



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 3A

COUNTERING THE CANON/S

**Living Cultures: Recovering Indigenous
Narratives in Architectural History**

TO CITE THIS PAPER | **Janet McGaw, Alasdair Vance, Aunty Margaret Gardiner, Uncle Gary Murray, Aunty Esther Kirby, Sue-Anne Hunter, Moira Rayner, Selena White and Sharon Mongta.** “(Not) Royal Park: Recovering the Enduring Importance of a *Kulin Nations* Gathering Place for Culture, Health, Wellbeing and Healing.” In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand: 37, What If? What Next? Speculations on History's Futures*, edited by Kate Hislop and Hannah Lewi, 419-426. Perth: SAHANZ, 2021. Accepted for publication December 11, 2020.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND (SAHANZ) VOLUME 37

Convened by The University of Western Australia School of Design,
Perth, 18-25 November, 2020

Edited by Kate Hislop and Hannah Lewi

Published in Perth, Western Australia, by SAHANZ, 2021

ISBN: 978-0-646-83725-3

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(NOT) ROYAL PARK: RECOVERING THE ENDURING IMPORTANCE OF A KULIN NATIONS GATHERING PLACE FOR CULTURE, HEALTH, WELLBEING AND HEALING

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Royal Park, Parkville, an area of windswept and open parkland just north of central Melbourne, has a long and complex history that has been well documented in historical studies and cultural heritage reports. Set aside early in the colony after La Trobe and his council petitioned for an area of 2560 acres to be reserved for “public advantage and recreation” and named in honour of the distant English monarch, it was quickly whittled down to 700 acres after gold was discovered. Land was needed for housing, experimental agriculture, a zoo, psychiatric asylum and hospitals in the rapidly expanding colony and this empty patch of land in close proximity to the town centre seemed suitable for ready appropriation. Later, during both world wars, it was used for a military camp that was subsequently taken over for low-cost housing, which became a notorious slum, before it was reclaimed as an area for sport and open space.

Settler Australia has a long history of seeing empty land as a terra nullius, available for the pickings. But this particular patch of country has a deeper history as a Kulin Nation inter-tribal gathering site for ceremony, healing, law, trade and marriage.

Over the past three decades Royal Park has received renewed attention by post-colonial historians, artists, activists and landscape architecture through discourse, performative arts practices and design, which have explored its unique ecology and broader cultural history. But the parkland’s enduring cultural significance for Indigenous people has had little attention. The authors draw on contemporary ethnographic research with, and Indigenist research by, Aboriginal people who work and use Royal Park for healing and cultural practices to this day. They argue that history is ever-present in Aboriginal culture and Royal Park remains what it always has been: a gathering place for culture, health, wellbeing and healing.

Introduction

This paper emerges from *yarns*¹ about the significance of Royal Park for Aboriginal people in Melbourne between collaborators on two research projects over many years. One of the authors is an academic in architectural design; three are Indigenous Elders with Victorian Aboriginal heritage; the other five are health professionals, all of whom have Indigenous heritage. The writing, therefore, has been framed by a method that sits between Western and Indigenist scholarship. The term ‘Indigenism,’ drawing associations with other critical, liberation epistemologies, has been coined to describe an alternative discourse that critiques the dominance of Western epistemologies by centralising Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being.² Royal Park is a place that many of the authors have retreated to for sustenance, regeneration and healing during work breaks. It has been a place for the contest of Saturday sport. It has been a place of gathering for *Kulin* nations to prepare for a significant annual cultural event. And for one of the authors, it was even a home for a time. All authors have read, edited and refined this paper. The first and second authors have been responsible for the overview of the settler histories of Royal Park, transcription of *yarns*, preparing the first draft and editing. All other authors are identified throughout the text in acknowledgement of the specificity and details of their knowledge and experience.

The paper begins with an overview of settler colonial histories of Royal Park. It turns next to an ethnographic Aboriginal account of the place. A reflection on Indigenous epistemologies of time and place is offered as a framing to understand Royal Park’s enduring significance. The essay concludes with speculations about what this means for histories of place, heritage and contemporary practices for health and wellbeing in Royal Park.

