

The silence of the donkeys: Sensorial entanglements between people and animals at Willowra and beyond

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Abstract

An indelible memory of visitors to Willowra Aboriginal community in Central Australia is the sound of donkeys braying as they roam the village in search of sustenance and are chased by barking dogs. While Warlpiri people view donkeys as an integral part of their sonic landscape, outsiders typically perceive the animals as a noisy, land-management ‘pest’ and want them removed. Recently, the arrival of a stranger in a truck towing a donkey trailer provoked concerned discussion. Talk intensified when, for a few days, the donkeys disappeared, and the silence of the donkeys echoed throughout the community. Tracing emergent social relations and mimetic connections that entangle donkeys and people in the Willowra region, this paper explores why donkeys matter to local Warlpiri, sensorially and otherwise. I contrast Warlpiri coexistence with donkeys to the treatment of donkeys by conservationists as feral animal and by capitalists as commodity. Linking the silence of donkeys at Willowra to the global trade in *ejiao*, a glue made from donkey hides used in Chinese medicine and cosmetics, I engage with Michael Taussig’s (2019) ‘The cry of the burro [donkey]’ to examine differing senses of being and predicaments that the sound of donkeys evoke cross-culturally. I conclude with a call to listen differently to other-than-human beings when considering multispecies assemblages. Attending to the sonic range of donkeys as an expression of their agency,



I suggest that we learn from Warlpiri and heed the cries of donkeys and their global silencing if we are to ensure our mutual survival.

KEYWORDS

donkeys, environment, multispecies ethnography, senses, Warlpiri Indigenous Australians

1 | INTRODUCTION

An indelible memory of visitors to the Lander Warlpiri community of Willowra in Central Australia is the sound of donkeys pounding the ground with their hoofs, clomping and exclaiming in a cacophony of voices, ‘hee-haw’, ‘haw-hee’, ‘hee-haw, hee-haw’, ‘haw-hee’, their cries diminishing as they flee barking dogs for safety. The donkeys are a constant presence, roaming freely in and around people’s yards and throughout the village, alone, in lines of two or three, or in groups, as they search for sustenance, call to a mate, jostle, cavort and seek company—donkey or otherwise. There are around 60 Willowra donkeys, and although children ride them at times, they are not ‘pets’, nor are they considered ‘wild’. Aboriginal residents of Willowra regard donkeys as an integral aspect of their sonic landscape. Three years ago, the arrival of a stranger in a truck towing a donkey trailer provoked concerned discussion. Talk intensified when, for a few days, the donkeys disappeared, and the silence of the donkeys echoed throughout the community.

Tracing historical relations and connections that entangle donkeys and people in the Willowra region and beyond, this paper explores why and how donkeys matter to local Warlpiri, sensorially and otherwise. This permits a contrast between Willowra people’s coexistence with donkeys and the ways in which donkeys are treated elsewhere: for example, by conservationists as a feral animal and by capitalists as a commodity (see Celermajer and Wallach, 2019). As we shall see, the silence of the donkeys at Willowra is illustrative of the precarious situation of donkeys globally.

My approach is inspired by Anna Tsing’s call for critical description in exploring more-than-human socialities. This involves methods that ‘move from technological and ethical object making to pursuing the social worlds of these objects in motion’ (Tsing, 2013, p. 34). Tsing suggests that one way of making sense of interspecies socialities is to explore a multispecies landscape, attending to the ‘landscape’s polyrhythms, that is, its enactment of multiple conjoined histories’ (2013, p. 34). My focus here is human–donkey histories and interactions in the multispecies landscape of the Aboriginal village of Willowra. As I indicate, the landscape of Willowra resonates with the ‘disturbance-based ecologies’ that Tsing observes often provide the ground for different species living together ‘without either harmony or conquest’ (Tsing, 2015, p. 5).

I consider how it has come about that Willowra Warlpiri now perceive donkeys as ‘belonging to community’. To understand this example of people ‘becoming-with’ animals through sharing a world (Ingold, 2013), I explore aspects of the ‘sensory model’ (Howes, 2019, p. 24) of the Warlpiri world and ways in which donkeys have sensorially entered this world and Warlpiri ‘relational schemas’ (Descola, 2014). While I attend to interconnected senses, I highlight the auditory. I consider the conceptual fields of silence, noise, voice and hearing in the context of Willowra people’s interactions with donkeys.

Novak and Sakakeeny (2015, pp. 1–2) note in relation to humans:

To “hear” a person is to recognise their subjectivity, just as to “have a voice” suggests more than the ability to speak or sing, but is also a manifestation of internal character, even essential consciousness. Sound, then, is a substance of the world as well as a basic part of how people frame their knowledge about the world.

Drawing on these authors, I engage with sound as the ‘interrelation of materiality and metaphor’ and the ‘ground for hearing, listening and feeling’. In writing this article my imagination has also been stimulated by Michael Taussig’s body of work concerning ‘The cry of the burro’.¹ In this extraordinary work, Taussig draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of mimesis to explore images evoked by the cry of a donkey outside his window one night in northern Columbia. For Taussig, the cry of the donkey is painful, alienating and eviscerating. In this paper I ask how donkeys sound to Willowra Warlpiri and how they (and others) listen to their voices.

