‘A most dangerous character’: The remarkable life of Yonki Yonka.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an historical biography of a nineteenth century Boon Wurrung man, Yonki Yonka, from the Port Phillip district of south-eastern Australia. He was born circa 1823, taken as a child with his kidnapped family to the Bass Strait islands, worked as a shepherd in Western Australia and South Australia, and in 1841 - aged about 18 - found his way back to his Country and his people. He immediately abandoned most of his European habits and for his few remaining years – he died aged 23 – returned to his traditional way of life, resisting the authority of the Port Phillip colonisers. The question I address is important to our understanding of events on this historical and cultural frontier: How did Yonki Yonka, and many other Aboriginal men and women like him, respond socially and psychologically to the colonisation of their Country by Europeans?

The narrative of Yonki Yonka’s life ranges across two territories, spatial and cultural. Through his colonial encounters, he and others like him travelled vast distances, either voluntarily or under coercion, from their Countries. The arrival of Europeans necessitated engagement with a foreign culture, which had little understanding of Aboriginal concepts and customs. This invasion brought with it debilitating contagious diseases, and the false promises of alcohol and social dependency. In examining the adaptability of Yonki Yonka and others in this first-contact generation, modern theories of resilience and acculturation have been explored to develop a coherent historical biography.

Three chapters recount Yonki Yonka’s life through childhood (1823-1833), youth (1834-1841) and young manhood (1841-1846). Each chapter contextually explores the challenges faced by him and his generation. A closing discussion summarises and evaluates his life from his own perspective, concluding that through his resilience he maintained a high level of agency and lived a largely autonomous life.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract p. 3
Acknowledgements p. 5
List of illustrations p. 6
Preface: A family connection p. 8
Introduction p. 11
  Literature review p. 17
  Methodology p. 24
Chapter 1: Stolen away by sealers: pre-settlement to 1833 p. 33
Chapter 2: The young traveller: 1833 to 1841 p. 55
Chapter 3: ‘A most dangerous character’: 1841 to 1846 p. 84
Conclusion: Understanding Yonki Yonka p. 133
Bibliography p. 140

Note: This thesis includes the names and images of deceased Aboriginal people and, where contextually necessary, reproduces historical terms that some will find racially offensive.
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The timely publication by Dr Marguerita Stephens of her transcription of the journals of William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, greatly assisted my research, while her advice and encouragement during several meetings is highly valued.

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

| FIG. 1 | Yonki Yonka, by Henry Hainsselin. | p. 7 |
| FIG. 2 | Yonka wool brand. | p. 9 |
| FIG. 3 | Map, the five People of the Kulin Nation. | p. 18 |
| FIG. 4 | Yonki Yonka’s family chart. | p. 44 |
| FIG. 5 | Sealers at Westernport. | p. 47 |
| FIG. 6 | Map, locations visited by Yonki Yonka, 1833-34. | p. 52 |
| FIG. 7 | William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines. | p. 86 |
| FIG. 8 | Map, the Western Port district, by William Thomas. | p. 90 |
| FIG. 9 | Baddourup’s and Billibellary’s family chart | p. 102 |
| FIG. 11 | A Wandjina figure, Glenelg River cave painting. | p. 125 |
| FIG. 12 | ‘A corroboree on Emerald Hill’, by W. Liardet. | p. 130 |
'He is now a most dangerous character, for a half-civilized savage is more mischievous than one who has never mixed at all with the white population.'

George Henry Haydon.
PREFACE

A family connection

About 20km north-west of Cranbrook in southern Western Australia, Yonka Road runs east from Albany Highway through the farm after which it was named. Although ‘yonka’ is a Noongar word for the grey kangaroo, this small rural road is in fact named for a Port Phillip Boon Wurrung man, Yonki Yonka.²

In the latter part of 1841 my great grandfather William Johnson and his friend Joseph Harper were travelling overland from Sydney to Melbourne when, not far from their destination, they became lost in the bush. According to the story passed down verbally from William to his son Fred, and through his son Alistair to me, they were found by Yonki Yonka and guided into the settlement, for which William was extremely grateful and which quite possibly saved their lives.³ William maintained a relationship with Yonki Yonka over the remaining five years of the latter’s life, and established a family tradition of naming properties in memory of his Aboriginal friend.⁴ At the time of his own death William was relatively well-to-do, owning property comprising a brick residence at 13 Spring Street (the former family home, which he named ‘Yonka’), a row of shops in Bourke Street and, backing onto them, a property in Church Street, all in central Melbourne.⁵

The house where William Johnson died – the second that he named ‘Yonka’ - was at the corner of Barkly and Charles Streets, St Kilda.⁶ This is Boon Wurrung Country, not far from the rich wetlands frequented by Yonki Yonka.

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³ Received oral story, undocumented.

⁴ Copy of a letter from Flora Shelmerdine, dated 24 February 1960, to Thora Wills-Johnson, in my family papers.

⁵ Probate jurisdiction report 76/174, Supreme Court of Victoria, dated 23 October 1902.

and his people in what is now Albert Park, Melbourne. William’s daughter Constance Julia Johnson carried the practice to Sydney where, as Mrs. St John George, she named the family home in Blues Point Road ‘Yonka’. William’s son Frederick Wills Johnson took Yonki Yonka’s name to Western Australia, when in 1913 at the age of 51 he took up 1150 acres (465 hectares) of land in the Cranbrook area and named the farm ‘Yonki Yonka’. Yonka Road now bisects the enlarged property.

![Image of a wool bale with a design representing Yonki Yonka and a possum cloak.](image)

**FIG. 2:** This wool brand, still in use, was designed by Frederick Wills Johnson. It depicts Yonki Yonka wrapped in a possum cloak, one foot on his knee and holding a spear (a familiar stylistic trope), against the profile of the Porongurup Range in southern Western Australia.

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Sam Furphy critically examines the widespread practice of appropriating Aboriginal words for properties, or owned objects such as boats, on the basis that ‘this cultural appropriation ... can subsume their complexity of meaning and association’.\(^9\) It is true that through a lack of cultural knowledge, the Johnson family lost the original meaning of Yonki Yonka’s name by generally contracting it to ‘Yonka’, and by transplanting it to the Countries of other Aboriginal languages. Although the name was adopted through a sense of friendship and obligation, it is perhaps a step too far to allow this as a partial ‘indigenisation of Australian settler identity’.\(^10\) There is no known evidence that William Johnson exchanged names with Yonki Yonka, which would have culturally legitimised the appropriation, though his son Fred was later known as ‘old Yonka’ in the Cranbrook district.

As well as naming his properties after Yonki Yonka, Fred Wills Johnson used ‘Yonka’ as a pseudonym during his frequent forays into the newspaper columns, as both a columnist and letter-writer. While (unsuccessfully) prospecting for gold at Bulong, east of Kalgoorlie, ‘Yonka’ filled his spare time in 1899-1900 as the local correspondent for the Kalgoorlie Sun, writing a fortnightly column under his pen-name. By these namesakes, the myth of Yonki Yonka endured through generations of a European Australian family, his story valued but untold, the whispering memory of his existence maintained by a bare scrap of legend. The intention of this project is to recover Yonki Yonka’s life story, to examine the circumstances of his time, and to understand as far as possible over these temporal and cultural distances, his life as he might have seen it.

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\(^{10}\) Ibid, p. 59.
INTRODUCTION

Yonki Yonka’s story encompasses the era of interaction between the Indigenous owners of the Country around Melbourne, and the settler-colonists who took over that land. Its interest to historians lies in the insights it offers into this critical early period of the colonisation of what is now Victoria. The narrative of Yonki Yonka’s life from his birth (circa 1823), until he died in early manhood in 1846, spans the settlement of Melbourne. He belonged to that generation of Kulin, the Aboriginal people of the Port Phillip district, which from 1835 was pushed aside by Europeans to establish what was to become one of Australia’s capital cities.

This thesis will detail the sequence of events in which Yonki Yonka was kidnapped as a child by Bass Strait sealers, from whom he escaped after about six months. A boat took him to Albany in Western Australia, and he worked as a shepherd in the Avon Valley during the early years of the Swan River settlement. He eventually earned enough money to pay his fare from Fremantle to Adelaide, and thence back to his Boon Wurrung people.11 By the time he arrived in 1841 he was familiar with European manners and practices, and spoke English well. Contemporary accounts show that on his return to Port Phillip he chose to rejoin his people where, once he had been initiated, he married a daughter of Billibellary, a leader of the neighbouring Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri) People and one of the ‘signatories’ of John Batman’s ‘treaty’.12 His adult name, Yonki Yonka, means ‘far away’ and probably alludes to his having returned from the great distance in which he was believed lost.13

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The Melbourne he found in 1841 did not exist when he was snatched by sealers from the shore of Port Phillip Bay. By the time he returned his people were enduring the consequences of disease, alcohol, loss of Country, and pressure from colonial institutions and individuals to ‘civilise’ through education, hard work and religion. Nonetheless, many of the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung of Yonki Yonka’s generation were able to adapt to revolutionary change, at least to the point of coexistence, over a breathtakingly short period.

I will argue that although their traditional way of life endured the trauma of colonisation by a flood of land-hungry squatters, individual Kulin like Yonki Yonka continued to make choices, to exercise agency, and to find the resilience they needed to deal with the hegemonic imposition of foreign laws, foreign religion and foreign education. I will further argue that contagious European disease was a significant factor in the rapid decline of the Boon Wurrung population; and that physical frontier violence was relatively unimportant in its effects on the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung – though that was not the case further out from Melbourne in the Portland and Gippsland districts. Yonki Yonka’s life and experiences illuminate the forces at work in, and on, this first-contact generation.

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Yonki Yonka’s image (Fig. 1), illustrates the gulf that separates me from the historical individual who is the subject of this thesis. A young Aboriginal man bearing the ritual scars (cicatrices) of his culture and wearing an opossum

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14 ‘Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes’, London, Aborigines Protection Society, 1837, pp. 126-127. The committee recommended that the Protectors find employment for Aboriginal people, help missionaries with the education of the young, and help develop an understanding of British law.

cloak, looks into the distance behind the observer. He is clearly in good condition, strongly built, and self-assured to the point that an insouciant half-smile is all he allows the artist. A head band holds back his carefully-arranged hair, and his only visible concession to European culture is the clay pipe inserted next to a perky feather. This engraving, the only known image of Yonki Yonka, was commissioned by George Henry Haydon for his book *Five Years’ Experience in Australia Felix* from the English engraver Henry Hainsselin.16

Haydon came to Port Phillip in 1840, a young man hoping to make his fortune in this new settlement, and returned to England five years later when his dreams failed to materialise. His great-great-grand-daughter, in her doctoral thesis, argues that through his writings he made a significant contribution to the early history of Melbourne, and that his book and his lectures in England influenced British perceptions of Australia.17 It is not known how Haydon met Yonki Yonka, but as Haydon’s surviving journals cover only 20 of the 53 months he spent in Australia, this detail might be among the missing material.18 Haydon was quick to publish his *Five Years’ Experience in Australia Felix* after returning to England, aware that he was competing with a ‘growing number of emigrant guidebooks and travelogues that were demanded by prospective migrants and armchair travellers alike’, and knowing that because of Melbourne’s rapid growth his publication risked becoming quickly outdated.19

Henry Hainsselin never visited Australia, so his representation of Yonki Yonka must have been based on one of Haydon’s more rudimentary sketches,

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18 Ibid., p. 17.
19 Ibid., p. 143.
examples of which are among the latter’s papers in Sydney. Hainsselin’s is a sympathetic portrait, perhaps falling between the ‘noble savage’ and ‘colonised indigene’ portraiture analysed by Elisabeth Findlay, but in the absence of the original sketch a deeper interpretation of cultural exchange between the sitter and the artist is impossible. The portrait needed to be consistent with Haydon’s report that the Port Phillip Aboriginal males were ‘generally considered...by far the finest race of men yet discovered on the continent of New Holland’. Haydon was not alone in this view: Joseph Gellibrand, a co-investor in the Port Phillip Association with John Batman, described the Kulin he encountered in 1836 as ’a fine race of men, many of them handsome in their persons and all well made. They are strong and athletic, very intelligent and quick in their perceptions’. Captain Smith of the Caledonia, who lived at Western Port for a year, described the Boon Wurrung people as ‘a stately, healthy race’. Hovell and Hume considered the Kulin they encountered at Port Phillip in 1824 to be ‘superior to any we had previously seen in any part of the colony’.

While not disputing Yonki Yonka’s health and athleticism, Haydon’s portrait can be seen as a metaphor for the challenge faced by the historian who attempts an historical biography of such a subject. Yonki Yonka presumably had some role in choosing his clothing, adornments, expression and pose, and if so, these would have been consistent with his self-image. Haydon then interpreted what he saw through the eyes of a young European male who was to present a version of the relationship between Port Phillip settlers and the traditional owners; a construct that had to appeal to potential English

20 George Henry Haydon, Australian diaries and sketches, 1840-1845, microfilm G6654, Mitchell Library, Sydney. An earlier sketch of Yonki Yonka has not been found.
22 George Henry Haydon, Australia Felix, op. cit., p. 102.
24 Hobart Town Gazette, 20 May 1826, p. 3.
25 ‘Expedition to the Southward’, Australian newspaper, 10 February 1825, p. 3.
purchasers of his book. His sketch was redrawn by an illustrator who had never seen an Aboriginal Australian. Finally, it becomes ‘primary’ source material in the hands of the biographer who, in this case, is from a radically different cultural inheritance and removed to a distant era.

Diane Barwick’s warning, that ‘no living person can fully understand the sentiments of people who lived a century ago’, is an appropriate caution.26 Yonki Yonka died in November 1846; I was born a century later in November 1946. Inga Clendinnen asserts that culture is as much a gulf as is time, cautioning us that Aboriginal Australia is a ‘world of mind and spirit, none of it written but stored in landscape, artefact, dance and story’ and is thus closed to outsiders.27 Bruce Pascoe, who identifies as Boon Wurrung through ‘distant heritage’, laments that those who have lost contact with their identity ‘in Aboriginal terms ... know nothing’ and can never reclaim those profound aspects of Aboriginality.28 In selecting a methodology to deal with these multiple degrees of temporal and cultural separation, then, the biographer has a duty to the reader to lay bare not only the path he or she will take, but all his or her inescapable deficiencies and prejudices. Empathising with the subject, according to Robert Barnes, ‘is a useful biographical tool, but due diligence is required to minimize translocating the biographer’s prejudices into the biography’.29 From a slightly different perspective, Miles Taylor warns that ‘biographers are not always best placed to spell out the significance of their subject. Familiarity breeds respect.’30 Fiona Paisley’s study of A. M. Fernando, the Aboriginal crusader who, in a different era, carried his public protests to Switzerland, Rome and London, is a case in point.31 Her access to Fernando’s own notebooks and letters brought her enviably close to her

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28 Bruce Pascoe, Convincing Ground: Learning to fall in love with your country, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007, p. 120.
subject, substantiating the respect that she clearly expresses for the man and his quest.

Aboriginal biography is further problematised when the author is non-Indigenous. Standpoint theory proposes that the world should be described from the social, spiritual and mental position of the subject, while Dennis Foley insists as a minimum requirement of Indigenous standpoint theory that the writer must be Indigenous.  

Aileen Moreton-Robinson agrees, noting that even though white and Indigenous women both occupy marginalised ‘other’ positions, ‘our respective subject positions speak out of different cultures, epistemologies, experiences, histories and material conditions which separate our politics and our analyses’. While accepting that a discussion of Yonki Yonka must be constrained by my ‘historically and culturally situated standpoint’, I do not accept that the project is necessarily defeated. To do so would result in silence. My approach to a discussion of Yonki Yonka’s life is that although I cannot give him a voice, I can – by examining his life – privilege the echo of his voice over the filtered interpretations of his colonisers. Decolonising Yonki Yonka necessitates a denial of the ‘privilege of whiteness as a natural dominance and normality’ felt even by sympathisers like William Thomas.

The first complication, alluded to in the discussion of Henry Hainsselin’s engraving, is that Yonki Yonka represented a version of himself to Europeans before they then interpreted and represented him in their written records – sometimes simply recording what they wanted to hear him say - or in their re-telling of the stories of others. There is a distinct feeling in some cases, such as Yonki Yonka’s religious discussions with William Hull (see pp. 123-125), that Yonki Yonka intelligently assessed

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33 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Talkin’ up to the white woman: indigenous women and white feminism, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2000, p. 124.
36 Yonki Yonka has no known descendants from whom oral memory might be obtained.
what his European interlocutors want to hear and provided that to them, placing him in a position of controlling European access to Aboriginal knowledge. Since almost all we know about him is by European report, interpreting his words and reported actions requires acknowledgement that in any given case, Yonki Yonka might have been second-guessing the observer. Psychologists call this aspect of human behaviour ‘reactivity’, which is as much a methodological issue for them as it is for historians.\textsuperscript{38} In sociologist George Herbert Mead’s terms, Yonki Yonka represented his public ‘me’ while suspending his private ‘I’ in situations where this might advantage him.\textsuperscript{39} My project, then, seeks to engage with a subject and members of his Indigenous peer group who might, or might not, at any given time, have been gaming their European associates.

**Literature Review**

There are numerous historical studies of the Aboriginal peoples who were displaced by European occupation and settlement of what was to become Victoria. Our knowledge of the Kulin prior to 1835 has been derived largely from the earliest European observations of their social organisation, food production, technological achievements, population, geographic distribution, religious practices and medical condition. Alastair Campbell is one of several historians who have usefully drawn these accounts together, and they will be examined in Chapter 1.\textsuperscript{40} The Woi Wurrung (now generally known by the clan name Wurundjeri) and the Boon Wurrung in particular, as the two language groups whose Countries became the site for the place now known as Melbourne (Fig. 3), were documented by settlers, amateur historians and anthropologists, missionaries, law enforcement functionaries, bureaucrats, and their official Protectors, from the first days of the invasion of their lands.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Alastair Campbell, *John Batman and the Aborigines*, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{41} European spellings of Aboriginal names and words are highly variable as approximations of the spoken words. For both convenience and consistency, the orthography of Aboriginal language group and clan names has been adopted from the Boon Wurrung Foundation of South Melbourne.
The accessibility of these records has steadily improved. In 2000 Ian D. Clark completed the transcription of the Port Phillip journals of George Augustus Robinson, Protector of Aborigines, in six volumes. In 2014 Marguerita Stephens published her transcription of the journals of Assistant Protector of Aborigines William Thomas, who was principally responsible for the Woi Wurrung and the Boon Wurrung, in four volumes. Thomas’ activities have also been examined in a number of secondary works, as have Robinson’s.

Michael Christie offers a starting point in the literature on which this project builds, and while his work was published in 1979, it still constitutes a standard text that begins prior to European colonisation and works through the issues of pastoral settlement, Aboriginal dispossession, colonial administration, the Aboriginal protectorates and the

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45 Nick Carson, Wikimedia Commons, downloaded February 2011.
‘unintended consequences’ of humanitarianism, albeit from a descriptive rather than analytical perspective. More recently, Richard Broome has produced an even-handed account that narrates the history of Aboriginal people in Victoria up to the turn of the century. He neither demonises nor eulogises either side of the frontier, and is energetic in presenting the positive as well as the negative aspects of the uneasy relationship during the colonial era. He does not, however, offer any structured analysis as to why first-contact Port Phillip Kulin engaged with the 1835 European influx, apart from some vague notions such as Aboriginal people being ‘intrigued by the novelty’ of European activities.

Lynette Russell is more confident in proposing that ‘in my reading of this history [of colonisers and colonised] I see resilience and capacity where others have seen despair and loss’. She introduces the subject of Aboriginal mobility, citing a range of reasons such as seeking the freedom of life that the sea afforded, looking for adventure or escape, and working towards economic gain. Her ‘models of interaction’ involve negotiation, economic imperatives and the formation of alliances. This is a much more positive perspective than Dane Kennedy’s view of Indigenous people caught between two cultures. Kennedy portrays these figures as having been ‘deracinated’ in consequence of their experiences, and so losing their identity.

Penelope Edmonds, taking a middle path, sees the colonial frontier more realistically as being inherently ambivalent – a place where ‘compassion, heart, forgiveness, trust and hope exist in tension with violence, horror, loss, betrayal and suffering’.

Eyewitness George Henry Haydon saw Yonki Yonka as ‘a most dangerous character’, ascribing the tension identified by Edmonds to him being ‘a half-civilized savage ...

more mischievous than one who has never mixed ... with the white population.'

This ‘ambivalence’ worried the settlers, who realistically saw an unpredictable frontier as dangerous, and who were frequently reminded that disputed seizure often incorporated fatal risk. Yonki Yonka, and those like him who were ‘half-civilized’, presented additional risk from their knowledge of the enemy.

Yonki Yonka’s travels and activities, from the time he was taken by sealers until he returned to his people, are discoverable largely because Assistant Protector of Aborigines William Thomas recorded his story. Marie Hansen Fels has collected together much of this material from Thomas’ journals and papers, and presented it in her monograph on the Mornington protectorate. She draws no conclusions about Yonki Yonka, other than to suggest that because she was able to verify much of his story through other sources such as shipping reports, Yonki Yonka was a reliable witness, and that those reports that could not be verified should therefore be accepted at face value. In the absence of contextual analysis, however, her portrait of Yonki Yonka becomes one-dimensional, which is less than satisfactory as the last word on a remarkable individual. Though she did not explore his character, consider his motives, or interpret his actions, I build on Fels’ research and scholarship, without which development of this thesis would have been considerably more difficult.

Diane Barwick, like Marie Fels, puts considerable value on the records of Yonki Yonka’s narration of events. She notes that William Thomas had a fair command of the Kulin dialects, that Yonki Yonka spoke fluent English, and that Thomas and his fellow Assistant Protector James Dredge routinely wrote up their diaries each day when they would have had a reasonably clear memory of what they had been told. The papers of George Augustus Robinson, Protector of Aborigines and William Thomas’ boss, are

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54 Ibid., p. 327.
useful for context but should be treated with caution. Leonie Stevens is wary of ‘the
pages of Robinson’s self-serving journals’, and in any case, he had little contact with
Yonki Yonka.\textsuperscript{56}

Histories of Port Phillip’s first decades that were published in the nineteenth century,
many of them as reminiscences, were predominantly Eurocentric. They focus on John
Batman and John Fawkner as the founders of Melbourne in 1835, the rapid
introduction and spread of sheep and cattle by squatters, the influence of the
humanitarian movement in establishing an Aboriginal Protectorate system, land
speculation, and agitation for the province to be divided from New South Wales as a
separate colony. Where Aboriginal events are mentioned, the focus is usually on so-
called ‘outrages’ against squatters, lawful and unlawful retribution by settlers and the
authorities, and the decline of the Aboriginal race.

The squatters’ perspective is well represented in a project by the Superintendent of
Port Phillip, Charles Joseph La Trobe, which resulted in \textit{Letters from Victorian
Pioneers}.\textsuperscript{57} More than 50 settlers responded to La Trobe’s request in 1853 to provide
him with their memoirs as the basis for a history of early settlement that he planned
(but did not write). Edward M. Curr and Peter Beveridge are two of the settlers often
quoted by historians, and I also draw on their work.\textsuperscript{58} Both Curr and Beveridge need to
be approached in the knowledge that they wrote their reminiscences decades after the
events described, and Sam Furphy additionally warns that in some cases Curr intended
‘to entertain the readers of his nostalgic memoir, not to provide an accurate and
disinterested account of the events’.\textsuperscript{59}

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\textsuperscript{57} T. F. Bride (ed.), \textit{Letters from Victorian Pioneers}, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{58} Edward M. Curr, \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, Then called the Port Phillip District (from 1841
to 1851)}, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1965; Peter Beveridge, \textit{The Aborigines of Victoria and
Riverina, as Seen by Peter Beveridge}, Melbourne, Hutchinson, 1889.
\textsuperscript{59} Samuel Furphy, \textit{Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History}, Canberra, Australian National University
ePress, 2013, p. 70.
\end{flushright}
Journalists have left us a running account of Port Phillip events through three bi-weekly newspapers: the *Port Phillip Gazette* (from 1838), the *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser* (from 1839), and the *Port Phillip Herald* (from 1840). They were joined by the *Melbourne Argus* in June 1846, a few months before Yonki Yonka died. These newspapers were often sympathetic in their treatment of ‘the Aboriginal question’, apart from condemning the killing of whites and the theft of stock, with frequent commentary on the plight of a people who had had their Country stolen from them. Their general view of the Protectorate system was that it had failed, with the *Herald* declaring that ‘the whole system of the Protectorate is rotten at the core’ and that the Protectors were failing to ‘[protect] the blacks without injuring the properties and endangering the lives of the white population’.

Source material to support a reconstruction of Yonki Yonka’s years in Western Australia is sparse. Without a single mention of any of his known names having been discovered in Western Australian records, we can only look to the shadows cast by those whom he named as his employers. Their diaries, and letters to and from relatives, at least provide a trail. In some ways, these personal memorabilia are more reliable than the official reports and correspondence from Port Phillip, much of which was designed to cover failure, incompetence and crime. I have used these sources principally for the contextual record of the lives and activities of Yonki Yonka’s employers, much of which would have been known to him.

Tom Stannage and his co-authors contextualise Western Australia during the years of Yonki Yonka’s residence (February 1834 to April 1840), thematically examining the early settlement’s economics and demographics, political developments and social history. Peter Cowan, drawing on the diaries and reports of Walkinshaw Cowan, a Guardian of Aborigines and Resident Magistrate at York, suggests that settlers in the

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60 A widely-published letter from the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1839 contained the admission: ‘it is impossible that the Government should forget that the original aggression was our own’. Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 31 September 1839.
63 Tom Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, Nedlands, University of WA Press, 1981.
Avon Valley prior to the convict era tended to be more tolerant of the itinerant customs of local Aboriginal people (who are Noongars of the Ballardong language group) than was later the case. Nonetheless, ‘there were bitter complaints that natives employed as shepherds simply disappeared and left flocks to be lost or destroyed’.

This opens the possibility that foreign shepherds like Yonki Yonka would be highly valued, since they would have no reason to traverse the local Country. Certainly, his income of 15 shillings a week as a shepherd and stock-keeper suggests that his services were well regarded, as many Aboriginal shepherds earned only their keep. Glennis Sewell, a family historian, has published her research on two of Yonki Yonka’s employers, Barker and Sewell, which informs a discussion of some of Yonki Yonka’s likely experiences as a shepherd. Family histories, while they might lack the research rigour of more structured biographies, nonetheless give the academic historian an advanced starting point. As Laura Rademaker says of Aboriginal historian George Nelson and his daughter Robynne, their family history is ‘essential reading for researchers’ of the Aboriginal mission at Cummeragunga in NSW.

Contextually, the overwhelming attitude of settler colonists was that Yonki Yonka and his contemporaries were a temporary aberration, which would be resolved by them dying out. Ethnographic science at the end of the eighteenth century placed Aboriginal Australians at the lowest level of civilisation and, as hunter-gatherers, at a point closest to nature. Russell McGregor traces the evolution of scientific and social appraisal from this point, describing the origins of the ‘doomed race theory’, and its logical consequence in miscegenation. While neither Darwin’s term ‘natural

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65 William Thomas, letter to the Melbourne *Patriot*, 14 October 1845, p. 2.
selection’ nor Herbert Spencer’s phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ pre-date 1859 and 1864 respectively, doomed race theories were commonly expressed during Yonki Yonka’s lifetime, predictively paraphrasing Darwin through the belief that a ‘stronger race’ would inevitably replace a ‘weaker race’.

Methodology

Historical biography is currently enjoying a revival, to the extent that ‘the biographical turn’ has itself become a focus for research. Barbara Caine is interested in why ‘more and more historians are either writing biographies or taking a biographical approach to social or intellectual history’. She attributes this to a growing interest in ‘the way in which an individual life can reflect wider patterns within society, or show the impact of social, economic and political change on ordinary people’. The biographical approach of this thesis rediscovers a life that spanned an epochal period of change, during which one nation was invaded by another. While historical biography sits as a subset of social history, there is no consequent limitation on the insights that the subject’s life can provide on the times — rather, the opportunity arises for verification of or argument with the broader propositions of the social historian. Inevitably, the boundaries of a fragmentary life such as Yonki Yonka’s will also encompass elements of microhistory, with contextual explanations of his known activities drawing on and contributing to a snapshot of one fragment of the colonial experiment.

Birgitte Possing defines historical biography as ‘encompassing both a reconstruction of a human life, and a representation of an historical individual’ (my italics).