Settler Colonisation, Aboriginal Displacement and the Creation of Royal Park

Melbourne’s urban pattern followed that of many colonial cities: an organised grid of streets laid out around a fresh water supply and a variety of open spaces within the centre and at its edges for immediate and future civic need, including smaller parcels for town commons; linear reserves for future rail and roadway developments; and larger reserves for recreation. Royal Park was one of those larger parklands – 2560 acres in all – set aside by Governor La Trobe and his council for “public advantage and recreation” in 1854.³ La Trobe had a particular interest in the Aboriginal people, who had been observed there from the early 1840s camping, lighting fires, holding corroborees. When gold was discovered 150 miles away the population hopelessly outgrew the township and a quick decision was made to erode Royal Park – first to 700 acres and subsequently to just over 400 acres – to provide allotments for housing and other institutions for the emerging colony.

Royal Park’s wildness and vast scale, unusually close to the city centre, made it an ideal site where experimentation could unfold and undesirable elements could be sequestered away from view. A flurry of agricultural, scientific and social experiments proceeded, reshaping and building upon the parklands over the second half of the 19th century to accommodate an experimental farm (1858); an Acclimatisation Society (1861); zoological gardens (1862); an ethnographic spectacle, a “Native Camp” (1888)⁴; school for orphaned children (1875); home for the homeless and destitute (1882); home for the Aged and Infirm (1902), Asylum for the Insane (1907). When the second world war approached Royal Park was re-organised once again to accommodate a US military camp (1941-1945) and then post-war emergency and transitional housing which quickly became a slum (1946-1956).

The significance of Royal Park to settler culture has been affirmed with a listing on the Victorian Heritage Register (H2337). The heritage study on which the registration is based cites Royal Park’s importance to the course of Victoria’s cultural history, its rare remnant stands of Indigenous vegetation and its significant vistas which afford “a dramatic and sensory appreciation of the city skyline and surrounding landscape.”⁵ But the Victorian Planning scheme states that, apart from a single scar tree at the Royal Zoological Gardens, Royal Park has no significant

Aboriginal heritage places recorded on heritage registers, even though heritage reports provide evidence from settler records of occupation.⁶ Drawing on early colonial diaries and paintings, a number of theorists have developed arguments that the 2000 or so acres were no happy accident.⁷ The clearing had been made through careful and specific cultural practices by Wurrung people over millennia. The dubious naming, “Royal Park”, misattributes the estate to a distant monarch, with no tangible connection to this *Country*.

There are a few reasons why this heritage is neglected. Settler diaries and oral accounts of Royal Park point to a collective use by visiting tribes rather than an exclusive and defended domain of the *Wurundjeri*; heritage value has been notoriously difficult to sustain in areas where there has been “significant ground disturbance”;⁸ and an entry on the Aboriginal Heritage Register under the Aboriginal Heritage Act (2006) requires submission of some tangible evidence of occupation by a Native Title holder, Traditional Owner or Registered Aboriginal Party. Amendments to the Act (2016) allow for intangible heritages to be included in the Register but this is to allow for the protection of stories and other knowledge rather than tangible places, and the burden of proof is high. Finally, oral accounts from Indigenous people are partial, largely contemporary and scattered. The deterritorialising effects of displacement in Victoria have been profound. As Libby Porter and Janice Barry have argued, Aboriginal heritage laws “operationalize the discourse that Indigenous values cannot survive modernity.”⁹ As a consequence, Royal Park’s Aboriginal history has been subjugated by the well-documented colonial histories.

Aboriginal Occupations: Memories and Stories

Although on *Wurundjeri* land, the few oral histories we have gathered support the contention that Royal Park was important for the whole *Kulin* nation but neither sacred nor secret for a single mob. Sue-Anne Hunter recounts that her Uncle Colin told her Royal Park was a place where many tribal groups would feel safe to pass through and camp for brief periods. Unlike sites along the Yarra River and Merri Creek, which were fiercely defended on account of their provision of fresh water, food and/or secret Cultural business, Royal Park was a place where other mobs from the *Kulin* nation were welcomed by *Wurundjeri* to gather and remain for a time. Al Vance concurs, recalling his mother telling him it was a *Kulin* nation meeting place for ceremony, healing, law, trade and marriage.