There is a rich and developing literature on the relationship between people, sound, landscapes and nature (Feld, 1982, 1996; Titon, 2012; Wafer, 2017),² but much of the material is concerned with ‘intact’ environments and indigenous people’s relationship with autochthonous species. There has been little attention paid to the sensory aspects of indigenous interactions with introduced or ‘feral’ animals. Furthermore, as Gallagher et al. (2017, p. 628) note, ‘much of the nature-culture literature is silent about sound’. This gap is compounded by the fact that, as Krause (2015, p. 6) argues in relation to ways that many Westerners listen to the sounds of animals, ‘listening is the “shadow sense”’.

At the same time, there is a dearth of literature on donkeys in Australia (but see Bough, 2008, 2011; Celermajer and Wallach, 2019), particularly Indigenous relations with donkeys, and in this regard the latter differ from camels and other introduced animals. In the context of Indigenous land management, donkeys have, in recent years, begun to attract interest at a species-population level, but I address this particular issue only in passing. Rather, this paper illustrates the unfolding ontological, sensorial and environmental significance of donkeys for a group of Warlpiri Indigenous people through time. In this way, it contributes to the emerging scholarship on introduced and feral animals.

In the first part of the narrative that follows, I provide some background on donkeys in the Northern Territory (NT) and a historical perspective on people and donkeys in the Lander Warlpiri region, where Willowra is situated. In the second part, I explore donkey–human interactions as part of the sonic landscape of Willowra. In the third part, I expand the focus and explore links between donkey removals and the production of *ejiao*, a glue made from donkey skins and used in Chinese cosmetics and medicine. I conclude with some reflections on Taussig’s (2019) ‘Cry of the burro’, and consider what it might mean to listen to donkey voices—to consider what senses of being and predicaments the cries of donkeys and their silencing evoke cross-culturally.

2 | BACKGROUND

Donkeys, like horses and camels, were introduced to Central Australia in the 19th century to facilitate settler colonisation of Aboriginal land (Bough, 2008, 2011; Vaarzon-Morel et al., 2012). As occurred in many other settler societies, they were employed in teams and as pack animals to haul goods and people.³ Once settlers no longer required the animals for transport, they released them to become free-ranging or ‘feral’. This transition was not a one-off event but part of the colonial process. The timing, scale and character of the process differed across Australia according to contingent factors such as the date of European settlement, the pastoral history of a region and the environments in which humans, introduced animals and other species met and mingled. It is important to pay attention to the ‘complex spatial and temporal assemblages’ (Galvin, 2018, p. 234) in which multicultural and multispecies



relations come into being if we are to gain a more nuanced sense of ways they might be reconfigured as worlds change. To this end, I begin by sketching the ecology and early history of the Willowra region, before exploring histories of Warlpiri and donkey interaction.

The Aboriginal village of Willowra has grown around the ruins of the old pastoral homestead situated at Wirliyajarrayi, a sacred Warlpiri Dreaming complex on the Lander River. The river courses through Anmatyerr and Warlpiri country in the Southern Tanami Desert. From a European perspective, the region is infertile: the climate is arid, with hot summers and such low rainfall that rivers are dry for the greater part of the year, if they flow at all. The vegetation is predominantly desert shrubland, with low trees and shrubs, and large areas of spinifex.

In the 1920s white settlers took out grazing licences over the region and stocked the land with cattle. Settler relations with local Aboriginal people were marked by violent conflict in the first years of contact, culminating in the Coniston Massacre. By the 1940s the situation had changed as Aboriginal people began working as stockmen and domestics for a new breed of pastoralists in return for rations (see Vaarzon-Morel et al., 1995). In this way, Willowra people remained on their country and were able to maintain traditional social structures and a high level of cultural autonomy with limited interference from the state (Vaarzon-Morel and Wafer, 2017). In 1973 the government purchased Willowra on behalf of the resident Aboriginal community and in 1981, following a successful Northern Territory land rights claim, Willowra Pastoral Lease became Aboriginal Freehold Land (see Vaarzon-Morel et al., 1995).

Although Willowra is no longer a cattle station, to this day elders contrast Willowra with government settlements such as Yuendumu, Lajamanu and Ali Curung, where Aboriginal peoples were forcibly settled under the assimilation policy. Warlpiri living in these settlements were subject to disciplinary regimes and teachings by missionaries and welfare administrators who were intent on transforming them from hunter-gatherers to Christians living domesticated, 'productive' lives (Hinkson, 2014). Willowra people continue to assert their distinctive sense of identity in creative ways. In one example, visitors are greeted by old station trucks artfully placed on red dirt mounds at the entrance to Willowra; together the rusted bodies function like a 'mouthpiece' (Munn, 1996, p. 99) announcing Willowra's distinctive history. The presence of donkeys provides another example: as I elaborate in this article, donkeys define and mediate Willowra's identity in a vital, dynamic and sonorous way.

3 | EMERGENT HUMAN–DONKEY ENTANGLEMENTS IN THE LANDER REGION

During the 1980s, Willowra women shared stories with me about their first encounters with donkeys. The animals were introduced to the Lander in the 1920s by settlers who had come from the Victoria River region, in search of country to graze cattle. Nangala recalled that Warlpiri people had just performed a ceremony to increase bush food, when the men appeared riding on horses, mules and donkeys. Astonished by the appearance of the strange creatures,⁴ it was also during this encounter that Nangala's relatives first tasted whiteman's flour and beef (Vaarzon-Morel et al., 1995).

