An Archaeology of the Affective Commons

Summoning the Border in Motion

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An Archaeology of the Commons stages an encounter between two systems: the commons—as place and practice—and archaeology understood as materially grounded storytelling. Following Lauren Berlant's invitation to attend to detail, both may be treated as affective infrastructures that become legible through instruments of urban governance: title plans, parcels, cadastral surveys, easements, and public works. The commons are most intensely performed at their boundary where unlike a border, they become dynamic, constitutive processes through which social, ecological and political relations are continually remade. Working with Melbourne's vestigial town common, I describe a re-enactment of "beating the bounds"—a reactivation of a dormant colonial edge—not as a revenant to be feared but as material to be reworked. Here archaeology-as-commoning is developed as a performative method—walking, drawing, filming and incantation—in order to reanimate erased sites and redistribute their narratives into shared cultural life. Attention to micro-details—fence lines, survey coordinates, species names, culverts and benchmark stones—guides a practice that both records and makes space.

Here as well, methodologically, cartography, technical drawing, field inscription and film are gathered into critical dialogue. Maps are read as cultural instruments that stabilise abstraction while insisting on generative frictions between representation and lived ground. Through slow, materially attentive inscription and speech, the work exposes how colonial spatial logics persist in urban seams—offset grids, easements, utility corridors, "paper roads"—and how they can be unsettled. The contribution is threefold: a reframing of commons boundaries as infrastructures of relation; a method for their excavation through performative, multi-scalar practices; and a demonstration that detailed attention can open new imaginaries for urban common land.

SUMMONING THE COMMON EDGE

Where the commons—understood as both place and practice—meets archaeology—a materially grounded mode of storytelling—(McFadyen 2011; Olsen 2010; Shanks and Tilley 1992) their conjunction becomes, following Lauren Berlant, an affective infrastructure that organises attention in detail (Berlant 2016). When read through the instruments of city governance—title plans, parcels, cadastral surveys, easements and public works—this infrastructure becomes legible as a distinctly urban operation. It presses us to attend closely to the commons and, especially, to the boundary, where they are most intensely played out. Such attention, in turn, asks how situated spatial and textual practices might particularise the contested histories, ecological imperatives, and community aspirations of the commons and common land through a detailed reading of place.

The boundary—unlike the border—of the common is not a line of exclusion but a dynamic, constitutive process through which social, ecological, and political relations are continually made and remade; where, read as a dormant colonial edge, the boundary exposes how colonial traces persist and can be reworked, and where to re-remember it is to better dismantle and perhaps to remake it. Thus, the common edge is summoned, not as a *"monkey's paw"* zombie revenant,[1] but to recast it as something vital and beneficent. Further, this archaeology-as-commoning is developed as a situated, performative method, using walking, drawing, filming, and textual incantation to reanimate this erased or forgotten common land and to redistribute its narratives into shared cultural life. Finally, I propose that detailed, materially grounded, practices of inscription and representation—from cartography and technical drawing to fieldwork and film—may be used to unsettle colonial spatial logics and open new imaginaries for the future of common land.

Whereas the commons, broadly understood, may be wielded as disruptors of ownership hierarchies—catalysts for ecological and cultural repair, and prompts for new forms of public infrastructure and archaeology—they also afford profoundly situated forms of practice, providing opportunities for the commons to tell a material story. Common land, as a legal and quasi-legal, historical, instance of the commons, relatedly, but also in contrast, is the physical arena—fields and pastures, but equally town reserves, creek margins, drainage easements, stock routes that became streets, and railway verges—where the commons, and commoning practices, are played out spatially and at their greatest intensity.

Transplanted from England to its colonies, and to Australia in particular, the commons arrived in both legal form—a bundle of rights in relation to land—and as a cultural imaginary: a vestige of feudal land tenure reconstituted within the machinery of colonial expansion. In this translation what had once, in England, been a fragile accommodation between ownership and shared use became, in Australia, an instrument of enclosure and dispossession on a continental scale. Its urban residues persist in cadastral seams: sudden mysterious offsets in street grids, leftover triangles at survey joins, utility corridors and *'paper roads'*[2] that often structure contemporary urban development.

Commons as a land tenure system in England began, it is often stated, in the medieval period—that is, beginning a little less than a thousand years ago (see for example, Neeson 1993). Common land, in this strictly legal sense, is always owned by someone and, historically, never by 'the people' in any straightforward way. These early owners would have been the Lords of whichever manor the land happened to be in. Latterly, owners of common land have tended to be local councils or other kinds of urban authority, the inheritors of these commons, but many are still privately owned (Rodgers et al.

2024, 4-8). Rights in common are rights that those working for the Lord—commoners—had to use and to take material from the land; to pasture their cows, feed their pigs, take fish and even to take material to maintain their dwellings. But those ancient commons were, and where they still exist, increasingly are, far more than simple resource repositories; *"[s]o important were the 'commons' in the political economy and struggles of the medieval rural population,"* writes Silvia Federici, *"that their memory still excites our imagination, projecting the vision of a world where goods can be shared and solidarity rather than desire for self-aggrandisement, can be the substance of social relations"* (Federici 2004, 18).

Is it possible that this relational intensity of feeling persists, even when those commons have been transported across the globe? In the years after the invasion of Australia large expanses of the colony were reserved for settlers as common land, beginning in 1804 with six tracts on Sydney's outskirts (Baskerville 1995; Campbell 2007; Maddison 2007). Following the 1861 Robertson Land Acts, hundreds more were declared—many in the Victorian goldfields, others in order to sustain the rapid growth of emerging and established towns (Davies et al. 2018). Melbourne, too, had its town common.

