

Wangayarta Burial Ground Opening Speech

Delivered by Professor John Carty, Head of Humanities

December 7, 2021

- *Ngadlu Tampinthe Ngadlu Kurna Yartangka Tikanthe*
- Today of all days, in this place of all places, to acknowledge that we stand on Kurna Country means more than words alone can carry.
- Today is not a funeral. But like a funeral – we stand together, and we bear witness. We stand here with our own sorrows, our own silences, and try to imagine something bigger than them. And we try to bear witness to it.
- The place where we stand is old Kurna Country, but it is also a new kind of Country, bravely imagined into being by Kurna people – and created together in the spirit of reconciliation. But as we know – there is no reconciliation without truth, and so it is important, as we stand here in solidarity, that we also stand in the truth of today.
- The truth here is pretty simple. There are hundreds of Kurna ancestors sitting in boxes, on shelves, in our Museum. There are many sad roads that lead to that situation – but the most common one was simply Adelaide itself. So many of these ancestors were disturbed from their resting places by the building of the roads we all drive on, the offices we work in, the homes we live in. The development of our town, of our society, was built on the disturbance of Kurna Country, and the lives (and deaths) of Kurna people.
- It is that painful recognition that must be spoken out loud today, of all days. Not to revisit the past or be weighed down by it, but to stand here together, in what is perhaps the first time for many of us, and to *share* it.
- Part of the truth that needs to be spoken today involves not only the physical building of our town – but the ideas underpinning it. The racist and dehumanising attitudes of scientists – from the Museum, the University and the Medical profession – that sought to treat Kurna ancestors not as humans, but as specimens to study.
- Many of the ancestors we will rebury were disturbed by my ancestors – the people who came before me in the Museum and in the University of Adelaide. So to my Kurna brothers and sisters here today – I say sorry. I am sorry on behalf of the Museum, on behalf of the University. I am sorry on behalf of all of us. I am sorry that our forebears did not treat your ancestors as brothers and sisters. I am very sorry for that.
- Sorry can't just be words. It also has to be expressed in our actions. This beautiful place where we stand – Wangayarta – is the result of those actions, it is the response to that history. And so it is worth explaining to everyone briefly how this place came into being...

- Reburials happen around Australia, and here in Adelaide. When it is one ancestor, or a small number, those people can usually be buried somewhere close to their original resting place. But when there are hundreds of ancestors – that simply isn't possible. Kurna had to imagine a new kind of place. This place here.
- The Adelaide Cemeteries Authority – through the remarkable Robert Pitt, offered this land to make that place possible. The Premier Steven Marshall offered the funding to turn this land into a memorial park.
- Then through the vision and leadership of Jeffrey Newchurch – the Kurna memorial park reference group was born, comprised of Kurna leaders and representatives from other Aboriginal groups, along with the Museum, Aboriginal Affairs and Adelaide Cemeteries. We met 16 times over the past two years developing the principles for how to build a place. And then we developed and shared those designs in a series of public meetings with the Kurna community. The co-design process was lead by Kurna – and realised through the team of landscape architects at Oxigen.
- The layout of the park is everywhere determined by Kurna principles.
 - The shield
 - The four burial mounds
 - The plants
 - The soil
- Today the Kurna community is reburying ancestors from the northern Adelaide plains into the northern mound, back into their Country. The plants that will grow around the ancestors are the plants they grew up with. Their food, their medicine, their shade. The ancestors will once again be surrounded by the smells, sounds and colours of their Country and importantly, the love and care of their descendants.
- It is a day many years in the making by the Kurna community; some of the Kurna elders that started this journey of repatriation and healing are sadly no longer with us; it is an important moment in time and it's fitting that we stop and reflect on this moment and acknowledge there is still more to do, together.
- I want to conclude with some thankyou's ... I want to acknowledge all the Kurna Reference Group members, and the leadership of Kirstie Parker and Nerida Saunders.
- Thanks to the University of Adelaide for their financial support and to everyone who has provided their moral support. In particular I want to thank Ben Kile, Sandra Lilburn and Lee Amoroso.
- I thank my colleagues at the Museum – who have cared for these ancestors, and made sure they were safe for this, their final journey. And in particular to Anna Russo – we would not be here today without you.

- I want to thank the Premier, who funded this project. Thank you for raising your eyes above the political horizon and looking at the bigger human responsibility here. Thank you for recognising the incredible burden on Aboriginal people to rebury their ancestors. And for making this a priority not only for your government, but for our society.
- The greatest thanks here are reserved for Kurna. I want to thank the Kurna leaders who brought us to this day. I know it was not easy. You put yourselves on the line to do this. You stood up and took the weight of these decisions – decisions you should never have had to make. You said, each of you, that we will not be the ones to pass this burden onto our children. We will be the ones to make it right. And so it is. Look around you. Your courage and resilience are here for all to see. Thank you for inviting us all to share this with you.
- We are all, as brothers and sisters beside you, healed by the scale and generosity of your gesture.

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