

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

TAHLIA PALMER &
JASPER COHEN-HUNTER



21 MARCH –
13 SEPTEMBER 2026



The Koorie Heritage Trust acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Narrm, the Wurundjeri People of the Greater Kulin Nation, on whose lands we operate. We pay respect to their community, their Ancestors and their Elders, past and present.

We acknowledge and pay respect to the Wurundjeri people for their ongoing, intrinsic connection to, and custodianship of, the lands and waterways of the Birrarung.

We also pay respect to all First Peoples and celebrate their continuing culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this publication may contain images, names and stories of people who have died.

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& Jasper Cohen-Hunter

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foreword



TOM MOSBY
CEO, KHT

wominjeka (welcome)

The Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) is proud to present *occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)*. This exhibition is the culmination of research, cultural knowledge and creative practice by artist Tahlia Palmer (Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent), developed in collaboration with Jasper Cohen-Hunter (Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung).

This exhibition is the world premiere of a new multichannel audiovisual artwork by Tahlia and Jasper, which forms the centrepiece of the exhibition and shares its title, *occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)*. Through immersive sound and moving image, the work interrogates the colonial occupation and regulation of the river, revealing how non-First Peoples changed the natural landscape that had sustained Wurundjeri people for countless generations. Presented alongside this work are printed reproductions of documents from Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), including maps, letters, images and drawings, which trace the sudden colonial intervention and subsequent transformation of the waterways from the 1800s onwards.

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 deep respect to the Wurundjeri People as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways of this area, and we recognise their ongoing, intrinsic connection to this living natural entity¹.

Since the mid-1980's the KHT's vision has been to ensure the rich cultural heritage, history and knowledge systems of First Peoples are valued, respected and celebrated. It is a great privilege to present this important new work and exhibition, which brings together cultural authority, contemporary artistic practice and critical historical inquiry in such close proximity to the Birrarung itself.

KHT is also committed to showcasing digital and time-based art as a vital expression of contemporary First Peoples visual art practice in Victoria. Works such as *occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)* demonstrate how First Peoples artists are using digital media, immersive technologies and archival material to speak powerfully to ongoing histories of colonisation, environmental change and cultural resilience. By supporting digital-based practices, KHT seeks to reflect the evolving ways First Peoples artists are telling stories, asserting sovereignty and engaging audiences in meaningful, multi-sensory experiences.

We sincerely thank 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.

I also warmly acknowledge the dedication of KHT's Curatorial team: Gail Harradine (Curatorial Manager), Travis Curtin (Senior Curator), Audrey Thomas-Hayes (Curator), Hannah Berry (Assistant Curator), Katherine Giesen-White (Collections Coordinator) and Gemma Jones (Public Programs Coordinator) for coordinating the exhibition, catalogue and public programs.