[UN]BEATING THE BOUNDS

In May 2025 Eleanor Suess, Hélène Frichot[3] and I beat the bounds of two of the four 'lost' fragments of old Melbourne Town Common in a contemporary re-enactment of ancient English communal practices.[4] These practices, medieval in origin, inscribe memory into bodies through shared, performative action, marking and reaffirming parish boundaries (then—see Fig.1) and lost commons (now); across kerb edges, fence lines and bridge abutments, but also where no border trace remains; through buildings and across football fields.[5] For us this movement was crucial to

our understanding of the common boundary, *"the border cannot be properly understood in terms of inclusion and exclusion, but only by circulation,"* asserts Thomas Nail, insisting that, *"in part this follows from the movement of the border. Since the border is always in between and in motion, it is a continually changing process. Borders are never done "including," someone or something"* (Nail 2016).

'Beating the Bounds of Melbourne Town Common' (Suess and Zambelli 2025), proposed archaeological method as an act of commoning—a process of generating shared meaning from latent or erased urban spatial, textual and more-than-human traces. Archaeology, here, is understood as a discipline which redistributes the narratives it generates, for the common good, narratives which would otherwise be locked into the ground itself. Archaeological tools and techniques designed for the purpose released material artefacts and their stories back into the world for their re-

entanglement into it. Through beating the bounds of Melbourne's forgotten common, we excavated the disappeared, working through the palimpsestuous stratigraphy of colonial and precolonial land ownership and stewardship—repairing as we walked; through small acts of re-remembrance.[6] Like archaeology, our approach was slow, attentive to traces; names, pieces of textual memory, ecological species lists. These detailed fragments were treated as evidence—re-assembled—in order to narrate a larger story of erasure and resistance.

MORE-THAN-HUMAN DETAILS

In 'Beating the Bounds of Melbourne Town Common', films, maps, and textual incantations were themselves material moments of our summoning as much as were the expansion joints, culvert mouths, gate hinges, benchmarks and blades

of lawn grass we encountered. They were reincarnations of the lost common, not precursors to buildings or made ground, but autonomous, meaningful interventions. They acted as both affective archaeological record and common cultural artefacts. These reincarnations treated fence lines, survey coordinates, and plant and animal species names as micro-details that made available larger-scale historical and political questions about dispossession, stewardship, and spatial justice.

The fence, the verge, and the offset survey line are not neutral instruments but legal as well as cartographic artefacts and encountered details. Nicholas Blomley has shown how property law materialises through such devices: the *"space of the fence"* are traces of both technique and ideology, translating the abstract promise of ownership into the daily choreography of exclusion and trespass (Blomley 2003). These cadastral seams persist

as infrastructural afterlives of colonial governance, producing what Stephen Graham calls the *"vertical politics"* of contemporary urbanism—where power circulates through pipes, pavements, and easements as much as through statutes (Graham 2016). Roads, drains, and title boundaries thus compose a buried and paper archive of expertise and violence. To walk these lines is to traverse the legal unconscious of the city, where theodolites and culverts still perform the discipline of tenure even as they decay or are forgotten. Beating the bounds unsettles this order not by erasing it but by amplifying its cracks, drawing attention to the border as a living instrument of law.

What we called the 'Docklands' fragment of Melbourne's four original pieces of common was filmed and an incantation of found text was spoken. We chanted:

Birrarung Yarra Yarra Yarra. Coast Spinifex Osaka Chestnut Teal North Wharf Kangaroo Grass Yarra New Holland Honeyeater Bolte Red-fruit Saw-sedge Citylink Magpie-Lark Docklands Coastal Tussock Grass Ron Barassi Silver Gull Moonee Ponds Knobby Club-sedge Pearl River White-faced Heron Observation Common Reed Footscray Superb Fairywren Old Timber Sea Rush Moonee Ponds Little Wattlebird Dynon Water-ribbon Anderson Little Pied Cormorant Ireland Robust Water-milfoil Railway White Ibis Dryburgh Eel-grass Adderley Black Swan Railway River Red Gum Abbotsford Buff-banded Rail Railway Drooping She-oak Madden Boobook Railway Silver Mulga Hawke Pacific Black Duck Railway Silver Banksia Roden Great Cormorant Railway Round-Leaf Pigface Stanley Darter Railway Blackseed Glasswort Rosslyn Coot Railway Coast Spear-grass Dudley Little Black Cormorant Adderley Beaded Glasswort Southern Cross Nankeen Kestrel Adderley Grey Mangrove La Trobe Rainbow Lorikeet Wurundjeri Water-tassel Marvel Noisy Miner Bourke Swamp Paperbark Batmans Rufous Fantail Fishplate Yellow Box Collins Spotted Pardalote Brentani Showy Bossiaea Batmans Hobby McCrae Golden Wattle Wurundjeri Stubble Quail Jim Stynes

Long-fruit Water-mat Wurundjeri Shining Bronze Cuckoo Jim Stynes Berry Saltbush Webb Willie Wagtail Australian Hop Goodenia Seafarer Little Raven Adela Plains Saltmarsh Grass Tom Thumb Great Crested Tern Collins Creeping Monkey-flower North Wharf Magpie Victoria Harbour. Yarra Yarra Yarra Birrarung.[7]

These performative re-enactments exposed—or so it seemed—the cartographic boundaries we traced as abstractions that both revealed and concealed lived, performative thresholds, but also provided opportunities to find rich entanglements within that abstraction.

The recitation of plant and bird names along the boundary, in particular, may be read as a kind of multispecies witnessing. Each utterance folds the ecological, the cartographic and the historical into the same performative field, an echo of what Beth Dempster and Donna Haraway called *sympoiesis*—the making-with of worlds through partial, entangled acts of attention (Dempster 2000; Haraway 2016).