70 William Thomas, Journal entry for 31 December 1847, in Marguerita Stephens, The Journal of William Thomas, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 285. Thomas characterised it as one of the mysterious dealings of providence, through which the Aboriginal race was steadily diminishing ‘to make room for a more intelligent race’.
scholarly level, she describes it as a composite of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history and literature. The reconstruction of Yonki Yonka’s life will necessarily be incomplete, since he left almost no records of his own creation. The nearest we come to hearing his voice is through a few brief sentences that Assistant Protector William Thomas recorded – verbatim, he implies – in his journal, or ghost-wrote for him, and even here Yonki Yonka is not speaking in his own language. The representation of Yonki Yonka’s reconstructed life, which will seek to explain and interpret recovered events, has its own challenges, requiring careful use of the historian’s tools. In reconstructing and representing Yonki Yonka, we must be wary of the cultural and epistemological hegemony of the present.

Leonie Stevens offers a partial solution to this difficulty in her brief biographical examination of Tunnerminnerwait. She warns biographers of Aboriginal Australians to resist traditional stereotype narratives such as ‘the reactive military rebel, the swaggering criminal or the child-like innocent’. She opts instead for a multi-faceted reconstruction by sifting through all available sources and according each a part only where it logically fits into the life trajectory being described. From these ‘fragmentary sources’ she pieces together composite lives driven by multiple motives.

Earlier historical biographies, particularly those that involve Aboriginal principals, also inform this project. Bain Attwood, in his biography of Bessie Cameron, set out to ‘recover a sense of her life as she might have experienced it’, stressing the importance of knowing how individuals acted and made decisions through their lives as well as the social context that accommodated and limited these actions. Shino Konishi points to innate differences between biographical subjects in a parallel study of Gogy and Bungin, two Aboriginal men who accompanied the French explorer Barrallier in his attempt to cross the Blue Mountains in 1802. Each of them was treated differently by Barrallier and, in turn, treated him differently, as well as having dissimilar relationships.

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75 In the case of Indigenous historical biography, literature might well be replaced by archaeology.
77 Ibid., p. 33.
with one another, resulting in six unique engagements.\textsuperscript{79} Konishi also wishes to ‘try to understand them as individuals with their own concerns and goals’,\textsuperscript{80} but neither she nor Attwood offers a methodology through which this understanding can be uniformly achieved.

My personal preference for a more structured framework leads me to consider Yonki Yonka’s agency (his capacity to act), and his resilience (his adaptability and strength of character that provide a foundation for that agency). To then examine the outcomes of this resilience-founded agency, I apply a model of acculturation (see p. 28ff) that allows me to track Yonki Yonka’s migration through the entangled Aboriginal and European societies. Finally, I adopt a theory of self-actualisation (see p. 29ff) to conclude my psychosocial inquiry by asking what Yonki Yonka thought of his life. I regard this four-stage framework as useful rather than prescriptive, offering assistance in coming to understand Yonki Yonka as an individual with his own concerns and goals.

\textbf{Agency}

My methodological starting point, in seeking to understand Yonki Yonka, is the familiar concept of agency. Dane Kennedy remarks ‘that historians have been trained to attend to agency’.\textsuperscript{81} There are many definitions of agency, but ‘a socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’ appears to fit most of the examples of Aboriginal agency found in the literature.\textsuperscript{82} Ian Clark and Toby Heydon note several relevant instances of Aboriginal agency. They say that Billibellary, Yonki Yonka’s father-in-law, ‘saw his relationship with [William] Thomas, and to a greater extent the one forged with George Robinson, as a means of accessing and influencing the directions of the Protectorate and its policies that greatly affected his people’.\textsuperscript{83} The Kulin often strongly resisted Thomas’

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 423.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Dane Kennedy, \textit{The Last Blank Spaces}, op. cit., p. 193.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Laura Ahearn, ‘Language and Agency’, \textit{Annual Review of Anthropology}, vol. 30, no. 1, 2001, p. 112.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Ian D. Clark and Toby Heydon, \textit{A Bend in the Yarra: A History of the Merri Creek Protectorate Station and Merri Creek Aboriginal School 1841-1851}, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004, p. 38.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
authority, and were prepared to go hungry at Merri Creek rather than join him at the Narre Narre Warren station, where two cartloads of harvested vegetables rotted for want of consumers.\textsuperscript{84}

Nor were the Native Police Corps automatically the tools of European law, instead resisting Thomas' orders on a number of occasions when he wanted clans moved on. Yonki Yonka's complex reactions to settler-colonialism – identifying as a Boon Wurrung, forming alliances with settlers, performing acts of bravery, defying the authorities – exhibit an active independence and express an unambiguous agency.

\textbf{Resilience}

Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow are among the few historians of Aboriginal Australia to examine resilience, exploring Aboriginal communities and individuals who exhibit a ‘capacity to engage actively with traumatic change’.\textsuperscript{85} They observe, as a result, ‘not only the capacity to absorb stress but to transform in order to cope with it’.

Goodall and Cadzow’s definition of resilience is echoed by Karen Hughes as ‘an ability to actively engage with traumatic change, involving the capacity to absorb stress and to transform in order to cope with it’.\textsuperscript{86} Both draw from developmental psychology, paraphrasing the definition of Luthar \textit{et al.}: ‘Resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.’\textsuperscript{87}

This is quite different from ‘agency’, which has been more frequently examined by historians. In comparing these two deterministic traits, resilience might be regarded as a pre-condition for agency during periods of traumatic change. Completing the link between resilience and culture, Felipe Castro and Kate Murray examine resilience as a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p. 40.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow, \textit{Rivers and Resilience: Aboriginal People on Sydney’s Georges River}, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2009, p. 4.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
transformative agent – a form of ‘adaptive coping’ - in acculturation. While their study is based on migrants moving to a foreign culture, in the case of settler-colonialism it was the foreign culture that migrated. In consequence, Port Phillip became what Mary Louise Pratt has characterised as a ‘contact zone’, being a social space ‘where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths’.

Once again, however, interpreting Yonki Yonka’s actions as a product of resilience must avoid cultural assumptions. Marion Kickett asks in her doctoral thesis: ‘What makes a successful Aboriginal person resilient?’ Using Indigenous Standpoint Theory as her methodology, she recorded interviews with 16 Aboriginal participants and then examined the transcripts to identify aspects of resilience from a cultural perspective. Through her research she identified 12 resilience characteristics from a Western viewpoint, and 14 from an Aboriginal viewpoint, of which only three were common to both cultures – self-esteem, a sense of humour, and coping with change.

Acculturation

A useful question is posed by psychologist John W. Berry: ‘What happens to individuals, who have developed in one cultural context, when they attempt to live in a new cultural context?’ Berry concludes that for a variety of internal and external reasons, individuals confronted by a foreign culture will occupy one of four positions: ‘marginalisation’ (low affiliation with both the native and the new culture); ‘separation’ (high-native, low-new); ‘assimilation’ (high-new, low-native); and ‘integration’ (high

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90 Marion Kickett, ‘Examination of how a culturally-appropriate definition of resilience affects the physical and mental health of Aboriginal people’, doctoral thesis, The University of Western Australia, 2011.
91 Ibid., p. ii.
92 Ibid., pp. 80-109.
affiliation with both cultures). Acculturation, then is not a single-point destination; nor is it a one-way street. Berry’s model allows for a more fine-grained analysis of cultural transfer than the broader definition of acculturation, as ‘the modification of the culture of a group or individual as a result of contact with a different culture’. 94 Within the context of colonisation, Berry’s model should be further nuanced to allow for the asymmetrical power relationships described by Pratt’s ‘contact zone’ model.

Bain Attwood provides a good example of Berry’s ‘assimilation’ in describing Charles Hammond, a Kurnai man from Gippsland, who had been brought up by Europeans and thereafter was ‘unwilling to mingle with other Aborigines, apparently regarding them with disdain’. He and his wife Annabella preferred to live among and work with Europeans and ensured that their seven children received a European education. 95 Yonki Yonka’s grandfather Mingaragong, on the other hand, is a good example of Berry’s ‘separation’ position, maintaining a high affiliation with his Aboriginal culture and a low affiliation with settler culture. William Thomas said that Mingaragong seldom visited Melbourne unless there were important affairs that required all of the Boon Wurrung to attend. 96 Yonki Yonka, I will propose, moved during his life from acculturative assimilation, to separation.

Self-actualisation

The broad field of psychology, as the science of human behaviour and of the workings of the mind, has generally held little appeal for historians. 97 Humanistic psychology is one part of this broad field. Through empathetic engagement the humanistic observer (or therapist) will attempt to understand the subject’s (or client’s) ‘thoughts, feelings

96 William Thomas, statistical return of the Aboriginal population in his district, VPRS 10, file 1839/242, PROV (Public Record Office Victoria).
and struggles from the client’s point of view’. The concept of empathetic historiography is less than radical, though the historian must also contend with the subject being physically absent. R. G. Collingwood held, contemporaneously, that ‘all history is the history of thought’. Humanistic psychology offers ‘self-actualisation’ as an analytical tool that, I propose, is particularly useful to the biographer in trying to determine what Collingwood’s man [sic] thinks of himself.

Self-actualisation theory, pioneered by psychologist Abraham Maslow and developed by Carl Rogers, offers a lens through which Yonki Yonka might be viewed as a psychosocial individual from whom we can infer motivation to explain action. This approach risks being accused of employing ‘one of those concepts ... which historians have somewhat casually borrowed from the social sciences and then used promiscuously for their own purposes’. Barbara Caine warns that many historians express ‘scepticism and downright hostility to the very idea that psychoanalysis has anything to offer’. In my view, Yonki Yonka’s narrative is enriched by the principle that ‘virtually no biographer can avoid dealing with a subject’s psychology’. Psychological inquiry supports the process of taking one life at a time, ‘and trying to make whatever sense one [can] of that life’. Stéphane Lévesque, examining R. G. Collingwood’s historiographical propositions, describes this empathetic analysis as a ‘methodology [that] explicitly focuses on inferential judgements from the evidence’.

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98 Carl Rogers, ‘The attitude and orientation of the counselor in client-centered therapy’, *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, vol. 13, 1949, p. 84.
Every individual, Carl Rogers proposed, has some understanding of who and what they are, and a view of what they want to be – they have a self-image and an ideal self. When the two coincide, Rogers proposes, self-actualisation is achieved.\textsuperscript{107} I will suggest that Rogers allows us through this theory to assess what Yonki Yonka might have described as his ‘ideal self’ and the extent to which his ‘self-image’ approaches this construct, thereby allowing an estimation of his ‘self-actualisation’. (This exercise can be found at pp. 133-136.)

Rogers agreed with Maslow that individuals have an inherent tendency towards actualisation, but noted further that a person’s ‘behaviours would be adequately adaptive to each new situation, and that the person would be continually in a process of further self-actualization’.\textsuperscript{108} On this basis, Yonki Yonka’s understanding of his own life would be progressive, changing as he grew older and had new experiences, as he re-evaluated his responses, and as he set new goals. This is a reminder that we are attempting to re-imagine a 23-year old, who had no later opportunity to adjust his ideal self and reconsider his self-image.

\textbf{In summary}

The preface to this introduction described the family legend that led to my interest in Yonki Yonka’s life. The introduction then detailed the challenges inherent in any attempt to document and explain the life of someone from a different time and culture, and warned the reader to be aware of the particular prejudices of the writer. In approaching this project, I have examined similar biographies of Australian Aboriginal people who lived in colonial and post-colonial eras and drawn from them a methodology – historical biography – that appears most appropriate for the study of Yonki Yonka’s life and historical context. Being aware of significant gaps in the

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
available records, this methodology will draw on historiography, psychology, sociology and anthropology, to develop as complete a picture as possible of my subject. Through this reconstruction and representation of Yonki Yonka, my objective is to privilege the voice of a young man who endured an assault on his Aboriginal culture and the attempted imposition of a new European culture, and yet was able to adapt to the extent he judged necessary through his resilience, and the intelligence to direct his agency. Speaking for him, unsatisfactory though it might be, responds to the charge that ‘we [Aboriginal people] struggle to have our history acknowledged’. To paraphrase Barbara Taylor, my intention is to contribute to my subject – to endow Yonki Yonka with fresh vitality by making him intelligible and meaningful to the living.

Chapter 1, which follows, reviews the condition of the Kulin People before European colonisation, noting the epidemic that convulsed the generation of Yonki Yonka’s grandparents. The narrative then follows Yonki Yonka when he is snatched with a group of female relatives from the shore of Port Phillip Bay, and taken as slave labour to the sealing islands of Bass Strait. This generates a discussion of the oppression of Aboriginal people and an attempt at enforced integration with the ‘lowest level’ of European society but, at the same time, considers the opportunities that arose for Aboriginal people like Yonki Yonka to adopt new practices and to select those modes of life, such as individual mobility, that they found attractive.

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109 Kali Bellear, son of Australia’s first Aboriginal judge, speaking at the Yabun Festival in Sydney on January 26 – the Australian newspaper, 27 January 2017, p. 5.

This first chapter of Yonki Yonka’s life briefly describes the world into which he was born, and the condition of the Kulin Nation in southern Victoria prior to European settlement. In their first ‘contact’, his people were ravaged by a foreign disease before Europeans arrived at Port Phillip. This epidemic remains controversial, but many historians believe it originated in the British settlement at Sydney and spread progressively through contact between Aboriginal language groups. By analysing multiple colonial sources, I confirm Yonki Yonka’s cultural identity as a member of the Yalukit Willam clan of the Boon Wurrung language group, and address some of the issues involved in delineating his Country. Yonki Yonka’s kidnap with members of his extended family, from the shores of Port Phillip Bay, is the principal focus of the chapter. The historians’ debate over reading with or against the grain when assessing the life of Aboriginal women living with Bass Strait sealer/settlers will be examined. The chapter closes with Yonki Yonka escaping from his captors to Launceston, aged about 11, and soon to travel to Western Australia.

**Kulin Country in the pre-contact era**

Yonki Yonka’s earliest Australian forebears first occupied this continent more than 50,000 years ago.¹ Their descendants reached the Port Phillip district more than 30,000 years ago, when Tasmania was still connected by a land bridge to the mainland.² In many parts of Australia, the archaeological record shows that they ate well from a highly-productive environment. On the New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria coastlines there are almost 20,000 shell middens, the largest up to 30,000

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¹ Chris Clarkson et al., ‘The archaeology, chronology and stratigraphy of Madjedbebe (Malakunanja II): A site in northern Australia with early occupation’, *Journal of Human evolution*, vol. 83, 2015, p. 46.
cubic metres and with a shell content of between 30,000 and 40,000 shells per cubic metre. Ancient occupation sites do not usually preserve soft tissue food remnants, but Jan Penney has assembled an inventory of Aboriginal foods that demonstrates the vast range of vegetable food sources available to Aboriginal communities in southeastern Australia – in this case, around Swan Hill on the Murray River. Her list includes 23 species of edible roots, tubers, bulbs and rhizomes, 13 fruits, and 22 seed varieties.

Early colonists of Port Phillip noted more than 180 bird species and at least 20 species of fresh-water fish, including two species of eel that the Kulin harvested annually.

The Kulin people’s first contact with their future colonisers can arguably be set in the 1790s when they were exposed to an exotic contagious disease, which most historians agree was either smallpox or chicken pox. Some of the Boon Wurrung adults who knew Yonki Yonka during his childhood bore the marks of this scourge, which had spread through much of the epidemiologically naïve Aboriginal population of southeastern Australia. James Flemming recorded in his journal that he had noticed the pock-marked faces of Aboriginal people during the 1803 Cumberland survey – ‘two of them appeared to be marked with the smallpox’ - when the exploring party examined both sides of Port Phillip bay and worked its way up the Yarra River to what is now known as Dwight’s Falls. Early Melbourne settlers noticed the same tell-tale marks, with George Gordon McCrae remarking: ‘We saw, occasionally, men of very aged appearance and deeply pock-marked’.

The source of the disease that left its marks on Boon Wurrung faces remains a contentious issue among historians, who offer a variety of theories about the nature and origin of the causal epidemic. These include the British settlement at Sydney, or

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4 Jan Penney, *The Death of Queen Aggie: Cultural Contact in the mid-Murray Region*, Bundoora, La Trobe University, 1979, pp. 117-132.
Macassan fishermen, being the source of smallpox or chickenpox, or a different and perhaps endemic disease. While there might never be an answer that will satisfy all historians, the type of disease is almost irrelevant compared with its fatal outcome. Janet McCalman et al. state that between 1788 and white settlement at Port Phillip in 1835, the population of Victoria was ‘savaged by at least two major smallpox epidemics’ and that it dropped from an estimated 60,000 people to about 15,000. Edward Curr, an early squatter in the Port Phillip District, estimated that ‘the Bangerang [Murray River] country could have supported twice the number of Blacks we found in it’. It would seem that Yonki Yonka was born into a substantially depleted population undergoing a slow recovery in numbers.

It appears that the second pandemic of the 1820-30s did not reach as far as the Kulin people. The Port Phillip colonists were able to estimate when the epidemic had occurred from the apparent age of the youngest person with facial scars – a method later refined by the World Health Organization to calculate, through ‘pockmark surveys’, epidemic frequency. Despite considerable European activity in the region between 1830 and the establishment of Melbourne five years later, ‘no European record[ed] any sign of a smallpox epidemic at the time’ while many reported a vigorous and healthy population.

John Kerr said that at the time of his arrival in the Port Phillip district in 1839, ‘only the oldest persons bore the marks of the fell visitation, which must have occurred when they were very young children’.

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10 Edward M. Curr, Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, op. cit., p. 120. The Bangerang (Yorta Yorta) are traditional owners of the Murray-Goulburn region. Curr concluded from the excess number of cooking ovens he saw in the district, and the many pockmarked individuals, that smallpox had swept through the district some 50 years earlier.


12 James Boyce, 1835: The Founding of Melbourne, op. cit., 194-195. Boyce, who thinks a Macassan origin of the disease was possible, makes a strong case for the second epidemic either failing to reach, or not penetrating far into, the Port Phillip district.

The traumatic memory of this devastating event, however, was fresh in the minds of Yonki Yonka’s people. ‘To this day the old men speak of it shudderingly, and with such an amount of loathing horror, as it is impossible for any other evil to elicit from their inherent stolidity,’ wrote Victorian settler Peter Beveridge. Among the legends that Yonki Yonka would have learned as a child, then, this verbal record of a mysterious and disastrous scourge would have been one of the more recent. Of greater importance is the consideration that any epidemic sweeping through a defined group – such as one that is constrained by marriage laws - will reduce that group towards a minimum viable number, and it will become increasingly vulnerable if further epidemics arrive before the population has had time to recover. ‘Humans cannot withstand high levels of mortality for long’, according to anthropologist John Moore. The reduction in numbers also reduced the Kulin nation’s ability to resist other pressures, including colonisation.

**European contact**

Europeans arriving in the Port Phillip District of New South Wales were highly impressed when they first saw what was, in fact, a managed landscape – the result of ‘planned, precise, fine-grained caring’ for Country - which in many areas reminded them of English parkland. Explorer Thomas Mitchell so admired the lush pastures he found around the Murray and Loddon rivers in 1836 that he ‘named this region Australia Felix’. Lieutenant James Tuckey was equally impressed in 1803 by the landscape around the short-lived Sullivan Bay settlement at Port Phillip – ‘beautifully picturesque; swelling into gentle elevations of the brightest verdure, and dotted with

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14 Peter Beveridge, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina*, op. cit., p. 18. Beveridge could not have literally meant that these recollections were occurring in 1889 when he published – a century after the epidemic – but was probably recalling the stories he heard while squatting between 1845 and 1868.


17 Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, vol. 2, London, T. and W. Boone, 1839, p. 333. This name, which translates as ‘fortunate Australia’, was subsequently adopted to describe all the fertile region of Victoria.
trees, as if planted by the hand of taste, while the ground is covered with a profusion of flowers of every colour’. 18

Permanent European settlement began in 1835 when John Batman and John Pascoe Fawkner, at the heads of their rival colonising initiatives, established a village on the banks of the ‘Yarra Yarra’ river.19 There had been some earlier sporadic contact, most likely involving independent sealers, with James Flemming reporting in January 1803 that the Cumberland expedition had found two huts, ‘apparently built by Europeans’, on the Mornington Peninsula coast near Arthurs Seat.20

Yonki Yonka might have seen evidence of this ephemeral settlement. He was born in Kulin Country circa 1823, based on Assistant Protector of Aborigines William Thomas estimating his age as 18 when they first met on 6 June 1841.21 Lieutenant-Governor David Collins and his 300 convicts and 45 settlers had come and gone two decades earlier, abandoning the settlement at Sullivan Bay on the Port Phillip shore of Boon Wurrung Country after just eight months.22 This first prolonged encounter between Europeans and Boon Wurrung had been relatively peaceful. ‘On the first days of our landing ... the natives ... came to the boats entirely unarmed, and without the smallest symptom of apprehension; presents of blankets, biscuit, &c. were given to them, with which, except in one instance, they departed satisfied and inoffensive.’23

Collins found Port Phillip unsatisfactory for a number of reasons, however, one of which was the apparent infertility of the land. His deputy surveyor, G. P. Harris, had reported that the surrounding land presented ‘a deceitful appearance of a rich country’ but was, in fact, mostly sandy soil that was unlikely to repay the efforts of

18 James Hingston Tuckey, An account of a voyage to establish a colony at Port Philip, in Bass’s Strait, on the south coast of New South Wales, in His Majesty’s ship Calcutta, in the years 1802-3-4, London, 1805, pp. 157-8.
20 John J. Shillinglaw (ed.), Historical Records of Port Phillip, op. cit., p. 22.
23 James Hingston Tuckey, An account of a voyage to establish a colony at Port Philip, op. cit., p. 154.
agriculture. Lieutenant Tuckey, who had been impressed by the landscape, conceded that these first impressions ‘had flattered us into the most delusive dreams of fruitfulness and plenty’.  

Yonki Yonka’s Country

In this thesis, the word ‘Country’ is capitalised wherever it refers to Aboriginal homeland, just as an Englishman would capitalise ‘England’. Anthropologist Deborah Rose and her colleagues explain that to Aboriginal people, Country is a proper noun as well as a common noun. ‘People talk about country [she does not capitalise the word] in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy.’ Jane Lydon agrees that the Aboriginal landscape ‘is conscious and embodies the substance, powers and traces of the ancestors’ – a concept that would have been incomprehensible to Collins and Tuckey.  

Boon Wurrung man Bruce Pascoe, in a poetic pause during his Convincing Ground polemic, holds that while another place could be admired, you could never love it like your own. ‘Love is when you stand before your country and your jaw drops open and your soul creeps out of your mouth and walks about the country and when it returns it whispers in your ear, pardon me but I have just visited our mother.’ Karen Hughes, who also capitalises ‘Country’, makes the point that this English word has been loaded with Indigenous meaning to encompass ‘home, clan estate, and the powerful complex of spiritual, animate and inanimate forces that bind people and place’.  

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understand Yonki Yonka and his generation, this is an important consideration for European researchers and readers, who must attempt to adopt this very different frame of reference to make any progress.

Anthropological influence on historiography has long been accepted by historians as a legitimate lens through which Aboriginal history can be viewed and discussed. Diane Barwick is credited with being ‘one of the first to explore the anthropological perspectives in historical documents, or [to] interpret her anthropological data from an historical viewpoint, at a time when disciplinary boundaries kept the two perspectives apart’ in the early 1980s. Anthropological analysis explains many aspects of history, such as why Yonki Yonka and others like him were quickly able to achieve fluency in English and, in some cases, French. Anthropologist Alan Rumsey notes that even today wherever Aboriginal languages are spoken it is not uncommon for individuals to speak four or five. This is necessary because language is embedded in Country, not in its inhabitants. As Yonki Yonka moved from one Country to another, for kinship, ceremonial or resource-sharing reasons, he would be expected to speak the language of that Country, making multilingualism the norm in Aboriginal society – ‘etiquette demanded that residents of a territory should use the language of its owners’.

Yonki Yonka’s people

The traditional owners of the land briefly occupied by Collins are the Boon Wurrung, one of five language groups that together make up the Kulin Nation (Fig. 3). The concept of Aboriginal nations is not a modern reinterpretation of governance, but was in common usage in colonial Port Phillip. George Augustus Robinson, for example, wrote to C. J. La Trobe on 4 February 1841 to record the prison release of three

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Aboriginal men from the ‘Waradjeri nation’ (now known as Wiradjuri), which occupied a large area in central New South Wales.\textsuperscript{33}

The other four language groups that comprise the Kulin are the Wathaurong, the Dja Dja Wurrung, the Taungerong and the Woi Wurrung, the last now generally referred to as the Wurundjuri.\textsuperscript{34} Each language group (which in the past were often called tribes) was sub-divided into clans, with each clan comprising a number of families. The boundaries between each language group were not always precisely delineated, but as Assistant Protector of Aborigines James Dredge noted, ‘each tribe has its distinct district the extent and boundaries of which are well known to themselves, and they speak of their country to a stranger with emotions of pride’.\textsuperscript{35} Marriages arranged between reciprocating Kulin clans had the effect of extending kinship ties to the Country of other clans and language groups. ‘District loyalties were thereby extended and trade with more remote areas was made possible by the resulting web of kinship ties uniting all Kulin clans in a far-flung confederacy,’ wrote Diane Barwick.\textsuperscript{36}

Boon Wurrung Country comprises a coastal strip running east from the mouth of the Werribee River (about mid-way between Melbourne and Geelong) through the southern suburbs of Melbourne, south-east to Moe and then south to Port Franklin, encompassing all of the Mornington Peninsula, Westernport Bay and Wilson’s Promontory (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{37} Gaughwin and Sullivan suggest that the Tarwin River, which flows into the eastern end of Andersons Inlet, formed the eastern boundary of the

\textsuperscript{33} Inward Registered Correspondence to the Superintendent of Port Phillip District, VPRS 10, file no. 1841/189. Historians such as Diane Barwick and Rachel Perkins have used the term ‘Kulin confederacy’, but ‘Kulin Nation’ is now the overwhelming choice of Koorie organisations, including the Boon Wurrung Foundation whose nomenclature I use.

\textsuperscript{34} Kulin Nation website, \url{http://www.yarrahealing.catholic.edu.au/kulin-nation} accessed May 2017. Wurundjuri is a clan of the Woi Wurrung, but because of its traditional ownership of the land where the city of Melbourne stands, it has subsumed the language group.


\textsuperscript{37} Boon Wurrung Foundation home page map, \url{http://www.boonwurrung.org/} accessed May 2017. Wilsons Promontory is not part of the lands covered by the 2010 Gunaikurnai Native Title Agreement, but a claim for the Wilsons Promontory Marine National Park land was subsequently lodged by the Gunaikurnai and was listed by the National Native Title Registrar in April 2015 - Native Title Services Victoria, ‘Annual Report 2014-15’, p. 21.
Boon Wurrung.\textsuperscript{38} Marie Fels has given considerable attention to this contested eastern boundary, demonstrating that the delineation of clan Country could change over time for reasons that included warfare, competition for resources, and fighting over women.\textsuperscript{39}

Yonki Yonka, as a Boon Wurrung child, had much to learn if he were to engage successfully with an environment in which life would be fundamentally reliant on the daily and seasonal availability of food. He would be prepared by his kinspeople passing on language and life skills, teaching him through both lore and resource management the relationship between a man and his Country, and ensuring he mastered those skills vital to a hunter-gatherer. ‘As people move through their lands,’ notes Claire Smith, ‘not only do they learn about relationships between place and their ancestors, they also learn about themselves and their particular rights and responsibilities’ in their Country.\textsuperscript{40} Like any child in any culture, Yonki Yonka was being normalised – in his case, as a pre-invasion Boon Wurrung. As I will discuss later in this thesis, childhood is an important time for developing resilience. Its growth relies on a state that psychologists call ‘biopsychosocial homeostasis’, which is that comfort zone where ‘a person is in balance physically, mentally, and spiritually’.\textsuperscript{41}

Yonki Yonka as a pre-initiation male would have had a childhood name at this time, a name that we don’t know. He would have been carried through his Country by his mother until the age of about four, and as a child born into the Boon Wurrung People he would have become familiar with his Country, particularly that part with which his clan identified. There is some confusion, however, about where his clan Country lies. The Yalukit Willam, one of the six clans of the Boon Wurrung people, claim Yonki Yonka as their own and record the kidnapping by Bass Strait sealers as involving Yalukit

\textsuperscript{38} Denise Gaughwin and Hilary Sullivan, ‘Aboriginal Boundaries and Movements in Western Port, Victoria’, \textit{Aboriginal History}, vol. 8, pt. 1, 1984, p. 86. Interestingly, a map on p. 118 of this journal includes Wilsons Promontory in Boon Wurrung Country, while a map on p. 87 does not.

\textsuperscript{39} Marie Fels, ‘I Succeeded Once’, op. cit. pp. 278-290.