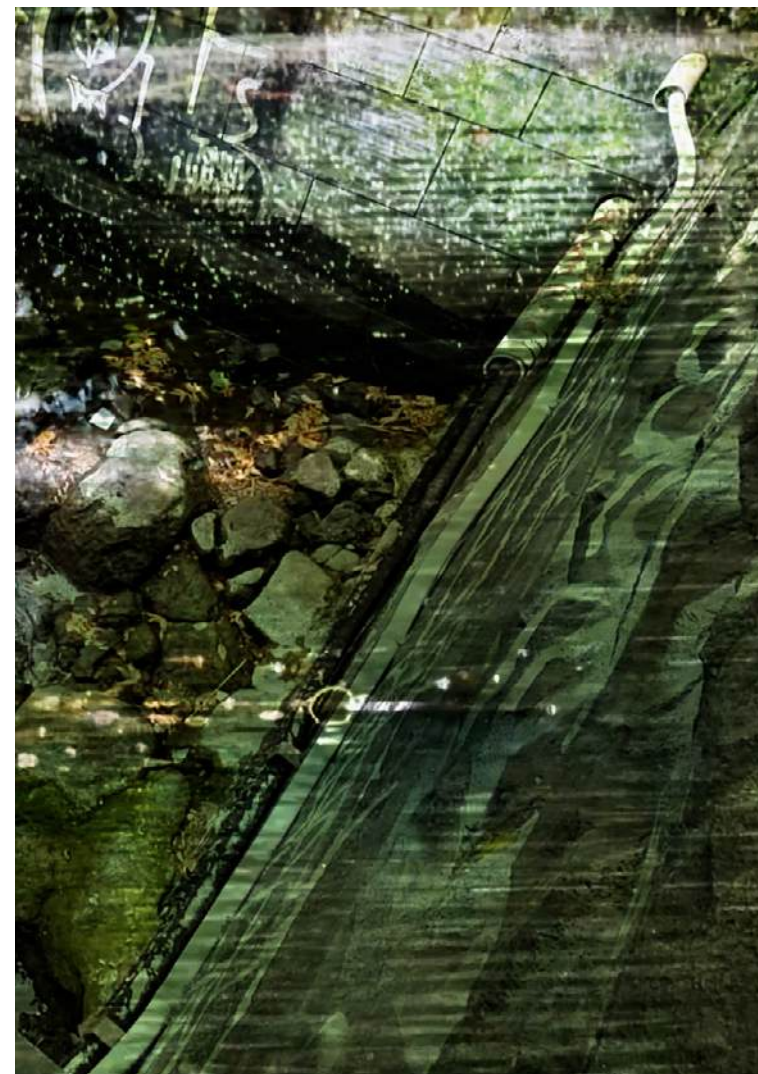
Finally, I would like to extend a very heartfelt Ngooon Godjin to Tahlia Palmer and Jasper Cohen-Hunter for this meaningful contribution, and for their willingness in sharing their knowledge, histories and culture through their art.

Ngooon Godjin (Thank You)

TOM MOSBY

CEO Koorie Heritage Trust

¹<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways/protecting-the-yarra-birrarung/yarra-river-protection-wilip-gin-birrarung-murron-act-2017>



TAHLIA PALMER
(Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent)
JASPER COHEN-HUNTER
(Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung)
occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung
(they tried to tame Birrarung) (video still)
2025-2026



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essay

TAHLIA PALMER
& JASPER COHEN-HUNTER

This exhibition is an offering; it is a document woven from fractures. We assert the inextricable link between attempted cultural genocide and ecological destruction, making audible and visible the colonial logic of ecocide. The river is a living archive, our work is to listen to its layers to expose the violence of its 'taming' and to point, guided by ancient law, towards the possibility of renewal.

Long before it was called the Yarra, the Birrarung (the river of mist) was the backbone of Woi-wurrung Country. From its mountain headwaters, it flowed into Narrm-narrm, an expansive shrubby area ready to receive flooding overflows, a place of profound abundance. At Birrarung's heart lay a great basalt falls, a natural divide where fresh water met salt, creating a wide, deep basin. At the junction of the Birrarung and Maribyrnong, a blue lake teemed with gunawarra (black swans) and gunabil (ducks), and women harvested murnong (yam daisies) from rich soils. Lagoons, filled by natural flood cycles, became iuk (eel) hunting grounds. Junction sites were places of gathering, ceremony, trade, and law for the Wurundjeri-willam, Marin-balluk, and Wurundjeri-balluk clans. This was not a passive landscape but a sentient and sustaining entity.

The European invasion, marked by the landing of the Enterprize in 1835, initiated a profound betrayal of Birrarung's existing order. The European gaze saw not a living entity, but a problem that hindered resource extraction: a floodplain to be controlled, a highway for shipping, and land to be rendered profitable. Aboriginal society was dismissed by the Europeans as deranged and benighted, our deep connection to Country an obstacle to European conceptions of progress. What followed was a campaign of physical and cultural violence, designed to tame and control land, water and people alike.

The pivotal acts of this violence against Country were engineering projects. In the 1870s and 1880s, on the advice of British engineer John Coode, the river was brutally reshaped. The sacred basalt falls were dynamited, destroying the vital fresh/salt water divide. The river was straightened and deepened for ships, its natural curves severed. Wetlands and lagoons were filled in. The original

junction of the Birrarung and the Maribyrnong was moved north; the curved rivers that once defined clan borders were replaced by the straight lines of Coode Island's shipping docks.