The border, in this sense, is never only a human inscription; it is also sustained by vegetal persistence, avian movement, microbial life in the soil. Elizabeth Povinelli's notion of geontopower—the distinction between Life and Nonlife—sharpens this edge, reminding us that colonial governance divided the living from the non-living, rendering certain soils inert, certain relations unthinkable (Povinelli 2016). To re-speak these names is therefore not inventory but invocation, a modest reanimation of what official grammars of tenure had silenced. The commons, attended to in this way, becomes a shared sensorium rather than simply a juridical category—an affective ecology where the human voice briefly rejoins the polyphonic matter of ground.

What happens, we asked as we walked and filmed and collected, at these boundaries, edges, borders? And what relationships, between those borders and the maps we carried with us to help trace them, developed as we walked?

BORDERS, BOUNDARIES AND EDGES

I had established the likely, approximate, border of the old common fragment by re-mapping the textual description of it (Barkly 1863 [published 1915]) via a contemporaneous map (Fig.2) onto a modern digital one (Fig.3). With our phones we followed on foot this messy re-representation of a 162 year old, text-only, land law proclamation.

Henri Lefebvre distinguishes between representations of space (maps, plans, diagrams) and representational spaces (lived, practiced, and embodied space), and he reminds us that maps, plans and diagrams are 'produced', that, *"the 'raw material' from which they are produced is nature,"* (Lefebvre 1991, 84) and that space produced in this way *"is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. Rhetorically, Lefebvre then asks, "[i]s space a social relationship? Certainly—but one which is inherent to property relationships (especially the ownership of the earth, of land)"* (Lefebvre 1991, 85). He further warns of the double reduction of space: first through its *"isotopy"* or homogenisation and then, *"the reduction of three-dimensional realities to two dimensions (for example, a 'plan', a blank sheet of paper, something drawn on that paper, a map, or any kind of graphic representation or projection)"* (Lefebvre 1991, 285). But I am not so sure that these are straightforward 'reductions', as our and countless other 'messy' maps testify to. These gestures of remapping reveal not only how space is practiced but also how its representations carry ideological weight.

Here, questions of what a messy cartographic representation of the, in turn, messy world begin to emerge. For example, John Harley develops a critical account of maps as cultural texts, arguing that maps are not neutral depictions of territory, but rather, cultural texts suffused with power. Although they fix boundaries on paper, on the
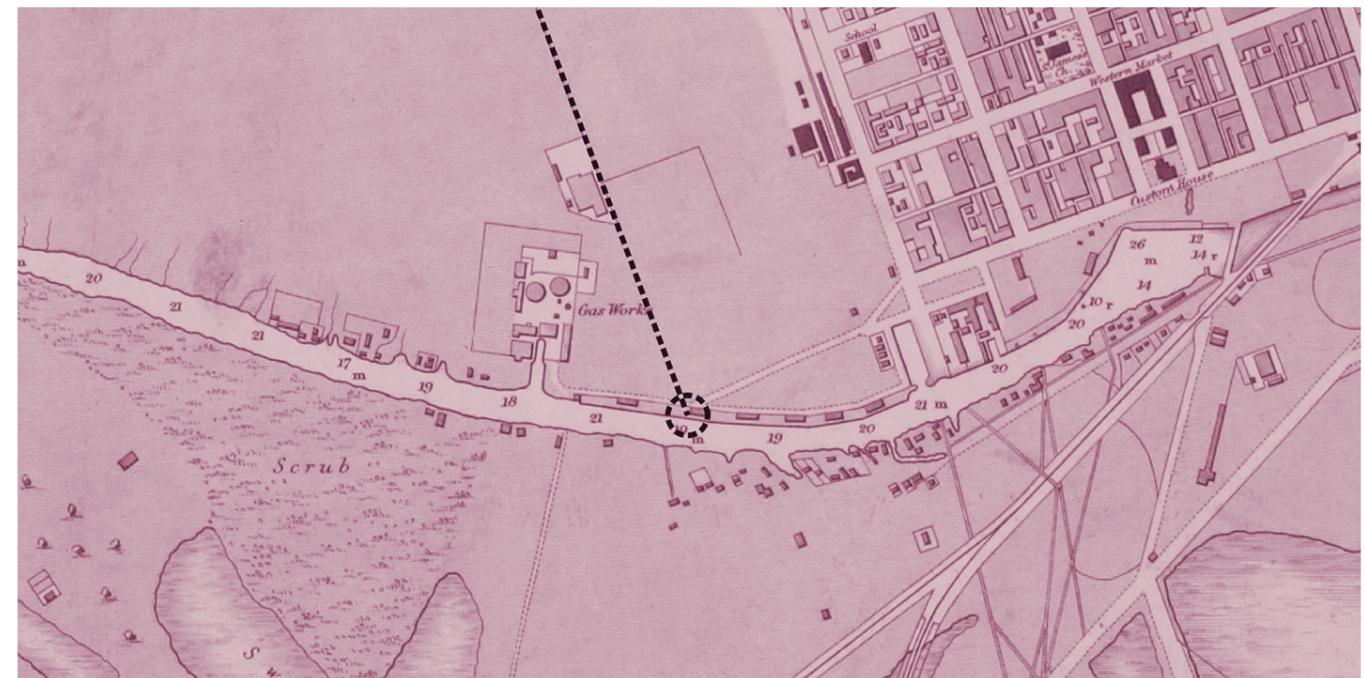
screen, these are often obscure, confused, contested realities on the ground. I take this 'ground' literally; breaking, as Harley put it, *"the assumed link between reality and representation which has dominated cartographic thinking"* (Harley 1989). Harley warns us of the myth of cartographic accuracy, and the power structures it

hides, *"[t]he topography as shown in maps, increasingly detailed and planimetrically accurate, has become a metaphor for a utilitarian philosophy and its will to power [...]. County and regional maps, though founded on scientific triangulation, were an articulation of local values and rights,"* and that, *"cartographers manufacture power"* (Harley 1989).