Despite the disruption and fragmentation of memories across the community, oral histories confirm a historic and enduring connection to Royal Park for Indigenous people in Victoria. Some memories are prosaic, others profound. Indigenous place-attachment is an evolving phenomenon, as Kelly Greenop and Paul Memmot have shown.¹⁰ Eight of the nine authors who have collaborated on this paper come from a range of Aboriginal groups, including the Traditional Owners of the lands on which Royal Park is situated, the *Wurundjeri* people of the *Kulin* nation, other tribal groups from Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Each recounts their own personal stories and experiences of Royal Park. None are complete on their own, but together they form a “synthetic assemblage” that reveals the place to be important for health and wellbeing.¹¹

Aunty Margaret Gardiner is not exactly sure where the specific sites of pre-colonial Aboriginal cultural significance are at Royal Park but is absolutely certain they are there. She remembers Aunty Winnie, who had grown up at *Coranderrk* and was the founding Chair of the *Wurundjeri* Tribe Land Compensation & Cultural Heritage Council Inc, negotiating in the late 1980s for a place to be set up at Royal Park for Aboriginal people. Aunty Winnie passed away in 1988 and the few others who carried specific knowledge of the site have failing health or are no longer with us. Moira Rayner laments the fact that another key knowledge holder passed in recent years:

The person we need to speak to is no longer with us. He passed away before we had the opportunity to talk to him.

But there are more recent stories of attachment to the place that are remembered by co-authors.

Royal Park offered safe haven to visiting Aboriginal people after the Second World War. The US military base, Camp Pell, was repurposed as transitional housing after the war for immigrants and returned servicemen. Uncle Gary Murray's family of six (parents Stewart and Nora [née Nicholls] and siblings Diane, Stephen, and Brian) were provided accommodation after their home on The Island in Balranald was flooded. Uncle Gary's father had served in the Australian Imperial Force for six years:

We lived on The Island in Balranald The big flood - I think it was '54 or '55 - wiped us out. They (Mum and Dad) had to row two boats out of the island into Balranald town and then mum caught a cab with the kids from Balranald to Carlton where her mother was staying. In the end we got transitional housing at Camp Pell - us four kids and mum and dad. We stayed at Camp Pell for nearly six months, I think, while housing commission homes were being built out at Glenroy. I remember those tin huts. They were bloody hot in summer and cold in winter. It was the first real house that we ever lived in - on the island we camped in tents - and it was like a mansion to us. I would have been five or six, I suppose.

While news reports of Camp Pell at the time describe it as a notorious slum and slaying ground of US soldier and mass murderer Eddie Leonski,¹² Uncle Gary was unaware of it as a child. He says: "I've got no bad memories of the place." He recalls spending time with three or four other Aboriginal families there, including the Lovetts, Beryl Booth and Aunty Georgina William's families:

I remember sitting around on the porch on summer nights and playing on the steps or in front of the tin huts. I have that memory of summer watching the sun go down. Your spiritual existence starts when you are born and where you live. Mine started in Balranald and it continued into Camp Pell.

Camp Pell was largely demolished to "clean up" the area in preparation for the 1956 Olympic Games but both the buildings and the site remained important. Uncle Gary reveals that the huts had a subsequent life as the Tanderra Holiday Homes in Queenscliff on a site donated to the Aboriginal Advancement League where he spent many a holiday. He has an old recorded interview in his collection between his sister and the late Alick Jackamos that he shared:

... by coincidence Pat Bryant got a couple of these (old converted army) huts and we all went there - Bindi Jack, myself, Doug Nicholls, Eric Onus and you name it, small Aboriginal community helped to pull them down and put them on a big flat top trailer and took them to down to Queenscliff. So Stewart and myself, Bindi and others were very involved in the erection of the holiday homes at Queenscliff¹³

Uncle Gary concludes: So my links there to Camp Pell are strong and good.

In 1984, Royal Park's Urban Camp was established on the site of Camp Pell. Hunter recalls a relatively recent gathering there of Kulin nations to prepare for *Tanderrum*¹⁴:

There was a lot of coming together of the Kulin Nations at that time... Tanderrum was held at Fed Square but Royal Park is where we did all the preparation. It was really good because it housed everybody, and everybody was able to practice what we were doing.