In the following decade a few men and women learnt to work with donkeys at Anningie, the neighbouring station to Willowra. Compared to horses, they found them easy to train. But it was not until the late 1940s, when station owners replaced donkeys with motorised transport, that Warlpiri people adopted donkeys, employing them to carry their belongings while walking or riding through country. Travelling with donkeys in this way, people developed an intimate knowledge of the animals' behaviours and attributes. Middle-aged and older Warlpiri people have fond memories of travelling with donkeys between Willowra and neighbouring stations.



The late Japangardi Poulson told me how he travelled from Yuendumu to Mount Denison as a child, accompanied by his Lander Warlpiri relatives and donkeys. He recalled ‘camping at waterholes on the way when the sun was going down. It was a slow trip, but it was enjoyable you know, because you see more life, hunting for animals or getting bush tucker’. Japangardi recalled that on one occasion, when he and his friends came to a waterhole in the hills and rushed to drink water, they forgot to leave someone with the donkeys. When they climbed down the hill, the donkeys had run away.⁵ Laughing, Japangardi remarked: ‘they really respected my father’.⁶

The donkeys belonged to individuals and were named. The names could refer to the physical or behavioural characteristics of an individual donkey or to places. For example, a relative of Japangardi called his donkey ‘Yalyawarri’,⁷ after being gifted it while attending a ceremony in Alyawarr territory. Names could thus ‘fix’ a donkey’s personal identity or index their role in facilitating human social networks. My friends affectionately remember old ‘Bus’, on whose elongated back they piled as kids, riding bareback. Bus was taking kids around in the mid-70s when I first came to Willowra. He died in the late 80s, but my friends reckoned he would have lived well over 30 years.

The late Maxie Jampjinpa told me about working with donkeys on the tin field on Anningie Station. He and his family would load donkeys with flour drums full of tin, which they traded with the station owner for rations. In other histories that I have collected, people describe how they would place swags and belongings on one or two donkeys and children on others, while adults walked alongside.⁸ The narratives detail the different kinds of animals hunted, yams dug, the seeds, bush fruit and bush medicine gathered, and the waterholes visited as they camped and walked through country with donkeys. People’s memories of travelling and living with donkeys during these times inform their relation to donkeys today.

When I first came to Willowra in 1976, few people had cars and one or two men would set off on donkeys for a day’s hunting. Such donkey travel has now ceased, but the significance of donkeys for people has not diminished. Although donkey numbers at Willowra have increased over the years, in contrast to the well-watered regions of northern Australia, where free-roaming donkeys number several million and range widely (see also Bough, 2008; Low, 1999), the number of donkeys at Willowra is low—around 60—and they do not wander far. It is estimated that donkeys can roam up to six kilometres from a water source. While I have encountered camels all over the Southern Tanami Desert, I have seldom encountered donkeys more than 10 kilometres from Willowra. Lack of surface water circumscribes the donkeys’ range, fostering their interaction with people and other animals at Willowra. The donkeys’ range expands following rain and contracts during periods of drought, when donkey–human interactions intensify. While the donkeys frequently congregate in variously constituted small groups—for example, all female or a male with females—it is not uncommon to see them gathered in a herd a few kilometres from the village. But even when socialising together at this distance, their familiar brays can be heard from Willowra. Noisy and feisty, they enliven the sonic landscape of all concerned.

4 | CONTEMPORARY INTERACTIONS BETWEEN WARLPIRI, DONKEYS AND DOGS

Dogs as well as humans figure as significant actors in the world of donkeys but the way they do so reflects their different socialities and life forms. As Kohn (2014, p. 276) argues, it is important to pay attention to such differences: their relational logics are not all the same, nor do Warlpiri regard the properties of different sentient beings in the same way.



Unlike whitefellas, Warlpiri rarely sit alone for long; such behaviour is typical of malevolent beings and treated with suspicion. In part, this is why people value dogs. As Napanangka told me, ‘When you have pets like dogs it’s really close to you like a mother. It’s a guardian, like a best friend. It protects you from magic man, *kurdaitcha*. It’s a guardian, like *milarlpa* [spirits of country]’. Dogs are ascribed classificatory kin terms (skin names)—typically the same as the owner’s mother—that integrate them into the Warlpiri social world (see also Musharbash, 2018). Unlike dogs, donkeys do not have skin names, nor do they live with people in the same companionable way.

Furthermore, donkeys move in and out of people’s homes and in this way are also different to ‘wild’ animals, for instance kangaroos, who live apart from humans (see Vaarzon-Morel, 2017, p. 194). At the same time, donkeys are regarded by Warlpiri as cohabitants of Willowra, but as with dogs and humans, coexistence is not always harmonious. Wailing donkeys can keep people awake at night—especially in dry periods when they hang around people’s yards—yet, at the same time and like barking dogs, the cadence of their voices, even when frenetic, can be strangely comforting—for Warlpiri as well as for me.⁹ My own response to donkeys has changed over the years. When I look back through my early fieldnotes, my references to donkeys are tinged with annoyance. Some examples:

Terrible night’s sleep, donkeys braying outside my window all night, dogs barking, kittens meowing on the roof, mosquitoes buzzing my face . . . Larry Japaljarri asked me how I was—I complained about the donkeys. He sympathized, said they were *warungka* [crazy] and said that that old blind Jangala owns them.

Extraordinarily windy, red dust pouring through louvre windows adding to the cacophony of the donkeys sheltering in the workshop next-door.