Willam women and children. This clan’s Country is the strip of land running east from the Werribee River to modern day St Kilda, including Williamstown, Port Melbourne, South Melbourne and Prahran. Diane Barwick, however, claims that ‘Yonki Yonka belonged to the Burinyung-balluk clan of the Bunurong which occupied Mornington Peninsula, eastern neighbours of the Yallukit-willam clan’. Their Country ran along the coast eastwards from Point Nepean to Cape Shank.

Though Barwick does not explain this identification, it perhaps arises from Yonki Yonka’s kidnap from the beach near Point Nepean and an assumption that this was his Country. In Rebellion at Coranderrk, however, Barwick describes an annual cycle during which ‘families and individuals entitled to make use of a specific clan estate were sometimes together, sometimes dispersed, sometimes journeying to other areas to fulfil the religious and family obligations of responsible adults in Kulin society. Over a lifetime, a person might successively join bands in different localities, utilising various rights to make lawful use of land owned by others.’ This mobility would explain a group from the Yalukit Willam utilising the Country of the neighbouring clan.

There is further evidence that Barwick appears to be mistaken. William Thomas, who took considerable interest in the Aboriginal clans and their relationships, recorded a list of ‘Boongurong Family Connections’ that show the ‘Werrerby Yallork’ clan as being led by ‘Old Mr Man, 2 Benbows & Derremot’. This is undoubtedly the Yalukit Willam clan, whose western boundary is the Werribee River. The two Benbows are Baddourup (‘big Benbow’) who was Yonki Yonka’s father, and his brother Barlut (‘little Benbow’ or ‘King Benbow’). We can be confident in asserting, then, that Yonki Yonka’s cultural identity was the Yalukit Willam clan of the Boon Wurrung language group, within the

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42 Meyer Eidelson, Yalukit Willam, op. cit., pp. 11 and 19.
44 Diane E. Barwick, Rebellion at Coranderrk, op. cit., p. 15.
45 William Thomas, correspondence, returns etc., 1846. ML MSS 214, vol. 10, Item 01, file FL832117.
46 The same list, compiled in January 1846, shows the family group of Buddurup (Benbow), his wife Mullingrook, Yonker Yonker aged 23, and his sister Bare boon, aged 18.
Kulin Nation. Knowing who you are and where you come from is the foundation of Koorie identity.

**Yonki Yonka’s family**

Yonki Yonka’s Yalukit Willam family occupies an important position in Boon Wurrung history. His paternal grandfather was Mingaragong, known to the Europeans as Old Mr Man (Fig. 4). William Thomas called Mingaragong a chief, and described him as a ‘man of some importance’. Mingaragong was born about 1771, if his estimated age of 68 in 1839 is accurate, which means that he was one of those older people known to Yonki Yonka who lived through the epidemic of the 1790s. This record establishes Yonki Yonka’s lineage back to a date prior to the European colonisation of Australia with some degree of certainty. Thomas said that Mingaragong seldom visited Melbourne unless there were important affairs that required all of the Boon Wurrung to attend. Mingaragong’s status is supported by his having four wives, three of whom were said to be sisters. These three sisters all died in 1844, within two months of one another. A fourth wife had died less than a year earlier. Mingaragong himself died in October 1847, at about 76 years of age, when an influenza epidemic spread through the Aboriginal encampment. William Thomas saw his grave in December that year and was surprised at an unusual arrangement of seven wattle saplings laid around it in a heptagon. He was told that it was intended to show ‘that but 7 remained of his tribe’.

Mingaragong had eight known children – and probably many more – of which Baddourup (also known as Buddurup, Baddoorup, Poor.tow.rup, Por.de.weer.rap, Big Benbow, Bondeon, and Mr Smith) was probably the oldest. As his European name

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49 William Thomas, statistical return of the Aboriginal population in his district, VPRS 10, file 1839/242, PROV.
51 Ibid. 31 December 1847, p. 285. This might mean 7 of his descendants.
FIG. 4: Yonki Yonka’s family. This genealogy chart has been derived from Marie Fels, who in turn relied on contemporary records, principally those by Assistant Protector of Aborigines, William Thomas. It can be assumed that many births, deaths and relationships were not recorded.53

53 Marie Fels, I Succeeded Once, op. cit., pp. 57-386.
suggests, he had allied himself with George Smith, the licensee of the Lamb Inn from 1837. Smith relied on Baddourup and his younger brother Mangerer (also known as Werram and Mr Man(n)) to such an extent that he formally complained to the resident police magistrate, William Lonsdale, about attempts to recruit them into the Native Police. He described them as steady and industrious workers, while crediting himself for his work in ‘civilising’ them over the previous two years. By the time Yonki Yonka returned in 1841, however, his father was noted frequently in William Thomas’ journal as being drunk in the encampment. Baddourup survived his son, and last appears in Thomas’ census on 30 June 1851, but six months later he disappears from the lists.

**Bass Strait sealers and settlers**

At the age of about 10, Yonki Yonka’s life changed irreversibly when he was kidnapped, and taken to the Bass Strait islands. The boom in Bass Strait sealing began in 1798, after survivors from the 1797 wreck of the *Sydney Cove* on Preservation Island reported numerous densely populated sealing grounds among the 78 islands of the Furneaux group. The islands from Bass Strait across the south coast of Australia to King George Sound were rapidly occupied by hundreds of sealers. Between 1800 and 1806 more than 100,000 skins were taken, but the over-exploitation reduced seal populations markedly and the big companies moved on to sealing grounds in New Zealand. When this indiscriminate slaughter began there were four seal species in Bass Strait – the Australian fur seal, the New Zealand fur seal, the Australian sea lion and the southern elephant seal, but today only the Australian fur seal survives there. Fur seals were hunted for their skins, which were exported principally to England and China, while the oil from elephant seals was used domestically and exported.

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54 George Smith to Lonsdale, 29/9/1838, VPRS 4, Box 5, 38/207.
55 Lynette Russell, *Roving Mariners*, op. cit., p. 95. The older geographical names ‘Bass’s Strait’ and ‘King George’s Sound’ are not used in this thesis, unless directly quoted.
The departure of the big sealing and whaling outfits opened the way for smaller operators to move in, many of whom were reputed to be former or escaped convicts, and who lived on the islands permanently in small settlements. Barbara Little notes that the biggest group, on Kangaroo Island, comprised only eight or nine men and their families.\textsuperscript{59}

The Aboriginal people who were taken to the Bass Strait islands were involved in a variety of commercial enterprises, of which sealing was just one. Mutton birds (short-tailed shearwaters) were caught, salted and dried which gave them a flavour, according to Haydon, ‘somewhat [like] red herrings, and are much to be preferred in this way to when fresh’.\textsuperscript{60} Robbing the underground nests of mutton bird colonies would have been well within the ability of Aboriginal children like Yonki Yonka.

According to the then Bishop of Tasmania, H. H. Montgomery, some 400,000 young birds were salted down in the Furneaux Islands in a good year and a large family could salt up to 1,000 birds a day.\textsuperscript{61} Even today, Aboriginal Tasmanians like Darrel West remember how important mutton birding was in their lives. ‘Not only did we eat muttonbirds; we slept on muttonbird feather mattresses, whatever was wrong with us was cured with muttonbird tonic and liniment, we used muttonbird fat and oil as everyday grease, lamp oil and cooking oil … and a barrel of salted birds stood out at the back.’\textsuperscript{62} Work on a midden at the Beeton rock shelter on Badger Island shows that Aboriginal islanders had been utilising mutton birds at least 9,500 years ago.\textsuperscript{63}

Like Yonki Yonka’s age, the year of his kidnap is a little uncertain, but we have his own evidence from the story he related to Assistant Protector of Aborigines William Thomas, some eight years later. Thomas calculated that Yonki Yonka ‘could not

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 112.
\textsuperscript{60} George Henry Haydon, \textit{Five Years' Experience in Australia Felix}, op. cit., p. 48.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., pp. 434 and 436. Badger Island is one of the Furneaux group.
FIG. 5: In 1833 during the voyage of the French ship Astrolabe, this scene of sealers and their hut was recorded in Boon Wurrung Country at Western Port. An Aboriginal figure can be seen closest to the hut. [Image courtesy of the State Library of Victoria.]

have been more than 10 years of age’ when he was kidnapped, which indicates an event in 1833. Thomas, ever hopeful of ‘civilising’ his charges, thought this was ‘just the age that would seem to be ripe for modelling the character’. In a second version by Thomas, who often brushed up his notes in what seems to have been preparation for more formal publication, he records that Yonki Yonka was kidnapped with eight women near Point Nepean when he was nine years old, four years before the first settlers came to Port Phillip.

James Dredge, Assistant Protector of Aborigines for the Goulburn River region from January 1839 to June 1840, also wrote about Yonki Yonka in his journal.

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64 William Thomas, miscellaneous papers, op. cit.
65 William Thomas, journal, mss. Set 214, item 2, CY 3126, frame 23ff, Mitchell Library. This has the minor consequence of setting his birth year at 1822, but introduces the complication of 1831 being the year of the kidnapping.
During the week a young man of the Boonworongs arrived in the Edina from Adelaide. It appears that about five [Dredge has crossed out ‘six’] years ago this Tribe was on the coast of the Bay near Arthur’s Seat, when a vessel came in and having anchored, her crew went ashore. Early one morning they induced nine women and two boys to go into their boat—and took them on board their vessel and sailed out of the harbour. One of the women contrived afterwards to make her escape and returned to her own people. The others were taken to Preservation Island [Fig. 6] in the Straits where they were used very cruelly.’

Dredge is clearly wrong with his dates, guessing at either 1835 or 1836, but it will be shown that the kidnap occurred before Melbourne was settled in 1835. Yonki Yonka’s recollection of this event from his childhood contains little detail, but an adult eye-witness who was involved in the abduction leaves us in little doubt that the Boon Wurrung women were seized violently. Pyterrunner (also known as Maytepueminner, Matilda and Maria) was a Tasmanian woman who was on board sealer George Meredith’s vessel at the time. In a record taken by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson, she is said to have told him:

Says she has been for a long time with the Sealers. That she was in George Meredith’s Schooner when he went to Port Phillip. That the vessel anchored within the entrance of the Port under Point Nepean. That there was a tribe of Natives on the Point hunting kangaroo, that they the Sealer’s Men went on Shore in their Boats and enticed the Natives, and told her to do the same. After fixing on the best looking women and Girls did at a preconceived sign seize upon and tie them with cords, and then conveyed them on board the Schooner and proceeded on a Sealing Voyage to King’s Island and then the Hunter Islands and thence to the Furneaux Islands were [sic] they were left by Meredith. This woman having accompanied me to Port Phillip pointed out the spot and described these proceedings.

Pyterrunner indicates that there was a tense standoff, telling Robinson that ‘the sealers did not shoot the blacks, nor did the blacks spear the whites’, which Robinson interpreted as both parties being afraid to commence hostilities. It might be assumed

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66 James Dredge, ‘Diary of James Dredge’, 16/6/1841, MS 5244, Box 16/4, La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria. He does not say where he got this information from.

67 Preservation Island, recorded by James Dredge as the kidnapped group’s destination, is one of the Furneaux Islands.

68 Robinson to Colonial Secretary of Van Diemen’s Land, 12 January 1837, AOT/CSO5/19/384: 171-196

that if Meredith had planned this raid, he and his crew would have come ashore well-armed and made their move only because they felt they had the upper hand. Marie Fels has assiduously researched this event, and by tracking back through George Meredith’s known activities she has pinpointed a voyage of his schooner \textit{Defiance} from March to May 1833 as the only time when the abduction could have occurred.\footnote{Ibid. p. 354.} This puts Yonki Yonka’s group onto the islands by May 1833, sold to sealer/settlers by Meredith, who was recorded in shipping notes as having arrived back in Sydney on 26 May with 536 seal skins and 2,550 kangaroo skins.\footnote{\textit{Sydney Herald}, 27 May 1833, p. 2.}

The question of who was abducted is an important one. Marie Fels notes that competing mainland Native Title claims have in part turned on descent from these abducted women, through their island-born offspring.\footnote{Marie Fels, \textit{I Succeeded Once}, op. cit. p. 10.} A close reading of the sources she quotes, including the recollections of Yonki Yonka, support a view that four women, four girls and Yonki Yonka were taken to the islands (excluding Toutkuningrook, who escaped). Fels believes that because Yonki Yonka was abducted ‘with his lubra’, this must mean that his mother was also kidnapped (since he was too young to have a wife).\footnote{Ibid. p. 326.} She does not, however, explain how William Thomas could write to the \textit{Patriot} that he had often heard of Yonki Yonka, and that ‘his mother had bemoaned his fate’.\footnote{\textit{Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser}, 14 October 1845, pp. 2-3.}

My belief, which is consistent with both records, is that Yonki Yonka was abducted with his step-mother Barbungrook, while his natural mother, Mullingrook, remained at Port Phillip. Barbungrook and Mullingrook were both wives to Baddourup, Yonka’s father. Mullingrook was born circa 1804 and so would have been about 19 when Yonki Yonka was born circa 1823. She is known to have still been on the mainland in January 1846, when Thomas recorded her as Baddourup’s wife and in the same family group as Yonki Yonka and his sister, Barebun.\footnote{William Thomas correspondence, returns etc., 1846, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 214, vol. 10, item 01, on-line file FL832117.} Yonki Yonka, given the
chance, would perhaps have been more willing to leave his step-mother on Preservation Island than his natural mother.

**Life on the islands**

The seasonal crews that had initially worked the Bass Strait sealing grounds were followed by independent island-dwelling sealer/settlers known as Straitsmen, who farmed, hunted and traded with passing ships, bargaining over wallaby and possum as well as seal skins. ‘Many of these men linked up with Aboriginal women and together they established families, farms, settlements and small businesses,’ Lynette Russell notes. She argues that though the Aboriginal women might have been coerced and abused in their capture and subsequent constraint, they could still exercise an ‘attenuated autonomy’ through the way they raised their families and organized their domestic arrangements. It was unlikely that they were living in isolation from others of their clan or language group, with sealers typically having from two to five women in a working and cohabiting coalition.

Some colonists, such as Thomas Godwin, asserted that Aboriginal women were better off with European sealers than with their own husbands, whom he said treated them harshly, and that ‘they have always proved faithful and affectionate to their new husbands, and seem extremely jealous of a rival’. While this was perhaps true in some cases, it idealises the ‘civilised European’ in juxtaposition with the ‘Aboriginal savage’ and, as an all-encompassing proposition, is not believable. It is equally unlikely that Aboriginal women were all taken by force, and all brutalized by their captors, though this view has dominated earlier interpretations. Alastair Campbell, for example, accepts that the Aboriginal women were all slaves who were forced to do domestic work ‘and to sleep with their masters, being flogged and sometimes killed if they disobeyed’. Patricia Cameron occupies the other end of the spectrum, arguing that

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77 Ibid. p. 102.


‘the great majority of [Tasmanian] clanswomen who went to the islands were willing participants in [a] culturally-based barter system, and they became the resource managers and initiators of the small-island mixed economy’.  

The engagement of Aboriginal women in the sealing industry was not a peripheral activity. Lynette Russell calculates that hundreds of Aboriginal women were involved, and that their labour secured the economic success of many colonial sealers. She credits them not only with adapting to their new life, but causing the Straitsmen to likewise adapt. ‘The Southern Ocean sealing communities included Europeanized Aboriginal women as much as they included Aboriginalized European men,’ she posits. At the same time, there were clear instances of violent men assaulting and enslaving Aboriginal women, which she details. Penelope Edmonds, in examining the 1832 inquiry by British Quakers James Backhouse and George Walker, suggests that their record be read ‘along the grain’, given the care they took in interviewing Aboriginal women on the islands, and on this basis she attaches credibility to ‘undeniably disturbing … evidence of sealer brutality and slavery’.

In several cases, Aboriginal women were recorded as refusing opportunities to return to their own people. In October 1836 the representative of the Port Phillip Association in the new settlement, John Helder Wedge, wrote to the Colonial Secretary in Hobart asking that G. A. Robinson, who at the time was in charge of Tasmania’s remnant Aboriginal population at Flinders Island, be instructed and resourced to rescue the women who, with Yonki Yonka, had been abducted three years earlier. By December that year the government boat Eliza had taken Robinson to Port Phillip in pursuit of the rescue and he had with him Pytterrrunner, who pointed out the site of the abduction as

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81 Lynette Russell, Roving Mariners, op. cit., p. 93.
82 Lynette Russell, Roving Mariners, op. cit., p. 100.
they entered the bay, describing the event as noted earlier. Robinson spent the week after Christmas interviewing Boon Wurrung leaders and eventually convinced two of them, Derrimut and Dallagalreeth, to go to Bass Strait with him, but when he left Port Phillip for the *Eliza* on 1 January 1837 they had changed their minds, and refused to go.

Robinson found one of the Port Phillip women living on Preservation Island with settler James Munro, but she was ill and confined to her bed. This woman had a daughter aged 13 to 14, who also had been among those abducted. Another Port Phillip woman was living with a sealer named Maynard on nearby Clarke Island, and they came to Preservation Island while Robinson was there. The Clarke Island woman, in an advanced stage of pregnancy, was asked by Robinson if she would like to go back to her own Country to which she replied negatively and profanely. Robinson attributed this to her being totally under Maynard’s control.

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Marie Hansen Fels, ‘*I Succeeded Once*’, op. cit., p. 333.

The *Eliza* was a fast two-masted schooner with two guns originally designed as a revenue cutter (customs vessel). It was 21.5 metres long and launched in Hobart in May 1835. Mike Nash, *Convict Shipbuilding and the Port Arthur Dockyard*, Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, 2001, per extract at [www.keyportarthur.org.au](http://www.keyportarthur.org.au) accessed May 2017.
At this stage, Robinson returned to Flinders Island, leaving the Master of the *Eliza*, James Hurburgh, to call into other islands. Hurburgh subsequently reported that on Woody Island he found three mainland women and five children, two of the women saying they had no wish to leave the sealers; and a Port Phillip woman with two children on Gun Carriage Island who also had no interest in returning to her Country. The names of these women were not recorded, so their origins are uncertain, but there seems to be little doubt that some of those who were abducted with Yonki Yonka refused, or were too frightened to accept, repatriation to their own people.

The variability of the treatment of Aboriginal women is perhaps most evident in the case of James Munro, reputed to be an exception to the norm ‘in that he did not beat his women’. Tim Jetson notes that this colourful character was the principal Straitsman in the Furneaux Islands, who was praised as ‘one of the best conducted men who inhabit the Straits’ and who was, for at least part of his long period of habitation, an appointed special constable responsible for reporting or apprehending escaped convicts. His ‘generosity of spirit ... saw Preservation Island become the social centre for islanders’, Jetson writes.

**Yonki Yonka’s escape**

William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, records in his 1841 account of Yonki Yonka’s kidnap: ‘Capt West since dead of a government schooner took Yanki Yanki to VDL. Yanki was 1 year in VD Land.’ This appears to mean that Yonki Yonka was taken by an official vessel from the Bass Strait islands to Launceston, though Thomas does not mention Launceston in this context. No record has been found to associate a Captain West with a government vessel, and there is no known record of a government vessel arriving at Launceston from Bass Strait between March 1833 – the

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90 Ibid, p. 41.
91 William Thomas, miscellaneous papers, op. cit.
earliest date that Meredith could have abducted the Aboriginal group on the *Defiance* – and 17 October 1833, when Yonki Yonka left Launceston for Albany.\(^{92}\)

No trace has been found of Yonki Yonka during his brief sojourn at Launceston, but in view of the above dates, he cannot have been at Preservation Island and then in Launceston for more than six months together. It is tempting to think that a government vessel called at Preservation Island some months after the captive women and children arrived there, that its captain took Yonki Yonka on board with a view of removing him from the authority of the sealers, and that on reaching Launceston a place was found for him on a coastal vessel. Given James Munro’s reputation as a generous spirit, it might not be unbelievable that he released Yonki Yonka while retaining those women he had purchased. In the absence of any known record this can only be conjecture, but it is clear that William Thomas was in error when he noted that Yonki Yonka was in Van Diemen’s Land for a year.

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**In summary**

This chapter has described the beginnings of Yonki Yonka’s life, and the first intrusions of Europeans onto Boon Wurrung Country. The Kulin Nation had been ravaged by smallpox, or an equally virulent disease, leaving Kulin Country depopulated by perhaps 30-50%. The kidnap and enslavement of Yonki Yonka and members of his extended family from the shores of Port Phillip Bay has been recounted from contemporary and eye-witness records, noting its consequence in a creole society wherein the Aboriginal women may have had more agency than is apparent from colonial accounts.

\(^{92}\) *Hobart Town Courier*, 18 October 1833, p. 3. See Chapter 2.
The first chapter of this thesis took Yonki Yonka to the Bass Strait islands in 1833, to work as a child for Straitsmen. Within the next six months he travelled to Launceston and then, as will be related, to Albany in 1834 and the Swan River colony in 1835. After working for several employers, by his own report, he purchased a passage to Adelaide in South Australia in 1840, worked for a further year there, and then signed on as a crewman to work his passage back to Melbourne – the town on his Country that he had never seen.

This period of Yonki Yonka's life is, biographically, the most difficult to trace. He was in Western Australia and South Australia for more than seven years, from early in 1834 until May 1841, but no record of his presence has been found in any source from those two colonies. On his return to Melbourne he told William Thomas the names of his employers, the names of the boats he had travelled on and the names of their masters, but otherwise there is not a single glimpse of him. Finding him in the record is made more difficult by the probability that he was known by his childhood name, which has not been discovered, rather than the name he is believed to have adopted on his return to Melbourne.

I will contextualise my subject through the correspondence and journals of colonial settlers who were in the same places at the same times, refer to government records for policies that would have shaped his social environment, and review newspaper reports of events that Yonki Yonka would have experienced or known about, so that in the absence of direct evidence he obtains a subliminal presence by his positioning.

Among the contextual themes that emerge through such an examination, this chapter speaks to the mobility of Aboriginal people during the colonial era; to their ability to interact with and, if it suited their purpose, work within, settler industry; and to the agency of a Boon Wurrung youth that prolonged exposure to a foreign culture did
nothing to extinguish. It brings Yonki Yonka into the theatre of frontier conflict, probably for the first time in his life, from which a consideration of colonisation’s impact on the Western Australian Noongar people is derived.

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From Bass Strait to Albany, 1833-34

James Dredge, a one-time Assistant Protector of Aborigines, when he recorded Yonki Yonka’s story in his journal, wrote: ‘The young man ... was, after a time taken [from Preservation Island] to Launceston where he escaped in a vessel which he thought would take him home. Her destination was however Swan River settlement’.¹ This observation raises questions, such as whether Yonki Yonka was taken on as a crew member or stowed away. William Thomas avoids the issue in his journal records, saying simply that ‘he was taken away from VD Land in the Royal William, cutter, Capt n Patterson, to Swan River’.² Thomas, the Assistant Protector of Aborigines responsible for the Boon Wurrung people, obtained his information direct from Yonki Yonka in 1841, when he identified the boats he sailed on and their masters.

Thomas and Dredge were both deeply interested in the Aboriginal people they were given charge of, as Assistant Protectors. Their journals record many stories that extend well beyond the requirements of official record-keeping. To the historian, these early records are both important for what they reveal, and frustrating because of the gaps in the narrative. Dredge, for example, tells us that Yonki Yonka was trying to get back to his people on the mainland, from which Diane Barwick concludes that he was involuntarily taken to Western Australia.³ This is not necessarily the case, given the readiness of Aboriginal people to travel with Europeans. Lynette Russell nuances Barwick’s simple assumption with an examination of Aboriginal people achieving maritime mobility by volunteering their services, and being recruited, as well as by being coerced or kidnapped. ‘The ways they entered the industry are as complex as

¹ James Dredge’s diary, 16 June 1841, op. cit.
² William Thomas, miscellaneous papers, op. cit.
their lives were within it,’ she notes. While Russell goes on to document two Aboriginal men and one teenager who went to sea as whalers, records of Aboriginal children at sea are infrequent. It was not, however, remarkable for any vessel to have one or more ship’s boys on board – this had been a feature of the British navy for more than a century. In just six years, from 1756 to 1762, the Marine Society in London recruited more than 4,500 boys for the navy. Their minimum age was supposed to be 14 but according to Roland Pietsch, many were younger.

The mobility of Aboriginal people is further evidenced by records of long sea voyages by Aboriginal women. Tracey Banivanua Mar mentions the Tasmanian sealer, Wore.temoe.teryenner, who travelled with three other Aboriginal women to Mauritius where they were stranded for several years, before eventually returning to Tasmania in 1827. Warroba (John Pigeon), a boy from the Shoalwater River region of NSW, sailed with a sealing crew in 1811 to Macquarie Island, about half way between New Zealand and Antarctica, long before Yonki Yonka was born. By early 1826 Warroba was with a group of sealers on Breaksea Island at the mouth of King George’s Sound, and was subsequently employed by Major Edmund Lockyer as a tracker, and a mediator between the colonists and the local Minang people. George August Robinson met Warroba when the latter returned to the Bass Strait islands from Western Australia, and Warroba was in 1835 taken to Port Phillip by John Batman to act as an interpreter and go-between in ‘treaty’ negotiations with the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung.

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8 Ibid.
The *Royal William*, which took Yonki Yonka from Launceston to Albany, was a 43-ton cutter built and registered in Hobart in 1833 for John Petchey. A cutter-rigged boat in this era was a full-bodied, deep draft vessel with a keel, designed to handle coastal waters. It left Launceston ‘on a sealing voyage to King Georges Sound’ on 17 October 1833. Yonki Yonka was about 10 or 11 years old, separated from his family and his language group, and making his way into the uncharted territories of adult occupations in distant waters. He was no doubt useful in helping with general shipboard duties on this small vessel, such as carrying aboard the salt and seal skins that would make up the *Royal William*’s cargo. The *Royal William* left Albany for Hobart on 4 March 1834, and its return voyage took just one month, compared with four months for its western journey, which indicates that it acquired its cargo of seal skins and salt while outward bound.

Despite his youth, Yonki Yonka would have been considered old enough to start earning his keep as a member of the working class. When the land regulations for the Swan River Colony were issued they allowed settlers 200 acres of land for every ‘labouring person’ brought out, with labourers being defined as men, women, and children above the age of 10. It was common in Britain and Europe at the time for children as young as 10 or 12 to be employed, and this practice was transferred to the Swan River Colony. Aboriginal children, particularly those who had been institutionalised to the extent that they spent part of their day in school or at a mission, were also employed by Swan River settlers in and around their houses. A set of rules published in 1842 required employers of children from the Perth Native School

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11 *Hobart Town Courier*, 18 October 1833, p. 3. Marie Fels did not find this reference, and thought the *Royal William* probably left for King George Sound in January 1834 (*I Succeeded Once*, op. cit. p. 369).
12 On its return to Launceston in April 1834, the *Royal William* had a cargo of salt and seal skins, having left King Georges Sound a month earlier – *Hobart Town Courier*, 11 April 1834, p. 2.
13 Arrivals from January 2, 1834 to June 19 1836, Tasmanian Archives, op. cit.
to provide their weekday clothing, help with the cost of any illness, give them one day of holiday every two months (apart from Sundays), and ensure they were sent back each night to sleep at the Native Teacher’s house. William Tanner, writing from the colony in December 1839 to his friend Thomas Brown in England, found it worthy of comment that ‘girls from 11 years old are made useful so great is the scarcity’ [of labour]. Frederick Irwin advised that an emigrant would do well to bring with him ‘a married man, with one or two sons above the age of ten’. This would give the settler a farm labourer, a house servant and one or two shepherds from the one family.

Albany pre-1834

The Noongar people of south-western Australia, generally considered as a socio-cultural grouping, have been more broadly thought of as the Noongar Nation since the Single Noongar [native title] Claim was successful in 2006. The Wagyl Kaip language group’s Country in this Noongar Nation stretches from just east of Manjimup across a large tract of territory to the Hopetoun area, taking in the Stirling Ranges, Albany, and the river catchments of Kalgan and Fitzgerald, among others. The dialect speakers of the Wagyl Kaip are the Ganeang, Goreng and Minang. Albany and King George Sound are the Country of the Minang people of the Wagyl Kaip Noongar, among whom Yonki Yonka lived for more than a year.

The European sealing industry on the southern coast of Australia pre-dates white settlement anywhere on this coast, including King George Sound. When Major Edmund Lockyer arrived there on Christmas Day in 1826 to set up a military outpost, he found a group of four angry Aboriginal men who had been marooned on Michaelmas Island by

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16 G. Shenton (Secretary), ‘Rules and regulations: For the Management of the children attending the school, and who may be in service among the inhabitants at Perth’, Western Australian Almanack, 1842, pp. 28-30.
18 Frederick Chidley Irwin, The State and Position of Western Australia; Commonly Called the Swan River Settlement, London, Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1835, p. 117.
sealers, ‘who had killed at least one man before abducting the [Aboriginal] women from the mainland camps’. Two weeks later a group of sealers who had been left by their mother-boat on nearby Breaksea Island up to 18 months previously came ashore in Princess Royal Harbour. This diverse group comprised Kangaroo Islanders, Bass Strait sealers, Aboriginal Tasmanian women, an Aboriginal man from Sydney, an African American, a small Aboriginal child and a native of New Zealand.