Aunty Margaret recalls the late 1980s and 1990s being an important time for calls for recognition and reclamation of sites of significance by *Wurundjeri* which was intensified by the parallel process of privatisation and investment in high profile capital works projects initiated by the state Liberal government. One of those, with which Aunty Winnie was closely involved, was a garden for Aboriginal families to use in Royal Park. Between the time it was first raised as an idea to the inception, it had changed radically:

Back when Jeff Kennett was Premier and Ron Walker was Lord Mayor of the City of Melbourne there was talk of reducing the size of it (Royal Park) and selling off bits for commercial use. In particular, the area that was central to our history. It didn't occur because each time there was talk of it ... interested groups always protested and got in the ear of the City of Melbourne. They got in touch with *Wurundjeri* for our input into various studies and would come up with grand plans from time to time.

One of the plans was from the Royal Children's (Hospital) in regard to having a specific area where patients and families could go. That was a good idea. Somewhere where Aboriginal people can just go and sit, where everyone feels comfortable, where they don't feel they are being looked at and judged, somewhere where they are not under any kind of pressure. A place that allows people to congregate or simply to commune with the peace of the place. I was quite excited about that. Wurundjeri were backing it one hundred percent. And then it all changed and became something for everyone. The idea was taken off us and used for another purpose. And we became silent.

Plans were first mooted to build a new Royal Children's hospital on the adjacent parklands in 2005. In 2016, after decades of consultation and a merry-go-round of plans, a playground themed around the *Wurundjeri* seasons was completed. It seemed from Aunty Margaret's perspective that their Indigenous park concept had morphed into a new park and playground on the old hospital site to appease locals and other stakeholders. But her overriding feelings about it are of disappointment and betrayal. City of Melbourne Design Studio ostensibly consulted with *Wurundjeri*, who gave consent for the use of their seven seasons to inspire the design of what is now known as the "Nature Play" playground.¹⁵ It was heralded as a triumph of great design and a revitalisation of the parkland for the greater good. But Aunty Margaret felt *Wurundjeri* were forgotten in the process:

It's ok for those locals who want to walk their dogs or do tai chi or take their kids to the playground. Now I'm not against that, but they pinched our idea and made it for everybody and it doesn't offer anything to our people. We're an afterthought.

I got sick of all the to-ing and fro-ing and literal thinking. It's too disappointing. What's the point of talking to us? It's just box ticking.

Meanwhile, the Aboriginal health workers who work on Royal Park's fringes describe a varied relationship between the park and health: a sense of the enduring presence of ancestral spirits in the landscape who sustain them in their work; a place that facilitates health for patients; and a safe place where they can meet amongst themselves. For some the sense of a spiritual presence is strong. Hunter says:

I've walked through there a bit and it's just got this presence – you know something was there.... does that make sense? What is it about that site that no one's ever spoken about? Or is unspoken?

Rayner says:

Most definitely the trees are alive, there. There are creatures that live in there. I don't actually see them but I feel them. Everything is alive there. You think you are walking past a dead log but there's absolutely nothing dead about that log there is something beautiful about the energy that is there....I don't know how to describe it to be honest.

Sharon Mongta says:

I worked at the Children's (RCH) for ten years. When I had a complex case or needed a break from the hospital, often I'd go for a walk down the back ... there is something about that place where I felt strongly drawn to it; a connectedness and belonging. It was quite a powerful feeling. This was going on for years for me. That was my place of peace when I was overwhelmed and stressed, that was where I went to get myself back together and then I could go back and keep doing what I do.... There was something about that place and I never knew what it was... A place of cultural significance. Yeah spiritually maybe that's what the place was telling me, through that feeling...I've had a pretty powerful connection with that place; a feeling.

The only other places Mongta can immediately recall affecting her in such a way, apart from her own *Country* which spans from the far eastern parts of Victoria up the coast of NSW to La Perouse, are sites of well recognised Aboriginal cultural significance: *Gariwerd* (The Grampians) and *Barmah*.