The tendency of donkeys to take shelter in draughty old buildings of the ‘transitional’ type, provided in the early 1970s to a select few people (with open roofs for smoke to escape, no rooms and a lack of storage areas), earned them the nickname ‘donkey houses’—an epithet that Aboriginal people still use to disparage inadequate housing.

While today most families live in European-style houses with fenced yards to keep donkeys and other beings out at night, in the 1970s most people slept in ‘humpies’ or in front of windbreaks made of branches, with cooking fires nearby. As the following excerpt from a children’s Warlpiri primer illustrates (see Figure 1), securing food from the reach of donkeys was tricky:

Night falls and we go to bed . . . In the morning we wake up [and] see the tracks . . . where they have scattered the ash and stood in the fire. The next night we lie down and we hear them. We get up as they are eating. “Hey! That donkey has come back while we were sleeping. The donkeys have eaten our flour.” People then hit them with sticks and they run off in fright. But the next night they return. When they see some tea in a box, they open it with their teeth and they eat it and spill it all over the ground . . . we decide to punish them when they come back in search of our food . . . We put our dogs onto them to chase them away . . . Then they go to someone else’s place and eat all their food . . . [they] are truly thieves. (Nakamarra, 1983, p. 20).

Attesting to the curiosity of donkeys, this story nicely conveys the way donkeys use their teeth to explore objects, whatever kind. It indicates their persistence in the face of aggressive dogs. It is a



FIGURE 1 Donkey stealing food while family sleep. Image by Janet Nakamarra, 1983 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

common sight to see donkeys kick out at dogs with their hind legs as they run away.¹⁰ Yet donkeys return, again and again. They run the gauntlet of snapping dogs to forage and seek out human company—particularly that of individuals who they know will feed them (Figure 2).

5 | DONKEYS AND COSMOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

As with other Indigenous Australians, Warlpiri people have totemic relationships with kangaroos, bees, honey, plants, wind, rain and other entities. These relationships are grounded in a landscape that was created by ancestors of these beings: as they travelled through the landscape, the ancestral beings sang topographic features into being, named places where they deposited bodily substances, and laid down Warlpiri law (Munn, 1973). The paths forged by the ancestral beings are referred to in English as Dreaming tracks or songlines, and collectively they form a complex network linking groups of people affiliated with different areas of land. According to Warlpiri ontology, people's rights in localised estates or 'countries' derive from ancestral beings with whom they share spiritual substance. Warlpiri do not have this kind of ontological relationship with donkeys. Nevertheless, donkeys figure in the 'more-than-human socialities' (Tsing, 2013) that constitute the Willowra landscape today. Moreover, Warlpiri people's relationship with donkeys has a religious dimension in that people have come to associate donkeys with Christianity and the figure of Jesus.

This religious association can be traced to the mid-20th century, when missionaries introduced Christianity to Aboriginal settlements. Every Easter, missionaries would recount the story of Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday before his crucifixion and resurrection. However, Christianity came late to Willowra and, for most people, it was not until they witnessed the performance



FIGURE 2 Donkey seeking human company. Necktie used by children when riding bareback [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of ceremonies depicting the Easter story that the association of donkeys and Jesus became manifest. These public re-enactments took place during the self-determination era in the 1970s and 80s, when Baptist ministers at Yuendumu and Lajamanu sought to indigenise Christianity. Referred to as *purlapas* in Warlpiri, these ceremonies were enacted using traditional musical, dance, and iconographic and ritual forms (Swain, 1988, p. 457).

When the Easter *purlapa* was brought to Willowra from Yuendumu, the role of the donkey was portrayed by women. They mimicked her characteristic movements, much as they depicted totemic animals in Dreaming ceremonies, but with a crucial difference—mimesis was not used to express sameness of identity (see Deger, 2006) but rather as a way of exploring Otherness (Taussig, 1993; cf. Curran, 2017). Through such performances, people came to regard donkeys as ‘Jesus’s animal’ (Vaarzon-Morel, forthcoming). A constant reminder of this connection is the dark band of fur extending from the donkey’s mane to tail and across her shoulders, which people liken to the cross of Jesus.

In commenting on the intrusion of Christianity among Warlpiri, Swain (1988, p. 455) argues that it ‘is best understood not as a conquest, but as an alliance—an alliance socially between Aborigines and Whites, cosmologically between Dreaming and God, and ontologically between place and Space’—a view with which I am in broad agreement. Today many Warlpiri consider themselves Christian, while at the same time following Warlpiri Jukurrpa or Law. Recently, when discussing donkeys with a friend familiar with the Bible, she reminded me that the donkey is one of only two animals to speak in the Bible (the other being a serpent). She pointed out that in a section of the Old Testament (Numbers), there is a story explaining why donkeys behave in certain ways—veering off course, crushing a rider against a wall, or refusing to move. She remarked that the story was not so very different to Jukurrpa stories.