However, Harley, as others have also suggested, seems to have missed the democratising power of infrastructures of community mapping (Krygier 2015)—or co-creative placemaking as processes of manufacturing power for the otherwise powerless. The community mapping of the re-appropriative strategies of "counter-
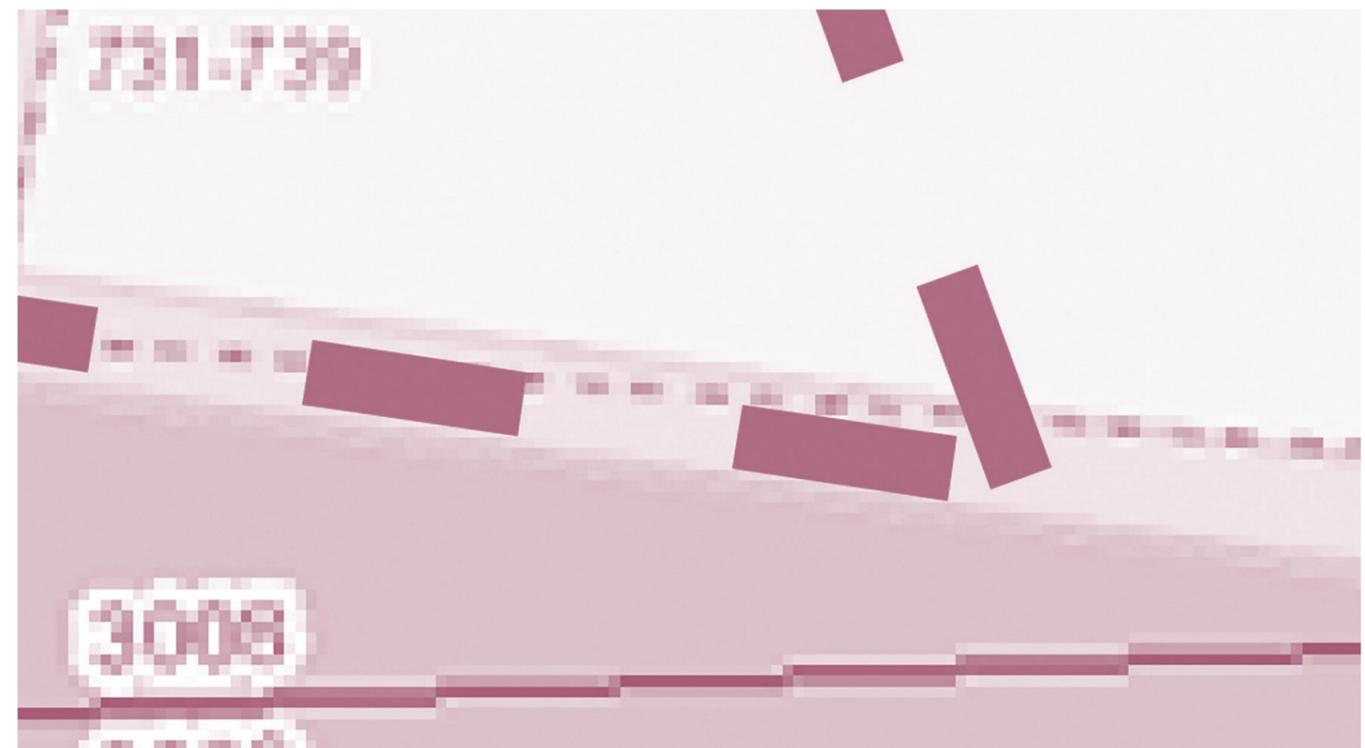

Fig.3 – Detail of map used to plan filming route. Locations derived from text description and map in Fig.2.

mapping," either with Indigenous land rights as with Nancy Lee Peluso's 'Whose Woods are These?' in Indonesia (Peluso 1995), or with Denis Wood et al, more generally, in 'Rethinking the Power of Maps' (Wood et al. 2010), or, again, with Shannon Mattern's machine-aided, re-democratisation of urban infrastructures in 'Mapping's Intelligent Agents' (Mattern 2017)—and many other like these, suggests so. Our efforts in beating the bounds, in summoning back the commons, rests on this suggestion.

Between Harley's representational politics and Nail's kinetic borders lies the method itself: an oscillation between map and motion. At the beginning of 'Deconstructing the Map' Harley quotes Beryl Markham's censure of the normative map. Markham writes, *"looking at it, feeling it, running a finger along its lines, it is a cold thing, a map, humourless and dull, born of calipers and a draughtsman's board"* (Markham 2001, quoted in Harley 1989). Yet this needn't necessarily be the case; drawings and other cartographic objects also have a messiness, a productive (though often obfuscated) inaccuracy. In this sense I hesitate to set messy 'reality' against clinical representational cartography. As I have suggested elsewhere (Zambelli 2013), drawing conventions traditionally associated with 'technical drawing'—such as scored or blue-line under-drawing and the deliberate over-crossing of axes—represent complex outcomes of both technological adaptation and artistic affectation. Historically, the scoring of vellum, for instance, made resistant surfaces receptive to ink, leaving behind a faint ghost of the drawing, while architects, beginning their journey towards stifling professionalisation, began distinguishing themselves from the 'finer' arts, retaining vestigial drawn flourishes within an increasingly codified practice. These minute gestures of excess—slightly over-long lines, for example, or carefully controlled wavering of the pencil or pen in hand across rigid construction geometries—constituted the architect's idiom of technical drawing: a subtle resistance to the tyranny of

idealised geometry, a rejoinder to Alder's claim that, *"[t]wo-dimensional drawings can never hope to capture fully the boisterous, messy world of thick things"* (Alder 1998, 522). In urban terms, such drawn excess becomes operative: millimetres of over-drawn axes become metres of street edge, verge width or rows of stadium terrace.[8] In Fig.3, the dashed line resists close reading: accuracy here is a dangerous illusion. The line is a scale-less vector, the map a raster that reveals less the more it is zoomed. Yet other modes of attention remain possible within this ambiguous cartography. Paul Emmons argues that, *"dashed lines are quasi-magical notations—allowing one to see the invisible, sewing together the physical and the metaphorical"* (Emmons 2020, 119). In Fig.4 the congruence of line and border allows one to, bathetically, see the window cleaners literally cleaning the edge, projected upwards, of the common.