Aboriginal practitioners in the Royal Children's Hospital recount times when they have retreated there for meetings, conversations with families and even therapeutic care for Aboriginal young people. Selena White describes her experiences:

There are these rocks where I used to see some of our families or carers or aunts and uncles or grandparents and that's where I used to have the deep and meaningful conversations. With parents that were having conflict on the ward we'd say come on, you're coming with us and we'd have a conversation with them in a respectful way so they'd feel at ease. So they'd feel comfortable.

Rayner shares:

There was one clinician who used that place with our Koori kids and that was a beautiful grounding moment and a wonderful way to do clinical practice. I know it was not only healing for those kids but also for that clinician because they connected in a totally different way and in a non-clinical environment. Those sessions helped the kids connect with who they were as spiritual beings.

Despite the dislocation of the colonial era, many Indigenous people continue to believe that *Stories* persist in the land whether people remember them or not. As Aunty Esther Kirby explains:

Stories will never be lost. You go back on country and them old fellas will come back and more or less give you a 'thing' of it. Let you know what's important to you.

Vance concurs:

We built our *Stories* by describing what is there. The land, waterways, living systems of plants and animals form a complex ecology that gave rise to our creation *Stories*. These *Stories* are still there and given a chance will come back into being physically.

Speculations: History's Enduring Presence

History takes as a given the Western epistemologies of time in which past, present and future are distinct. Its stories may have enduring consequences but they are always about events that have ended. Its methods of scholarly discovery follow particular rules of investigation and verification. Indigenous epistemologies, by contrast, are described through the concept of the *Dreaming*. As *Tanganekald* woman from South Australia and Professor of Law Irene Watson, has explained, the *Dreaming* is "an ever-present place of before, now, and the future, a place that we are constantly returned."¹⁶ Ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose elaborates: the *Dreaming* is dynamic and non-linear, a historical inversion in which the past is jumping ahead and life is lived in orientation towards origins.¹⁷ In Aboriginal cultures the *Dreaming* is performed cyclically through ceremony, dance and song in a way that doesn't just recount a story from deep time, but rather brings the creation into being anew. New place stories are much the same. While contemporary place-attachment has been explored by architectural historians, this paper focuses on the use of stories in cultural heritage more specifically. Being on Country is a reorientation to a place of before that profoundly and directly impacts their health and wellbeing.

Architectural history translates most directly into practice through heritage reports that determine whether and how buildings and sites are protected. Royal Park has been the focus of a few that have been used to successfully protect it against careless development. But laws do not always serve Aboriginal rights to place. Native Title Act 1993, Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010 and the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 have all been ostensibly attempts to offer some form of land justice to Aboriginal people. But as Patrick Wolfe has argued, even these laws are a perpetuation of the settler-colonial "logic of elimination", reducing land to a commodity and pitting families against each other.¹⁸ As Aunty Margaret points out:

There is no recognition of pre-settlement Aboriginal use (of Royal Park) in the Planning statute. That's the fact. Just one little scar tree. I think it's disgraceful. Our history is not recognised at all.

Despite almost three decades of legal attempts to undo colonial dispossession, planning legislation remains blind to its persistent subjugation of Aboriginal presence.

Conclusion: Recovering the Enduring Importance of Royal Park for Culture, Health and Healing

Aboriginal clinicians at the Royal Children's hospital would like to see the *Wurundjeri* vision that Aunty Margaret described become a reality. They have speculated about what it might be like to have access to Royal Park for care: an Aboriginal Knowledge Place for all the hospitals in the Parkville precinct that could be a spoke in the bigger wheel of Aboriginal Knowledge Places around the state with a central Treaty House in Melbourne.¹⁹ They hope that an Indigenous garden in the outdoor area adjacent to *Wadja* Aboriginal Family Place would be the first step: a safe space for Aboriginal families to gather. The garden would have medicinal plants, spaces for smoking and water ceremonies, and places for storytelling, deep listening, and healing practices. This would be the starting place for Aboriginal health trails that could be developed in Royal Park for all Indigenous people.

There has been significant work done by architectural historians to broaden notions of heritage to include memory and narrative, with nuanced arguments about how these notions shape identity and authentic experiences of place. If Royal Park's heritage can be recast to take in the ineffable, experiential descriptions of Aboriginal people's ongoing encounter with the *Spirit* world, then the nearby hospitals might stand a better chance of offering Indigenous people culturally appropriate experiences of health.