6 | DONKEYS, RAIN AND WARLPIRI 'RELATIONAL SCHEMAS'

Donkeys are incorporated into Warlpiri people's lives in yet other ways: they have been assimilated into Warlpiri 'relational schemas' (Descola, 2014) through sensory modalities that engage Warlpiri and Christian symbolism. Warlpiri associate donkeys with rain, water, the greening of country and wellbeing. *Ngapa* (rain) Dreaming tracks connect Warlpiri groups associated with different countries in the Tanami Desert and they play a critical role in survival and sociality (see, e.g., Taylor et al., 2016). Thus, the association between water and donkeys is especially significant. When I asked a Warlpiri friend why donkeys are associated with rain, she recounted the story of Jesus's death, followed by his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Looking indulgently at me as though it should be obvious, she pointed out that the Easter story is a story about rejuvenation and life. As Jesus's chosen animal, the donkey symbolises life itself.

This Christian symbolism is entwined with complex cultural connections between death, regeneration, rain and the passing of time, which are worth alluding to here. For instance, on the death of an elder it is customary for people to allow a period of time to elapse before they can visit the person's totemic country again or perform associated Dreamings. Once mourning is completed, the Dreamings and country may be 'opened up' again—but ideally this should happen only after rain has fallen and the country is green with the growth of new vegetation.

The links between donkeys, rain, the greening of country and wellbeing reflect Warlpiri views concerning the interdependence of the human and more-than-human entities in the world. Relatedly, these connections rely on correspondences (Taussig, 1993) that are grounded in people's sensory experiences and perceptions of their environment (Strang, 2005, 2006). For instance, as I discuss elsewhere (Vaarzon-Morel, forthcoming), a decade ago, following a period of conflict in the community, Willowra experienced a severe drought. People were encouraged to attend church to help resolve the conflict. Finally, peace was made and, around the same time, the rains came and the river flowed once again. Linking these events during a subsequent church sermon, my friend Japaljarri told everyone:

When everyone was fighting this place got dry; donkeys bin die then people got sick. But when we went to church and said sorry to God, we got a lot of rain and everything bin grow. The Lander River flowed—a miracle from God. He blessed this country and people.¹¹

On a much earlier occasion, in the 1980s, mischievous boys locked some donkeys in an empty house, where they died from dehydration before being found. Not long after this incident, people fell ill and had to be flown to hospital in Alice Springs. The cause of the 'sickness' was widely attributed to the senseless death of the donkeys, which people emphasised, were Jesus's animals. It is against Warlpiri law to kill animals in a wasteful way: according to the logic of Warlpiri relational ontology, such transgression can provoke cosmic repercussions, including sickness and drought (Vaarzon-Morel, 2017, p. 200). Such compassionate thinking reflects a widely reported ethic of care (Rose, 2005) among Aboriginal people, which generally extends to introduced beings with whom people have shared history.

Speaking of the way in which water links bodies with their environment, and the importance of water to health cross-culturally, Strang (2006, p. 71) observes that water is 'integral to social identity, embodying and physically uniting the person with a particular place and the other people in it, who also ingest, use and share that common substance'. In the examples from Willowra, we see the equation of donkeys with water and life and, correspondingly, the role of donkeys in overcoming differences among people as they entangle Christian and Warlpiri cosmologies.



The 'mode of existence' (Hage, 2017, p. 120) that exists between Warlpiri and donkeys is one of reciprocity. While donkeys bring rain in times of drought, people feel obligated to provide donkeys with water. This last summer saw record-breaking high temperatures and the continuation of a drought, with dingoes, kangaroos and other native animals struggling to survive in the desert as waterholes dried up. Unlike many Aboriginal settlements that have severe water shortages that threaten their continued existence and endanger people's health, Willowra has plentiful water supplied by an underground aquifer. The drought brought the donkeys into the community in search of water, turning up the volume of human–donkey sociality.

Yet even as the donkeys disrupted people's sleep with their 'hee-hawing', people recognised that the donkeys too were stressed by the intense dry heat and they felt compassion. Visiting some friends one day, I watched Jupurrurla water a patch of lawn in front of his house while donkeys grazed nearby (see Figure 3). I commented on the drought and how lucky we were that Willowra had good water. Jupurrurla replied that Willowra had such good water because of the donkeys and people were watering their lawns for the donkeys, so that they would not die.

7 | **SENSORY DIMENSIONS OF WARLPIRI CULTURE AND COUNTRY**

Classen (1997) directs our attention to the importance of approaching different cultures on their own sensory terms, and Howes has emphasised the need to attend to 'the culturally specific practices of looking . . . and ways of listening . . . that inform our engagement with the world' (2019, p. 22). Following the imperative to 'focus on the "emplacement" of the sensing subject in a particular environmental and cultural context' (Howes, 2019, p. 20), I briefly consider sensory aspects of Warlpiri



FIGURE 3 Donkeys grazing in Jupurrurla's yard [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/taja.12383)]

culture. My focus is on the auditory, but also on the interconnection between the senses, for the sake of drawing attention to different Aboriginal modes of communication (Rose, 2005) and ways of listening. These provide an entry point for ways that Warlpiri respond and listen to donkeys.

Warlpiri have an elaborate vocabulary related to listening, vocalisation and sounds made by human and more-than-human phenomena. For example, the term *jutayinyi* refers to the sound made when testing the ground with a digging stick to establish the presence of a yam. That sounds are powerful and affective is illustrated by the fact that people can cast a spell on others by 'singing' them. Warlpiri draw analogies between sounds made by different species, human or more-than-human. For example, *jaa-jaa*, the name for a crow's call, is likened to the babbling of babies before they can talk (Laughren et al., 2009). Animals communicate with Warlpiri people through sound and other ways. To give some examples, the call of the Whistling Kite is said to harden the milk in a nursing mother's breast; a cuckoo's call warns people that someone is approaching (see also Curran, 2020).