Lockyer brought in all the sealers and women from the nearby islands, took depositions, and arrested Samuel Bailey for the murder of a Minang man. Two Minang women who had been taken by the sealers were reunited with their people but, as Sarah Drummond records, Lockyer faced a dilemma over an Aboriginal girl – aged about seven – who had been brought in from Bailey’s camp on Eclipse Island. She was not a Minang girl, nor connected to any of the Tasmanian women, and can be counted amongst those Aboriginal women and girls whom Liz Conor calls ‘the playthings of settler sadism’. It was thought that she had been taken off the coast somewhere to the east, and had been with the sealers for about seven months. In the absence of any better solution, Lockyer sent her to the Aboriginal School at Blacktown in NSW. Drummond’s research shows that in an unthinking irony she was named Fanny Bailey, after her principal abuser, and that there does not appear to be any further record of her.

The story of this little girl is a caution for any historian tempted to gild the lifestyle of Aboriginal females abducted or held captive by Straitsmen. Tiffany Shellam describes this particular group of sealers as being ‘rough-as-guts’, which goes half way towards an adequate categorisation. Major Lockyer called them ‘a complete set of pirates’ and ‘actually savages’. Bailey was, by any measure, a monster, and Drummond

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justifiably does not exclude paedophilia from the probable abuses endured by kidnapped children. Ross Anderson also hints at this risk, saying that although the term paedophilia was not used at the time, Lockyer ‘recognised the danger Fanny Bailey was in and acted by removing her from Samuel Bailey’s grasp’. Knowledge of such abuse might be a further reason why a government revenue official thought it necessary to take Yonki Yonka from Preservation Island to Launceston, though if so, it would seem his powers did not extend to protecting the four girls who were also snatched from Port Phillip.

Yonki Yonka’s Albany

Albany was a tiny settlement when Yonki Yonka arrived on the Royal William early in 1834. The Government Resident, Sir Richard Spencer, had taken up his position in September 1833 and found himself among ‘seventeen [white] civilians, a few soldiers, dilapidated buildings and a moribund economy’. Spencer’s complement of 17 servants and a family of 10 added considerably to the size of the village. Donald Garden calculates that the population of Albany, when Sir Richard arrived, ‘consisted of the garrison, three civil officers and six private individuals, probably a grand total of about forty’. No record of Yonki Yonka has been found from his time in Albany, which appears to have lasted about a year, though there are records of Aboriginal people being employed by Europeans.

According to a contemporary account, the Aboriginal people ‘are much attached to the settlers, and not less than six or eight were constantly employed working in the Governor’s [sic] garden’. In December 1833 Sir Richard Spencer reported that these Aboriginal workers had been employed ‘daily the last fortnight as agricultural labourers, cutting down trees, clearing the land, and paying them 1 Lb [0.45 kg] of

29 Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 5 October 1839, p. 159.
31 The Colonist and Van Diemen’s Land Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser, 15 April 1834, p. 3.
flour and 2 oz [56 grams] of suet for a forenoon’s work, or a job equal to that, for which they are all very grateful’. 32 Six months later Spencer commented that ‘the natives continue on the most friendly terms with us, and are becoming more useful, one has learned to work as a carpenter, and another to saw in the pit’. 33 This Eurocentric view can, of course, be reframed from an Aboriginal viewpoint through which we see the colonists as reliant on Aboriginal labour, and willing to trade with them as much food as was required in order to secure their services.

We have one record of Yonki Yonka seemingly associating with Aboriginal women while he was in Western Australia. William Thomas notes in an enigmatic sentence: ‘He left 3 lubras behind at Swan River with the sealers’. 34 In this case, Thomas is probably using the word ‘lubra’ to mean an Aboriginal woman, rather than a wife. The reason why Yonki Yonka would mention this to Thomas might be because he was referring to three Boon Wurrung women who were at King George Sound.

William Thomas wrote a journal entry about these three women, based on information from George Douglas Smythe, who was employed by Governor Stirling from time to time as a surveyor, and who had been the surveyor on Captain Thomas Bannister’s overland expedition that left the Swan River in December 1830, and arrived at King George Sound two months later. 35 Smythe told Thomas that there were three Port Phillip women and a boy at Albany who had been stolen by sealers in 1834 ‘by the Capt of the George the fourth Cutter, which left Sydney touched at Western Port, on its way to St [sic] Georges Sound’. 36 Through her analysis of the record, Marie Fels has

32 Spencer to P. Brown, Colonial Secretary, 19 December 1833, Battye Library accession no. 320A.
33 Spencer to R. W. Hay, Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 June 1834, Battye Library accession no. 320A.
34 William Thomas, vocabularies and miscellaneous information, op. cit. Thomas used ‘Swan River’ for the whole colony.
36 Ibid. Marie Fels (I Succeeded Once, op. cit. pp. 359-361) goes to considerable lengths to try to identify this cutter, which she thinks might have been the fourth in a series of government cutters called George or Prince George. I believe she has misread Thomas’ journal entry, and that he meant ‘George the Fourth, cutter’, rather than ‘George, the fourth cutter’. Fels has compounded her problem by misquoting Thomas in saying ‘the problem lies in determining the meaning of the phrase “the fourth cutter George”’. The Hobart Town Courier (20 November 1830, p. 2) lists ‘George IV’ as one of three cutters at the port.
made a strong case for this being an 1834 event, different from the kidnap of Yonki Yonka and his group in 1833, and involving Boon Wurrung women snatched from Western Port rather than Port Phillip. My identification of the cutter involved as *George IV* strengthens the case that this was not the raid by Meredith in his schooner *Defiance*.

The three women were identified by William Thomas, from his conversation with Smythe, as: Mary, age 26, two children, living with Captain Williams ‘of Whaler’; Eliza Newton/Nowen, on Balls Island [probably Bald Island], aged about 24, with seven children; and Julian [sic] Morgan, age 22, ‘has several children’. ‘These Lubras are all anxious to come to Port Phillip to see their friends at Western Port,’ Thomas noted. A question arises from this record. Given that there were more than nine children mentioned as part of this group, why would Smythe have noted that there were three Port Phillip women and a boy at King George Sound? This might be a reference to Yonki Yonka, as having been with the Boon Wurrung women at the time. It would largely correlate with the statement that ‘he left 3 lubras behind at Swan River with the sealers’, and if this was Yonki Yonka, it evidences a connection with some of his own people for at least part of his year at King George Sound.

**Samuel Adams Barker**

Yonki Yonka remembered a Mr Barker as his first employer in the Swan River Colony. William Thomas noted from his later discussions with Yonki Yonka that: ‘His masters were, at Swan River, 1 & 2 Mr Barker, 3 Mr Phillips, 4 Mr Mundy. He gives Mr Barker the best character. His occupation at the Swan River was Shepherding and Stock-keeping’.

Though these are scant details, without any dates attached, the Swan River Colony at the time was sparsely populated, making identification of these employers

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37 Marie Fels reads Thomas’ handwriting at this point as ‘Eliza Nowen’ whom she says ‘appears on the list of apical ancestors from whom the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation derives its authority to be the tradition owners of the Mornington Peninsula’, whereas Marguerita Stephens is less certain, transcribing the name as ‘New[ton?]’.

38 William Thomas, journal 11 December 1839, op. cit.

39 William Thomas, vocabularies and miscellaneous information, op. cit.
relatively straightforward.\textsuperscript{40} The colony, established in 1829 exclusively for free settlers, initially suffered from slow growth and a lack of labour and it was quickly outstripped by South Australia (established 1836) and Port Phillip (1835).\textsuperscript{41}

Samuel Adams Barker arrived at Fremantle from London on the barque \textit{Adams} in November 1834.\textsuperscript{42} Its complement of passengers was tiny – just two in cabins and four in steerage. One of Barker’s steerage companions was John Sewell Jnr., and both were sons of tenant farmers in Essex.\textsuperscript{43} On arrival in Fremantle the \textit{Adams} was chartered by Stephen G. Henty to sail to Launceston and load 600-700 sheep for farmers in the Swan River Colony. Henty employed Barker and Sewell, both of whom were aged about 20, to travel with him and help with the stock.\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Adams} left Fremantle on 17 December 1834 and arrived in Launceston on 19 January 1835. Having acquired and loaded its stock, it left again for Fremantle via King George Sound on 3 March 1835.\textsuperscript{45}

The return voyage raises the likelihood that this was when Yonki Yonka was first employed by Barker and Sewell. Now about 11, still at King George Sound, and without the complication of having to be enticed out of his Country, Yonki Yonka was probably an attractive candidate to two young men who had called at the port with a load of sheep and were looking for a shepherd. There is no known evidence for this sequence of events, but it is a feasible explanation of how Yonki Yonka and Samuel Barker became acquainted, and of how he reached the Swan River. The \textit{Adams} arrived back at Fremantle on 4 April 1835 and, as with the outwards journey, the shipping notes mention Henty but not Barker or Sewell, let alone an Aboriginal shepherd.\textsuperscript{46} It brought

\textsuperscript{40} James MacQueen, \textit{General Statistics of the British Empire}, London, B. Fellowes, 1836, p. 211. The statistical return for Western Australia in 1834 recorded just 1,623 people at the Swan River, 90 on the Canning River and 23 at York.

\textsuperscript{41} Pamela Statham, ‘Swan River Colony 1829-1850’, in Tom Stannage (ed.), \textit{A New History of Western Australia}, op. cit., p. 181.

\textsuperscript{42} Pamela Statham, \textit{Dictionary of Western Australians 1829-1914: Volume 1, Early Settlers 1829-1850}, Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 1981, p. 13. Statham incorrectly calls this barque the \textit{John Adam} in her entry for Samuel Barker, and incorrectly has it arriving in June 1834 in her entry for John Sewell. See also the \textit{Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal}, 29 November 1834, p. 398.

\textsuperscript{43} Glennis Sewell, \textit{From Pebmarsh to the Swan}, op. cit., p. 83.


\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Launceston Advertiser}, 5 March 1835, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal}, 5 April 1835, p. 470.
with it 1,200 sheep, a horse and 5 cattle.47 By now the rush for land in the Avon Valley was on, with enthusiastic support from Governor Stirling. Writing to London shipping agent Charles E. Mangles in December 1834, he said the York district offered ‘one thousand square miles [2,600 sq km] of the finest imaginable sheep land’ and that Lady Stirling’s flock would cross the hills in a few days. ‘Every exertion is making to procure sheep, it evidently being the best speculation in this country’, Sir James enthused.48

As noted earlier, Yonki Yonka told William Thomas that he had worked for Barker twice, which suggests a break in between. His first period of employment perhaps came to an end after the sheep brought back from Launceston had been distributed to their buyers. Following their involvement in this enterprise, Barker and Sewell were employed on a property on the Swan River for its grantee, Surveyor-General John Septimus Roe. They planted crops there in 1835 and had a successful harvest.49 This system of working land grants on behalf of absentee owners was common in the colony, since those owners had to fulfil their location duties to maintain title to their grants, which would otherwise revert to the Crown.

The next year, 1836, Barker and Sewell obtained a similar position at a property called ‘St Aubyns’, south of York in what is now the Beverley district. This land had been granted to Edward Pomeroy Barrett Lennard whose father, Sir Thomas, was a family friend of the Sewells in England and who had encouraged John Sewell to try his luck in the colony.50 We might imagine, then, that in the unfenced pastures of the Avon Valley the partners Barker and Sewell would have need of one or more stock keepers, and that this was when Yonki Yonka re-entered their employ and accompanied their party with its small herd of cattle across the Darling Range. By late 1836 Barker and Sewell were reported to have 21 acres of land under cultivation in the York district, but only

47 Ibid., 11 April 1835, p. 474.
48 Frederick Chidley Irwin, The State and Position of Western Australia, op. cit., p. 65.
49 Glennis Sewell, From Pebmarsh to the Swan, op. cit., p. 85.
50 Ibid. St Aubyn was the family name of Barrett Lennard’s mother, Dorothy - http://www.thepeerage.com/p7284.htm, accessed May 2017.
45 sheep. The other 15 settlers in the district had flocks ranging from 110 to 1600 sheep.\textsuperscript{51}

Shepherding had its own animal husbandry techniques, which made experienced and reliable shepherds valued employees. It was preferable to run three flocks: one of ewes, one of weaners and yearlings, and a third of wethers and rams, requiring multiple shepherds.\textsuperscript{52} Edward Curr wondered why the shepherds in the Port Phillip district had flocks of only 500-700 sheep when, on those open plains, he thought they could easily have looked after 5,000 sheep each. He then found that on earlier pastures in NSW it had been more difficult to shepherd stock, and ‘it had been decided by the country police magistrates that shepherds … should not be held responsible for sheep lost from flocks which exceeded 520’.\textsuperscript{53} Thomas and Eliza Brown, farming 6 km from York in 1842, had a flock of about 600 ewes ‘that are attended with very little trouble, it is about a sufficient charge for one shepherd’.\textsuperscript{54}

Unlike the Port Phillip district, where the early shepherds were former convicts from Van Diemen’s Land or those who had come overland with flocks from Sydney, the Swan River farmers had to rely on either indentured European labour, which was in short supply, or Aboriginal labour.\textsuperscript{55} James Dredge tells us that Yonki Yonka ‘made himself useful as a Stock keeper and eventually obtained one pound per week wages’.\textsuperscript{56} As the demand for sheep grew, so did the demand for shepherds, and their remuneration. ‘Shepherds are already much wanted,’ said the \textit{Perth Gazette} not long after Yonki Yonka arrived at the Swan River.\textsuperscript{57} The going rate for good shepherds in 1836 was reported to be £20 to £25 per annum, depending on ability.\textsuperscript{58} As flocks increased, the demand for shepherds pushed up wages. Samuel Viveash, writing from York in late 1839 to his friend Thomas Brown in England before the latter embarked for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} \textit{Swan River Guardian}, 27 October 1836, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Curr, Edward M., \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria}, op. cit., p. 71.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Peter Cowan (ed.), \textit{A Faithful Picture}, op. cit., p.22.
\item \textsuperscript{56} James Dredge’s diary, 16 June 1841, Ms 11625, Box 16/4: 196, State Library of Victoria.
\item \textsuperscript{57} \textit{Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal}, 31 October 1835, p. 591.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 15 October 1836, p. 780.
\end{itemize}
the Swan River, warned him that ‘shepherds can have here 40 pounds or upwards’ a year. Writing to his father-in-law almost four years later, Thomas Brown complained about the extras demanded by shepherds. ‘Shepherds wages are £40 a year with board and lodging and when in the bush they require a person to cook and keep their small huts which are made with old sticks and black boy [Xanthorrhoea] rushes,’ he said. ‘They are generally very extravagant with ... meat, flour, sugar and tea, requiring from two to four lbs of meat per day, 2 lbs of fine flour and an equally extravagant quantity of every thing else,’ Yonki Yonka might not have been so well fed as a white shepherd, but if he had a lower overhead cost it would no doubt increase his desirability as a stock-keeper.

A further advantage in employing Yonki Yonka, rather than a local Noongar, is that he had no traditional social or Country ties in the Western Australian colony, and so no need to absent himself from time to time to attend to those obligations. ‘The greatest inconvenience in employing natives,’ York settler Eliza Brown complained in a letter to her father in 1842, ‘is that they are not constant, their services cannot be secured, and it takes up a great deal of time to persuade some of them to accept employment.’ Foreshadowing the colony’s later adoption of indentured Aboriginal employment, Mrs Brown grumbled that there was no way to punish Aboriginal hands when they withdrew their labour. ‘Often when they forsake others cannot be found to fill up their places as they will vacate a district suddenly and not appear again for several weeks,’ she wrote.

Yonki Yonka’s employment for wages stands in contrast to the conditions under which many Aboriginal children were taken into European establishments. Shirleene Robinson concludes from her study of such children in Queensland that ‘they had

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59 Peter Cowan (ed.), *A Faithful Picture*, op. cit., p.3.
60 Ibid, p.31.
61 Ibid.
62 Decades later, Aboriginal employees could be indentured by a magistrate under the Aborigines Protection Act 1886.
63 Peter Cowan (ed.), *A Faithful Picture*, op. cit., p.25.
much in common with slaves’. Both Aboriginal women and child labourers ‘were either paid poorly or not paid at all’, and were often physically abused, she found. Victoria Haskins sees Aboriginal domestic service as occurring in a government-endorsed colonising ‘contact zone’, where the servant’s vulnerability enables deracination and miscegenation. In the Swan River colony, by contrast, shepherds were generally well paid and the Agricultural Society decided to award prizes to shepherds who raised the greatest number of lambs. By describing Barker as his best employer, Yonki Yonka appears to be signalling that his employment as a shepherd was a positive experience. It should also be accepted that individual cases varied, with Aboriginal boys working on Pilbara sheep and cattle stations towards the end of the nineteenth century often being badly treated.

In May 1837, a violent event took place at ‘St Aubyns’, between York and Beverley, which represents in microcosm many of the important elements of frontier violence and Aboriginal dispossession. It is reasonable to assume that Yonki Yonka was still employed by Barker and Sewell, since he did not mention another employer that fits this time, so he might have been witness to this event.

The first report of the killing of a soldier, Isaac Green, was published in the *Perth Gazette*, followed by John Sewell describing the event in a letter to the *Swan River Guardian*. Green, who was a soldier in the 21st regiment, had walked about 50 metres from the house to check the oven. Ovens or kitchens were generally built some distance from dwellings, to reduce the risk of fire. As Green rose from the oven he was speared in the chest, and as he turned to run back to the house, two more spears hit him in the back. George Sewell, who was John Sewell’s brother and who had arrived in

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64 Shirleene Robinson, ‘“We do not want one who is too old”: Aboriginal child domestic servants in late 19th and early 20th century Queensland’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 27, 2003, p. 179.
65 Ibid., p. 171.
the Adams with him and Samuel Barker, heard Green call out ‘bring the gun’. He ran to the house where, by now, Green had collapsed on the floor. Sewell was missed by two spears as he ran, and hit on the hand with a third. Seizing a gun, he ran outside, where the sight of the gun caused the attackers to withdraw.

George Sewell then called Barker, who was working in a field some way off, and Barker immediately rode off for help. John Sewell later said that he himself had ridden 40 miles (64km) to York where at about 11pm he alerted the Government Resident, Mr D. Macleod. Macleod and a Constable Heffron went back with him to ‘St Aubyns’ where the former took depositions from Isaac Green and the latter began inquiries into the attack, but as the assailants had melted away into the bush, he made no progress. Green died a painful death 48 hours later, the barbed end of one spear that had passed through his lung still in his body.

The recriminations following this event underline the dilemma that settler-colonists faced in making moral judgements about frontier violence. In his letter to the Guardian John Sewell swore revenge, saying that there had been no provocation and that Green had given more food to local Aboriginal people than anyone else. ‘I hope and trust that there are those amongst his Comrades who will never rest till they have avenged his death, and I can assure you, that neither the law of King nor Council shall ever prevent me from executing my vengeance upon the treacherous cowards,’ Sewell vowed. The editor of the Guardian, William Nairn Clarke, urged caution: ‘We have inserted Mr Sewell’s letter in justice to all parties, but would advise him not to take the Law into his own hands. Too much blood has already been spilt in the warfare between the whites and the blacks, and we are afraid that the destruction of the Aborigines has been in the ratio of ten to one.’

Six weeks earlier the establishment-supporting Perth Gazette had noted that thefts and spearings in the York district meant that ‘nothing short of a second Pinjarra punishment will satisfy some minds’. Following Green’s death the Gazette hardened

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70 Swan River Guardian, 15 June 1837, p. 156.
71 Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 1 April 1837, p. 876.
its position, saying that there was a general community feeling in favour of ‘a second Pinjarra example’ and that if the York ‘natives’ were not quickly convinced of the military superiority of the settlers, ‘many lives will from time to time be sacrificed, on both sides’. Advocate-General George Fletcher Moore reiterated the ‘respect for power’ proposition, saying that until Aboriginal people understood the superiority of Europeans ‘they will not refrain from outrage, nor become amenable to our laws’.

The so-called Pinjarra example, which the Gazette characterised as a ‘wholesome chastisement inflicted at Pinjarra’, refers to armed conflict between a party led by Governor Stirling and Bindjareb Noongar camped on the Murray River, south of Perth, on 28 October 1834. Following a series of thefts and spearsings similar to subsequent events at York, Stirling’s punitive expedition of foot soldiers, mounted police and settlers, 25 in all, surrounded the encampment and in the ensuing conflict at least 15 Noongar men were killed. Stirling later reported that the women were subsequently collected together and ‘informed that this punishment had been inflicted because of the misconduct of the tribe, that the white men never forgot to punish murder’ and that ‘if any other [white] person should be killed by them, no [Aboriginal person] would be allowed to remain alive on this side of the mountains’. The ‘battle’ was considered a triumph by the settlers and earned Stirling ‘much praise from the colonists for the way he had conducted it’. The event has since been less favourably interpreted, with a number of historians categorising it as a massacre. There are also varying estimates of the number of Aboriginal deaths, ranging from Stirling’s official report of 15 to a more likely total – as detailed by Pamela Statham - of 20 to 25 killed on the day and another four or five dying later from their wounds.

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72 Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 3 June 1837, p. 912.
73 George Fletcher Moore, correspondence, Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 19 August 1837, p. 957.
74 Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 12 August 1837, p. 952.
75 Governor Stirling, report to the Colonial Office dated 1 November 1834, CO 18/14, folio 134.
The *Swan River Guardian*’s editor, William Nairne Clark, declared that the colony was in crisis, and everyone should support the governor in undertaking measures to protect the lives and property of the colonists, ‘or else, the Natives in the confidence of their own power, may annihilate the settlement’. \(^{79}\) Stirling’s focus was on the new eastern frontier, where armed Aboriginal resistance to the invasion of Country resulted in a number of spearings in the Avon Valley, including Isaac Green’s death. Yonki Yonka remained in the Avon Valley for almost three more years, in what might well have been a precarious position as an Aboriginal outsider working for white men who constantly feared – and often experienced – armed resistance to their presence.

**Living in Noongar Country**

Yonki Yonka’s relationship with the Noongar people of south-west Australia is not known, but it is unlikely that he could have spent a year in Albany without Minang Noongar contact. The Government Resident at Albany, Sir Richard Spencer, reported that ‘we have about 140 [Aboriginal people] assembled every second full moon to receive a present of two lbs. [0.9 kg] of flour each’. \(^{80}\) The Noongar language was spoken everywhere south-west of a line from Geraldton to the Great Australian Bight, east of Esperance. \(^{81}\) As in any language group there were many variants, and Nathaniel Ogle’s comment that the Swan River Noongars ‘perfectly understood’ those from King George Sound sounds over-optimistic. \(^{82}\) Clint Bracknell acknowledges up to 14 distinct Noongar dialects. \(^{83}\)

Lieutenant-Governor Irwin, who was involved in bringing two Minang Noongar men from Albany in 1833 to the Swan River for discussions with the Whadjuk Noongar, commented on the progress that the two Aboriginal groups were making in

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\(^{79}\) *Swan River Guardian*, 20 July 1837, p. 205.

\(^{80}\) Richard Spencer to the Lord Bishop of Australia, 25 May 1837, Battye Library, accession no. 738A.

\(^{81}\) Lois Tilbrook, *Nyungar Tradition*, op. cit., p. 3.

\(^{82}\) Nathaniel Ogle, *Western Australia: a Manual for Emigrants to that Settlement or its Dependencies etc*, London, James Fraser, 1839, p. 60.

\(^{83}\) Clint Bracknell, ‘“Kooral Dwonk-katitjiny (listening to the past): Aboriginal language, songs and history in south-western Australia”, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 38, 2014, p. 2.
understanding each other, indicating earlier difficulties. Those who attended the first meeting described the two dialects as so different that only a few concepts were immediately understood.

Many settlers noted, however, an unusual ability among Aboriginal people to quickly learn the languages of others. ‘In respect of memory, that of the Black is unusually tenacious,’ said Edward M. Curr. ‘What he has once learnt he seldom forgets and has at his finger ends. Looking to him as a linguist, it is to be remarked that he picks up very quickly any Australian [Aboriginal] tongue.’ John White, the Surgeon-General on the First Fleet, commented that the linguistic ability of the Eora people around Sydney was far superior to that of the Europeans. ‘Any thing spoken by us they most accurately recited, and this in a manner of which we fell greatly short in our attempts to repeat their language after them’, he noted. Diane Barwick described communication by hand signals as a form of language that had been ‘particularly well developed in Australia, [and] was used whenever individuals were subject to speech taboos and in dealings with speakers of foreign languages’. Apart from populating their maps with Aboriginal place names, and retaining Aboriginal words for some plants and animals, Europeans were generally unwilling or unable to master even the language of the Country they were in. John Hepburn, who squatted 30km north of Ballarat in 1838, admitted that ‘after all my residence amongst the natives I never learnt a word of their lingo’.

Yonki Yonka presumably spent at least eight months, in between the two periods when he was employed by Barker and Sewell, living among the Whadjuk Noongar of the Swan River colony, perhaps doing some casual work for Europeans, but in terms of known records this is a blank period in his narrative. By the latter part of 1835 the

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86 Edward M. Curr, Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, op. cit., p. 139.
88 Diane Barwick, Rebellion at Coranderrk, op. cit., p. 20. It was common for Aboriginal men not to speak directly to their wives’ mothers.
Whadjuk people’s Country had been colonised for six years and, after an early period of uneasy mutual curiosity they had begun, in 1830, to physically resist the invasion. Neville Green describes a steady increase in tension, beginning with petty thefts of food, escalating through scarce and precious pigs and sheep being speared or taken, retaliations by the settlers and, before a year was out, a skirmish between the European militia (which all male settlers between 15 and 50 were obliged to join) and a group of Aboriginal warriors at Lake Monger, near Perth.\(^90\)

By mid-1833 Yagan, now considered a Noongar resistance hero, and whose defiant statue stands on Heirisson Island, had been captured, escaped, ambushed and killed, and his father Midgegooroo shot by a European firing squad. Small military garrisons had been established to protect settlers in seven districts and, as noted earlier, in October 1834 the violence peaked with the Pinjarra massacre.\(^91\) This armed resistance had no parallel in the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung when Melbourne was first settled in 1835, underlining the danger of making generalisation about first-contact engagement. In March 1835, reconciliation meetings were held with the Murray River (Pinjarra) and Swan River Noongars and agreements to live together peacefully were negotiated, and then celebrated by corroborees.\(^92\)

This cessation of hostilities and the provision of food and clothing to Aboriginal people allowed the settlers to reframe the Noongar from feared guerrillas to at least mendicants, and in some cases, beggars. Yonki Yonka arrived on the Swan River in April 1835, a month after peace had been established, and perhaps frequented the streets of Perth for a time while he was unemployed. How he managed to provide for himself is unknown, but access to government provisions, being accepted by Whadjuk Noongars as a guest traveller, and perhaps even occasional begging, all suggest themselves. One of the constant complaints in early Australian towns, before Aboriginal people were driven away, concerned begging in the streets, with some

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\(^90\) Neville Green, ‘Aborigines and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century’, op. cit., p. 81.
\(^91\) Ibid., pp. 81-85.
\(^92\) Ibid. P. 85.
suggestion that the added embarrassment of a lack of clothing was an equal affront. To the white community in Perth they had become ‘the most importunate beggars’ who ‘daily pestered with the call of “money give it him” till the passenger is frequently obliged to pull forth his sixpence in order to get rid of the annoyance’.94 

The framing of Aboriginal people as beggars who, because they were thought to have had no need to abandon their traditional means of support, conformed to the social definition of the undeserving poor, was convenient for those Europeans who saw little injustice in their harsh treatment. At the same time, their constant presence in the streets was a reminder, say Leigh Boucher and Lynette Russell, that there would be no smooth transformation of the colonial spaces as the colonised quietly faded away.95 Jan Pettman suggests that this refusal to become invisible, this insistence on accosting settlers in the street, was itself a form of resistance by the colonised against the colonisers.96

Samuel Pole Phillips Vs. John Randall Phillips

Yonki Yonka nominated his second employer in Western Australia as Mr Phillips, for whom there are two candidates – John Randall Phillips, who arrived in Protector in February 1830, and Samuel Pole Phillips, who arrived in Montreal in May 1839.97 If it was the latter, Yonki Yonka can have only worked for him for a few months, because his next employer arrived at King George Sound in January 1840 and had left the colony, with Yonki Yonka, by April of that year. Samuel Phillips is nevertheless a possibility because after arriving he quickly bought land in the Toodyay valley, east of

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93 See, for example, the South Australian Register, 5/4/1843, p. 2. The longevity of this complaint is evident from the ‘Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare’, 1956-57, Perth, Government Printer, p. 44.
94 Swan River Guardian, 1 June 1837, p. 2.
Perth, in partnership with Edward Hamersley.\(^98\) By August he was at Toodyay and advertising for two sawyers, presumably to cut the timber that was being cleared on the property.\(^99\) This places him about 90km north of ‘St Aubyns’, the property being run south of York by Barker and Sewell, where Yonki Yonka is believed to have worked for several years from 1836. In clearing the property Phillips ‘was assisted largely by the natives in the neighbourhood, by whom, from the very first, he was held in high esteem, owing to the kindly treatment they received from him’.\(^100\) Kimberley concurs that Avon district Ballardong Noongars ‘rendered him assistance in developing his property’.\(^101\)

The second candidate, John Randall Phillips, was much better established, having taken up land on the Canning River in December 1830. By the end of 1832 the farmers along the Canning were starting to make real progress, and had discovered that pastoralism — sheep, cattle and goats — was more rewarding than cropping.\(^102\) Phillips was one of those settlers who invested in sheep from Van Diemen’s Land and before long his flocks were grazing as far east as the foothills of the Darling Range, ‘often tended by shepherds who were no more than nine and 11 years old’.\(^103\) During Yonki Yonka’s period in Western Australia, John Phillips concentrated on Stoke Farm on the Canning, where he had 70 acres under cultivation near present-day Gosnells. Like other settlers he suffered stock losses from raids by the Aboriginal clans they had displaced, losing 71 sheep and 34 goats over the three years to 1838.\(^104\) In 1839 John Burtenshaw, a shepherd about 12 years old, was killed by Aboriginal raiders within 500 yards of the farm while tending Phillips’ sheep and goats, and 17 sheep were driven off.\(^105\) The violent frontier, 10 years after settlement of the Swan River Colony, was still no more than 20 kilometres from Perth.