What does it mean for the ground to be messy and for the representational line to be messy too—as if the map were the territory (Korzybski 1933)? At the level of their detail perhaps cartographic translations regain some of that assumed congruence lost in the difference between Lefebvre's *"representations of space and representational spaces"*. Nail in particular challenges the idea of borders as static lines, arguing instead that they are dynamic processes and flows. The cartographic line is a translation of one kind of mobile, lived, and embodied threshold, for another. *"[T]ake the border between states,"* Nail writes:

[t]he border of a state has two sides. On one side the border touches (and is thus part of) one state, and on the other side the border touches (and is thus part of) the other. But the border is not only its sides that touch the two states; it is also a third thing: the thing in between the two sides that touch the states. This is the fuzzy zone-like phenomenon of inclusive disjunction that many theorists have identified as neither/nor, or both/and. If the border were entirely reducible to the two states, nothing would divide them—which can't be true (Nail 2016, 3).

What is the material of the "fuzzy zone"? Can I pick it up? And what if the two states were not divided but instead drawn together? Or if the fuzziness didn't, or couldn't, decisively either divide or unite? This picture is made more complex when border fuzziness is both material and representational as I am arguing here. Often it is literally a verge or easement: seeded with native plants, say, crossed by services, owned by one entity, maintained by another, used by all. Here, *"a border seems to be something created not only by the societies that divide them within and from one another, but also something that is required for the very existence of society itself as "a delimited social field" in the first place. In this sense, the border is both constitutive of and constituted by society"* (Nail 2016, 4). Nail's "constitutive of" seems closer to what we see played out along the border of the common—at least of those commons which persist—where the border makes the society. For emphasis Nail reiterates that, *"the border is not the result of a spatial ordering, but precisely the other way around—the spatial ordering of society is what is produced by a series of divisions and circulations of motion made by the border"* (Nail 2016, 9).

In this understanding the commons occur most intensely at the border. As this border shifts—one way, another, or not at all until it is noticed—what seems to be lost on one side or the other, is not gone but subducted beneath, persisting within the other. It was therefore our intention to notice the common at its historic border. But as mobile entities, noticing the border is necessary but not sufficient: Nail reminds us that, *"[w]ithout regular intervention and reproduction (or even legal or economic deployments), borders decay and are forgotten, taken over by others, weakened, and so on. Borders are neither static nor given, but reproduced"* (Nail 2016, 6-7). Thus, we can say that beating the bounds is first a noticing, and then a maintenance, of the border's motion. Or rather, for us at Melbourne Town Common, because of its prolonged stasis, this perambulative motion was less

like maintenance than it was the beginning of a resuscitation through incantation.[9]

Nail argues that borders demand *"a fundamental questioning of the processes of differential inclusion and exclusion that are constitutive of the public and its subjective figurations epitomized by citizenship. This is why the question of the common must always involve an interrogation of the question of borders"* (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 279). But where Neilson theorises borders as constitutive processes, Gloria Anzaldúa also offers a situated account of their psychic, cultural, and artistic force. In this way, in

Borderlands: the New Mestiza / La Frontera, Anzaldúa treats the U.S.–Mexico border not only as a cartographic line but also as a cultural, linguistic, and psychic threshold. She theorises the border as wound, scar, and generative site of hybridity. For her, borders are affective edges that she refers to as *"[t]he psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands"* (Anzaldúa 2007, Preface). Anzaldúa 'zooms-in' to the detail of the border when she explains that:

[n]umerous overlays of paint, rough surfaces, smooth surfaces make me realize I am preoccupied with texture

as well. Too, I see the hardy contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other "objects" and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit* (Anzaldúa 2007, 66).

It is the threatening environment of the Mexico-US border which for Anzaldúa enables creativity, *"[l]iving in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes*

poets write and artists create" (Anzaldúa 2007, 73). Anzaldúa's 'borderlands' also connect to more recent discussions of commons as liminal thresholds of collective life. Charalampos Tsavdaroglou and Konstantinos Lalenis in their work on refugee housing commons describe the liminal character of the commons border where, *"refugee housing commons as threshold places of direct democracy, self-organisation, and co-habitation"* (Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis 2023, 50). As Stavros Stavrides reminds us, *"[p]orosity may therefore be considered as an experience of habitation, which articulates urban life while it also loosens the borders which are erected to preserve a strict spatial and temporal social order"* (Stavrides 2016, 68).

Together, these accounts—from Lefebvre's dialectics of space, Harley's critique of cartography, Nail's dynamic borders, Anzaldúa's affective thresholds, and Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis's commons thresholds—trace a line picked up by beating the bounds of Melbourne Town Common: the revival of affective commons boundaries through performative perambulation, where the commons emerge not as a fixed territory but as an affective, political, and creative border condition, continually made and remade through incantatory practice. If borders and cartography are abstractions that both obscure lived experience and offer a messy alternative, then drawing and archaeological inscription, I would argue, also offer a way back into the material and the gestural, just as soil collected at the boundary (Fig.5) reminds us that, yes, we can 'pick up' the border.