When I am with Warlpiri friends in their ancestral country, they are alert to movements, sounds, smell and the feel of country. Their knowledge of ways in which different beings communicate with each other extends to more-than-human ancestral spirits, animals and other phenomena. To give some examples: if an individual ventures alone from camp in the silence of night, they might hear the snapping of twigs, which a friend told me is the sound of *milarlpa*, spirits of country, asking of a person, 'Eee, who are you?'. When visiting sacred places or country not visited for some time, people must call out to the ancestral spirits, to announce their connection to the country and introduce strangers lest they be harmed (see also Hinkson, 2014, p. 95). Ancestral spirits look after the owners of country but hide food from strangers who transgress. These spirits may appear in people's dreams and impart Dreaming songs (Dussart, 2000; Wafer, 2017) to owners of country. In these and other ways relationships of mutuality between people and country are sensorially reproduced, ensuring the wellbeing of both.

Here I note that numerous authors attest to the significance of song in Aboriginal totemic life-worlds. As Yanyuwa woman Eileen McDinny told John Bradley, 'Everything got a song, no matter how little . . . plant, bird, animal, country, people, everything' (Bradley with Yanyuwa families, quoted in Wafer, 2017, p. 27). Although Warlpiri do not have traditional songs for donkeys, certain affective qualities and imagery associated with sound and silence shape the way that they perceive, interpret and interact with donkeys as part of their multispecies landscape.

Warlpiri equate loneliness with loss and abandonment on the death of a loved one and express their sorrow through ritualised keening and silence. Different mourning cries express differing affective relationships, such that 'one adopts the appropriate mode of wailing or keening depending on one's relationship to a deceased person' (Laughren et al., 2009). Traditionally, mothers and widows of deceased persons undertook a speech taboo when in mourning, employing sign language to communicate, while keening at different times. Although the period of mourning is now shortened, women still move into a 'sorry camp', where they unburden their sorrow with close kin. The converse of the associated complex of mourning, death and silence is noisy social engagement, conviviality and life. This is precisely how people think of Willowra donkeys—as life.

But what of donkeys' voices, and how do Warlpiri listen to their vocalisations? According to Browning and Scheifele (2004), donkeys—unlike horses—can vocalise while breathing in and also while breathing out. The 'hee' sound is produced during air intake, and the 'haw' sound during air outflow, resulting in a series of brays that diminish as the animal becomes short of breath. The authors report that 'The acoustic character, duration, and sequence are unique to each animal' and some donkeys 'hee-haw', others 'haw-hee' (Browning and Scheifele, 2004, p. 2485). Furthermore, they note that only a few animals bray and of these, 'donkeys (*Equus asinus*) have the most rich or raucous bray, depending on your point of view' (Browning and Scheifele, 2014, p. 2266).



My Warlpiri friends do not distinguish between brays¹² of individual donkeys, but they recognise that donkeys vocalise for differing reasons—for example, when lonely and calling to a friend, or when stressed or excited. As I have indicated, Willowra people's responses to the braying of donkeys depend on context and are not separated from affective concern for the animals. That is, they do not categorise donkey braying negatively, as unwanted sound. Thus, while people might call donkeys *warungka*,¹³ meaning crazy, or exuberant, the cries of donkeys summon their compassion and other kinds of concern.

8 | CROSS-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF DONKEYS AS FERAL ANIMALS AND COMMODITY

While Aboriginal residents of Willowra regard donkeys as an aspect of their sonic landscape, outsiders typically perceive the animals as a noisy, land management feral 'pest' and want them removed. That it is especially the braying of donkeys that has caused intercultural dissonance over the years at Willowra suggests the importance of cultural context in shaping judgements and affect in relation to the animals and their cries. To illustrate differing sensibilities toward donkeys, over decades, various non-Indigenous community advisers attempted—unsuccessfully—to have the animals trucked away to be killed for pet food. On one memorable occasion, a community adviser had grids erected between fences to prevent donkeys entering areas where people lived. However, the donkeys soon learnt to take a large run-up to leap over the grids. The gradual appearance of holes in the fences revealed Willowra people's strongly felt sentiment that the donkeys' place was 'inside the community'.

It is not that Warlpiri do not get annoyed with donkeys. They can and do, but they accept that different beings such as donkeys act differently, that they have feelings and express them in their own ways in response to different situations. Warlpiri also have different cultural sensibilities concerning the need to control animals—whether companion or wild,¹⁴ native or feral—than do many non-Indigenous people. This is related to different ontological understandings concerning nature–culture (Descola, 2014), notions of the human–animal divide, constraints surrounding mobility and practices of domestication (Vaarzon-Morel, 2017). As Fijn states, Aboriginal coexistence with animals 'did not include the containment, domination, control or selective breeding of individuals over successive generations' (2017, p. 22). Moreover, in exploring the conjoined histories of people, donkeys and Willowra, my ethnography has shown how it is that donkeys and people may co-exist 'without either harmony or conquest' (Tsing, 2015, p. 5).