\(^{99}\) *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 17 August 1839, p. 129.  
\(^{100}\) *Western Mail*, 22 June 1901, p. 72.  
\(^{103}\) Ibid., p. 24.  
\(^{104}\) Ibid., p. 38.  
\(^{105}\) *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 20 July 1839, p. 114.
While no record of Yonki Yonka has been discovered that points towards either Samuel Pole Phillips or John Randall Phillips, the circumstantial evidence favours the former settler. Yonki Yonka was likely to have been with Barker and Sewell in the Avon Valley in a longer-term engagement that would account for much of his five years in the Swan River region, from April 1835 to April 1840, during which he grew through his adolescent years to about 16. This placed him in the right area to be employed by Samuel Phillips, and then to be taken up by Alfred Miller Mundy when he and Edward John Eyre arrived in the Avon Valley with stock from Adelaide.

**Alfred Miller Mundy and Edward John Eyre**

The 80-ton schooner *Minerva* arrived in Adelaide on 2 January 1840 from Scotland, via the Cape of Good Hope, with a general cargo.\(^{106}\) Reports soon emerged that ‘several large stockholders’ had chartered the *Minerva* and the *Cleveland* to take sheep and cattle to King George Sound, from where they were to be driven overland to the Swan River Colony.\(^{107}\) Most of the stock were carried on the much bigger barque *Cleveland*, 400 tons, which had brought immigrants and general cargo from London.\(^ {108}\) The *Minerva* and the *Cleveland* both left Adelaide on February 2 for Albany.\(^ {109}\) The charterers were Edward John Eyre, Alfred Miller Mundy and Edward Bate Scott, but they were not the only entrepreneurs seeking to benefit from the rapid growth in demand to stock the newly-found pastures of Western Australia. William Nairne Clark, the irascible editor of the *Swan River Guardian*, wrote to the Colonial Secretary in March 1840 to say that ‘King George’s Sound seems to be on the rise as a sea-port. … While I am writing this letter, I observe nine ships at anchor in Princess Royal Harbour.’\(^ {110}\) The rise of King George Sound as a stock-handling port occurred because of the extra risk from the rough winds and waters often experienced in rounding Cape Leeuwin, to bring stock to Fremantle. Frederick Irwin thought that once the route from

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\(^{106}\) *Southern Australian*, 9 January 1840, p. 4; *South Australian Register*, 11 January 1840, p. 4.

\(^{107}\) *South Australian Register*, 25 January 1840, p. 4.


\(^{109}\) *Adelaide Chronicle and South Australian Advertiser*, 4 and 11 February 1840, p. 2;

Albany to the Swan River was established, ‘King George’s Sound will become a station of great importance, it being but ten days sail from Van Diemen’s Land. It will, consequently, afford great facilities for the introduction of stock from that colony and Sydney, without exposure to the risk and loss that are often encountered in doubling Cape Leeuwin.’

The distance from Albany to York is a little more than 400 km, but this was no great challenge to experienced overlanders like Eyre and Mundy. The latter had earlier arrived in Adelaide by driving overland from Port Phillip with his friend Joseph Hawdon (and a servant) in a light tandem cart, a distance Hawdon calculated at about 600 miles (840 km), taking a month to do so.

In March 1840 Eyre and Mundy advertised about 60 cattle, 700 ewes, 100 wethers and five horses that by then were grazing at Dale River in the Beverley district. It is open to conjecture as to whether Yonki Yonka was one of the shepherds keeping watch over these herds, but his identification of Mundy as an employer suggests that he was, since there was no other apparent time when he might have been useful.

Eyre and Mundy reached Perth on 21 March 1840, and there was a suggestion that if they quickly sold their sheep they would return to Albany for 600 more. They were elected as honorary members of the Agricultural Society, at a meeting attended by both Samuel Pole Phillips and John Randall Phillips. They also discussed with officers of HMS Beagle the discoveries that the Beagle expedition had made in the north of Western Australia. Geoffrey Dutton suggests that Eyre’s rekindled interest in exploration might have been prompted by learning that the Beagle had sailed 40 miles (55km) up the Adelaide River and twice as far up the Victoria River, with the sheer

111 Frederick Chidley Irwin, The State and Position of Western Australia, op. cit., p. 73.
114 Ibid., 28 March 1840, p. 3.
115 Ibid., 11 April 1840, pp. 3-4.
volume of their waters making Eyre wonder about the possibility of a vast inland lake north of the sterile Lake Torrens he had seen on his expedition in May 1839.\textsuperscript{116}

**A year in South Australia**

Yonki Yonka left the Swan River colony on 16 April 1840 on board the *Minerva*, bound for King George Sound and Adelaide. The vessel appears to have picked up another 12 male passengers at Albany and, on its arrival in Adelaide on 9 May, was reported to also be carrying ‘five black boys’.\textsuperscript{117} This supports Yonki Yonka’s recollection that he went to Adelaide on the *Minerva*. The only passengers listed in the Perth shipping notes were his former employers, Edward John Eyre and Alfred Miller Mundy.\textsuperscript{118}

Yonki Yonka appears to have been travelling with, but independently of, Eyre and Mundy. He had been earning the top wage for a shepherd, no doubt a reflection of his skills and reliability, and paid for his own passage from Fremantle to Adelaide. James Dredge, in his notes on Yonki Yonka, said that ‘an opportunity offering he took his passage in a vessel bound to Adelaide for which he paid nine’ [pounds].\textsuperscript{119} The master of the *Minerva*, as Yonki Yonka accurately remembered, was David Reid. This journey demonstrates an impressive ability by a youth, isolated from his own people and culture, to plan ahead by saving his wages, and to exercise unfettered agency in deciding to travel at least part-way back towards his home. Perhaps he was mentored by Alfred Mundy, his employer; perhaps by agreement Mundy held onto his wages so that the fare could be accumulated; but even in this case Yonki Yonka is exhibiting maturity in coming to such an arrangement. Once he returned to Port Phillip he was frequently described as being intelligent, and his voyage to Adelaide demonstrates this in terms of analytical planning.\textsuperscript{120} His determination is underlined by the fact that he


\textsuperscript{117} *South Australian Register*, 16 May 1840, p. 4; *Adelaide Chronicle and South Australian Advertiser*, 13 May 1840, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{118} *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 18 April 1840, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{120} Thomas to La Trobe, 8 June 1841, Series no. VPRS 10, file no. 1841/843, Inward Registered Correspondence to the Superintendent of Port Phillip District; *Geelong Advertiser and Squatters’ Advocate*, 29 October 1845, p. 2.
did not know if his voyage would be successful. The geographic description ‘Port Phillip’ was probably unknown to him since the European settlement post-dated his departure, while any question to Europeans about the bay known by the Kulin as ‘Nerm’, and recorded as such in a map drawn by William Thomas (Fig. 8), would not have been understood.

One of the five Aboriginal ‘boys’ on board the Minerva with Yonki Yonka was Wylie, a young Minang Noongar man from King George Sound, who was later to accompany Eyre on his famous trip west across the Nullarbor from Adelaide to Albany, probably saving Eyre’s life through his ability to find food and water in a landscape that appeared barren to Europeans.\textsuperscript{121} The other three might have been shepherds who were being taken back to Adelaide after the Minerva had unloaded its cargo and, if so, they might have provided support to Yonki Yonka once he got to Adelaide and realised he was not yet home. Eyre and Mundy were welcomed back in Adelaide as ‘two of our most esteemed and enterprising colonists’.\textsuperscript{122} Eyre’s letter in the South Australian Register, describing the trip from Albany to York, also reveals that he was already thinking about an expedition overland from Adelaide to the Swan River. ‘It will be exceedingly interesting to know the character of the intervening country between this colony and theirs, and to unfold the secrets hidden by those lofty and singular cliffs at the head of the Great Bight’, he wrote, but warned that it was ‘quite unpracticable’ to think of opening up an overland stock route through ‘the vast extent of desert country’.\textsuperscript{123}

The shipment of stock to Albany was not to be repeated, and by June 18 Eyre was leaving Adelaide on an expedition north, that he had partly financed himself, only to be blocked by Lake Torrens and what he thought was a vast extension of the same lake, but was later named Lake Eyre after him. Alfred Mundy’s stock transporting days were also over. On 24 June, six weeks after his arrival back in Adelaide, he was


\textsuperscript{122} Adelaide Chronicle and South Australian Advertiser, 13 May 1840, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{123} South Australian Register, 23 May 1840, p. 5.
appointed acting Private Secretary and Clerk of the Council in the Colonial Secretary’s Office.\textsuperscript{124}

Yonki Yonka spent a year in South Australia, from the time the \textit{Minerva} arrived on 9 May 1840 until he left on the \textit{Edina} on 17 May 1841. When Yonki Yonka got to Adelaide he was about 17 years old, a stranger in the Country of others, and having to support himself. The South Australian settlement that he found on his arrival had a population of about 13,250, of which about 6,700 lived in Adelaide and its environs. More important, for an experienced shepherd looking for work, the colony supported 186,000 sheep and 14,800 cattle just three years after settlement.\textsuperscript{125} At the time he arrived, newspaper advertisements were calling for experienced shepherds, who were being offered at least 15 shillings a week plus keep, so he might have found little difficulty in obtaining employment with rations.\textsuperscript{126}

William Thomas said that ‘his master at Adelaide was Mr John Gombel’, but so far this person has not been identified.\textsuperscript{127} It might be a corruption of Gamble, but no Gamble or Gombel appears in the South Australian shipping lists before 1841.\textsuperscript{128} A search by staff at the State Library of South Australia for Gombel in its databases, indexes, catalogues, books and finding aids has not been able to locate an individual with that name or similar during this period. A candidate, in substitution, is John Gemmell who arrived in Adelaide on the \textit{Orissa} on 14 March 1840, and by September was grazing stock at Strathalbyn, south-east of Adelaide.\textsuperscript{129} He appears to have been medically qualified, and to have begun practising some years later.\textsuperscript{130} The second possibility, Bob

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{South Australian Government Gazette}, published in the \textit{Southern Australian}, 30 June 1840, p. 2. Historians appear to have largely ignored Mundy. The \textit{Australian Dictionary of Biography}, for example, contains entries for more than 70 men who have held the office of Colonial Secretary, but Alfred Miller Mundy is not among them.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Adelaide Chronicle and South Australian Literary Record}, 8 July 1840, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Southern Australian}, 14 July 1840, p. 2; 4 August 1840, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{127} William Thomas, vocabularies and miscellaneous information, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{128} Diane Cummings, ‘South Australian Passenger Lists 1836-1851’, State Library of South Australia, on line at \url{http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/BSA/}, accessed May 2017. Trove is also barren for any South Australian references to John Gamble/Gomble/Gombel. A James Gambell appears in the unclaimed mail list published in the \textit{Adelaide Chronicle} on 27 January 1841.

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{South Australian Register}, 14 March 1840, p. 2; \textit{Southern Australian}, 11 September 1840, p. 2 and 24; August 1841, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{South Australian Government Gazette}, 6 July 1848, p. 234.
Gemble, would require some confusion in the record to qualify as a candidate, but he does appear to have a connection with Yonki Yonka. William Nairne Clark, mentioned previously, wrote that Bald Island was where Bob Gemble from Van Diemen’s Land lived ‘with his black gins and his children for months together’. As noted earlier, Eliza Newton/Nowen – one of the three Boon Wurrung women taken from Western Port, also lived on Bald Island with a sealer (unidentified), and Yonki Yonka seems to have been connected with these three women.

Unless a more definitive link is found, however, Yonki Yonka’s activities in South Australia will remain unknown. Searches of the Aboriginal Information Management System database, and of Colonial Secretary’s Office correspondence, have failed to find any reference to Yangalla (one of the names by which he was known) or Yonki Yonka.

Return to Port Phillip

The barque on which Yonki Yonka returned to Port Phillip was the Edina, under the command of Captain Thomas Skinner, which left Adelaide on 17 May, 1841. She arrived in Port Phillip on 31 May. James Dredge recorded in his journal that ‘during the week a young man of the Boonworongs arrived in the Edwina [sic] from Adelaide … [he] hired himself on the Edwina to work his passage to Port Phillip’. It was a further week before Yonki Yonka appeared at William Thomas’ camp on the south bank of the Yarra River, dressed in sailor’s clothes, and this delay supports James Dredge’s journal comment that he worked his passage. As a member of the ship’s crew, Yonki Yonka was probably required to help unload the Edina before he could be discharged.

131 Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 8 October 1842, p. 4.
132 The AIMS database currently has more than 147,000 entries for Aboriginal people, extracted from South Australian Government records held at State Records of South Australia.
133 Southern Australian, 21 May 1841, p. 2.
134 Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser, 3 June 1841, p. 2.
135 James Dredge’s diary, 16 June 1841, MS 11625, op. cit. William Thomas, in a slightly confused record, notes that he ‘took his passage or worked his passage from Adelaide to Pt Phillip in the Diana [sic], Capt Skein [sic]’ - William Thomas, vocabularies and miscellaneous information, op. cit.
136 William Thomas, journal, microfilm reel CY2605, op. cit.
Once again, Yonki Yonka had demonstrated an ability to deal with the new order and ‘both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back’.\textsuperscript{137} His determination to find his own people appears undiminished by a year in South Australia and a total absence of eight years. His agency – leaving his South Australian employer, negotiating a crew position for a two-week voyage, and then leaving the ship’s company – is self-evident from this agenda as being entirely his own. His command of English no doubt helped him to navigate his way through the European system, but it also conforms with the definition of Luthar \textit{et al.}: ‘Resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.’\textsuperscript{138} By now, according to Dane Kennedy’s proposition, Yonki Yonka should have been ‘deracinated’. Certainly, he was one of those ‘wrenched from their families, friends, communities and localities’ by a traumatic event but, as the next chapter will show, his resilience allowed him to avoid any deracination.\textsuperscript{139}

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\textit{In summary}

Eight years after he was kidnapped from Port Phillip as a child, Yonki Yonka returned to his Country a mature, intelligent young man already wise in the ways of settler-colonists, proficient in English, self-assured and self-directed. He had travelled from Launceston to Albany and lived there for about a year, and then sailed to the Swan River colony to work for pastoralists in the Avon Valley. His agency and determination are evident from his year-long quest to return to his Boon Wurrung people, finally achieved in June 1841. From a European perspective, he had become acculturated to the norms and expectations of the dominant society and was ready for the final transition to become a true British subject, undifferentiated from those of the working class other than by his colour and the remnants of his Aboriginal heritage. He had yet


\textsuperscript{139} Dane Kennedy, \textit{The Last Blank Spaces}, op. cit., p. 164.
to be Christianised, but was otherwise a satisfying example of the civilisation that Britain bestowed in return for seizing lands that had been owned by Aboriginal peoples for millennia. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, Yonki Yonka’s Aboriginal perspective bore no resemblance to this European world-view. In exploring his actions, we have an opportunity to examine the psychosocial drivers underlying his choices and, contextually, the external forces that limited and shaped the remaining years of his life.
CHAPTER 3

‘A most dangerous character’: 1841-1846

Introduction

Our knowledge of Yonki Yonka’s life, after his return to Port Phillip in June 1841, relies on a number of significant events for which records exist. His narrative concludes five years after his home-coming, with his mysterious death in November 1846 at the age of about 23. He was joyously welcomed by his people which, I argue, had a profound psychological effect on him, and was perhaps the deciding factor in his choice to resume a largely traditional way of life. He enlisted briefly in the Native Police Corps, which was an institution in which some of the interests of the settlers and young Aboriginal men coincided. The ceremony marking his future wife’s coming of age, described in detail by William Thomas, is an example of the cultural richness evident from Aboriginal rites. It equally serves as a rebuttal of the European characterisation of Aboriginal women as being inevitably brutalised by their men. I suggest that Yonki Yonka’s actions as an intermediary between Aboriginal and European interests, and his brushes with the law, can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance, consistent with the resistance-accommodation model (see p. 93ff).

The number of contemporary references to this young man, aged about 18 on his return to Melbourne, is surprising. The most comprehensive source comprises the journals, letters and reports of the Assistant Protector of Aborigines from 1838 to 1849, William Thomas (Fig. 7).¹ The three Port Phillip newspapers of the time also record events in which Yonki Yonka featured, while several European settlers wrote

¹ Thomas’ papers are principally archived at Public Record Office Victoria (Chief Protector of Aborigines VPRS 10; Native Police Corps VPRS 90; and Superintendent correspondence, Aboriginal Affairs VPRS 10); State Library Victoria (MS 14624, series 1 and 4); and the Mitchell Library at State Library New South Wales (ML/MSS 214, a major part of which has been digitised at http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110068729 ).
about their engagement with him. It is perhaps even more surprising that given this relative wealth of sources, Yonki Yonka’s biography has not previously been written.

**Yonki Yonka’s return**

On Sunday 6 June 1841, Assistant Protector William Thomas was at the Aboriginal encampment with about 203 Kulin on the south side of the Yarra River, in the vicinity of today’s Royal Botanic Gardens, when a handsome, urbane young Aboriginal man arrived at the encampment and introduced himself.

His appearance was intelligence [sic] & nought of the savage appeared in his countenance, he had fine eyes. Long black hair which appeared to have been taken much pains with, hung in curled ringlets on his shoulders, & waved each side of his face and on his brow.³

This was Yonki Yonka, now about 18 years old, who had been taken as a child from Port Phillip eight years earlier and was now returning to his family and his people.⁴ ‘He came to my tent and told me he was a native of this place which I did not believe at the moment but which a few hours convinced me was correct by the caressing and joyous formalities among the natives’, Thomas noted.⁵

Yonki Yonka greatly impressed William Thomas who, years later, again described the homecoming. He made it clear that here was the epitome of European hopes for the transformation of young Aboriginal people into the model of ‘civilised savages’.

It was one fine afternoon he made his appearance at my tent, in the encampment south of the Yarra. As he drew near, I thought, oh that my poor blacks were like that fine black sailor; he had on a blue jacket, black silk handkerchief hung loose and easy on his neck, as sailors are wont to wear them; his fine dark eyes, [and] very long black curly hair ... gave him an

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² *Port Phillip Patriot* and *Port Phillip Gazette* are both available on-line at [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au), while *Port Phillip Herald* is available through subscription at [https://paperofrecord.hypernet.ca/default.asp](https://paperofrecord.hypernet.ca/default.asp). The colonial writings of George Henry Haydon and William Hull are also examined.

³ Thomas did not record the event in his journal on the day, but wrote about it several times subsequently. We know that members of the Yalukit Willam clan were present, as Thomas recorded two of Yonki Yonka’s uncles, Little Benbow and Mr Man, as being drunk the previous day.

⁴ William Thomas, vocabularies and miscellaneous information, op. cit.

⁵ William Thomas, journal, CY 3126, op. cit.
imposing appearance; he was, moreover, particularly clean in his person. Being a black sailor, I made him sit down, in order to make inquiry of the blacks of his country, when I put the question to him what black country he was, he said: “I am your blackfellow,” and in an effecting [sic] manner told me his history; I had often heard of him from the blacks; his mother had bemoaned his fate; he kept in my tent till the blacks returned to the encampment one after another, asking me as they came by, ‘name that black sailor?’ till one of his family connections arrived, when Yonker Yonker, no longer able to constrain himself, made himself known to them; the excitement that night can only be felt by a black, not described by me.6

FIG. 7: William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, Port Phillip District, from 1838 to 1849. Image courtesy of State Library Victoria, La Trobe Picture Collection.

Thomas was so impressed by Yonki Yonka that he wrote an introductory letter to the Port Phillip Superintendent, La Trobe, and sent Yonki Yonka off to be inspected. ‘The bearer is the intelligent Aborigine, of whom I spoke the preceding day, who was with

6 Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser, 14 October 1845, pp. 2-3. Yonki Yonka’s purported statement that ‘I am your blackfellow’ appears unlikely – perhaps originally it was ‘I am Yarra blackfellow’.
nine Lubras stole from the Beach between Arthurs Seat & Point Nepean about 6 or 7 yrs back. He states His own History in good English, & answers to the name of Yunki Yunker. Thomas may have intended to demonstrate to La Trobe that examples could be found of young Aboriginal people being ‘civilised’ and transformed into ‘useful citizens’. The Superintendent, Thomas said, ‘felt much interested in him’. This might, of course, have been no more than La Trobe’s reaction to ‘an anthropological curiosity’ which, as Wiradjuri broadcaster Stan Grant lucidly argues, remains a common reaction today.

Yonki Yonka might not have been known by this name when he first met Thomas. This was his adult name, meaning ‘far away’, no doubt alluding to the distances he had travelled and the time he had been absent from his people. His juvenile name might have been Yangalla or Yangala, a name we know from his interaction with the Melbourne magistrate, William Hull. It is clear from a number of sources, including William Thomas, that Bob Cunninghame was the European name adopted by Yonki Yonka. There are many variants of Yonki Yonka, which is the preferred spelling in this biography, but it is nonetheless a European approximation of the spoken words. Diane Barwick settled for Yonki Yonka, as did Meyer Eidelson in consultation with his Boon Wurrung Foundation advisors. My great-grandfather, who knew Yonki Yonka well, also invariably used this version.

7 Thomas to La Trobe, 8 June 1841, op. cit.
8 William Thomas, letter to the Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser, 14 October 1845, pp. 2-3.
10 William Thomas, miscellaneous writings, Marguerita Stephens, The Journal of William Thomas, op. cit., p. 47. The Boon Wurrung word ‘yonker’ might be assumed to mean ‘distant’ and, with repetition, ‘far distant’, but this word is not included in Thomas’ lists.
11 William Hull (attributed), Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales, Melbourne, J. Pullar and Co., 1846, pp. 33-34. Hull calls him ‘Yangalla (or Yan-yan), alias Robert Cunningham’ and accurately notes that he had visited South Australia.
12 William Thomas correspondence, returns etc., 1846, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 214, vol. 10, item 01, on-line file FL832307. Archibald Cunninghame was admitted to the bar in April 1841, but there is no record found of a connection between him and Yonki Yonka. His brother John had a 100 sq km station called Wanregarwan on the south bank of the Goulburn River, but again there is no known link.
13 William Thomas, in those of his journals that have been transcribed by Marguerita Stephens, calls him Yankiyunker, Yanker Yunker, Yanki Yanker, Yanker Yanki, Yanke Yanke, Yanki Yanki, Yanki, Yanker Yanker, Yanke Yanka, Yonker, Yonker Yonker, Yonka, Yonka Yonka, Yonka, and Yonke Yonke - Marguerita Stephens, The Journal of William Thomas, op. cit.
14 Diane Barwick, ‘This Most Resolute Lady’ op, cit., p. 212; Meyer Eidelson, Yalukit Willam, op. cit., p. 19.
Welcome home ceremony

On his first night back with his people, Yonki Yonka slept at the miam (shelter) of his father, whom Thomas identifies as ‘Big Benbow’. Yonki Yonka was formally welcomed home by his people on 8 June in a moving ceremony. Thomas saw several such ceremonies performed when a clan member returned from confinement, such as a prison sentence, or from a long absence. The kobin koolin or embracement ritual called for the returned person to sit, still and unspeaking, while a succession of ‘his kindred fall on his breast and weep’. Each of them might mutter some phrases and weep for three to five minutes ‘which is truly affecting to behold’, Thomas said. When this part of the ceremony was complete, the clan members would have gathered around to listen while Yonki Yonka related his adventures from start to finish, and then told him all the significant events that had occurred while he was absent.

One such ceremony impressed Thomas so much that he wrote ‘the greeting of the tribe cannot be described’. A Port Phillip settler, in an otherwise largely contemptuous description of the Aboriginal people around him, also noted welcoming events in which ‘fathers and mothers were to be seen embracing their sons, their heads resting on the bosoms of those they loved so tenderly, and tears of joy flowing; young men hand in hand, tears glistening in their eyes, with choked utterance, gazing on each other’.

This welcoming ceremony may well have marked a fork in the road for Yonki Yonka, as the catalyst that caused him to abandon the European model of an Aboriginal worker and return to clan life. His decision puzzled contemporary European observers, who could not understand why he would ‘regress’ to what they regarded as his ‘savage state’. A despairing William Thomas later wrote: ‘However strange it may appear, this Yanki, the 2nd night was as the other blacks, naked and bedaubing himself over, and

15 William Thomas, journal, CY 3126, op. cit., frame 23 ff.
16 William Thomas, journal extracts and miscellaneous notes 1841, op. cit., frame 49.
before a week, was in every respect as the other blacks. He has now most awfully deteriorated in appearance, & is as filthy dirty & I think more so than his companions.'¹⁹ Notwithstanding his entanglement with European culture, Yonki Yonka had clearly signalled that he understood himself to be Boon Wurrung.

Our brief glimpse of Yonki Yonka on first arrival home raises the question of acculturation. Thomas wished ‘that my poor blacks were like that fine black sailor’ who was dressed according to the European code, who spoke good English, who was clean, and who appeared to have employment. Had Yonki Yonka maintained this persona, it would be reasonable to assume that he had become what John Berry describes as ‘assimilated’, having a high affiliation with the new culture and low affiliation with his original culture.²⁰ However, Yonki Yonka’s renunciation of this persona leaves us with the question of whether he had ‘really’ assimilated but retained the agency to choose a more distant position within the acculturation model, or whether it was a survival response that became unnecessary when he was able to rejoin his people.

Yonki Yonka’s choice was not unprecedented. As early as 1789 Bennelong, captured by Governor Arthur Phillip who taught him ‘the arts of British decorum and etiquette’, enjoyed dressing in European clothes and seemed eager to ‘assimilate to their ways’.²¹ He and Phillip became friends. He travelled to England with Phillip, and stayed there for two years before returning to Sydney in September 1795, where he ultimately rejoined his own people to live in a traditional manner.²²

Yonki Yonka’s resolute return to the habits and social life of his own people, stripped of any European perspective or judgement, is a clear example of resilience. At its simplest level of definition, resilience ‘conveys both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back’.²³ Yonki Yonka’s psyche was bent, during his youth, to the point where he dressed like a European, spoke like a European,

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¹⁹ William Thomas, vocabularies and miscellaneous information, op. cit.
²² Ibid., p. 33.
and worked like a European. Within days of returning to Melbourne he had decided to dress like a Boon Wurrung, to speak the language of the Boon Wurrung (except, in the cultural tradition of his people, when he was in the Country of others or conversing with the monolingual English), and to eschew the work of Europeans. Responding several years later to William Thomas’ criticism of his ‘miserable way of living’ Yonki Yonka answered: ‘If I like it, what’s that to [the] white man?’ He said ‘white man ... only make me work, work, and Black Fellows no like work, & never live like white man’. Yonki Yonka had drawn an acculturation line that he would not cross, despite continuing engagement with the Europeans.

