



Image: Vernon AH KEE, Kurna Language Ephemeral Public Art Project, Fenn Place, University of South Australia, City West campus.
Photograph by Sam Noonan.

VERNON AH KEE: KAURNA LANGUAGE EPHEMERAL PUBLIC ART PROJECT

Opening remarks by Professor Irene Watson, Pro Vice Chancellor Aboriginal Leadership & Strategy, University of South Australia

I acknowledge that we gather on the country of Kurna peoples, and I acknowledge all other first nations and peoples present for the opening of a great artists work, Vernon Ah Kee working in collaboration with the Kurna language group and Uncle Lewis. We should note that the country in this place we now call Adelaide and the entire continent is full of Aboriginal languages, every place, all things of the natural world have a first name, an aboriginal name.

I want to begin with a story of the huntswoman spider Wururi, from the lands of my ancestors of the coorong and the south east.

Wururi, our ancestor scared people by her angry and dangerous behaviour of lighting fires while the community slept. At her death there was a celebration of her passing and there was feasting on her body. As different peoples arrived, first the Ramindjeri, and then other peoples came from the different directions, and as they ate and devoured parts of Wururi's body each began speaking a distinct language.

It is one of our stories of how the diversity of language grew from the land, and there are others which live in the land from which they grew. The power and knowledge of Wururi was shared at her death to provide for the creation of a diverse range of languages. Such is the diversity of Aboriginal language, evidence of the density of Aboriginal peoples, knowledges and boundaries across Aboriginal Australia.

Aboriginal boundaries that were shared for thousands of years were held together by principles of Yara - Kurna, Wutamba – Boandik , ngarpartji ngarpartji - Yankuntjatjara, they generally translate into the English word reciprocity.

Yara is a word that is core to how our nations lived in this continent for many thousands of years. A word which provides insight into coexistence and how it can be achieved, by way of the law of reciprocity and the shared space of two-way learning. It means a form of exchange, or that you give me and I give in return. Sharing and caring is the core of Aboriginal relationships to each other and the land. The words Yara, wutamba, ngarpartji ngarpartji are words meaning – you give me and I will give you in return.

Yara is one word which forms part of the project of Vernon Ah Kee, which ties language, culture and identity to place as a relationship. The act of painting the word in bold red across Fenn Place shouts out - our languages live in spite of the violence of colonialism and policies of linguisticide that is, the extermination of language.

The colonial project of eradicating aboriginal languages did not work, our languages are still spoken and will continue to be spoken by future generations, but there remains a threat as this project reminds us. But the truth and the spirit of—*always was always will be Aboriginal land peoples and language*—simply lives on in the land, under the duress of colonialism.

I acknowledge Kurna Elder Dr. Lewis O'Brien; Kurna Warra Karrpanthi language group members, and their permission and support to use the Kurna language for this project.

I acknowledge the beautiful, the critical and the visionary work of Vernon Ah Kee, and am honoured that he has brought his work and ideas to Kurna lands.

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Vernon Ah Kee: Kurna Language Ephemeral Public Art Project is a Samstag Museum of Art presentation on Fenn Place, University of South Australia's City West campus.

TAPA / Pathway

MUIYU / Seat of emotions

MARNI / Good

MARNININTHI / becoming better, improving

Located southern end of Fenn Place, adjacent to Hindley Street

YARA / Reciprocity

Located northern end of Fenn Place, adjacent to North Terrace