



## **TAHLIA PALMER & JASPER COHEN-HUNTER**

### **occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)**

**21 March - 13 September 2026**

*occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)* is an artistic and research-led inquiry into the ongoing impacts of colonial land and water management practices along the Birrarung (Yarra River). The work has been created by artist Tahlia Palmer (Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent), in collaboration with Jasper Cohen-Hunter (Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung).

Building on research undertaken in 2024 during Tahlia Palmer's creative residency with the Public Records Office of Victoria, the work uses moving image and to examine colonial decision-making and its effects on the landscape.

The central film brings together edited video footage recorded at sites along the Birrarung, with found footage and archival materials connected to these locations. A layered soundscape

accompanies the film, composed from field recordings captured both underwater using hydrophones and above water using microphones, alongside audio recordings of Jasper Cohen-Hunter sharing his knowledge and perspectives on the specific sites.

Displayed alongside the video work are reproductions of maps, letters and photographs from the Public Record Office Victoria Collection, as well as a map from the Koorie Heritage Trust Collection.

The Birrarung (Yarra River), runs parallel to the Birrarung Building at Federation Square, where the Koorie Heritage Trust has been located since 2015. The name *Birrarung* means *river of mists* in Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung language.

KHT acknowledges and pays respect to the Wurundjeri people for their ongoing and enduring connection to, and custodianship of, the lands and waterways of the Birrarung.

KHT sincerely thanks our exhibition presenting partners for their support: Creative Victoria, City of Melbourne, the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body, the Australian Government through the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support program, Viva Energy Australia and ANZ.

The development of this artwork was partly funded by a City of Melbourne Quick Response Arts Grant.

**Tahlia Palmer**

Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent

**Jasper Cohen-Hunter**

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung

**Aaron Wyatt – Viola**

Noongar

**Chloe Sanger – Violin**

**Megan Alice Clune – Clarinet**

**occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral  
Birrarrung (they tried to tame Birrarung)**

2025-2026

three channel video with audio

25 min 37 sec (looped)

In this work, the artists assert the fatal link between genocide and ecocide, exposing the colonial logic of ‘taming’, inherent in European intervention. Video footage and field recordings of the Birrarung are layered with shredded snippets of a score composed in the 1800s, inspired by the river. By contrast, the soundscape features the voice of Jasper Cohen-Hunter, who recounts the Creation Story of the Birrarung as told by Beruk (William Barak, 1823-1903), the Ngurungaeta (leader) of the Wurundjeri-balluk.

Collection of the artists

# Melbourne's Living Museum of the West

## Still Here - Aboriginal Map of Melbourne's West

1996

print on paper

This poster was produced by Melbourne's Living Museum of the West Inc. as part of the Museum's *Still Here* exhibition in 1996. Research was carried out by Gary Vines and Uncle Larry Walsh (Daung Whurrung), with artists commissioned to undertake the design of the poster.

This map shows names of clans and language groups across the west of Narm (Melbourne), as well as images of people with connections to the area over time, as determined by its authors, based on information available at the time of printing.

The Koorie Heritage Trust acknowledges that as Woi-wurrung language is one of many oral languages that was not a written language pre-colonisation, multiple spellings of words exist and are used concurrently. The Koorie Heritage Trust also acknowledges that there are many different perspectives in terms of where and how boundaries of Country are drawn. This map is not suitable for Native Title claims.

Collection of Koorie Heritage Trust

M1

# **Department of Crown Lands and Survey**

Plan (scanned reproduction)

Undated

Courtesy of Public Records Office Victoria  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, ROLL113B; YARRA YARRA RIVER SALT  
WATER RIVER AND TRIBUTARIES

# Department of Crown Lands and Survey

1.  
Plan (scanned reproduction)  
1869  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, LODDON74; RIVER YARRA; HARDING
  
2.  
Plan (scanned reproduction)  
Undated  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, MCS40COPY1; HOBSON BAY AND RIVER YARRA
  
3.  
Plan (scanned reproduction)  
1860  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, MCS52; YARRA RIVER
  
4.  
Plan (scanned reproduction)  
1860  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, MCS53; RIVER YARRA YARRA AT THE QUEENS WHARF; WARDELL W.W
  
5.  
Plan (scanned reproduction)  
1908  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, MCS74; RIVER YARRA AND VICTORIA DOCK
  
6.  
Plan (scanned reproduction)  
Undated  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, M/X86; QUARRY ALLOTMENTS YARRA RIVER

7.

Plan (scanned reproduction)

1869

PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, ROLL16; YARRA RIVER WIDTH DOCKS &  
RAILWAY BRIDGE

8.