This contrasts with situations elsewhere. For example, in high rainfall areas of northern Australia where there are large populations of feral donkeys, ecologists report that they are having a serious negative impact on the environment (Low, 1999; cf. Bough, 2011). They are listed as an invasive, feral species by the Australian Government and the NT Government on their environmental websites,¹⁵ where 'management' techniques are discussed that include the practice of culling. Such techniques of control provoke tensions and contestation among the many Indigenous peoples who regard donkeys (or other introduced animals such as camels) as belonging to country (Rose, 1995; Trigger, 2008; Vaarzon-Morel, 2017; Vaarzon-Morel and Edwards, 2012). However, Aboriginal views on feral animals are neither homogenous nor unchanging (see also Altman, 2016; Vaarzon-Morel and Edwards, 2012).

9 | THE SILENCE OF THE DONKEYS

This account of human–donkey interactions at Willowra provides the framework for a better understanding of Willowra people's reactions when, in 2017, a stranger drove into town towing a trailer

with donkeys and hay. A few days after he appeared, the Willowra donkeys disappeared and the silence of the donkeys began. This set off a chain reaction in the community, with people asking: Where had the donkeys gone? Who was this man? Why did he want Willowra donkeys?

Apprehension increased when it was learnt that the donkeys in the trailer were his own and that he wanted to agist them at Willowra. People were puzzled by this seemingly innocent request. Concern intensified when it was learnt that he had arranged to leave his donkeys in cattle yards located well north of the village. It transpired, moreover, that he had paid some young men with tobacco to round up Willowra donkeys and mix them with his own. When asked what he wanted with the donkeys, he replied evasively that donkeys were now in demand—and that donkeys were being farmed in the Top End of the NT.

There was much community discussion and speculation about the stranger's 'real' intentions, with people exclaiming: 'They're Willowra's donkeys, they were born and grew up here, they belong here'; 'We don't want our donkeys sold and killed'. It was not long before members of the community contacted their Aboriginal land council to explain the predicament, requesting support to have the stranger removed from the community. Soon after, the donkeys returned. Now aware that the demand for donkeys was coming from China, people asked about this market. I shared what little I knew. Then, my curiosity piqued, I began to separate the strands from the viscous glue that threatened to entangle the lives of donkeys and Willowra people in global commodity chains.

The stranger, I learnt, was a former dealer in Aboriginal art who had attracted censure and criticism from art advisers who were keen supporters of Aboriginal art centres and their ethical practices. Following the crash of the Indigenous art market in 2015, he had turned his attention from 'trafficking art' (Myers, 2002) to trafficking donkeys, now a global commodity worth more than Aboriginal art.

How had this come about? The demand is not for live donkeys but for their skins, which are boiled down to produce *ejiao*, a 'donkey-hide' gelatine or glue. *Ejiao* is reported to have been used by the Chinese imperial family to beautify their skin and improve their health, and demand for *ejiao* has skyrocketed with the rising Chinese middle class. At the time of writing, *ejiao* was retailing between \$500 and \$2000 per kilo (Staight, 2018). It is estimated that China has a market demand for 10 million donkey skins, worth over a billion dollars (Brann, 2016).

As a result of this demand, *ejiao* makers are sourcing donkey hides from all over the world, and the total number of donkeys is rapidly declining. For example, in 1990 China had an estimated 11 million donkeys, but by 2017 it was only three million (Bissland, 2017). The rapid increase in the economic value of donkeys has led to a surge in global donkey thefts, with reports of villagers, who are dependent on donkeys for their livelihoods, having to hide their donkeys. According to one expert, Dr Max Kelly, 'There's been several examples across the African continent, where overnight the entire donkey population of a village was basically stolen and skinned' (Bissland, 2017). For the most part, the global market is unregulated and, as scientific research and horrific images on the internet testify, donkeys are being slaughtered in shocking and inhumane ways.

From the perspective of the many people who regard donkeys as a feral land management pest, donkeys have suddenly become an asset. The NT Government alone has received over 50 inquiries from Chinese companies regarding the farming of donkeys for *ejiao* factories, and donkey farming is being trialled in the NT. To the dismay of pastoralists in the cattle industry, who are invested in beef production and have long sought to eradicate feral animals from their stations, the NT Primary Industry Department now regards the value of feral donkeys as 'favourable' compared to cattle (Brann, 2018a). However, at this stage they do not support live donkey exports, because, to quote an NT minister, 'the behavioural issues of donkeys made them very different to cattle' (Brann, 2018b). Donkeys are highly vulnerable to stress, which they express by kicking, stomping and, of course, wailing. But who is listening?



10 | CONCLUSION: LISTENING TO THE CRIES OF DONKEYS

By way of conclusion I return to Taussig's reflections evoked by listening to the cries of a donkey outside his window in Columbia. As mentioned earlier, Taussig experiences the cry of the donkey as painful, alienating and eviscerating, with the capacity to 'turn the world inside out in sonic delirium'. Reflecting on the 'surreal qualities' of the donkey's cry, he wonders 'if the donkey has been selected through millennia as the Great Mimetic Trick' (Taussig, 2018), capable of 'conjuring connections' between apparent opposites in the realms of both matter and ideas. Taussig is concerned with non-sensuous mimetic correspondences which, while lacking physical connection, connect the large and small.

The donkey's cry unleashes a 'swathe of mimeses' concerning the palm oil plantations in Columbia, where Taussig was dwelling. Reflecting on the implications of their expansion, Taussig observes that palm oil is now in our food and everywhere, and that as part of the 'capitalist circuitry', it eats and destroys bodies—those of people, animals and the land. Equating the cry of the donkey with the expansion of palm oil, he ponders, 'is that a non-sensuous correspondence, an assemblage held together with sticky mimetic glue that shakes the world as it compresses at midnight outside my window?' (Taussig, 2018).