INSCRIPTION AND DRAWING

A preliminary outline of a typology of drawing marks might begin with those created by adding substance to a surface—the laying down of chalk, ink, or graphite—lines that can later be erased or reworked, leaving minimal trace. Marks may also result from the removal of material—through

scratching or etching. Alternatively, they might arise from moving or displacing the material, as with techniques of chasing or repoussé work. Sometimes, drawing alters the condition of the material itself—marks made by staining, substituting one substance for another, or, more recently, by changing the alignment of liquid crystals in a digital screen. This mode of substitutional marking ranges from the ink drawings of ancient Roman instruments to twentieth-century techniques still within living memory. Above all, however, drawing as mark-making, remains an alchemical, transformative act.[10] Yet this transformation is not only a matter of time: each mark folds the instant of its making into the surface, leaving a residue of gesture and attention. Ray Lucas insists on inscription as a temporal and processual act, arguing for inscription as a creative problem that resists closure, emphasising process, temporality, and the embodied gesture as central to how we understand and theorise artefacts and movement. He uses, inter alia, architectural drawing as an example, but cartography shares the inscriptive character of drawing as well as its contested relationship to the thing represented. The thingness—but most of all its existence in time—of a line is central to Lucas's argument. In the 'Fieldnotes and Sketchbooks' exhibition, Lucas recalls, *"I made a mark - a simple, synchronous gesture that left a trace of my immediate response on the surface of the paper [...]. This line was, to repeat, the trace of an immediate (that is to say, without mediation) gesture [...]. Visitors [...] could respond to this mark because the line is most clearly understood as the trace of an action or gesture that can be reconstructed on the basis of the spectator's own experience or supposition regarding the making of such marks"* (Lucas 2009, 165). I see the cartographic line in this way too: inviting response because of its relationship to gesture. This insistence on gesture and temporality also illuminates the archaeological problem of drawing; a practice in

this discipline often reduced to record-keeping, to the archive at its least affective. Leslie McFadyen argues that:

In archaeology we draw to make something of what someone else has made in the past, and we draw after we have excavated the thing that was made. This puts archaeologists off from thinking about their drawing as a creative practice in itself, and encourages them to think of it instead as a record after practice, more like a representation of something after the event (be that an event in the past or the event of excavation itself) (McFadyen 2011, 35).

Alain Schnapp goes further, insisting that, *"above all, all excavation is fabrication. The object or monument is only brought to light through the act of seeking it, and whilst observing a certain number of rules of study and interpretation isn't the archaeologist often taken for a discoverer? The discoverer must not compel the reality of the past but imagine it"* (Schnapp 1996, 30). In 'Beating the Bounds of Melbourne Town Common' we did indeed aim to "bring light through the act of seeking," yet we also, I admit, tried to "compel the reality" of it—but by imagining it through our performance of its border. Improvisatory moments in excavation reveal how drawing participates both in the making of the archive and in re-enacting past actions. As re-enactment the archaeological drawing has the incantatory power we sought in beating the bounds: carefully recited but improvisory in their making: filming where and when the mood took us, choosing particular words for our incantation from a multitude available on street signs and maps and citizen scientist lists of birds, for example. In archaeology, McFadyen explains how she:

Introduce[s] those improvisatory moments in archaeology when there is a tension between the sculpted shape of the excavated feature and the traces of action that we can draw. Between cut and fill, excavation and drawing, trowel and pencil, archaeologists find themselves amidst a prehistoric monument that is not
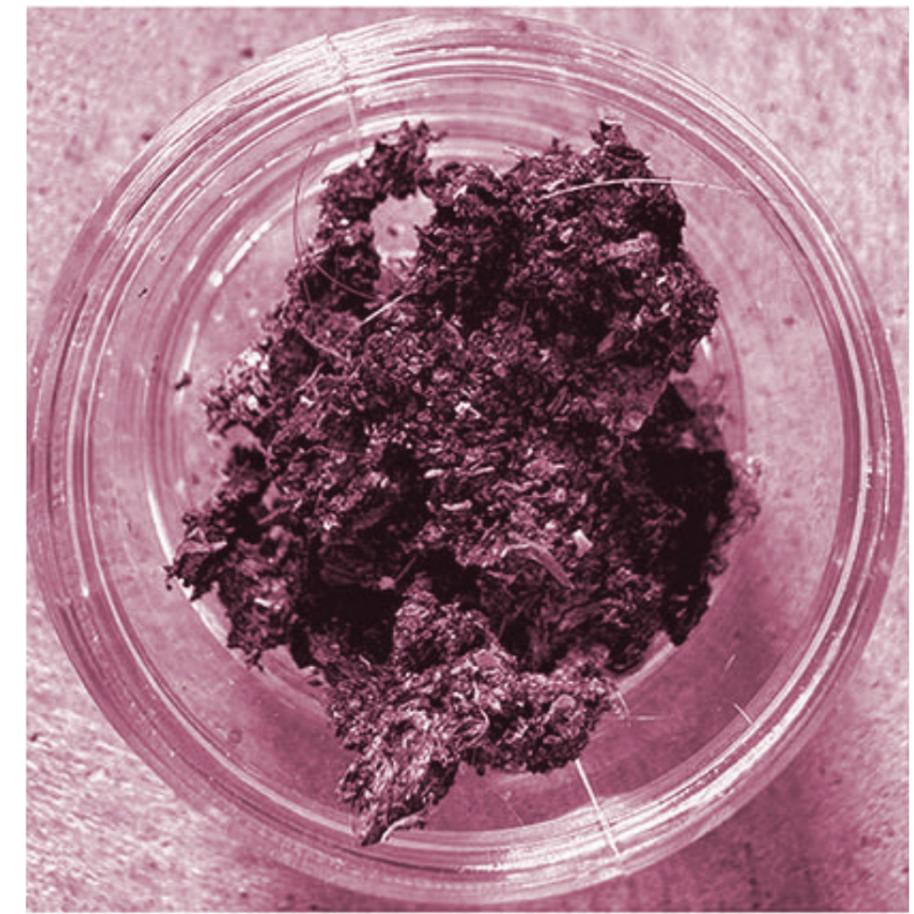
MELBOURNE TOWN COMMON