Endnotes

¹ "To *yarn*" is an Aboriginal English term that has no direct translation in English. It means "to converse"; is at once convivial and lighthearted but also acknowledges the presence of "old fellas" or ancestral spirits who, if one listens deeply and attentively, will shape the stories that are shared and the way they are received.

² Karen Martin & Booran Mirraoopa, "Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous and Indigenist re-search," *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27:76 (2003), 203–214. doi:10.1080/14443050309387838

³ Heritage Victoria, *Royal Park*, 2014, 12-13.

⁴ Lynette Russell. 'Wellnigh impossible to describe': dioramas, displays and representations of Australian Aborigines [online]. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 2, 1999: 35-45. Availability: <<https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=132725210287034;res=IELIND>> ISSN: 0729-4352. [cited 11 Nov 20].

⁵ Heritage Victoria, "Assessment of Cultural Heritage Significance & Executive Director Recommendation to the Heritage Council: Royal Park, Parkville," VRH No. PROV2337, file No. 601069, Hermes No. 1954. Available at <https://heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ROYAL-PARK-ED-Rec-Feb-2014.pdf>;

⁶ Joanna Freslov, *Royal Park, Parkville: An Aboriginal Archaeological and Historical Study*, Report to the City of Melbourne. Andrew Long and Associates, June 2002. This report was prepared for background briefing and was not endorsed by Council; Shaun Canning and Frances Thiele, *Indigenous Cultural Heritage within the Metropolitan Melbourne Investigation Area: A report to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council* (February 2010)

⁷ Francesco Vitelli, "Epic memory and dispossession: the Shrine and the memory wars", *Mongrel/Subaud*, 1, (2005): 9-12; Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2011), 258-266; Kathryn Ferguson, "Imagining Early Melbourne" *Postcolonial Text*, 1:1 (2004). https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/1430/1/1430_Ferguson_2004.pdf.

⁹ Libby Porter and Janice Barry, "Bounded Recognition: urban planning and the textual mediation of Indigenous rights in Canada and Australia", *Critical Policy Studies*, 9, no.1, (2015), 32.

¹⁰ Kelly Greenop and Paul Memmott, "Aboriginal identity and place in the intercultural settings of metropolitan Australia", in E. Peters and C. Anderson (eds), *Indigenous in the city: contemporary identities and cultural innovation*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013). 256–281.

¹¹ Manuel DeLanda, *A new philosophy of society: assemblage theory and social complexity*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 12.

¹² John Hetherington, "Camp Pell", *The Argus* 24 April, 1953. Available at <https://www.trove.nla.gov.au>.

¹³ Diana Travis, 'Interview with the Late Alick Jackomos' (18 September 1995). *Werriemander Milloo Whistling Spear - John Stewart Murray* (2020) Unpublished. Gary Murray Collection.

¹⁴ *Tanderrum* is a traditional ceremony that brings together the wurrung speaking mobs of the East Kulin nation to welcome and provide safe passage and temporary access and use of land and resources. It was reimaged as an annual event at Federation Square in 2013.

¹⁵ Ricky Ray Ricardo, "Seasoned players: Return to Royal Park" *Landscape Australia* 8 April 2016, <https://landscapeaustralia.com/articles/return-to-royal-park/>

¹⁶ Irene Watson, "Sovereign spaces, caring for country and the homeless position of Aboriginal peoples", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108, no. 1, (2009), 37.

¹⁷ Deborah Bird Rose, Rose, *Reports from a wild country*, (UNSW Press, Sydney, NSW, 2004), 55.

¹⁸ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, no.4 (2006), 387-409.

¹⁹ For more detailed discussion see Alasdair Vance *et.al.*, "Towards and Aboriginal Knowledge Place", *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 11 no.1 (2016); and Anoma Pieris and Gary Murray, "A Treaty needs a house: Emplacing first people's a prior rights in Wurundjeri Country, metropolitan Melbourne," in Grant, *et.al.*, (eds) *The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture*, (Singapore: Springer, 2018) 551-579.