Extemporising on Taussig's 'The cry of the burro' (2019), I am compelled to consider how listening to donkeys at Willowra has led me not only to trace connections—sensuous, mimetic and other—between people and donkeys at Willowra but also to contemplate the precarious situation of donkeys elsewhere. Worldwide, donkeys are being stolen, farmed, sold and slaughtered for their bodies to make *ejiao*, a viscous glue that is consumed by people to beautify their skins or use as medicine. Sucked into the capitalist circuitry that is creating landscapes of death, silence and extinction, they have become, literally and materially, the glue connecting people and places like Willowra with the global world.

In this paper I have explored the 'multiple conjoined histories' (Tsing, 2013, p. 34) and sensory entanglements of Warlpiri people and donkeys at Willowra that have contributed to people now perceiving donkeys as 'belonging to community'. Attending to the auditory, I argue that human and more-than-human coexistence involves cultural issues related to how we listen to others, and how we make cultural sense of them and judge them. Taking the lead from Warlpiri, I argue furthermore that we need to be wary of binary thinking concerning agreeable or disagreeable animal sounds: we need to listen differently when considering introduced animals and multispecies assemblages.

Donkeys, long part of Willowra community, index Willowra's history as a former Aboriginal-owned cattle station, and in this way mediate distinctions between Willowra and settlements such as Yuendumu. The presence of the donkeys at Willowra speaks to local people's assertions of autonomy and resistance to whitefella management regimes, with their ever-changing modes of governmentality. As subjects and actors in a vital, multispecies landscape, donkeys mediate and co-constitute affective relations among human and more-than-human beings. They do so via chains of sensual mimetic connections and interactions, which, when broken, result in the silence of donkeys. Given the increasing slaughter of donkeys to produce *ejiao* glue, we would do well to pay attention to Warlpiri ways of listening and heed the screams of donkeys and their global silencing.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I draw upon Michael Taussig's lecture 'The cry of the burro [donkey], listening and seeing otherwise', which was given at Watch This Space, Alice Springs on 14 February 2019. The lecture is reproduced online as 'Palms' (2018).
- ² Stephen Feld's (1982) work with the Kaluli in the Bosavi rainforest in New Guinea was seminal in demonstrating the constitutive relationship between sound, culture, people and place, and it launched the 'anthropology of sound' and the ethnography of listening. More recently Feld (1996) coined the term 'acoustemology' in reference to the way we come to know the world through the environmental emplacement of sound (see Fijn and Kavesh, this issue).
- ³ See Bough (2011) for the history of donkeys in settler societies. According to Bough, the contribution of donkeys to colonisation has been ignored, and in Australia 'it is difficult to find records of donkeys in colonial times' (p. 76).
- ⁴ For Aboriginal reactions to introduced animals elsewhere in Central Australia see Vaarzon-Morel et al. (2012, 2017, p. 190); for northern Australia see Fijn (2017).
- ⁵ For a different version of this story, see Central Land Council and Bowman (2015, p. 134).
- ⁶ Japangardi's classificatory father.
- ⁷ The Warlpiri pronunciation of Alyawarr.
- ⁸ See Sandall's (1969) film showing Pitjantjatjara people travelling with donkeys and camels in the NT.
- ⁹ In regard to noise in urban contexts, Gallagher et al. (2017, p. 623) note that 'aesthetic appreciation or depreciation is highly variable and context specific'. They note tensions that can exist in responses to 'noise' such that it can impact 'personal health and well being, while on the other hand noise may be heard as registering a particular vitality within the cultural and social sphere' (LaBelle quoted in Gallagher et al., 2017, p. 623).
- ¹⁰ Discussing interactions between a dog and donkey in Wyoming, Smuts (2001, pp. 304–305) suggests that initially the donkey recognised the dog as a potential predator but that eventually they 'co-created a system of communication that worked for them'. The large number of dogs that guard people's homes at Willowra likely prevent the development of similar empathetic interactions. Indeed, dogs have been known to injure donkeys.
- ¹¹ Quoting Tuan, Strang (2006, p. 105) notes the rich symbolism of water in the Bible: 'Showers are signs of God's pleasure: over the restored Holy Land showers of rain and dew will make the sand and wilderness bear fruit (Isaiah, 35)'.
- ¹² Warlpiri use the verbs *yulami* (to cry, howl, whine, roar) or *purlami* (call out, howl, screech) to refer to donkey vocalisations. They do not generally use the term 'bray'. More than one person has told me that when they first heard the term 'bray', they thought people were saying 'pray'.
- ¹³ The terms *warungka* and *kurrika* among others are applied to the following states associated with hearing and consciousness: someone hard of hearing, deafness, someone who takes leave of their senses, crazy or mad, someone who is hard headed and lacks empathy, ignorance. Relatedly, the verb *purdanyani* is associated with a complex of terms associated with hearing, listening, comprehension, intelligence, empathy and memory.
- ¹⁴ On Aboriginal distinctions between tame and wild in Central Australia see Vaarzon-Morel (2017, p. 194).
- ¹⁵ For example, see [nt.gov.au > environment > animals > feral-animals > feral-donkey](http://nt.gov.au/environment/animals/feral-animals/feral-donkey).

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