Fragment 2 (Docklands)

Commercing at a point where the north bank of Yarra Yarra River is intersected by the old city boundary; thence north by said boundary to the south fence of the Melbourne and Murray River Railway; by that fence south-easterly to its intersection with the northern boundary of the railway reserve at Batman's Hill; by part of the northern boundary thereof south-westerly to its north-western angle; thence south-easterly by said railway reserve and a prolongation thereof to the Yarra Yarra River and by that river westerly to the point of commencement.
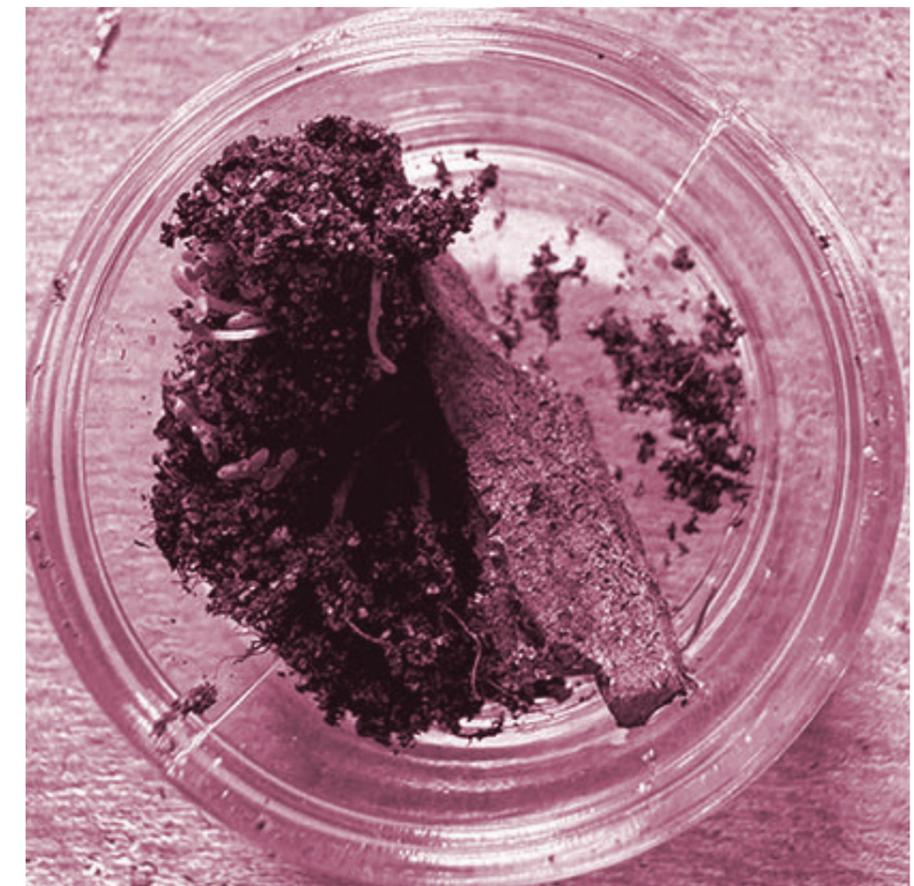

Fig.5 – Text describing the boundary of Melbourne Town Common (Barkly 1863 [published 1915]). Soil collected at the boundary of old Melbourne Town Common (Suess and Zambelli 2025) – location as Fig.2, Alessandro Zambelli, 2025.

quite here but yet at hand. What I want to emphasise about drawing, and about bringing the making of the archive into that practice, is how it changes the ways we can both write about time and relate prehistoric things to past and future (McFadyen 2011, 33-35).

In 2012, at an educational archaeological excavation at Must Farm[11] run by McFadyen, I watched her inscribe into the soil, with her trowel, the outline of what she described as 'tree throw.' Tree throw is indicated by the subtle change in soil tone and texture where, in this case, thousands of years earlier, a falling tree, its roots rotating upwards, brought with it a new stratigraphic order. Lesley McFadyen drew the new border of these disordered soils through, to my eyes, an incantatory series of magical gestures. This parallel between trowel and pencil made this archaeologist's gestures directly legible as drawing and as sympathetic magic. Here, the drawn border, the natural border, and the border inscribed in the soil, become, not one, not exactly, but a palimpsestuous layering—all layers active and affecting one-another. In this sense, both archaeology and architecture, as well as our incantatory beating of the bounds, meet in representational acts which are always also performative: a making that stages past, present, and future in a messy simultaneity. Each mark not only recording but remaking, insisting that design and excavation alike are processes of continual becoming. What does all this mean for the commons themselves, where the methods of archaeology and drawing converge upon questions of thresholds and futures?

COMMONS FUTURES

I have found commons borders to be fluid, in constant tension between cartographic line and affective threshold. The commons border does not define a territory where things are allowed (hierarchically by others) but instead generates a resistance to neoliberal pressures—it exists in spite of those pressures and not as

a beneficence of the structures that support them. How is this resistance constituted? It is constituted through social, political and affective infrastructure, and in the detail of the common threshold; the section at the verge, the dimension of a gap, the specification of a fence. Building on 'Beating the Bounds,' archaeology is understood as a commoning method: a situated, collaborative set of practices that reanimates erased spaces and spatial hierarchies through micro-scale performative acts of documentation and representation. Using walking, drawing, collecting and film as investigative tools, it attended to boundary markers, survey lines, and ecological traces as material moments where multiple temporalities converged. In doing so, it framed representation not as a precursor to spatial practice, but as a meaningful act in its own right—one capable of unsettling colonial legacies and opening new commons imaginaries.