It is self-evident that on his return to Port Phillip, Yonki Yonka exercised his agency in choosing his future, rather than accepting continued employment by colonists. He had already seen European settlements at Launceston, Albany, Fremantle, Perth and Adelaide, and worked for European masters. All those events, however, happened in

FIG. 8: The Western Port District, drawn circa 1840 by Assistant Protector of Aborigines, William Thomas, showing the Aboriginal name as Nerm. (Courtesy State Library of Victoria.)

what Yonki Yonka would have regarded as foreign Countries, and while they clearly broadened his knowledge and world view, returning to Port Phillip was different. Here, in his own Country, a foreign culture had been implanted and was growing rapidly. The census taken on 2 March 1841, which covered the region from Portland to Westernport, recorded a non-Aboriginal population of 8,274 males and 3,461 females, or a total approaching 12,000. The European population of Melbourne had passed 4,000 the previous year, which Richard Broome sees as the establishment of a pool of infectious diseases such as dysentery, typhus and influenza.

The Kulin nation had a long-established and intimate relationship with its Country, which encompassed its physical, social and spiritual aspects. Jane Lydon notes that ‘many features of the [Aboriginal] landscape may be actual ancestral powers, alive and conscious’. The imposition of a settler-colonial culture in Port Phillip from 1835 brought with it a different perception of reality, competing with and eventually dominating the traditional construct, if only through sheer weight of numbers.

The psychological consequence of the Boon Wurrung’s kobin koolin ‘embracement’ ritual was that it reinforced one of the foundation stones of resilience: a sense of belonging. Each of Yonki Yonka’s kin reaffirmed their engagement with him, and the interval of history that would otherwise have been lost was filled by their story-telling. Yonki Yonka’s response was much more complex than throwing off a thin veneer of acculturation, to reveal his true self. The kobin koolin ritual can be understood as a process of assimilating change, offering a response to what Christopher Lalonde calls ‘the paradox of sameness in change’. Through this ritual, the Boon Wurrung adapted their future to include Yonki Yonka as being simultaneously the same person and a

27 Jane Lydon, Fantastic Dreaming, op. cit., p. 46.
28 Two centuries later, in current-day Australian schools, programs that emphasise a sense of belonging as a pathway to resilience are being run – see Lisbeth Pike, Lynne Cohen and Julie Ann Pooley, ‘Australian Approaches to Understanding and Building Resilience in At-Risk Populations’ in Linda Liebenberg and Michael Ungar, op. cit., pp. 264-285.
radically changed young man, while Yonki Yonka adapted his future to accommodate his people as being simultaneously the same people he had left eight years earlier, and a culture wrought radically different as a consequence of colonisation. In his study of Aboriginal Canadians, Lalonde notes the linkage between individuals with a strong sense of personal continuity, and Aboriginal cultures with the same view. Both parties find their resilience reinforced through reconfirmation of core values.

Yonki Yonka had clearly not been forgotten by his people: William Thomas commented that he had often heard of him, and that his mother had bemoaned his fate. Quite possibly she was keeping his memory alive by chanting, as did Miago’s mother, who sang constantly while her Noongar son was absent on his voyage with explorer George Grey, ‘ship bal win-jal bat-tar-dal gool-an-een’ (roughly, ‘whither is that lone ship wandering?’) The desire for interpersonal attachment, or the need to belong, ‘is a fundamental human motivation’ say psychologists Baumeister and Leary. ‘No man is an Iland, intire of itselffe.’ When Yonki Yonka came to his fork in the road, which demanded a decision about where he belonged, the welcoming ritual would have left him in no doubt. His land was not that of the settlers, or of the missionaries, but of his own Kulin people.

**Resistance and accommodation**

Melbourne appeared to be at peace when Yonki Yonka arrived, with no sign of the violent clashes that so often characterise newly-established frontiers, and which he had probably seen himself in the Avon Valley in Western Australia. The Boon Wurrung, and the neighbouring Woi Wurrung, appear at first to have been singularly accommodating in their response to European invasion. In October 1835, clan leaders of the Woi Wurrung and the Boon Wurrung warned the handful of Europeans at

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30 Ibid., p. 65.
Fawkner’s little settlement on the Yarra that an assemblage of some 300 ‘up country’ men were planning to massacre the settlers and loot their belongings. Derrimut, a Boon Wurrung leader, was tasked to pass this intelligence to John Fawkner, but Ian Clark is in no doubt that the ‘warnings were sanctioned by the leading Yalukit-willam and Wurundjeri-baluk clan heads’. Clark holds the view that Derrimut was probably invoking Aboriginal tradition by guaranteeing the safety of those who had been accepted as visitors, and says that some (unidentified) Boon wurrung elders believe that Fawkner had promised Derrimut to rescue the women and children who had been kidnapped in Yonki Yonka’s group.

This apparently co-operative response impressed Assistant Protector William Thomas who, in December 1847, fell into a reverie over the grave of Yonki Yonka’s grandfather, Mingaragong, south of Melbourne at Brighton. Respecting the Aboriginal tradition of keeping important graves cleared of vegetation, he pulled out a piece of fern and ‘left the spot full of reflection of the Mysterious dealings of providence, as a finite Mortal unable to unravel the mystery of the rapid decrease of these people’. He noted that for the past 10 years during which he had been an Assistant Protector, the Boon Wurrung had never been prosecuted for anything worse than ‘the crime of drunkenness’.

The peacemaking strategy of Derrimut and his fellow arweets (clan leaders) seems on the face of it to conform to the accommodation model of frontier engagement, rather than the resistance model. Nathan Wolski criticises both models as being overly-simplistic. In his evaluation, the resistance model as proposed by Henry Reynolds is characterised by violence, while the accommodation model seeks to explain those
cases where violence was replaced by negotiation.\textsuperscript{38} Wolski posits that more recently, historians have adopted a model of resistance-as-a-spectrum, in which acts of physical violence and retribution lie at one end, while at the other he observes acts of psychological guerrilla warfare.\textsuperscript{39}

We might find Derrimut’s action at a point along this spectrum, where the \textit{arweets} of his people planned to harness the firepower of their colonisers by characterising ‘wild blackfellows’ as a common enemy and themselves as trustworthy allies. Shino Konishi suggest a similar strategy by Bennelong, in attempting to ‘muster British support against his rivals by presenting them as enemies’.\textsuperscript{40} Alternatively, the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung might simply have concluded that this large group would reduce their share of the gifts of food and implements that the Europeans were handing out, and that they would benefit from scaring their competitors away. Fawkner’s only advice that an attack was imminent came from Derrimut. As Wolski points out, ‘use of the coloniser’s culture is by no means an act of accommodation or acculturation, but rather can be one of the key moments in resistance’.\textsuperscript{41}

In this interpretation the decision of clan leaders Derrimut, Billibellary, Ningerranaro and Bet Banger, can be seen as resistance in the form of opposing the colonial logic that Europeans were superior strategists. Derrimut thereafter had access to Fawkner’s gun for hunting, and the Europeans inscribed on his gravestone: ‘...erected by a few colonists to commemorate the noble act of the native chief Derrimut, who ... saved them from massacre planned by some of the up-country tribes of Aborigines’.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 219.
\textsuperscript{40} Shino Konishi, ‘Bennelong and Gogy’, op. cit., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. p. 223.
\textsuperscript{42} Ian Clark, ‘You have all this place’, op. cit., p. 124.
Melbourne 1841

When Yonki Yonka returned to his Country and his people, he found both in a very different state from that which he had, unwillingly, left. The speed with which pastoralists and settlers had spread north from Tasmania, south-west from Sydney and direct from Europe was extraordinary. Bruce Pascoe likens the squatters to cane toads tipped out of a bucket, who ‘leapfrogged each other to claim the open plains of Australia Felix’.43 Where Yonki Yonka had left bushland, wetlands and clan meeting grounds as a ten-year-old boy he now found a busy – if rudimentary - town. Robert Murray, who arrived three months later in September 1841, described Melbourne as laid out in a grid of less than a dozen streets, with a motley variety of buildings that ranged from three-storey brick houses to ‘the low tenement of wood, only a few degrees superior to a booth at a village fair’.44 The stone customs house was the sole public building that foreshadowed the official dignity of Melbourne’s future architecture. Along the river bank stood a line of pumps, with operators supplying fresh water from the Yarra Yarra to the cart owners who would sell from the cask throughout the settlement.

Melbourne’s site was selected at this point of the Yarra River because a basalt bar across the river separated the brackish tidal waters from the flow of fresh water. ‘It was because of these falls,’ notes Gary Presland, ‘that Melbourne was located precisely where it was’.45 In the natural basin below the falls small boats anchored, having transferred people and goods from the port at Williamstown, itself a settlement of some 400 Europeans. The Presbyterians, Wesleyans and Independents had already built their brick churches, underlining the religious composition of the town, while Murray found the Episcopalian and Roman Catholic churches in the course of construction.46 Suburbs had appeared, both on the south bank of the river, and east of the city block at ‘Newtown’ (Fitzroy), which was being carved out of the encroaching

43 Bruce Pascoe, Convincing Ground, op. cit., p. 82.
44 Robert Dundas Murray, A Summer at Port Phillip, Edinburgh, William Tait, 1843, p. 12.
46 Robert Dundas Murray, A Summer at Port Phillip, op. cit., p. 21.
bush and was popular with those who could afford to build. Residents of the town endured invasive dust in the summer months from unpaved streets that, in winter, turned into quagmires made more dangerous by eroded gullies and the stumps that had not yet been grubbed up after felling the original forest trees. Fed by the original influx from Tasmania and the more recent arrival of subsidised immigrants, Melbourne had grown to some 12,000 inhabitants.\textsuperscript{47}

The Port Phillip district saw more than 10,000 new arrivals in 1841, boosting the population to 20,416. Across the Kulin People’s Country spread more than a million sheep that in 1841 allowed the export of some 1,200 tonnes of wool, while 78,000 head of cattle grazed the native grasses.\textsuperscript{48} These bare statistics gain their meaning through comparison with pre- and post-invasion Aboriginal demographics. William Thomas, who arrived in the colony in 1838, concluded from his inquiries that in 1835 the combined number of Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung was about 350, while in September 1839 when he took ‘a careful census’ of these two language groups, he found their number had declined to 207. ‘Disease had, and was then awfully raging among them’.\textsuperscript{49} As the numbers fell, related language groups began to coalesce together. Thomas noted that Ninggollobin, choreographer of one of the most popular corroboree dances, had joined the ‘Melbourne tribes’ when his Mount Macedon people became ‘near defunct’.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{Initiation}

Yonki Yonka had a young man’s needs that would most readily be satisfied by reattachment to his kinship group, chief among them a desire for a regular sexual relationship. That would require him to be declared an adult. Initiation was common across Aboriginal nations: Peasley noted, as far away as the Mandildjara of the western Gibson Desert, that tribal law dictated that a man could not marry before he had

\textsuperscript{47} Ib\textit{id}. p. 47.
\textsuperscript{49} William Thomas, Sketch of Manners and Songs and Dances, 1858. MSS 214/vol. 24/Item 1, files FL828919 and FL828921, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
\textsuperscript{50} Ib\textit{id}.\textsuperscript{,} file FL828987.
passed through his initiation.\textsuperscript{51} Like all language groups the Boon Wurrung had an initiation process, typically performed at puberty, which made Yonki Yonka an unusually mature candidate for manhood.\textsuperscript{52} Haydon said that the Goulburn people, and some others, knocked out a boy’s front teeth when he came of age, ‘but this is not a universal custom, for neither the Bournarongs [Boon Wurrung] or Woeworongs [Woi Wurrung] are found to do this’.\textsuperscript{53} Henry Hainsselin’s portrait of Yonki Yonka, based on a sketch by Haydon, supports this record, showing him with a full set of fine teeth. The sketch also shows him with the welts of initiation on his chest, shoulders and arms.\textsuperscript{54}

If settler Alfred Howitt’s informants are to be believed, the Boon Wurrung \textit{talangun} ceremony was relatively quick and uncomplicated. The boy was taken away by some men, dressed in full male attire, and then given the freedom to eat animals that had previously been forbidden to him, as fast as the men could catch them. Howitt said he had been told this by both William Barak and two survivors of the Taungurong and Dja Dja Wurrung people, who knew the ways of the Boon Wurrung. However, Howitt also cautioned that by the late 19th century the old traditions of the Kulin were breaking down, and that this might only have been a remnant of the previous initiation process. Among the neighbouring Woi Wurrung the initiates had traditionally been given permission progressively to eat black duck, musk duck, flying tuan [a small possum], spiny ant eater and finally, by about the age of 30, emu.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] There are fragmentary European records of various initiation practices among the Kulin language groups, some of them contradictory, and there is no way of knowing what was revealed to these onlookers and what was kept secret.
\item[53] George Henry Haydon, \textit{Five Years’ Experience in Australia Felix}, op. cit., pp. 103-104.
\item[54] Diane Barwick says that tooth avulsion was an element of male initiation ceremonies among the Kulin - \textit{Rebellion at Coranderrk}, op. cit., p. 21. I believe she has misread John Batman’s journal. Barwick says the Aboriginal ‘chief’ understood the significance of the mark made on a tree by ‘pointing to his own mouth’. Batman’s journal actually states: ‘I took ... the principal chief of Port Phillip, to whom I showed the mark on the tree, which he instantly recognised, and pointed, also, to the knocking out of the front tooth’. I read this as the Woi Wurrung knowing the association between tooth evulsion and such marks, and pointing to the Sydney Aboriginal man’s missing tooth. The words ‘pointing to his own mouth’ do not appear in the journal. See John Batman, \textit{The Settlement of John Batman in Port Phillip from his Own Journal}, Melbourne, George Slater, 1856, p. 21.
\end{footnotes}
Magistrate William Hull, who knew Yonki Yonka personally and was, as a Freemason, interested in ceremony, describes a somewhat more elaborate *talangun*. This involved admission as a warrior, at about the age of 16 or 17, and was quite possibly the ceremony undertaken by Yonki Yonka. The individual was first brought before his kinfolk, and then retired into the bush. Sometime later he emerged, covered in mud and dust. ‘His head is then shaved, with the exception of a tuft on the crown. ... The bald part is burnt all over with a fire stick by the doctor. Mud is then applied until it assumes the form of a helmet, which is carefully dried. He then has green boughs put about him; has all the war implements delivered to him; is permitted to enjoy a saturnalia of fourteen days, and then enters into the society of men and may take a wife.’56 This ceremony, or some variant of it, could have been Yonki Yonka’s doorway to manhood and resulted in the cicatrices shown in Hainsselin’s drawing (Fig. 1).57 Late in June 1841, about six weeks after he arrived back in Port Phillip, Yonki Yonka told William Thomas that he was going to the Barrabool Hills (west of Geelong in Wathaurong Country), and there is no further mention of him until 9 August, an absence that might allow for such ceremonial events.58

**1841 - William Johnson rescued**

As an initiated warrior Yonki Yonka obtained the right to travel freely through the Country of the Boon Wurrung, and those lands of other Kulin language groups for which he had rights of access through his mother’s people, the Woi Wurrung, or particular permission. It was in the bush somewhere north of Melbourne – which is not Boon Wurrung Country – where he and my great grandfather William Johnson first met. As noted in the preface, William Johnson and his friend Joseph Harper/Harpur were travelling overland from Sydney to Melbourne in the latter part of 1841, not long

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57 Val Attenbrow, *Sydney’s Aboriginal past: Investigating the archaeological and historical records*, Sydney, University of NSW Press, 2010, p. 131. She describes male scarification during initiation ceremonies as showing the stage a person had reached in their progress through life.
58 William Thomas, in Marguerita Stephens (ed.), *The Journal of William Thomas*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 320. Thomas does not mention Yonki Yonka’s hair having been cut, so this might not have been part of his initiation ceremony.
after Yonki Yonka returned to Port Phillip. Not far from Melbourne, according to the oral story passed down through my family, the party became lost in the bush.

This at first seems strange: the route between Sydney and Melbourne was by now well-travelled and the marks of successive herds of cattle and flocks of sheep would, one would think, be reasonably clear. In mid-1841 a Mr Barclay brought 51 horses overland from Sydney to Melbourne, and reported that ‘the line of road is not at all difficult to travel at this season of the year’. 59 The Australian bush, however, is tricky to navigate and even experienced travellers were regularly reported to have lost their way. ‘To be lost in the Bush in Australia is indeed a most forlorn and bewildering position, for the general absence of salient features in the landscape renders it very difficult to recover a track once lost,’ Kerr wrote. ‘When the sun is obscured by clouds the most experienced traveller is apt to stray; and I have often lost myself for several hours in these wide solitudes, returning repeatedly by some inexplicable tendency to the spot where I first discovered I had lost my way.’ 60

A feature of many of these ‘lost in the bush’ stories is the discovery and rescue of the unfortunate Europeans by Aboriginal people, who were unstinting in their assistance. One such story is related by Robert Lyon, a Swan River colonist, who was full of praise for the Noongars he encountered. In 1833 he wrote: ‘Though we were invaders in their country, and they had therefore a right to treat us as enemies, when any of us lost ourselves in the bush, and were thus completely in their power, these noble minded people shared with us their scanty and precarious meal; suffered us to rest for the night in their camp; and, in the morning directed us on our way to head quarters, or to some other part of the settlement.’ 61

Yonki Yonka and William Johnson developed a close relationship, following this rescue. In a letter from Dora Shelmerdine, one of William Johnson’s grand-daughters, she

59 *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser*, 15 July 1841, p. 3.
writes that William’s ‘bosom pal was Abo [sic] chief Yonki Yonka, who lived in the Bluff straight in from where our old house “Yonka” was in St Kilda.62 There were many such enduring relationships between Aboriginal and European residents at Port Phillip. George Henry Haydon, whose Australia Felix contains the portrait of Yonki Yonka, recorded without elaboration that because Little Benbow (Yonki Yonka’s uncle Barlut) ‘was once instrumental in saving my life, I have good reason to be grateful to him’. When Haydon’s steamer left Melbourne to take him back to England, Barlut came to see him off, and Haydon noted that both parties felt as the steamer pulled away that they were losing a friend.63 I knew no more than the bare fact of Yonki Yonka’s rescue when I began research for this thesis, and this legend might have been close to being lost to the Johnson family, just as it seems to have disappeared from the Harper family’s history. William Harper makes no mention of Yonki Yonka in The History of the Harper Family.64

Marriage

Yonki Yonka married Bungervoook, a daughter of Billibellary, who was one of the most important clan leaders amongst the Woi Wurrung. His marriage underlined his importance in the Boon Wurrung hierarchy and his status as a future leader. The event seems to have happened within six months of his return, with William Thomas recording in his journal in January 1842 that ‘Yanki’ and his lubra had gone to the settlement at Narre Narre Warren.65 Chief Protector George Robinson said it was generally accepted that Billibellary was one of those signatories who made their mark on Batman’s 1835 ‘treaty’, and called him an eminent ngurungaeta, or clan head.66

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62 Copy of a letter from Dora Shelmerdine, dated 24 February 1960, to Thora Wills-Johnson, in the author’s family papers. ‘The bluff’ probably refers to the former St Kilda cliffs, which were a source of grinding stones used to sharpen stone axes – Meyer Eidelson, Yalukit Willam, op. cit., p. 51.
63 George Henry Haydon, Five Years’ Experience in Australia Felix, op. cit., p. 117.
Billibellary had several daughters, each of whom would have become eligible for marriage at menarche, when the ceremony of *murrum turrukerook* was performed. Assistant Protector William Thomas witnessed Bungerrook engaging in this rite, presumably not long before she was given in marriage to Yonki Yonka, probably at the age of 13 or 14 years.\(^{67}\) As Thomas described it, two bark fires were lit some distance apart and Bungerrook, covered in charcoal powder apart from white spots on her face and body, was led forward by her mother. She then climbed up onto a log ‘where the young woman stood silent and sad as though doing penance’, holding a small branch from which all leaves had been removed, and a piece of bread impaled on each twig. About 20 young men approached her, each throwing a twig at her and then taking a piece of bread, which they spat into one of the fires.

They then began stomping, as at a corroboree, and stamped out the two fires. The twigs thrown at Bungerrook were gathered up and buried deep in the earth, so as to prevent her kidney fat falling into the hands of her enemies. The branch from which the bread was taken was also burnt, and Bungerrook was then handed down by her mother and taken back to her father’s mia-mia. That night a corroboree was held for the young men who participated in the ceremony, with the dancing led by Billibellary. ‘The purport of this ceremony is, on the part of the young men, that they will not defile her person without her consent, or suffer others to do so, but will protect her to their utmost till she is lawfully married,’ Thomas explained.

Marriage arrangements were the foundation of alliances between the Kulin language groups and clans.\(^{68}\) In Aboriginal law, the father had the right to determine who his daughters would marry, though the unrecorded influence of mothers should not be discounted. In many cases, reciprocal marriages were agreed.\(^{69}\) This occurred in Yonki Yonka’s case. Not only did he marry Billibellary’s daughter, but his sister Bareboon was

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\(^{69}\) Diane Barwick notes that spouses were acquired by ‘sister-exchange’ (*Rebellion at Coranderrk*, op. cit. p. 13), while colonial settler Peter Beveridge, possibly exaggerating, said that ‘no man can get a wife unless he be the possessor of a sister or ward, whom he can give in exchange’ (*The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina*, op. cit., p. 20).
given in marriage to Billibellary who, because of his maturity and importance, warranted more than one wife (Fig. 9).

Bungerrook’s coming-of-age ceremony has here been described in some detail to demonstrate that in Kulin culture, these sorts of milestones were celebrated in a complex ceremony that evidenced a highly-evolved appreciation of the value of the individual. Although it seems Bungerrook had no agency in the matter, the ceremony embodied structure, respect, purpose and recognition. In the light of this formality, those European settlers who described Aboriginal marriages as wild and violent must be suspected of other motives. William Thomas, in the same letter in which he describes the *murrum turrukerook* ceremony, offered a lurid account of the process of bride-giving. He said that the bride on the first night of marriage was unhappy and
generally crept home to her mother. When her husband awoke to find her gone, he would go to claim her, and ‘her father in a rage knocks the poor girl about with his bludgeon or tomahawk, drags her by the hair of her head to her koolin [man], where she gets another drubbing. This is often continued for two or more days, till the poor creature is regularly broken down. She resigns to her fate, and generally proves a constant and affectionate wife.’

Liz Conor believes that the European depiction of Aboriginal women as ‘battered, downtrodden, half-starved camp drudges who were routinely passed between men against their will’ arose from reports that were ‘mostly hearsay and fabrication’, of which she gives several examples. Where there are witnessed violent events, a more nuanced interpretation can often be offered. Shino Konishi, for example, suggests that Bennelong’s avowed intention to beat a young woman to avenge an inter-family dispute — a threat he did not carry out — may have been intended ‘to remind the British of the continued jurisdiction of Aboriginal law within the boundaries of the colony’.

The dichotomy in Thomas’ representation of successive ceremonies in a Kulin girl’s life can also be explained as a product of framing within English Christian beliefs. The coming-of-age ceremony had no equivalent in the Protestant churches, and so could be viewed without a moral overlay and, we might assume, be accurate in its described sequence, if not its ascribed meaning. Marriage, however, carried great socio-religious significance, and any contemporary description of an equivalent ritual amongst non-Christians was necessarily judgemental. Jane Lydon points out that there was an overwhelming objective by the colonial administration and the missionary movement ‘to replace traditional customs, such as bestowal, with Christian marriage’.

William Ellis, a secretary of the London Missionary Society, told the 1836 Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes that ‘true civilization and Christianity are inseparable;

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70 Ibid., pp. 400-401.
71 Liz Conor, Skin Deep, op. cit., p. 95.
73 Jane Lydon, Fantastic Dreaming, op. cit., p. 127.
the former has never been found but as a fruit of the latter’. A newspaper correspondent reinforced the generality of this proposition, writing that ‘our only hope of the ultimate civilization of the natives rests upon the success of the Missionaries in promulgating amongst them the truths of Christianity’. William Thomas is forced by his own position to add a footnote that ‘of course these scenes are not practiced now in my encampment’, lest he be seen as complicit in such pagan events.

There were, for moral Christians, only three possible states for a woman: chastity, prostitution, or marriage. Anne Summers convincingly categorised male-dominated society’s judgement of the last two states as ‘damned whores and God’s police’. Christian marriage was the only option for an observer like William Thomas, and it was easy for such commentators to condemn any alternative practice by presenting scenes that might have happened in some cases, as being the repugnant norm.

1842 – Native Police Corps

On 23 February 1842, Yonki Yonka was one of 23 Aboriginal men who enlisted in the newly re-formed Aboriginal Police Corps. These men, notes Marie Fels, were already knowledgeable about European law enforcement and justice. ‘Equally importantly they were nearly all either clan heads or heirs to clan heads. In terms of traditional power and authority they constituted a formidable group of men.’ Fels credits Billibellary as the leader whose enrolment in the Native Police Corps was critical to its establishment in 1842, signifying to the other 22 initial recruits that they should follow. She further points out that Billibellary was of such importance that he could set his own terms: he would not ride a horse, do drill, engage in policing duties, or travel outside his own Country. In effect, Billibellary appointed himself the Aboriginal officer whose status was equal to any white officer other than the Commandant, and his only engagement

75 Southern Australian, 5 February 1841, p. 3.
77 Henry Dana to La Trobe, 31 March 1842, VPRS 19/P Inward Registered Correspondence, Superintendent Port Phillip District, unit 28, item 42/674.
78 Marie Hansen Fels, Good Men and True, op. cit., p. 55.
was that ‘each evening, an hour before sundown, he dressed himself in his police uniform and marched back and forth between his mia-mia and [William] Thomas’ tent which were adjacent. Billibolary [sic] was making a statement about his corporate solidarity with the police, but at the same time asserting his status.’

Although much of the commentary on this corps has examined its role in suppressing Aboriginal seizure of sheep and cattle, its intended role was much broader. The duties of the corps included carrying despatches, searching for people lost in the bush, tracking bushrangers and escaped convicts, fire-fighting, ceremonial parades and guarding shipwrecks. Aboriginal involvement in the corps was the result of a long and careful deliberation by Kulin leaders. William Thomas and the just-appointed commander of the corps, Captain Dana, knew that agreement by Billibellary was critical to Kulin participation. They ‘made known to Billibellary the Government’s intention, and to further it stated that his influence was applied to first. He begged seven days to think. Night after night did this faithful chief address the encampment’, and after seven days Billibellary had a cohort of recruits with himself at the top of the list.

The contemporary European view of the Native Police Corps was almost universally positive, conforming, as it did, to a recognised element of law and order. J. H. Kerr was disappointed that the ‘very useful and efficient corps’ was eventually disbanded. ‘It is to be regretted that [the Corps] was subsequently given up,’ he said, ‘for the natives when placed in positions of trust were usually worthy of confidence, and their keen faculty of observation rendered them expert trackers, while their frugal habits and powers of endurance qualified them to bear fatigue and exposure without much inconvenience.’

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79 Ibid., p. 86.
80 Ibid., p. 62.
Charles La Trobe who, as Superintendent of Port Phillip and then Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria from February 1839 to May 1854, was in office through the entire history of the Corps, described it as ‘the only example of success among the many schemes set on foot to raise the aboriginal native in this quarter of New Holland above his natural level’. In so saying, he categorised the system of Protectors as a failure. G. H. Haydon regarded the formation of the Corps as a wise step, particularly because he approved of these men being removed from the control of the Protectors. ‘Men who before were fit for nothing, are now a great benefit to the colony from their knowledge of the bush, powers of tracking &c., and now they are got under control, form as efficient a police as could be desired, particularly in operations against distant troublesome tribes.’

Haydon’s comments bear further examination. There can be little doubt that from a European perspective, bringing under-occupied Aboriginal men ‘under control’ by subjecting them to militia discipline, and employing them in the civilisation-supporting application of British justice, was an achievement that could only have been improved by their conversion to Christianity. Conveniently, the so-called ‘outrages’ against settlers and their stock were occurring at some distance from Melbourne, where the actions of the Native Police Corps were more likely to be seen only by those Europeans who approved the use of strong measures to quieten the frontier.

The Chief Protector of Aborigines, G. A. Robinson, was among those who thought it proper that Native Police should be used in ‘checking the predatory attacks of Aboriginal Natives’. Their commanding officer, Henry Dana, summed up the European perspective in his first report to La Trobe: ‘...there is nothing better calculated to wean them from their wandering and useless habits than the forming [of] the young and influential men into a Corps of Police, and from the specimen I have had

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85 G. A. Robinson to Colonial Secretary E. D. Thomson, 12 June 1839, VPRS 4409/P, Copies Of Correspondence Relating To The Establishment Of The Aboriginal Protectorate, unit 1.
of their conduct and capabilities I am led to believe that at no distant period they will become a most useful body of men generally, and especially when any outrages are committed by the Aborigines’.  

