and through extensive research, we may be able to reasonably deduce when it passed here and what its intentions were. But we're always looking at signs, not the thing itself.

Native people on peyote pilgrimages still stop at the Highway 90 bridge over the Pecos, and have a cigarette rolled in corn husks, blowing smoke in the four directions. It's a place you should stop at on the way. They're almost in sight of the White Shaman painting at that point, but most of them don't know it.

"There's one thing that I want to communicate here," Gary tells me. "We're not interested in beating a drum against imperialism. Why? Because it failed. We have access to the things we need. We have all the tools we need, because of this painting. Let's forget the colonial past, and let's move on about our ancestors' business."

1 Carolyn Boyd and J. Phil Dering, "Rediscovering Ingredients in Paintings of the Pecos River Style," in Painters in Prehistory, ed. Harry J. Shafer, (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013), 180–181.

2 Harry J. Shafer, "Culture and Lifeways of Native Peoples in the Lower Pecos," in Shafer, Painters in Prehistory, 93–138.

3 Carolyn Boyd, The White Shaman Mural: An Enduring Creation Narrative in the Rock Art of the Lower Pecos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 1.

4 Bryan Bayles, interview, June 20, 2019.

5 First, there is significant evidence of ritual use of peyote in this region, dating back thousands of years. In particular, a dig at Shumla Cave (just a few miles from the White Shaman Shelter), which found six-thousand-year-old evidence of ritual peyote usage, ties this particular art style to ritual peyote use (see Martin Terry et al., "Lower Pecos and Coahuila Peyote: New Radiocarbon Dates," Journal of Archeological Science 33, no. 7 [July 2006]: 1017–1021). Though now endangered due to overharvesting, peyote still grows in the Lower Pecos region. While imperial attempts at stopping its use certainly diminished the number of people who made religious use of the cactus, the Wixáritari never stopped their use. Accordingly, Boyd comprehensively establishes the archeological record of ritual datura use in the Lower Pecos region (Carolyn Boyd, Rock Art of the Lower Pecos [College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003], 91–104), another trait shared by the Wixáritari. Both of these points are to say that the Wixáritari and the ancient Lower Pecos people may well exist in the same religious tradition.

Second, as detailed by Boyd in the fifth chapter of White Shaman Mural, the relative geographic and cultural seclusion of the Wixáritari makes them "the starting point for understanding pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican belief systems" (56). In particular, the motifs present in their contemporary visual art are clearly in the Mesoamerican artistic tradition. Given the cultural ties between the Wixáritari and the painters of White Shaman, it makes sense to look for thematic connections between the mythology of the Wixáritari and the White Shaman panel, despite the considerable geographic and temporal distance between them.

6 Boyd, White Shaman Mural, 58. Further, Robert Zingg, a well-regarded North American chronicler of Wixáritari culture, found the stories combined frequently enough to present them as such in his work.

7 Note that these colors, with the exception of green, match the colors in the painting.

8 Johannes Neurath, "Shifting Ontologies in Huichol Ritual and Art," Anthropology and Humanism 40, no. 1 (2015): 61.

9 Boyd, White Shaman Mural, 91.

10 Bayles, interview..

11 Gary Perez, interview, June 11, 2019.

12 Gary Perez, interview, May 18, 2019.

13 Anne A. Fox, "An Archaeological Assessment of the Southern Portion of the Olmos Basin, Bexar County, Texas," Index of Texas Archaeology: Open Access Gray Literature: Vol. 1975, no. 1, article 7 (1975).

14 Joe Tellez, interview, June 20, 2019.

15 We would be remiss to not mention that this dissolving of history is not an accident. See these lines from Justice Scalia's opinion from Employment Division v. Smith (1990), which concerned two members of the Native American Church being fired from their jobs due to their sacramental peyote use: "It may fairly be said that leaving accommodation to the political process will place at a relative disadvantage those religious practices that are not widely engaged in; but that unavoidable consequence of democratic government must be preferred to a system in which each conscience is a law unto itself or in which judges weigh the social importance of all laws against the centrality of all religious beliefs." Free exercise of religion, in this case, was apparently taken to be subservient to state laws prohibiting the use of controlled substances. Scalia justified the opinion in part with the argument that "the only decisions in which we have held that the First Amendment bars application of a neutral generally applicable law to religiously motivated action have involved not the Free Exercise Clause alone, but the Free Exercise Clause in conjunction with other constitutional protections such as freedom of speech or the right of parents to direct the education of their children," that is, free exercise of religion is apparently not a right unto itself, but only insofar as it is exercised in conjunction with other constitutionally protected rights. This case was in part undone by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, and further undone by the 1994 Amendments to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (for more on this, see the 2004 book Dangerous Harvest: Drug Plants and the Transformation of Indigenous Landscapes, edited by Michael K. Steinberg et al.). However, the fact that, as recently as 1990, our highest court felt that it was appropriate to restrict the practice of a religion that has been practiced in some iteration in the region for the past six millennia should make clear to us that this knowledge didn't just drift away into the wind. It was deliberately destroyed.

16 Perez, interview, June 11, 2019.

17 Perez, interview, June 11, 2019.