In 'The Tell-The-Tale Detail' Marco Frascari argues that architectural details are not decorative fragments but generative joints where construction and meaning meet (Frascari 1996). Tracing architectural histories from Leon Battista Alberti to Carlo Scarpa, he shows how details structure perception, order buildings, and unite ethics and aesthetics. In Scarpa's "fertile details", ornament and function merge, proving that in architecture, the detail tells the tale. It is the detail, then, that in this account, anchors the commons to the world—the scored line, the incantatory text, the boundary marker, the soil at the water's edge. These small material and gestural acts are not simply documentary and material residues, but constitutive of the commons' border itself: they hold together the motion, decay, and renewal of that threshold. As both archaeology and spatial representation reveal, the border's vitality resides in such minute negotiations—in the hand's wavering across an underscored line, in the measured perambulation of an ancient invisible boundary line, in the act of naming plants and birds along that boundary. The

detail is where the not-so-abstract line meets the lived and affective thickness of ground; where the commons is continually remade through attention, care, and repetition. In this sense, to work in detail is to practice a form of commoning—to keep the border in motion, to resist its forgetting, and to sustain its potential as a shared, ever-becoming infrastructure of relation.

If every boundary is also a social contract, interactions with the living as much as the dormant must involve practices of care. Silvia Federici has described commoning as an "autonomous reproduction of life," a collective refusal of enclosure that begins in maintenance and extends to solidarity (Federici 2010). The modest gestures of cleaning, tracing, or naming along the edge belong to this lineage: they are reproductive acts that keep the possibility of relation alive. Jane Bennett's vibrant matter illuminates the political charge of such gestures, where the agency of things—the rusted hinge, the tuft of grass—presses back upon human intention (Bennett 2010). To dwell with this vibrancy is to accept that repair is never completion but continuous negotiation. The future of the commons, then, is not secured through law or plan—at least not alone—but through repeated, attentive acts that bind the affective, the material, and the ethical. It endures in the detail: in the daily maintenance of shared ground.

If the boundary of Melbourne's Town Common, once revealed, makes visible the operations of colonial surveying and forgetting, it also makes available a way of thinking more generally about the commons as an ongoing negotiation between edge and edge-adjacency, law and use, map and gesture. Here, the border is not simply the limit of the common but the place where its social and material negotiation can become most visible. Attending in detail to that edge is an act of commoning—tracing and remaking shared life through small, situated gestures of repair, delineation, and care.

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NOTES

1. In which a family uses a mummified and cursed monkey's paw to wish their dead son alive again; as frantic knocking sounds at the door, they reverse their wish—moments before his disfigured, undead, body would have entered JACOBS, W. W. The Monkey's Paw [electronic resource]. Edition ed.: Project Gutenberg, 2009 [1902].

2. 'Paper roads' are mapped and unbuilt road reserves—legal corridors existing only on survey plans, marking intended, but never realised, infrastructure.

3. Professor Eleanor Suess, Deakin University and Professor Hélène Frichot, University of Melbourne.

4. This re-enactment was first exhibited as: SUESS, E. AND A. ZAMBELLI. Beating the Bounds of Melbourne Town Common [panels and film]. In V. MANNERING, K. MCFARLANE, N. TORY-HENDERSON, H. FRICHOT AND D. NEWELL eds. Repair Stories [exhibition]. Melbourne: Melbourne Design Week, 2025. ibid. Then published as: ZAMBELLI, A. AND E. SUESS. Unbeating the Bounds of Australia's Colonial Commons. In H. FRICHOT, L. BENJAMIN AND V. MANNERING eds. Repair Stories. Melbourne: Perimeter Editions, 2025 [in press].

This work, in turn, builds upon related work done by Siobhan O'Neill as part of our 'Wastes and Strays' project: O'NEILL, S. In-Common Sites. Wastes and Strays, 2021. and RODGERS, C., A. ZAMBELLI, R. HAMMERSLEY, E. CHEATLE, et al. English Urban Commons: The Past, Present and Future of Green Spaces. Edition ed. London: Routledge, 2024.

5. Part of the border passes, now, through the centre of Marvel Stadium (also known as Docklands Stadium).

6. For a detailed meaning of 'palimpsestuous', see: DILLON, S. The Palimpsest: literature, criticism, theory. Edition ed. London: Continuum, 2007.

7. Text as read by Eleanor Suess and Alessandro Zambelli at the 'Festival of the Commons in Architectural Writing': ZAMBELLI, A. AND E. SUESS 2025. Dispelling the Unquiet Bounds of Australia's Colonial Commons. In Proceedings of the The Festival of the Commons in Architectural Writing, The Bartlett, UCL, 20th June 2025.

8. The old commons boundary passes through the middle of Marvel Stadium.

9. One historical form of beating the bounds was the Rogantide Perambulation HINDLE, S. Beating the Bounds of the Parish: Order, Memory and Identity in the English Local Community, c. 1500-1800. In M. HALVORSON AND K. SPIERLING eds. Defining community in early modern Europe. Ashgate, 2008, p. 205-227.

10. This typology was first proposed in: ZAMBELLI, A. The Undisciplined Drawing. Buildings, 2013, 3(2), 357-379.

11. A Bronze Age archaeological site in Cambridgeshire: BALLANTYNE, R., A. COOPER, D. GIBSON, M. KNIGHT, et al. Must Farm pile-dwelling settlement: Volume 2. Specialist reports, 2024.