

Nasim Patel

The Grimwade Collection Miegunyah Student Project Award 2023
Written Report



Fig. 1. *Young camels*, unknown artist, 1891, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973.



Fig. 2. *Equivalent Voids*, Nasim Patel, 2023, still from film.

My research project for the Miegunyah Award explored the relationship between cameleers and the Australian landscape during the colonial period. The cameleers were at least 2000 men who migrated to Australia from across the Middle East and South Asia between the 1860s and 1930s, bringing with them around 20 000 camels (Jones and Kenny 2007, 35). I was interested in the cameleers as an extension of previous research I had undergone in creating my short film 'non-paradise' for the Sydney Opera House through the Shortwave 2023 program. The film initiated my interest in studying the Western colonial lens of a desert environment, labelling the landscape as uninhabitable, impermeable, and ultimately hostile (Patel 2023). The

cameleers exemplified the possibility for desert traversal and goods transportation through effectively utilising camels with cultural technologies of rigging and load-bearing. My research project sprung from the 1891 painting 'Young camels' (artist unknown) and was tied closely to Russell Grimwade's interest in early colonial Australia. I was interested in the role of the cameleers in this process, and their historical invisibility in Australian cultural awareness. The short film I created as an outcome for my research project, 'Equivalent Voids', felt like a natural way to make their presence visible and audible through the use of image and music. This report will present my research into both Western colonial and Islamic perspectives of deserts, identify the role of the camel and my use of them as a metaphor of place in Australia, and explore my interest in rap as a mode of collage in laterally drawing together outside resources and binding them together with elements of my personal experience.

For my research, the major resource in understanding the British perspective of deserts also came from within the Miegunyah collection. *The Friend of Australia*, written by Thomas J. Maslen, was published in 1830, is a collection of ideas about how to traverse the sandy plains of Australia to explore and colonise the hard-to-reach inland regions. Maslen (1830, 160) was an early proponent of using camels as the primary method of desert transportation, recommending the import of the animals along with their proficient drivers, the cameleers. *The Friend of Australia*, written while Maslen was living in England is filled with writing on the Australian landscape drawn from reports received from explorers and early colonists (Cook 2008, 13). Throughout the book, the words 'barren' and 'desert' are often used together and sometimes synonymously, effectively homogenising much of the Australian landscape (Maslen 1830, 153, 156, 170-171, 229). In general, the environment is framed as dry, arid, and absent of any life.

I was interested in the contestation between this perspective and the Indigenous peoples that have thrived within these desert environments for millennia, as well as the ability for desert traversal in other parts of the world. In particular, I was curious about the ability for the mostly Muslim cameleers to live in this landscape and the attachment between their religion and their environment. The origins of Islam in the sandy deserts of Arabia are baked into the ethics of the religion. *Shari'a*, Islamic law, literally translates to 'the way to the water', and the paradisaical afterlife is characterised by abundance, greenery, and water (Qur'an, 2:21, 7:49, 18:106, 43:82, for some examples). Furthermore, *hajj* – the act of pilgrimage to Mecca – commemorates the desperate search for water by Hajar, the second wife of Abraham whom he abandoned in the deserts of ancient Mecca (Haynes 2013, 118). Camels, exemplary of life's ability to survive in these hard conditions, are referred to in the Qur'an (22:37) as 'blessed' animals and were highly respected by the cameleers (Jones and Kenny 2007, 35). This sharply contrasts with the perspective of Maslen (1830, 221-222), who describes camels as God's gifts to be worked and treated as

slaves. This is an interesting dissonance in the place of the camel in Australia, which reveals a dominating colonial imperial perspective over life and land.

This perspective on camels influenced the short film I created as a research outcome. Engaging with the subjugated position of the camel on all fours, I recorded a rap piece I had written, collating information garnered throughout the project. Hip-hop and its discipline of rap has its roots in collage, and I wanted to explore using it as a method of understanding intersecting ideas. Scholars such as Stavrias (2005, 46) argue that rap music is a postmodern bricolage of pre-recorded sounds such as other music, political speeches, and news media, as well as being reliant on a mastery of language. This collating of pre-existing content allowed it to be an effective protest genre for subjugated African-Americans who would not have access to grander music-production resources to tell their stories. I believe the reference-based quality of rap music qualifies it as an effective method for drawing together distal ideas. The result involved me using rap as a poetic method of collating the ideas, experiences, and tactile connections I had interacting with the Miegunyah Collection and the university staff, as well as my research into cameleers and the early period of settler colonisation. While using the protest genre of rap music, I embodied the subservient image of the camel and included my personal experiences into the rap-collage to parallel the experience of the cameleers living in this country, while considering the different eras that we lived on this land.

My research project into 'Young camels' (1891) and the wider Miegunyah collection allowed me to contextualise the cameleers within colonial history and within the Australian landscape. In doing so, I have attempted to render their forgotten roles more visible. The work of Maslen gave useful insights into the Western colonial perspective of the Australian environment and provided a fascinating contrast to Islamic conceptions of the desert, as well as of camels. The flourishing wild camel populations in the diverse deserts of Australia that I embodied in 'Equivalent Voids' will forever remain an index that points to the presence of the cameleers and their role in the history of this country.

References

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