These ‘distant troublesome tribes’ were in some cases traditional enemies of the Kulin, allowing an interpretation that by organising and arming one group of warriors, the colonists could cynically encourage the suppression of other Aboriginal nations. From this viewpoint, Yonki Yonka and his score of comrades in arms were unwittingly – or knowingly – contributing to their own colonisation and, as a product of the new imbalance of power, the ultimate destruction of Koorie heritage. The authorities were not unaware of this disturbance of Aboriginal equilibrium. Marie Fels believes that Melbourne’s administrator, Captain William Lonsdale, in the brief earlier attempt at establishing a corps in 1837, was aware that he might have ‘altered the balance of traditional Aboriginal power relations’, when he decided to arm the corps to ‘make them feel a superiority over the other blacks’. Beverley Nance gives some credence to this new disparity, estimating that the Port Philip Native Police Corps was responsible for 125 Aboriginal deaths. Jonathan Richards, who focuses on the Native Police in Queensland, proposes that rather than being concerned about an alteration in the balance of power, colonial authorities widely used such forces throughout the British empire as a ‘divide and rule’ strategy, and that in some cases Aboriginal participants ‘fought as much in their own self-interest as for other reasons … the British had learned to adapt traditional Indigenous enmity to their advantage’.  

Yonki Yonka and his compatriots had their own reasons for joining the Corps, which no doubt were reviewed exhaustively in the week of discussion led by Billibellary. Their considered decision validates a rejection of any notion that adaptation undermines

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86 Henry Dana to La Trobe, 31 March 1842, VPRS 19/P Inward Registered Correspondence, Superintendent Port Phillip District, unit 28, item 42/674.
Aboriginality.\(^\text{90}\) They probably welcomed an advance in their strength as warriors. The speed of horses replaced the greater physical demands of chase on foot; the potency of guns exceeded the lesser range – though not necessarily the accuracy – of spears and clubs; the adoption of uniforms and the practice of drill mimicked the ceremony of corroboree, even down to forming ranks;\(^\text{91}\) and the aegis of British law, although it demanded revenge for matters beyond Aboriginal tradition, provided justification equivalent to their own Country law for pursuit, capture and punishment. The Native Police Corps offered the same camaraderie and intra-cohort competition that has always been valued by young warriors, and as if these were not sufficiently attractive, notes Michael Cannon, they were treated on the same footing as their white interlopers by being equally rationed, including rations for their wives and children.\(^\text{92}\)

Their commanding officer, Henry Dana, understood their inescapable obligations to Country, allowing them time for their traditional activities and mostly turning a blind eye to even unauthorised absences.\(^\text{93}\) Today, Noonuccal Nuugi man Wesley Enoch believes that ‘one of the joys of Aboriginal culture is that it is able to survive because it is malleable’, moving with shifts and changes and taking into account new influences, new technologies and new peoples.\(^\text{94}\) Grace Karskens agrees that ‘Aboriginal culture is not timeless, fixed and unchanging, but adaptable and dynamic’.\(^\text{95}\)

Aboriginal Corpsmen did not take the ultimate step of transferring their loyalties from their existing culture to this new tool of colonialism. This is apparent from several events, one of which involved Yonki Yonka as a principal. In July 1843, three Wathaurong men were suspected of having assaulted a Mrs Smith at Brunswick. The Wathaurong, whose Country runs west and south from the Werribee River boundary with the Boon Wurrung through the Geelong region to the Anglesea coastline (Fig. 3),


\(^{91}\) In one recorded instance, the Native Police performed a corroboree in which they used their swords instead of spears, with the fire-light being reflected from the blades. John T. Hinkins, *Life Amongst the Native Race, with Extracts from a Diary*, Melbourne, Haase, M’Queen and Co, 1884, p. 35.


\(^{93}\) Marie Hansen Fels, *Good Men and True*, op. cit., p. 45.

\(^{94}\) Sydney Festival director Wesley Enoch, the *Australian*, 31 December 2016, p. 8.

had a reciprocal relationship with other Kulin language groups, which is why the three suspects were able to sleep at William Thomas’ encampment near Melbourne. Thomas organised with the Melbourne police to come early in the morning to arrest the three men, but an hour before daybreak Yonki Yonka and a member of the Native Police Corps, Murrum-murrumbean, arrived and gave warning.

‘At day break a regular debate ensues, and by 8 o’clock I am left with only a few old people & the 2 who gave the Alarm’, Thomas recorded. ‘Mr Broadie the Chief Constable & his party arrive in the cautious manner directed but the Blacks were gone.’ Thomas later commented that the Native Police did not dare to act against those bound by kinship. ‘One cannot but admire such a feeling in a black when

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affecting their friends, though as a body for the public safety, such conduct is not to be tolerated,’ he wrote.  

98 From multiple instances where the Kulin-centric Police Corps failed in, refused or frustrated attempts to impose British law on their own people, it was clear that the colonial power had no option but to tolerate this no-go barrier. It is equally clear that Yonki Yonka and his comrades were able to exercise their agency in these acts of resistance, despite being subject to the discipline of a quasi-military force.

Marie Fels wrote that as the engagement with the Corps progressed it would separate the men from those who had not signed up, and they would become ‘increasingly, men of dual consciousness, with divided claims on their loyalty’.  

99 It is perhaps more realistic, however, to consider that Yonki Yonka and his fellow Corpsmen had added a new element to their hierarchy of loyalties and that, when two loyalties conflicted, their own cultural loyalties retained superiority.  

100 Diane Barwick concurs that the ‘ethnocentric Kulin’ felt no solidarity with other Aboriginal nations, ‘but Billibellary would not tolerate attacks on other Kulin’.  

The period(s) when Yonki Yonka was an active member of the Native Police Corps are not known. Part of the reason the Corps was successful was the informality of its membership – ‘men moved in and out of the Corps according to whether they wished to be rationed or not’.  

102 A list of the 21 troopers comprising the men of the Corps in 1843 does not include Yonki Yonka, and it might be assumed that by then he had tired of this reacquaintance with European employment, or was prevented by disease from continuing.  

98 Marie Fels, Good Men and True, op. cit., p. 105.
99 Ibid., pp. 51 and 87.
100 Fels later (p. 106) comes to the same view, that when loyalties collided ‘being native seems to take precedence over being a policeman’.
101 Diane Barwick, Rebellion at Coranderrk, op. cit., p. 31.
102 Marie Fels, Good Men and True, op. cit., p. 74.
103 Ibid., 138-139.
1842 – the scourge of syphilis

A year after his return to Port Phillip, Yonki Yonka was diagnosed with a venereal disease that the Medical Dispenser at the Merri Creek encampment, Henry Jones, diagnosed and treated as ‘pseudo syphilis’.\textsuperscript{104} This diagnosis might explain Yonki Yonka withdrawing from the Native Police Corps. Pseudo syphilis was an infection thought by many Europeans at the time to be a venereal disease that was endemic in the Aboriginal community, and that predated colonisation. At the time, however, diagnosis of syphilis was uncertain and its confusion with other venereal diseases was common.\textsuperscript{105}

In Yonki Yonka’s case, the mystery deepens when Henry Jones reports that after being on the sick list for a long time, the patient fully recovered.\textsuperscript{106} Since no treatment available at the time cured syphilis, Yonki Yonka either did not have the disease, or perhaps independent of his treatment he went into spontaneous remission, which is not unusual.\textsuperscript{107} Whatever disease he had, it did not seem to affect his athleticism.

Three years later, in 1845, he was recruited with other men to recover the body of James Gaull, a Melbourne merchant who drowned in the Yarra River when his small boat capsized at night. Several Aboriginal men were brought from the encampment at Merri Creek the day after the accident, and they dived in pairs all that day and until about 1pm the following day before ‘the body was recovered by two natives named Bob Cunningham and Lanky’ from a depth of about nine metres.\textsuperscript{108}

Venereal disease was brought to Port Phillip at the very beginning of permanent European settlement, with John Batman being the most visible of the carriers. He knew as early as 1835 that he did not have many years left. His nose was already being

\textsuperscript{104} Henry Jones medical report, June 1842, VPRS 4410, unit 2, item 48, Public Record office of Victoria.

\textsuperscript{105} As late as 1927, syphilis was regarded as presenting symptoms so easily confused with other diseases that mistaken diagnoses were not uncommon, and ‘pseudo syphilis’ was used to describe infections with syphilis-like symptoms - John H. Stokes, ‘The Problem of Pseudo-Syphilis’, \textit{Annals of Internal Medicine}, vol. 2, no. 11, 1929, p. 1139.

\textsuperscript{106} Henry Jones medical report, Ibid., item 49.


\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Hawkesbury Courier and Agricultural and General Advertiser}, 13 February 1845, p. 1.
eaten away by syphilis, and before long he could scarcely walk unaided. The Europeans tended to disguise the incidence of this disease amongst their ranks, other than blaming the epidemic on former convicts, and where it was mentioned there was a resort to euphemism. Meredith Temple-Smith claims that at least four of Batman’s daughters probably died from syphilis, with death certificates at the time using terms such as ‘atrophy’, ‘nervous exhaustion’, ‘softening of the brain’ and ‘no cause’. Melbourne newspapers carried discreet advertisements for ‘corrosive sublimate’, the term used at the time for mercuric chloride, which was thought to be an effective treatment for syphilis.111

When venereal disease began to spread through the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip, a recovery in population became impossible. Infant mortality as a result of congenital syphilis is high. Almost half the children infected in the womb will die shortly before or after birth. Those who survive are likely to suffer any of a large number of deformities such as no bridge to the nose, deafness, painful limbs and blindness.112 The contrast with John Batman’s observation, that ‘the [Aboriginal] children where [sic] good looking and of an healthy appearance’, is a significant clue to syphilis being a newly-introduced cataclysmic epidemic.113 William Buckley, the convict who lived with the Wathaurong for 32 years prior to John Batman’s arrival, said the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip ‘had no such disorder’.114

1844 – An intermediary between two laws

In February 1844 Yonki Yonka took a leading role in an event which illustrates the legal dilemma that inevitably arises when one body of law seeks to usurp another. The

111 Port Phillip Gazette, 29 December 1841, p. 1; Port Phillip Patriot, 15 February 1841, p. 3.
documentary source is a newspaper report, which necessitates some rebalancing to allow for sensationalism and condescension, but the facts are relatively clear.115 On 8 February, some 635 Kulin had assembled for a retribution session, which resulted in injuries to two Boon Wurrung, two Barrabool (Wathaurong) and two Mt Macedon men.116 William Thomas commented that he usually arrived at the Aboriginal encampment at 5 or 6am, and left about 9am for his breakfast, because by then ‘their quarrels were generally over’. This time, they outwitted Thomas, by waiting until after he left to begin their punishment ceremony.117 ‘Their quarrels’ were, from an Aboriginal viewpoint, a punishment and dispute-settlement process. The delay until Thomas had left can be seen as an act of resistance, a denial of any assertion that Aboriginal law must make way for colonial law.

Two days later at about 6pm on 10 February, Chief Constable Brodie, who had a warrant for the arrest of a Boon Wurrung man called Poleorong (known as Billy Lonsdale), heard that he was with a group of Aboriginal men in a paddock on the road to Heidelberg. The warrant alleged that ‘Billy Lonsdale’ had murdered a Goulburn Aboriginal man. Chief Constable Brodie and Constable Tucker found ‘between three and four hundred blacks were assembled … the whole of whom were ornamented with war paint, and by their gestures and manner of handling their weapons an outbreak was momentarily expected,’ the Port Phillip Patriot reported. Yonki Yonka stood forward from the melee to deal with these white authorities but, on learning of their mission, was not prepared to help them. William Thomas was also present and pointed out Poleorong to Brodie. Thomas asked six or eight members of the Native Police Corps who were present to help in the arrest, but ‘they refused to render the slightest assistance’. Undaunted, Brodie moved to seize Poleorong, at which Yonki Yonka spoke some words (presumably in Boon Wurrung) and Poleorong darted into the centre of the Boon Wurrung group, seized a spear, and called on his companions to help him.

115 Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser, date unknown, republished in the Sydney Morning Herald, 27 February 1844, p. 4. This edition of the Patriot does not appear to be extant.
117 Ibid.
By the following Tuesday, Yonki Yonka had been apprehended and brought before the Mayor’s Court charged with obstructing Brodie in the execution of his duty, the policeman giving evidence that ‘Bob Cunninghame’s’ violent actions at the time put him in fear of personal injury. ‘Bob (who by the bye speaks English as fluently as an [sic] European) having made a profound congee [a low bow] to the Bench, waived [sic] his hand gracefully, and arranged the oily braid [of hair] upon his brow’ before giving evidence, reported the Patriot. Yonki Yonka was remanded for 24 hours until William Thomas was available to help in his defence.

On resumption ‘Cunninghame in defence said, the interference on his part was attributable to the duty he owed his tribe, who intended to punish Billy Lonsdale for murdering the boy at Western Port, according to their own customs, and if Mr. Brodie had come [the next] morning he would have assisted him in his capture’.118 Through the intercession of Thomas, Yonki Yonka was sentenced to just two days in gaol. Poleorong does not appear to have been prosecuted for this alleged event, possibly because William Thomas regarded the whole matter as ‘not a real murder but a superstitious notion that [Poleorong] caused the death of the old man’.119 Eventually Poleorong and Warrador faced almost 100 spears, but managed to deflect them with their shields and neither was fatally injured.120

This event reveals Yonki Yonka as a young man immersed in his own culture who can, nonetheless, easily migrate to the dominating culture and deal with it confidently on his own terms. It seems from the newspaper account that he mocks the court by bowing deeply, and by taking time to arrange his hair. As an intermediary, he attempts to smooth the fault line between two legal systems by recognising the validity of both. Poleorong would have been punished according to Aboriginal law and then, if European law demanded any further penalty, he would have been handed over for that judgement. From Yonki Yonka’s perspective, it was a given that Aboriginal law

118 Sydney Morning Herald, 27 February 1844, p. 4.
120 Ian D. Clark and Tony Heydon, A Bend in the Yarra, op. cit., p. 49.
would apply, since law was embedded in Country, and the offence had taken place in Country.

By offering the middle ground, Yonki Yonka was tempting the European legal system to recognise traditional law. The failure to press charges against Poleorong might have arisen from bureaucratic inertia, or lack of resources or opportunity, but in the end it was Aboriginal law that was applied. The reasonableness of Yonki Yonka’s position has been borne out in the judicial practices and legal decisions explored by Mark Finnane, who notes a wide recognition today of Aboriginal payback customs. Modern criminal law recognises, under certain conditions, customary law ‘as an element of practical life in indigenous communities, and will take [this] into account in … sentencing’, he states.121

By now, Yonki Yonka is emerging as a leader among his people. Certainly, William Thomas regarded him as such, and in a long conversation in 1844, begged him to ‘prevail upon the Western Port Blacks to settle down and cultivate the ground’.122 Yonki Yonka did not deny that he had the authority to undertake such a campaign, but as well as immediately rebuffing Thomas he told the Assistant Protector that he had created his own problem. The Boon Wurrung had been prepared to settle on their Country on the Mornington Peninsula, but Thomas had failed to secure this place for them, and had left them to look after the Woi Wurrung. ‘These observations was [sic] a silencer to me,’ Thomas admitted in his journal.123

Yonki Yonka’s brushes with the authorities had no effect on his determination to maintain the authority of tribal law. Only 18 months after the Poleorong episode, 5km from Melbourne, a group led by Yonki Yonka demanded that a Goulburn Aboriginal man be handed over by the driver of a dray. The bullock driver, knowing that his Aboriginal companion’s life was in danger, refused the demand and succeeded

123 Ibid.
in getting safely back to town, but a newspaper report concluded that ‘the man’s life will no doubt eventually be taken, as Bob Cunningham is not a man to be disappointed of his prey!’\textsuperscript{124}

Once again, Yonki Yonka was described in the press as ‘considered a civilized aboriginal - he is certainly the most intelligent one we have seen’.\textsuperscript{125} This emphasis on Yonki Yonka’s intelligence as a remarkable characteristic should be questioned, since it is more likely a product of his fluency in English than a hallmark of unusual genius. The colonists in most cases could only judge the intelligence of their Aboriginal acquaintances through dialogue, which was necessarily in English since very few of them knew more than a few Aboriginal words.\textsuperscript{126}

The Aboriginal law that he helped to enforce relied on men like Yonki Yonka to energetically apply the principles of payback which, according to Mark Finnane, were aimed at resolving the harm done and restoring peace, rather than enjoying retribution.\textsuperscript{127} Yonki Yonka lived by these laws himself, evidenced by him being speared in the thigh during an altercation in which seven others were also wounded.\textsuperscript{128} The demands of Aboriginal justice were considerable: Beverley Nance has determined that between 1835 and 1850 there were 59 reported white deaths at the hands of Aboriginal assailants in the Port Phillip district, but ‘possibly 200 or more’ Aboriginal deaths attributable to their own countrymen.\textsuperscript{129} The unknown factor is the extent to which European invasion of itself created an environment in which Koorie people were more likely to transgress Aboriginal law. If they also began to payback those deaths that arose from European diseases, this increase would make Nance’s statistics exceptional to an historic stasis. As Nance points out, historians have irreconcilable

\textsuperscript{124} Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 15 November 1845, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{125} Geelong Advertiser and Squatters’ Advocate, 29 October 1845, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{126} A court reporter noted that Yonki Yonka had ‘a much more perfect knowledge of the English language’ than two-thirds of those brought before the bar – Port Phillip Gazette, 24 February 1844, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{127} Mark Finnane, ‘Payback, customary law and criminal law in colonised Australia’, op. cit., p. 308.
\textsuperscript{128} William Thomas, journal entry 30 January 1846, in Marguerita Stephens (ed.), The Journal of William Thomas, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{129} Beverley Nance, ‘The Level of Violence’, op. cit., p. 533. Over the same period, at least 400 Aboriginal deaths can be attributed to white settlers (Nance, op. cit.), while Broome calculates a ratio of 12 to 1, or about 700 Aboriginal deaths - Richard Broome, Aboriginal Victorians, op. cit., p. xxiv.
views on this point. C. D. Rowley takes the position that social breakdown exacerbated Aboriginal killings, while Geoffrey Blainey (using the reminiscences of William Buckley) has calculated annual pre-invasion death rates from violence at a substantial one-per-270 head of population.\textsuperscript{130}

1845 – ‘the most enlightened of his countrymen’

The \textit{Port Phillip Patriot}, in October 1845, described Yonki Yonka as ‘probably the most enlightened of his countrymen’.\textsuperscript{131} In the context of its report, this phrase was intended as a condemnation. It is worth repeating the brief article in full, to better analyse its underlying intent.

\begin{quote}
\textsc{The Aborigines.} – We feel assured that it is only necessary to point out to the Licensed Victuallers the injury which must necessarily arise from supplying the aboriginals with intoxicating liquors, for them to abstain from the practice. All hopes of bringing these benighted beings within the pale of civilised society must be at an end if they obtain a taste for, and can procure supplies of, ardent spirits. So late as Saturday last an Aboriginal, well known in Melbourne as Bob Cunninghame, and who is probably the most enlightened of his countrymen, was reeling about Little Flinders-street in a state of intoxication, and beating his lubra with a waddy, who thereupon took refuge in the house of Mr. Peacock, the teacher of the aboriginal school, and the door was closed upon her intoxicated husband. Cunninghame became furious, and putting a waddie under the door, forced it open, rushed into the house, overthrew a child six years of age, knocked down a nurse with an infant in her arms, and frightened Mrs Peacock into fits, then seizing his lubra by the hair, he dragged the unfortunate female into the streets towards his mia mia on the Yarra. Passing through Richmond, he was so brutally using the poor woman, that a sailor passing interfered, and gave Bob Cunninghame a sound thrashing. Thus, from the facility of obtaining ardent spirits by an aboriginal, has the sanctity of the dwelling of a respectable citizen been violated – public decency outraged by a woman being beaten in the streets – and the demoralised habits of the black himself only the more strongly confirmed.
\end{quote}

The \textit{Patriot} was inviting its readers to agree that if an Aboriginal man as acculturated as Yonki Yonka seemed to be, could commit the terrible acts it described, there could


\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Port Phillip Patriot}, 8 October 1845, p. 2.
be little hope for others of his race. This formulaic morality tale comprises a string of stereotypes that would be readily accepted by the *Patriot’s* readers - a noble savage seduced by the evil of alcohol; the mendacity of the merchant class in their amoral pursuit of profit; the fear of a powerful man on the rampage; the violation of sanctified domestic space wherein women and children are terrorised; and the brutality of domestic violence within an Aboriginal marriage. There was, however, the highly unusual aftermath of the condemned Aboriginal principal in this tale responding, in his own voice, with an evidenced counter-charge that the story was mostly a tissue of lies.

Assistant Protector William Thomas described, in a subsequent letter to the *Patriot*, how he took its report to Yonki Yonka with the intention of shaming him for his actions and demonstrating to him the consequences of drunkenness. He found, instead, that Yonki Yonka was outraged by the newspaper story and demanded redress. Thomas had Yonki Yonka tell his side of the story and transcribed what he wanted to say to the editor of the *Patriot*, promising that if his version could be validated he would forward the letter over Yonki Yonka’s name. As a result, we have the rare voice of a young Aboriginal man making his own case, aware that the power of the press was an important matter and his reputation was at stake. His letter reads:

**YONKER YONKER’S LETTER,**

*To the Editor of the Port Phillip Patriot.*

Sir. – My master read me your paper; why you put lies about me there? I did not beat my lubra; I did not knock a child down; I did not make Mrs Peacock go into fits; I was drunk and saucy, that’s all; and if white gentlemen did not give me drink, I could not get drunk; I never go in blackguards’ houses, only my friends.

his

ROBERT X CUNNINGHAM.

mark

In his supporting letter, Thomas said he had made ‘strict inquiry’ into the matter, and that ‘no part of the statement made in your journal is correct’ except that Yonki Yonka was outrageously drunk. A note in his journal adds that he had gone to see Mrs

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132 *Port Phillip Patriot*, 14 October 1845, p. 2.
Peacock and found ‘that Yonker’s account was correct with the exception that he was very abusive & by his manner frightened Mrs Peacock’s nurse, but he never maltreated his lubra or any one’. This direct evidence supported Thomas in objecting to the *Patriot* that ‘the maltreatment of his lubra, frightening Mrs. Peacock into fits, knocking down children and nurses, and being only hove to by a sailor, is all false’. Thomas described Yonki Yonka as being ‘in great dudgeon with your journal on account of the libellous paragraph’, and concluded by demanding that ‘your informant, whoever he be, should render Yonker Yonker an apology’. The *Patriot* did not make or solicit an apology, but it did give Yonki Yonka’s letter prominence and ran William Thomas’ supporting letter at length, thereby tacitly admitting that the original report was inaccurate, if not false.

Yonki Yonka’s sophisticated understanding of the power of the press in white society was not exceptional. Munday, a Noongar leader of the Country between Perth and Guildford, and at one time a declared outlaw, was a frequent visitor to the *Swan River Guardian* office where he was in the habit of warming himself in front of the fire. He told the newspaper’s editor, William Nairn Clarke, that part of the attraction was that ‘paper talk goes far far away’. Nairn described Munday as having a ‘noble superiority of mind’. Letters also talked far away, a point not lost on Bennelong when in 1796 he dictated a letter to be sent to his patron Arthur Phillip and other acquaintances in England.

Violence by Aboriginal men towards their wives is a recurrent theme in colonial documents. Equivalent domestic violence by white men was less often recorded,

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114 *Port Phillip Patriot*, 14 October 1845, p. 2.
116 Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, op. cit. p. 55. van Toorn argues that Bennelong ‘must have had some idea of what kinds of objects letters were, what kinds of work they could do, [and] why people exchanged them’.
117 See, for example, Liz Conor, *Skin Deep*, op. cit. Penelope Selby, writing to her mother in 1849, told her that ‘another peculiarity of this country is that [European] men ... are rather fond of beating their wives – a gentleman in [Port Fairy] killed his the other day. He had not been married six months.’ - Lucy Frost, *No Place for a Nervous Lady: Voices from the Australian Bush*, Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1984, p. 181.
perhaps because the ratio of European women to men during Yonki Yonka’s lifetime was much lower, but where it occurred the level of violence was no less. ‘A few evenings since,’ the Port Phillip Herald reported in a typical story, ‘a man residing in Bourke-street, becoming jealous of his wife, took to drinking; and in one of his mad fits of intoxication struck her to the earth by a blow on the head with an axe. Dr Wilkie was immediately called in ... she having fainted from loss of blood. The husband remains in custody, waiting the issue of the woman’s severe illness; but we learn that she is doing well’.  

Taylor, Schmitt and Ray suggest that domestic violence in Aboriginal families was much less common prior to colonisation, and that ‘the distress and frustration experienced by disintegrating tribal communities led to an increase in the amount and severity of violence directed against women by some of the men’.  

Geoffrey Blainey has been chastised for offering ‘unnecessary comparisons between the “treatment” of Aboriginal people and the “poorest white people”, as if, in a grotesque competition for victimhood, it is untenable to speak of indigenous dispossession and disadvantage without mentioning white suffering in the same populist breath’.  

In risking equal criticism, I suggest that a failure to mention white-on-white violence in the context of Aboriginal domestic violence can lead to an imbalance in the historical view, supporting the trope of moral superiority that was energetically advanced by the settler-colonists.  

The Patriot article describing Yonki Yonka’s ‘rampage’ was an attack on his self-esteem, framing him within a European construct that accepted Aboriginal depravity and violence as a given. His only admission in this case was his susceptibility to alcohol, which was a common problem for this first-contact generation. Thomas commented in his letter to the Patriot: ‘It is inevitable that Yonker Yonker (the civilised black as you term him) should be so fond of drink ... I never knew but one civilised black that was

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138 Port Phillip Herald, 7 January 1840, p. 2.  
140 Mark McKenna, reviewing Geoffrey Blainey’s The Story of Australia’s People: The Rise and Rise of a New Australia, in the Australian newspaper, 17 December 2016, p. 23.
otherwise.’ He might equally have recognised that the abuse of alcohol was not race-based, but afflicted Aboriginal and European alike, with an endless procession of settlers making their way through the police court in Melbourne, many of them having consumed their entire seasonal rural earnings in one long drinking session.

The question of whether or not alcohol suspends agency, irrespective of race, is worth considering. In his letter to the Patriot, Yonki Yonka said ‘if white gentlemen did not give me drink, I could not get drunk’, which sounds like an absence of agency. A more nuanced view, however, sees the Patriot having admitted moral failure by Europeans in the supply of alcohol, and Yonki Yonka – having noted this admission – taking the opportunity to blame-shift his one admission, which was being drunk.

**Intellectual entanglement**

The emphasis on conflict, dispossession and disease in the historiography of settler-colonialism is too infrequently leavened with an examination of the flow of ideas across the contested border. Yonki Yonka’s engagement with Europeans quickly earned him a reputation for intelligence, with the Melbourne magistrate William Hull going so far as to describe him as ‘a very superior man indeed and a highly intellectual man’. Yonki Yonka appears to have appreciated his ability to express himself to Europeans, and wished that his education had been more extensive. ‘He said why not white man learn him to read when take him away’, William Thomas recorded in his journal. This linguistic inequality between English and Aboriginal language speakers, lessened only in the law courts where translators were used, supported the colonists’ preconception that Aboriginal people were generally of a lesser intelligence and, therefore, that Yonki Yonka was an aberration rather than a comprehensible member of an equally intelligent people.

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141 Port Phillip Patriot, 14 October 1845, p. 2.
142 See, for example, Geelong Advertiser 16/4/1845, p. 2; Port Phillip Gazette, 24/5/1845, p. 2; Port Phillip Patriot, 29/11/1845, p. 2.
Thanks to this ability by some Kulin to express themselves in English, we have one or two remarkable records that cause historians to wonder at what else this culturally-rich nation knew, but did not offer across the divide. Yonki Yonka was one of those who gave us a 1,000-year old historical fact that relied not on the written record, but on an accurate verbal legend being passed from generation to generation through ten centuries. Georgiana McCrae, who lived on Boon Wurrung Country at Arthur’s Seat, diarised a story that she heard third hand from an unidentified Aboriginal source about the formation of Port Phillip Bay. ‘Plenty long ago ... gago, gego, gugo, ... alonga Corio, men could cross, dry-foot, from our side of the bay to Geelong.’ Georgiana’s grandson Hugh McCrae, who edited her diary, continued in the third person: ‘They described a hurricane – trees bending to and fro – then the earth sank, and the sea rushed in through the Heads, till the void places became broad and deep, as they are today.’

William Hull, a Melbourne magistrate who was acquainted with Yonki Yonka, recorded this historical fact in his evidence to the 1858 Select Committee:  

With regard to traditions, I may say it is not generally known that the blacks, - Cunningham [Yonki Yonka], Murray [an uncle], and Old Bembo [Yonki Yonka’s father, Baddourup], say that their grandfather, ‘My uncle,’ as they call him – they do not know the word grandfather, my uncle is the term they use for all progenitors – recollected when Hobson’s Bay was a kangaroo ground; they say, ‘Plenty catch kangaroo, and plenty catch opossum there;’ and Murray assured me that the passage up the bay, through which the ships came, is the River Yarra, and that the river once went out at the heads, but that the sea broke in, and that Hobson’s Bay, which was once hunting ground, became what it is.