The motive was singular: profit, shipping, protecting colonial investment from the natural cycles they had foolishly built upon. They promised their royals their royalties, and so they bulldozed everything to fit their colonial plans. The river's current state – consistently brown, polluted by sediment, plastic, oil, and heavy metals, unfit to drink or swim in – is the direct, physical evidence of this fracture. It is the enacted consequence of viewing land and water as separate from people and culture. It is the legacy of empire, the legacy of colonial thinking, the legacy of attempted genocide.

Our installation constructs an audiovisual palimpsest of this history. Field recordings from above and below the water's surface capture the contemporary reality: the muted ecosystem, the screech of mechanics and electronics... these are not neutral sounds; they are the audible consequences of the fracture. Against this is placed the ghostly echo of colonial fantasy: Rudolf Bial's *Yarra Songs Waltzes* (1879). This romantic European composition, inspired by the composer's visit to Melbourne in 1857, represents the colonial desire to impose a picturesque order. In the installation's soundtrack, the shredded snippets of this score, here played on viola, violin and clarinet, are manipulated, slowed down, and intercut with our collection of contemporary field recordings. The polite waltz fragments are disrupted, overwhelmed, and challenged by the sound of the damaged, complex reality that those colonial actions created. This sonic juxtaposition makes audible the stark gap between colonial perception and consequence, between the fantasy of taming and the reality of ecocide.

To find a path forward, we must listen to a deeper, older story than Bial's waltzes, or any other European story that whitewashes the harm caused. Amongst the narrative of fracture, we centre the Creation story of the Birrarung as told by Beruk (William Barak), Ngurungaeta (leader) of the Wurundjeri-balluk. This story holds the essential law: an old man who harms a child

Amongst the narrative of fracture,
we centre the Creation story
of Birrarung as told by Beruk
(William Barak), Ngurungaeta
(leader) of the Wurundjeri-balluk.
This story holds the essential law:
an old man who harms a child
is punished by the creator Bunjil,
establishing the principle
of intergenerational care.
The teaching is clear. "Let this be
a lesson to all old men: they must
be good to little children."

—
TAHLIA PALMER &
JASPER COHEN-HUNTER



TAHLIA PALMER
 (Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent)
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is punished by the creator Bunjil, establishing the principle of intergenerational care. The teaching is clear. “Let this be a lesson to all old men: they must be good to little children.”

The parallel is devastating, and too often not considered: those old European men – the colonial planners, engineers, and policymakers – were not good to the little children, not even their own. Their poisoning of the river was part of the poisoning of its people. As Djuran Bunjileenee Uncle Robbie Thorpe (Krautungalung) powerfully articulates, this is the fatal equation: genocide = ecocide = suicide. The attempt to erase Indigenous culture went hand-in-hand with the vandalism of its life source, an act of self-destruction for the colony that continues to haunt and harm all who live here.

The artistic method in use, this act of shredding and re-assembling, of layering and juxtaposing, is a gesture of resistance. It is not merely documentary; it is a form of active listening that encourages renewal in spaces of death. It is an attempt to restore complexity to a system simplified for extractive gain. By remembering what was (the falls, the lagoons, the clear water) and rigorously documenting what is, we refuse colonial erasure. We make the fractures visible and audible. We challenge audiences to consider where they fit in it all.

By re-centring Beruk’s story and Wurundjeri Sovereignty, we point towards a different logic: one that protects life for future generations. The health of the waters is the health of us all. To heal the river is to begin to heal the relationship, we must heed the lesson held in the river’s disrupted and polluted sediment, and the stories and knowledges of the people whose DNA is tied to the river from the beginning.