Plan (scanned reproduction)

Undated

PROV, VPRS 8168/P0003, WS67B

## **Department of Trade and Customs**

9.

Hydrographic Survey Plan (scanned reproduction)

Undated

PROV, VPRS 18782/C1, 2252;HW S 7470

## **Public Works Department (previously the Department of the Commissioner of Public Works)**

10.

Public Works Plan (scanned reproduction)

1892

PROV, VPRS 3687/C1, R RI 1868

## **Superintendent, Port Phillip District**

11.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/1159, 39/311

12.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 19/P0000, 42/1277

13.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/10980, 47/2018

All letters undated. Courtesy of Public Records Office Victoria

## **Police Magistrate Port Phillip District**

14.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 4/P0000/470, Folder No: 85|1838, Sydney  
authorising construction of a dam across the Yarra River

## **Victorian Railways**

15.

Etching (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 12903/P0001, 522/07

# Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners

16.

Contact Print (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8363/P0001/8, Aerial view of the West Gate Bridge under construction over the Yarra River in Melbourne

17.

Lantern Slide (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8361/P0001, 36

18.

Lantern Slide (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8361/P0001, 45

19.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/5, Photograph [034]

20.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/5, Photograph [036]

21.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/5, Photograph [033]

22.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/30, Photograph [006]

23.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph [114]

24.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph [257]

25.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph [107]

26.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph [228]

27.

Photographs (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph [225]

28.

Photographs (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph [221]

29.

Photograph (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 8362/P0001/34, 416

All records undated

Courtesy of Public Records Office Victoria

# **Surveyor General's Department, Port Phillip Branch**

Plan (scanned reproduction)

1841

Courtesy of Public Records Office Victoria  
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, SYDNEY9, YARRA YARRA RIVER;  
TOWNSEND

# LETTER TRANSCRIPTION

## Superintendent, Port Phillip District

11.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/1159, 39/311

13th December 1839

No 39

Mr Frederick Manton

Melbourne, 12 Decr 1839

Proposal to complete the Dam and Bridge  
across the Yarra Yarra River

To His Honor C. J. La Trobe Esqr

Sir,

It occurred to me that the water at the falls of the Yarra Yarra River in the Town of Melbourne now running to waste, might be made available & valuable for the purpose of a Flour Mill, by the Completion of the Dam & Bridge commenced by Govt., and cutting a Race or Mill Stream on the opposite side of the River, and I beg leave to make the following proposition to your Honor, trusting it will meet with your favorable consi-deration, but before doing so I beg to bring to your notice, that beside the great convenience the completion of the Bridge will be to the Public, the advantage to Govt will be proportionately great, in making available a considerable quantity of Land at present of little value, it will al place at the disposal of your Honor the labour of a number of hands who can be otherwise employed in works of Public benefit.

My proposition is as follows –

To a copy to Sydney copied and sent on the 17th Dec.

To complete the Dam across the Yarra Yarra River at the falls in the Town of Melbourne, also to build a substantial Bridge over the same according to the Plan ent herewith, also a Bridge over the Race or Mill Stream.

The condition or consideration that Govt will allow me the purchase at a reasonable upset price Twenty Acres of Land on the Banks of the River opposite the Town of Melbourne, commencing just above the falls where the race & Dam for Mill Stream will be commenced and running along the banks of the River below the falls to form a square of Twenty Acres – giving me the right of waste water for the Mill Power. I also agree to build up the Dam to a certain height, also to make the flood gates at the race according to a level to be given by Govt so as to allow the fresh water above the falls to be kept at a certain height.

All the above works I propose to undertake shall be finished in a substantial manner, and subject to inspection of by one your Honor may appoint.

I have the Honor to be  
Sir your obt svt  
Fredk Manton (signed)

*Mr Manton informed that Mr La Trobe considers that the character of the conditions which he proposes to Govt renders the acceptance of his proposal out of the question.*

Transcription courtesy of Public Record Office Victoria

# LETTER TRANSCRIPTION

## Superintendent, Port Phillip District

12.

Letter (scanned reproduction)  
PROV, VPRS 19/P0000, 42/1277

9th July 1842

Mr Charles Jno Dennys  
proposing ye XXXX of Baths on ye river Yarra

*advised him to do nothing until the Municipal Bills were passed. C.  
J. L*

Queen Street  
Melbourne, 9th July 1842

To  
His Honor  
C. J. La Trobe Esqr  
Superintendent, Port Philip

Sir,

I have the honor to address you on a subject which I will briefly explain I trust that the undertaking may meet with your favourable consideration.

