

Getting to Know You

Jo Anne Van Tilburg

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Rapa Nui archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. My mother, who grew up on the plains of western Canada and was always interested in what she called “Indian things”, taught me to be an explorer. I pursued a career in education, art, and world cultures until my attention turned to archaeology. The UCLA Archaeological Survey gave me challenging field work training on a variety of sites in California, Mexico, and Guatemala. Clement W. Meighan, who is legendary in California archaeology and was the chairperson of my doctoral committee, involved me in his rock art teaching and research. My role today as the director of the UCLA Rock Art Archive, which Clem co-founded, allows me to combine my research and field work in archaeology with my interest in art and human creativity, and acknowledges what I owe Clem as mentor.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. The late Roger C. Green was a great teacher and mentor to an entire generation of students in Pacific studies. His character, personality, and integrity shaped the high quality and adventuresome nature of his work. I met Roger on Rapa Nui at the *Primer Congreso Internacional de Isla de Pascua y Polinesia Oriental* in 1984 and then, for over two decades, knew him as a colleague. Roger and his wife Valerie became great friends of my family, and we saw each other often in California, Auckland, on Easter Island, and in Santa Fe, where Roger was putting the finishing touches on his Southwest research. Roger was the true incarnation of the legendary gentleman and scholar—sadly, a rare creature today. He was a creative, non-linear thinker. Roger’s standards were high and he didn’t suffer fools. I miss him to this day.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out differently from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. Every project of mine has surprised me. I was surprised in Guatemala when I assembled a pot in the lab and it turned out to be a completely



different vessel that it was originally thought to be. I was surprised that an old dream of owning an art gallery was resurrected on Easter Island when Cristián Arévalo Pakarati, my Rapanui research partner, and I created the Mana Gallery. Recently, I was stunned when we reached the bottom of our Rano Raraku excavation and found a small basalt stone etched with a “signature” petroglyph tucked under the statue’s base. The sheer humanity of such a definitive gesture is moving.

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. I would have tried very hard to do something that resulted more or less in what I have now: a personally challenging and rewarding career, a loving family, the adventure of travel and learning, and a useful public life.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?
 A. When I realized that there are few truly random events in life.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Rapa Nui in the future?

A. Our immediate goal is to complete our laboratory work on recent excavations in Rano Raraku and, at the same time, to see our massive *Atlas* of the Easter Island statues through the complex publication process.

Q. What is your favorite Rapa Nui site and why?

A. I don't have a favorite site. I have places on the island that are special because they speak to me of people or events I know well or remember fondly. These places may be quite ordinary to some eyes. They only become special at certain times of the day, in varying types of weather or depending upon the angle of the sunlight or moonlight and the direction of the wind. I am at home in many places on the island. I love it all.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?

A. I don't have much interest in dispelling myths, which can be interesting or amusing and in some cases even inspiring. Misinformation, however, is another matter. We were recently given a major opportunity to weigh in on an Internet discussion that was, unfortunately, rather typical in its naiveté but pretty astonishing in its reach.

Our project website (www.eisp.org) received over 10 million "hits" in such a short time that it crashed because someone, somewhere downloaded an image of our excavation and tagged it with the exclamation, "Easter Island statues have bodies!" An unsigned email circled the globe a few months ago and then multiplied and intensified until it "went viral".

We were astonished to learn that so many people world-wide *had no idea* that the statues were complete heads and torsos, in spite of hundreds of published photos showing intact statues previously excavated by others. We posted an essay and photos addressing the misconception and continue to receive thousands of visitors weekly.

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Rapa Nui?

A. I would suggest that the complex, evolving, overlapping, integrated, layered, and nuanced history of the island, as revealed in its equally complicated archaeological record, cannot be neatly fitted into most of today's theoretical approaches

to meaning. Caution is required in interpreting the extraordinary amount of data that has emerged from the island-wide survey. I support Katherine Routledge's assertion that nothing on the island is obvious or understood until, over time and through a lot of patience one develops "intelligent eyes".

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Rapa Nui archaeology or anthropology (or those fields generally)?

A. I would suggest that it is useful to recognize and reject the current, truly dismal state of affairs in the U.S. and elsewhere in which science is debunked and scientists and experts in every field are derided. To that end, I think anthropology needs to extend itself in new ways. Useful research might be conducted, for example, into the ways in which "creative license" has become a free-for-all, causing the valid differences between innovation and imitation to be ignored in the classroom. I also think that there should be a concerted effort to evaluate the valid archaeological uses of various types of technology through a more vibrant professional literature. Technology and statistics are a lot alike: they each raise issues that often fail to pass the "so what?" question Clem Meighan asked.

Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology and anthropology?

A. On Easter Island, I would like to see greater vision and stronger leadership on the part of the government and involved community organizations in order to ensure that the archaeological agenda is clear and in the best interests of science and site conservation.

Q. What are you currently reading?

A. The proofs of my own current book *Rock Art at Little Lake: An Ancient Crossroads in the California Desert* (Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, 2012) and *Breaking Ground: Pioneering Women Archaeologists*, edited by G.M. Cohen and M. S. Joukowsky (University of Michigan Press, 2004).

Q. Credentials?

A. Director, UCLA Rock Art Archive the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

Co-director, with Cristián Arévalo Pakarati, the Easter Island Statue Project (EISP)

1986 Ph.D. University of California, Los Angeles (Archaeology)

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