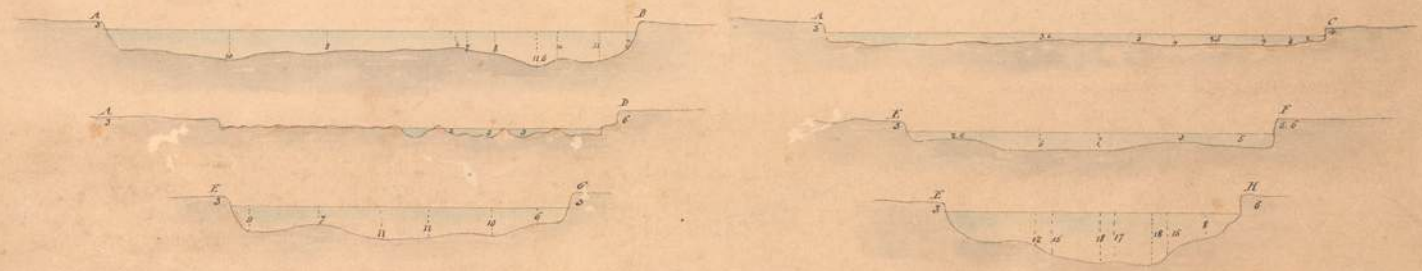
This exhibition is a testament to the river as a living archive. It is a witness to the fracture and a woven plea, through sound and image, to listen – not to the simplistic waltzes of conquest, but to the complex, wounded, and enduring song of Country. Only then can the lesson be learned, and the long work of becoming good to the little children, and to the river that sustains them all, truly begin.

Flat land about four feet above high water mark.



Survey of the falls at the East end of the basin, on the Yarra Yarra River near Melbourne.

Sections of the River



NB The Soundings were taken at half Flood, the depths are given in feet.
 Neap tides rise and fall 2 feet.
 Spring tides " " 5.6 inches in South West gales.



6417
 Sydney

11/2/1841

James W. Miller del. 1841

No. 39

13th December 1839

39

311

Mr. Frederick Manton
Melbourne 12 Decr 1839

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

a copy for
Copied & placed
on the 17th Dec

It occurs 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 also 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 -

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 consideration, 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.

SUPERINTENDENT, PORT PHILLIP DISTRICT (1839-1851)
Letter (scanned reproduction)
Undated
Collection of Public Record Office Victoria
PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/1159, 39/311

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
sent herewith, also a Bridge over the
Race or Mill Stream.

The Condition or Consideration
That Govt will allow me to 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 which I propose
to undertake shall be finished in a
substantial manner, and subject
to inspection of by one your Honor
my appoint - I have the Honor to be

Sir your obt svt
Fredk Manton

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 Honormay 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.

7.1.5
The above works which I propose to undertake shall be finished in a substantial manner, and subject to inspection of by one your Honor my appoint - I have the Honor to be
Sir your obt svt
Fredk Manton

artist bios



TAHLIA PALMER

Tahlia Palmer is an artist of Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent born on Whudjuk Noongar Boodjar (Perth, WA). Descended from a paternal line who survived dispossession, forced assimilation and the Stolen Generations (NSW+QLD), and maternal Dutch grandparents who survived WW2, her art practice works on confronting the conditions that create and perpetuate intergenerational trauma, as well as finding pathways for healing.

In her work she critically engages with history, politics, and environmental issues to advocate for Sovereign Indigenous perspectives. She releases ambient/drone/noise soundscapes under the pseudonym *amby downs*, named after the QLD station on which her Murri ancestors worked in servitude.

JASPER COHEN-HUNTER

Jasper Cohen-Hunter is a Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung gulinj from Narrm (Melbourne).

He is a media practitioner, writer and community organiser dedicated to advancing the struggle for Wurundjeri Sovereignty.

His published work is focused on an Indigenous perspective of decolonisation, anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism from within so-called Australia. He is also an independent researcher on cultural revitalisation, native ecology and frontier resistance.



TAHLIA PALMER
(Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent)
JASPER COHEN-HUNTER
(Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung)
occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung
(they tried to tame Birrarung) (video still)
2025-2026

list of works



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 Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)*
2025-2026
three channel video with audio
25 min 37 sec
Collection of the artists



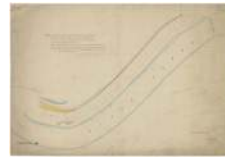
Melbourne's Living Museum of the West
Still Here – Aboriginal Map of Melbourne's West
1996
print on paper
Collection of Koorie Heritage Trust
M1



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ ROLL113B: YARRA YARRA RIVER SALT WATER RIVER AND TRIBUTARIES](#)