Although Hull identified Hobson’s Bay as the ancient hunting ground he probably meant the greater Port Phillip Bay, since there are no heads at the former – it is simply the anchorage where the present-day Yarra empties into Port Phillip Bay. In discussing Boon Wurrung legends with two generations from the one family – Yonki Yonka, his

145 Hugh McCrae (ed.), *Georgiana’s Journal: Melbourne a hundred years ago*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1934, p. 176 (entry for 30/10/1850).
father, and his uncle – the youngest member of this hierarchy may well have provided the trans-cultural language bridge.

Recent marine survey work verifies the Boon Wurrung legend of the sea breaking in and flooding a plain.\textsuperscript{147} Gary Holdgate found that the entrance to the bay had been blocked by sand and silt about 2,800 years ago and sediments showed that water on the floor of the bay, about 20 metres below sea level, had dried to a few small salt lakes until about 1,000 years ago. ‘It looks like the Aboriginal stories might be right,’ he told the \textit{Age} newspaper. ‘There was a great flood. It’s quite possible the blockages unblocked quite quickly, perhaps due to some sort of overtopping, big storms, even perhaps an earthquake.’\textsuperscript{148}

Hull also interrogated Yonki Yonka about his religious beliefs, thinking that he had cultivated a quisling who would reveal the Boon Wurrung secret/sacred knowledge.\textsuperscript{149} ‘Yang Yang [Yonki Yonka] became very confident and I could get almost anything out of him, but always with a strict injunction to secrecy; in particular, I was not to let his uncle, Mr Murray, know anything he told me. By that means I attained a knowledge of their superstitions, and their traditions, and their astronomical notions.’ What Hull failed to realise, and which can be demonstrated through at least one documented case, was that Yonki Yonka was calculating what his interlocuter wanted to hear and then deciding how to reply, effectively controlling the exchange.

The case in point involved the drawings that explorer Captain George Grey made of Aboriginal figures in 1838, from a cave on the Glenelg River in Western Australia, now known as the Wandjina paintings. Having been led by Yonki Yonka into thinking that he recognised the paintings, Hull surmised that ‘Yangalla [Yonki Yonka], having visited


\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Age}, 8 May 2011.

\textsuperscript{149} Secret/sacred ceremonies, artefacts and knowledge may only be conducted, used or expressed by those custodians of appropriate ceremonial rank, and revealed to those qualified by gender, rank or initiation – David Kaus, ‘The management of restricted Aboriginal objects by the National Museum of Australia’, \textit{reCollections: A Journal of Museums and Collections}, vol. 3, no. 1, 2008, unpaginated.
South Australia, had probably been at the cave, as the paintings were apparently familiar to him, and he inquired how they had been obtained by white fellows’.  

Yonki Yonka first told Hull that the drawing (Fig. 11) represented the sun. Later, his story became more elaborate, and he identified the figure as ‘Pundyil’, a person ‘who lives to be good to white-fellows’. Another Wandjina figure they discussed ‘took care of black-fellows as well as white fellows’. Hull noted that Yonki Yonka made him promise that he would not tell any of the Kulin what he had revealed. Yonki Yonka’s subterfuge, in retrospect, is almost transparent, but Hull had heard what he wanted to hear, and happily wove it into his theories about the descent of Aboriginal Australians from ancient biblical tribes. Yonki Yonka clearly had no idea what the figures represented, since they came from Country about which he had no knowledge, but in preparing his story he reinforced his relationship with a European who had considerable authority, and he wove the legend to encompass both whites and blacks in its mythology. Had Hull been a little more careful, he might have noticed that Yonki Yonka had adapted the Kulin spirit Bunjil (or Pundyil), who lived in the sky, where Jupiter could be seen as the light from his fire, and who had nothing to do with white-fellows.  

We must assume that European records are deficient when detailing Aboriginal sacred and ritual practices. This is secret/sacred business, which was carefully concealed from outsiders – Aboriginal and European alike. Assistant Protector William Thomas witnessed in 1845 a great gathering of almost 200 Aboriginal people from the Delatite River region, meeting with the Kulin at Merri Creek. The Delatite people were led by Kuller Kullup, whom Thomas thought was about 80 years old, ‘the oldest man I have ever seen among the blacks’. From time to time Kuller Kullup spoke at length to the

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150 William Hull (attributed), Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales, op. cit., p. 34. Hull was lambasted for his theories by a well-informed reviewer in the Geelong Advertiser, who pointed out that the Glenelg River of Grey’s expedition was in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and was not, as Hull imagined, the Glenelg River that winds through Victoria and South Australia - Geelong Advertiser and Squatters’ Advocate, 19 August 1846, p. 2.

151 Assistant Protector Parker, Port Phillip Herald, 28 January 1845, p. 3. Ian D. Clark details the Bunjil legend in An Historical Geography of Tourism in Victoria: Case Studies, Warsaw, De Gruyter Open, 2014, pp. 18-19

men who were gathered around him in semi-circular rows, ‘patiently waiting for the sound of his voice’. Whenever Thomas approached to attempt to discover the nature of this discourse, Kuller Kullup would fall silent and would not speak again until Thomas was out of earshot. We might have assumed that Yonki Yonka was privy to these addresses, but Kuller Kullup was aware of the danger of unauthorised listeners, and when Thomas sent in the respected leader Billibellary to sit with the men, Kuller Kullup again stopped talking.\footnote{R. Brough Smyth, \textit{The Aborigines of Victoria: with Notes Relating to the Habits of the Natives of Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania}, Melbourne, Government of Victoria, 1878, vol. 1, p. 136.}

\footnote{George Grey, \textit{Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North West and Western Australia, During the Years 1837, 38 and 39}, vol. 1, London, Boone, 1841, Fig. 15.1.}
Attempts to inquire into Aboriginal religious beliefs met with similar resistance. Assistant Protector Parker commented on the ‘vagueness and obscurity in their notions’ on a higher being, with the excuse offered by the Loddon River people that they were ‘very stupid’ when it came to these matters.\textsuperscript{155} What is unbelievable now was, to a European deeply embedded in his supposedly superior religion, wholly believable as characteristic of a heathen race. Yonki Yonka knew that the monotheistic belief of the settlers was unassailable and reassured William Thomas that he believed there was a god. He also saw the shaky logic of some Christian propositions, and slyly remarked that he ‘did not believe there was a hell or else white men would not get drunk & swear [because] they would be afraid of going there’.\textsuperscript{156}

\textbf{1846 – Tragedy and trauma}

Yonki Yonka’s way of life seems to have changed markedly in early 1846. The circumstantial evidence leads to a conclusion that his wife had died and that, in consequence, he increasingly resorted to alcohol to dull his trauma.\textsuperscript{157} Yonki Yonka had married Bungerrook, one of Billibellary’s daughters, towards the end of 1841. There are references to Billibellary’s children spread through William Thomas’ journals, from which it is possible to construct a chart of his family (Fig. 9).\textsuperscript{158}

The oldest daughter was Wigal (also known as Mary Anne), who was about 20 years old in 1846, and married to Burrenum (Mr Wedge). The second was Budbeduruk, about 18 years old and married to Tallunundulk of Devils River. The third daughter, Bungerrrook, was aged about 16 and married to Yonki Yonka. Two other daughters, Mintoollook and Bergyunuk, were aged about 10 and 7 respectively.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[155] Assistant Protector Parker, \textit{Port Phillip Herald}, 28 January 1845, p. 3.
\item[157] George Bonanno argues that ‘potentially traumatic event’ is a preferred description since, in response to any given event, some people may experience trauma and others may not. See George A. Bonanno, ‘Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?’ \textit{American Psychologist}, vol. 59, no. 1, 2004, pp. 20-28.
\item[158] Thomas papers, MSS 214/10 on microfilm CY 3083, p. 80, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
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In early January 1846, Thomas recorded in his journal that Billibellary’s daughter had given birth to a son. It is not clear which daughter this was, as no further identification is made. Thomas simply noted the next day that he had been to the Merri Creek encampment to see the baby, and he was ‘much surprised how light the color is’. The following month, Thomas again records a ‘Child Born Yarra Tribe Billibellary Daughter’. In this case the daughter was probably Wigal, for six days later Thomas notes that Mary Anne’s 6-day-old child had died. Three weeks after the second birth, on 22 March, Thomas - again without going into detail - records that ‘Billibellary’s daughter had died in the night’ and was buried near the Merri Creek Aboriginal School.

Which of Billibellary’s daughters had died? Wigal was recorded as still alive in 1851. Budbederuck was presumably living with her husband Tallunundulk at Devils River, which is about 100km north-east of Melbourne, so even if she had died it is extremely unlikely that she would have been buried at Merri Creek. Bergyunuk (Suzannah) had died in November 1845. No further record of 10-year old Mintoollook has been found. It would seem that there is an even chance that 16-year-old Bungerrook was the daughter who died, perhaps made more likely in the aftermath of her having given birth two months earlier. Bungerrook disappears from the record at this point. The last glimpse we had of her was when Thomas recorded ‘Yonker Yonker & 1 lubra’ in mid-January 1846.

When Yonki Yonka is next mentioned by Thomas, it seems he is living in the same miam as Nerrimbineck (Young Winberry) and, from the end of April 1846, they were lectured or admonished by Thomas for their drunkenness which, the Assistant Protector assured them, would see them in hell. Yonki Yonka had teamed up with this young man who had already gained a reputation for drunkenness, and from this time

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161 Ibid, entry for 16 January 1846.
there is no mention of Yonki Yonka’s family. Thomas calls them ‘these two drunkards’.  

This abrupt change in Yonki Yonka’s life might be read as a reaction to his wife (and possibly his son) having died, leaving him with a deteriorating view of his future, and adding the stress of personal loss to the trauma of his culture being challenged by the relentless increase in the white population. There is no record by Thomas connecting Yonki Yonka and alcohol until late 1844, and that journal entry was based on hearsay. It is five months later when Thomas records for the first time as an eyewitness that Yonki Yonka was ‘beastly drunk’. By tracking Yonki Yonka through Thomas’ journals, it would seem that his engagement with alcohol was infrequent, or at least unremarkable, up until 1846. Nor should it be assumed that there had been a permanent change in Yonki Yonka’s way of life. By June 1846 there are signs of renewed purpose, with Thomas noting that he had gone to work ‘with some white person’ in mid-June, and that he did not return from this assignment until 2 July.

1846 – Yonki Yonka’s death

Yonki Yonka died unexpectedly on 4 November 1846, aged about 23 years. He was sufficiently well known to colonial Melbourne for his death to warrant reports in four newspapers; the Patriot taking its usual folksy approach, the Gazette reporting the death soberly and respectfully, and the squatter-supporting Herald and Geelong Advertiser describing him as ‘this notorious aboriginal’ – presumably referring to his drunken episodes. None of them afforded him the dignity of his Aboriginal name – to Europeans, he was Bob Cunninghame. However, the Gazette offered the positive

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162 Ibid, entry for 20 May 1846.
163 William Thomas, journal entry 16 October 1844, in Marguerita Stephens (ed.), The Journal of William Thomas, op. cit.,
164 Ibid., journal entry 7 March 1845.
165 Ibid., journal entries 16 June & 2 July 1846.
166 Ibid., journal entry 4 November 1846.
167 Port Phillip Patriot, 10 November 1846, p. 3; Port Phillip Gazette and Settlers’ Journal, 11 November 1846, p. 2; Port Phillip Herald, 12 November 1846, p. 2. The Geelong Advertiser and Squatters’ Advocate (18/11/1846) took the Herald’s copy.
face of British law by calling for a Coroner’s inquest for all Aboriginal people who had
died by violence or accident, ‘as being British subjects, they deserve this protection’.

The *Gazette* alone provided the valuable information that his grave was ‘situated on
the brink of a hill, across the Yarra opposite Melbourne’. Emerald Hill, in what is now
South Melbourne, matches that description. At the time it was the first significant
elevation above the swampy ground on the south side of the Yarra.168 Emerald Hill was
a Ngargee, a traditional meeting point for the Boon Wurrung, and the site of
ceremonial events such as corroborees.169 Water-colourist W. F. E. Liardet has left us
an image of one such corroboree, painted from memory some 35 years after the event
[Fig. 12]. If ‘Garryowen’ is to be believed, Emerald Hill was ‘covered with a rich sward,
green as the freshest shamrock … the whole eminence encircled by shining lagoons,
the sparkling sea, and growths of scrub and ti-tree’.170 Emerald Hill, since landfill raised
the level of South Melbourne, is no longer so apparent as an eminence, but the old
South Melbourne Town Hall stands at the peak which has an elevation of 16 metres
above sea level.171 This is, fittingly, the office of the Boon Wurrung Foundation.

Assistant Protector William Thomas provides the thread, through his journal entries,
from which we can reconstruct Yonki Yonka’s last days. In mid-August 1846 Yonki
Yonka spent the night in the Melbourne watch house and the following morning ‘looks
very sheepish & says he cannot help getting drunk’.172 By 13 October, Yonki Yonka’s
susceptibility to alcohol again saw him in trouble, but this time he also assaulted a
constable which earned him 14 days in prison, and the sobriquet ‘An Aboriginal

168 The City of South Melbourne, when it was granted independent municipal government in May 1855,
was originally called the Municipal District of Emerald Hill – *Jubilee History of the City of South
169 *Expression of Interest Brief – Emerald Hill Library and Heritage Centre Forecourt Public Art
Commission*, City of Port Phillip, 2013, p. 3.
170 Edmund Finn (‘Garryowen’), *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 1835-1851: historical, anecdotal and
personal*, Melbourne, Fergusson and Mitchell, 1888, vol. 2, p. 535. Finn falsely claimed to have given
Emerald Hill its name, but Johnny Fawkner referred to it by the same name as early as 1838.
171 Google Earth, accessed November 2016. See also Miles Lewis (ed.), *Brunswick Street Lost and Found:
172 William Thomas, journal entry 19 August 1846, in Marguerita Stephens (ed.), *The Journal of William
Thomas*, op. cit.
Lushington’ from the Gazette. Thomas, who was punctilious in his duty of visiting Aboriginal prisoners, saw Yonki Yonka and explained to him that his confinement was merited by the assault of the constable. He saw him again the next day, when Yonki Yonka ‘professes sorrow for his conduct’, and two days later on Sunday 18 October Yonki Yonka was again visited. This time, as Thomas no doubt thought befitted the Sabbath, he had ‘some serious talk’ with Yonki Yonka and afterwards wrote in his journal: ‘Oh Lord grant that his promises & my exertions may not be forgotten’.  

By 23 October, Yonki Yonka was within a few days of being released from gaol. Thomas thought he looked very unwell, and hoped, therefore, that his punishment might have the desired effect. On 1 November he was still ‘a little indisposed like all others after confinement in Jail’ and, once again, Thomas noted his hope that Yonki Yonka would benefit from his experience. Three days later Yonki Yonka died and Thomas, not

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knowing this, was surprised to discover the Aboriginal encampment on the south side of the Yarra deserted. Finding a fresh grave, Thomas was even more puzzled, since no-one at the encampment had been ill except Yonki Yonka, ‘who had merely a pain in his limbs on acct of confinement in Jail, common to all Blks who have been in custody for any time’. In the eastern camp, Thomas found a lone Aboriginal man. Knowing that the names of those recently dead could not be uttered, Thomas began to run through a list of his charges, asking where each one was, and when the question about Yonki Yonka was met with silence, Thomas knew with near certainty who was in the grave.\textsuperscript{174}

Being somewhat suspicious at not having been told of the death, Thomas obtained a magistrate’s warrant to open the grave and, accompanied by a clerk and a constable – the latter to do the digging - he went to the gravesite on 9 November. Here, Yonki Yonka’s body was found, buried in the traditional way. ‘On removing the earth they found Bob tightly bound with cord in an opossum rug, in an inclined position.’\textsuperscript{175} Thomas carefully examined the body, but could find no evidence of violence, and could only conclude that Yonki Yonka had unexpectedly died from an unknown illness. Yonki Yonka was reburied, and Thomas noticed a few days later that the traditional graveside fire had been lit and the ‘grave set again in order’. Here, the contemporary European record of Yonki Yonka ends.

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In summary

This chapter has described the most important, and best documented, period of Yonki Yonka’s life. He returned to Melbourne in 1841 as a young adult and rejoined his people. After a brief period as a member of the Native Police Corps he led a largely traditional life, married to a daughter of one of the Kulin people’s most important leaders. He maintained a relationship with a number of Europeans and, when


\textsuperscript{175} \textit{Port Phillip Gazette and Settler’s Journal}, 11 November 1846, p. 2.
demanded by events, acted as an intermediary between the two cultures. Towards the end of his life, perhaps as a consequence of his wife’s death, he increasingly resorted to alcohol and consequently became entangled with European law. His death in 1846, aged about 23, was from unknown causes and cut short a life that might otherwise have developed as a Boon Wurrung leader.

A post-script to Yonki Yonka’s life can be found in Diane Barwick, who examined the fight for land at Coranderrk (Fig. 3). This 9.6 km² tract of Country had been secured by the Taungurung and Wurundjeri through the leadership of Yonki Yonka’s brother-in-law, (Simon) Wonga (Billibellary’s son), 17 years after Yonki Yonka’s death. By then, no more than 250 Kulin remained, while their Country was occupied by more than 500,000 Europeans.\footnote{Diane Barwick, \textit{Rebellion at Coranderrk}, op. cit., p. 16.}
CONCLUSION

Understanding Yonki Yonka

What are we to make of Yonki Yonka’s brief life, and by what method might that assessment be approached? Bain Attwood, in his biography of Bessy Cameron (nee Flowers), suggests that the historian seek a deeper understanding by the ‘imperative [of trying] to understand how Bessy saw her own life’. More recently Shino Konishi has urged historian-biographers to put aside conventional tropes and ‘imagine the lives of their Indigenous subjects’.

My question, rephrased, becomes: What might reasonably be proposed as Yonki Yonka’s view of his life? In seeking a methodology through which the question can be approached, I believe that the psychological theory of self-actualisation can help the biographer to understand the subject’s viewpoint of his or her life (see p. 29ff). Konishi recommends that ‘rather than effacing any sense of emotional connection to [one’s] Indigenous subjects’ the biographer should ‘embrace this sense of connection and attachment … to try to understand better the particularities of their circumstances and their individual temperaments’. This empathetic method, in answer to Dennis Foley’s insistence that Indigenous standpoint theory requires indigenous authorship, I read as befriending Yonki Yonka rather than becoming him.

Contemporaries such as Assistant Protector William Thomas, from his Eurocentric position, clearly judged Yonki Yonka as a disappointment. Thomas had high hopes for the handsome young sailor who first strode into the Yarra encampment in 1841, but in the subsequent four years ‘since he appeared at my tent … I do not suppose that he has … done four days work as a civilised man’, despite several squatters being ‘desirous of obtaining him at more than the ordinary wages given’. Yonki Yonka, however, had of his own volition moved from a position on the acculturation scale

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1 Bain Attwood, ‘ “…in the name of all my coloured brethren and sisters…” op. cit., p. 23.
4 William Thomas, letter to the Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser, 14 October 1845, p. 2.
approximating to ‘assimilation’ (see p. 28ff), to what psychologist John Berry calls ‘separation’, in which the original culture dominates but some desirable features of the new culture are incorporated.5

Yonki Yonka’s view of his own life can, under my chosen methodology, be examined by comparing his experience with what we know of his expectations: that is, a comparison between what he was and what he believed he should or could be; between his self-image and his ideal self. When the two coincide, according to psychotherapist Carl Rogers, self-actualisation is achieved. An analysis of Yonki Yonka’s words and actions allows some informed conclusions about how he would describe his ‘ideal self’ and the extent to which his ‘self-image’ approaches this construct, thereby deriving an estimation of his ‘self-actualisation’. This approach removes any difference between biographical subjects who, despite their various starting points, can be equally assessed within the one frame. It also, in a sense, completes the circle back to psychologist Abraham Maslow, who derived his hierarchy of needs (with self-actualisation at the apex) from an analysis of the biographies and writings of 18 people.

Elements of Yonki Yonka’s self-actualisation are clear. He sees himself as a traditional Boon Wurrung, and he lives and behaves like a traditional Boon Wurrung. His resilience has allowed his self-image and his ideal self, in these respects at least, to coincide. As Jane Lydon puts it, the ‘steady and irreversible acquisition of European culture’ that Europeans saw as a worthwhile goal was, rather, a voluntary and partial incorporation of new knowledge and new ideas by some Aboriginal people, many of whom subsequently changed their minds.6 It can also be considered as the beginning of a long process for a resilient people who, Penelope Edmonds proposes, never surrendered their sovereignty but ‘the modes through which they assert those sovereignties have shifted, from armed conflict to the realms of culture, politics, bureaucracy, and political performance’.7

6 Jane Lydon, Fantastic Dreaming, op. cit., p. 22.
7 Penelope Edmonds, Settler Colonialism and (Re)Conciliation, op. cit., pp. 23-24.
However, Yonki Yonka envied some of the skills possessed by Europeans. In the same conversation with William Thomas he lamented that though the white man had taken him away, he had never been taught to read. Yonki Yonka did not need to read if he wanted only to maintain his pre-invasion Aboriginality, but he understood the permanent change in circumstances once settler-colonists had imposed themselves on his Country, and felt himself at a disadvantage as an intermediary because of his illiteracy. If resilience is a ‘capacity to engage actively with traumatic change’ that requires ‘not only the capacity to absorb stress but to transform in order to cope with it’, then the transformation in Yonki Yonka’s world view as a consequence of colonisation required him to engage actively with it and to turn it to advantage where possible. We can posit that Yonki Yonka’s ideal self was as a traditional Boon Wurrung man who could engage or disengage with the invader at will but, when engaged, deal with the invader as an equal. His self-image as an intermediary, however, would allow that because of his illiteracy he was at a relative disadvantage, blocking desirable elements of his ability to move between two cultures and making full self-actualisation impossible in this aspect of his life.

A further measure of resilience is ‘the capacity to absorb stress’. Yonki Yonka, along with many of his peers, increasingly resorted to alcohol for reasons that have been explored earlier, one of which might have been an attempt to at least temporarily suspend post-traumatic stress. As discussed, his association with alcohol until early 1846 was only noted three times, and there is evidence that the death of his wife and child may have been the traumatic event that led to his increasing use of this drug. To ask Yonki Yonka about his self-image in terms of alcohol consumption is problematic. On the available evidence, his answer prior to 1846 might range anywhere from an admission of a personal weakness, to a protest that using alcohol for release was an acceptable social norm, or further, that alcohol could be used to both fuel and disguise a position of resistance.

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8 Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow, Rivers and Resilience, op. cit., p. 4.
If Thomas is to be believed, in his last year Yonki Yonka saw himself as falling short of his ideal self: ‘Yonker looks very sheepish & says he cannot help getting drunk’. Stress is cumulative when traumatic events succeed each other faster than an individual’s resilience can absorb the consequences. Yonki Yonka, we might assume, shared in the widely-recorded concern of his people that their culture was changing, their Country was largely lost to them, and their children had progressively less to inherit as the European occupation relentlessly proceeded. Whether or not Yonki Yonka might have emerged from his trauma, as its origins became more distant, is impossible to theorise.

It is relevant that Yonki Yonka’s engagement with alcohol was framed and contextualised by William Thomas, according to the way he saw the world. Today, it would be unremarkable to observe two young men living together and occasionally becoming loudly drunk. Emma Dortins, in her examination of Bennelong’s later years, agrees with Grace Karskens that much of the tragedy of Bennelong’s drinking is a myth, and that his final years were much more multi-layered than is apparent from the available historical evidence. She warns that ‘if Bennelong’s life is “tragic”, then it is storytellers who have made it so’. Our ability to ‘hazard a recreation of his thoughts’, as Dortins puts it, is impeded in Yonki Yonka’s case by the brevity of his life, and the consequent absence of his likely recognition as a ngarweet of the Yalukit Willam (like his father, Baddourup), and perhaps the Boon Wurrung.

An important life

In this thesis, I sought to answer three principal questions. First, who was Yonki Yonka and what did he do – what was the narrative of his life? Second, what were the

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9 William Thomas, journal entry 19 August 1846, in Marguerita Stephens (ed.), *The Journal of William Thomas*, op. cit. Yonki Yonka might, of course, have simply been pretending remorse to keep Thomas happy.
10 Emma Dortins, ‘The many truths of Bennelong’s tragedy’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 33, 2009, p. 59. [pp. 53-75]
11 Ibid., p. 70.
12 Ibid., p. 59.
circumstances within which this narrative unfolded – what do we know about his contextual environment? Third, how did he deal with his life within this context – what can be said about his social and psychological responses to the invasion of his culture by settler-colonists? After reviewing the answers to these questions, a higher-level consideration remains – to what extent has the historical biography examined by this thesis usefully added to the historiography of first-contact Aboriginal Australians?

Yonki Yonka’s life has been reconstructed, so far as is possible, from colonial records. Principal among these has been the manuscript collection of Assistant Protector William Thomas, who knew Yonki Yonka for the last five years of his life. Thomas cared, arguably beyond the dictates of his employment, for the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip whom he regarded as his charges, and positioned himself as a buffer between them and the Europeans. A few other researchers have touched on Yonki Yonka’s life, Marie Fels being by far the most important, and this project has continued a journey that she began.

In contextualising Yonki Yonka’s life I have drawn on the work of many historians as well as scholars from other disciplines. The colonial frontier continues to be a focus of historians, for good reason. What happened in Australia as the British Empire rolled across the Country of its Indigenous peoples resonates today in land, law and culture. Contextual interpretation is an evolving historiography, which has required my consideration of perspectives that at times appear mutually exclusive, while the distance between my position and Yonki Yonka’s adds further complexity to the usual challenges faced by a biographer.

Yonki Yonka’s psychosocial response to his experience as a first-contact generation Boon Wurrung is important to an understanding of why, in any given situation, he reacted as he did. To answer this question, a number of methodologies have been adopted from other disciplines. I have examined his life through the psychological prism of resilience, the sociological theory of acculturation, and the psychotherapist’s construct of self-actualisation. In doing so, I have relied on the proposition that the intellectual abilities of the Kulin people were no less than those of the Port Phillip
colonisers, that their motivations are discoverable, and that an examination of Yonki Yonka’s actions can lead to a deeper understanding of why he made the choices he did.

Yonki Yonka’s life is important to us today for several reasons. As an exercise in historiography, it shows that an historical biography can be pieced together even from those lives that are fractured in time and place. Temporal and spatial discontinuities might challenge the biographer, but with clearly stated caveats they can be overcome. Through his life we know more about how the Kulin engaged with and adapted to colonisation, with some individuals quickly adopting the coloniser’s language and mobility, mediating at the cultural frontier, becoming entangled with European vices and falling victim to infectious diseases.

Second, Yonki Yonka’s story bears witness to the lives of a generation whose dispossession is still ignored, or denied, by Australians with contrary interests. The obligation of historians to bring forward reliable witnesses of the past is most acute when that past generates denial or acrimony. Each of these recovered witnesses adds to the completeness and reliability of the narrative of that time. Third, Yonki Yonka’s engagement with those who challenged his way of life, his psychological resilience in these circumstances, and his continuing agency, transcend racial preconceptions. His story energises the continuing journey towards a reconciliation of equals.

Further research

Within the limitations of this thesis, only one Aboriginal life has been examined. This has had the advantage of generating, I hope, as near complete an understanding of Yonki Yonka’s life as is possible, given the documentary resources available and the twin gulfs of temporal and cultural removal. There are many other first-contact members of the Kulin Nation who have not been equally examined, among whom I would include Nadergoroke (the wife of Derrimut, and one of those kidnapped with Yonki Yonka); Ningolobin (also known as Captain Turnbull, a leader of the Mt Macedon
clan of the Woi Wurrung); Murrum Murrumbean (Mr Hill, a cousin of Billibellary, who strongly resisted the spread of alcohol among his people); Poleorong (Billy Lonsdale, a renowned Boon Wurrung warrior who also spoke good English, and was a known magic man); and many more. Some older biographies, such as Patricia Marcard’s 1969 article on William Barak, are overdue for revision.13

As Marie Fels notes, the biographical details she recovered ‘are the platform for future work – every one of them probably leads to another story’.14 This biography responds to her challenge, and is informed by her work. If further research by historians were to generate a critical mass of historical biographies, it would then become possible for a meta-narrative of the Kulin response to the invasion of the Port Phillip district to build on those fine-grained studies, to explore commonalities and exceptions, to generalise, and to reach broader conclusions.

14 Marie Fels, I Succeeded Once, op. cit., p. 400.
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