It has been a remark frequently made to me that there is one serious want in this Town viz: a Bathing Establishment, where every convenience could be obtained & Baths of hot & cold water, vapour & medicated, be constant-ly in readiness.

In a hot climate & during the prevalence of Illness in the Town it cannot be disputed but that an Establishment of this nature would be a signal public Benefit & the object of my application is to solicit your assistance & protection in carrying out my plans in this regard.

I therefore respectfully request to be informed whether you would grant me a licence for the occupation of a small Portion of Land on this side of the Banks of the Yarra Yara, about midway between Mr Le Souifs Ferry Boat & the Punts, upon which I would at once commence the necessary Erection, provided that, I might consider myself secure of no second licence for the same purpose being granted to any other party.

The first outlay in the erection of & fitting up an Establishment of the kind must necessarily be considerable & could be turned to no other use in the event of the speculation being unsuccessful & on this ground I think you will consider me entitled to the Protection I ask.

I hope to be favored, at your convenience with an early reply to this communication & have the honor to remain

with much respect

Sir

yr most obt. hble sevt.

Charles John Dennys (signed)

His Honor

C. J. La Trobe Esqre

&ra &ra &ra

Melbourne

Transcription courtesy of Public Record Office Victoria

# LETTER TRANSCRIPTION

## Superintendent, Port Phillip District

13.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

Undated

PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/10980, 47/2018

No. 47/2018

1st Nov 1847

*The Crown Prosecutor*

*States his opinion that ye Corpn of Melbn has no power to make Bye Laws relating to ye waters of ye River Yarra Yarra*

Melbourne

October 27th 1847

Sir,

Having carefully read the 91 st, and three preceding Sections, of the Melbourne Corporation Act, and construing these four Sections together, I do myself the the honor to state, that, in my opinion, the Corporation of Melbourne have not the power to make any by law, relating to the waters of the River Yarra. If the local Legislature intended, that the Corporation of Melbourne should have any authority to make a by-law relating to the waters of the River, it would have specifically used the words "waters" of the said river" in place of the "waters of the "said Town". I apprehend that the Legislature used the words the "waters of the said Town" deliberately, and by way of selection, and distinction, in relation to the power conferred on the

Corporation by the 88 Section of the Melbourne Corporation Act, enabling the Corporation to construct and erect water works; and therefore I cannot help thinking that any by-law, made by the Corporation before the erection, and construction, of such water works, would be premature. I lay much stress on the word "obstructions" used in the act. I think that word is applicable to the "waters of the Town" [properly so called] when they shall have been conducted by pipes to the residences of the Inhabitants of the Town. When the Corporation shall have erected, and constructed, water works, then, the Corporation may make a by-law against any impediment, obstruction, or damage to the pipes, or to the current of the waters through the pipes laid down through the Town for the purpose of bringing water home to the Inhabitants of the Town. The Corporation may make a by-law as to the wharves, and streets, because they already exist, but the "waters of the Town" have not that existence that would enable the Corporation to make a by-law affecting them. In my opinion the local legislature could not confer, on the Corporation of Melbourne, any power, over the Yarra, or its waters, as being a navigable river; over which the Crown alone has control. It may be said that the Queen has impliedly, if not expressly, assented to the Act; but her Majesty has not assented that the Corporation should have any control over the waters of the navigable river Yarra Yarra, tho' she may have assented to their having control over the waters of the Town.

I have the honor to be  
Sir  
Your Honors  
most obedient servant  
James Croke (signed)  
Crown Prosecutor

Transcription courtesy of Public Record Office Victoria

# LETTER TRANSCRIPTION

## Police Magistrate Port Phillip District

14.

Letter (scanned reproduction)

PROV, VPRS 4/P0000/470, Folder No: 85|1838, Sydney  
authorising construction of a dam across the Yarra River

No 38/1202 Colonial Secretary's Office  
Sydney, 5 November 1838

Sir,

In reply to your letter of the 5th Ultimo, conveying the information called for by my communication of the 29th June, relative to a Dam being thrown across the Yarra Yarra River, I am directed by His Excellency the Governor to inform you that, he authorises you to commence the Dam whenever you may have Convicts at your disposal fit for the work.

I am however directed to add, that, the Dam must not be carried higher than is necessary to exclude the Salt water until more correct information is furnished, which the Surveyor General has called on the officer of his Department at Melbourne to transmit, respecting the levels of the Land above the spot where it is to be placed.

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your most obedient Servant

for the Colonial Secretary

T. C. Harington. (signed)

Transcription courtesy of Public Record Office Victoria

Scan here to access a digital version of the exhibition booklet, which includes a List of Works with links to Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) records.