Surveyor General's Department, Port Phillip Branch (1836-1851)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
1841
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ SYDNEY9_YARRA YARRA RIVER: TOWNSEND](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
1869
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P2_LODDON74: RIVER YARRA: HARDING](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ MCS40COPY1: HOBSON BAY AND RIVER YARRA](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
1860
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ MCS52: YARRA RIVER](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
1860
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ MCS53: RIVER YARRA AT THE QUEENS WHARF: WARDELL W.W.](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
1908
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ MCS74: RIVER YARRA AND VICTORIA DOCK](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ M/X86: QUARRY ALLOTMENTS YARRA RIVER](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
1869
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0002_ ROLL116: YARRA RIVER WIDTH DOCKS & RAILWAY BRIDGE](#)



Department of Crown Lands and Survey (1857-1983)
Plan (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8168/P0003_ WS67B](#)



Department of Trade and Customs (1851-1901)
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) (1855-1987)
Public Works Plan (scanned reproduction)
1892
[PROV_VPRS 3687/C1_R.R1 1868](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
Contact Print (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8363/P0001/8_ Aerial view of the West Gate Bridge under construction over the Yarra River in Melbourne](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
Lantern Slide (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8361/P0001_36](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
Lantern Slide (scanned reproduction)
Undated
[PROV_VPRS 8361/P0001_45](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/5, Photograph \[034\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/5, Photograph \[036\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P1/5, Photograph \[033\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/30, Photograph \[006\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph \[114\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph \[257\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph \[107\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph \[228\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photographs (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph \[225\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photographs (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8357/P0001/63, Photograph \[221\]](#)



Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners
 Photograph (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 8362/P0001/34, 416](#)



Victorian Railways (also Victorian Railways Commissioners 1883-1973, Victorian Railways Board 1973-1983)
 Etching (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 12903/P0001, 522/07](#)



Police Magistrate Port Phillip District (1836-1839)
 Letter (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 4/P0000/470, Folder No: 8511838, Sydney authorising construction of a dam across the Yarra River](#)



Superintendent, Port Phillip District (1839-1851)
 Letter (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/1159, 39/311](#)



Superintendent, Port Phillip District (1839-1851)
 Letter (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 19/P0000, 42/1277](#)



Superintendent, Port Phillip District (1839-1851)
 Letter (scanned reproduction)
 Undated
[PROV, VPRS 19/P0000/10980, 47/2018](#)

acknowledgements

This exhibition would not be made possible without the archiving and documentation of stories as told by the pioneers who have come before us: in the stories as told by Beruk (William Barak), in the passing down of knowledge of the old ways, of a time before the Enterprize sailed into the Birrarung. We want to express our gratitude to Gumbri (Nanna Jessie Hunter) and Wonga (Uncle Norm Hunter) for their tireless dedication to preserving stories on the Birrarung and of Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve for future generations. We would like to thank Aunty Alice Kolasa and Uncle Tony Garvey for their consultation towards this project as part of the Birrarung Cultural Mapping Project led by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation. We would also like to extend our gratitude to Aunty Gail Smith for providing Woi-wurrung language translation for the title of the exhibition on behalf of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation.

We would like to acknowledge Aunty Kim Wandin, whose public artwork *luk bagurk gunga, 2023*, appears in *occupation studies: ngayanhurra bayarral Birrarung (they tried to tame Birrarung)*.

TAHLIA PALMER AND JASPER COHEN-HUNTER

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Tahlia Palmer & Jasper Cohen-Hunter

Published by Koorie Heritage Trust in conjunction with the exhibition, Gallery 2, Koorie Heritage Trust, 21 March — 13 September 2026.

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kht.org.au

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Hours After

Inside front cover & inside back cover images:

TAHLIA PALMER

(Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay and mixed European descent)

JASPER COHEN-HUNTER

(Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung)

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

(video still)

2025-2026

Centrefold image:

**SURVEYOR GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT,
PORT PHILLIP BRANCH**

Plan (scanned reproduction), 1841
PROV, VPRS 8168/P0002, SYDNEY9, YARRA
YARRA RIVER; TOWNSEND



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T** **KOORIE
HERITAGE
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Exhibition Partners



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