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## Engaging communities in archives and museums

Imelda Miller, Olivia Robinson and Cameo Dalley

Imelda Miller is an Australian South Sea Islander and curator, First Nations Cultures, at Queensland Museum. Olivia Robinson, a Bidjara Aboriginal woman, leads collection engagement at the State Library of Queensland. In this interview with Cameo Dalley, recorded in 2021, they discuss their experiences working in major collecting institutions, and issues to do with repatriation, community engagement and representing difficult and traumatic histories. They also reflect on their collaborative practice on a major exhibition at the State Library of Queensland in 2019 titled *Plantation Voices: Contemporary Conversations with Australian South Sea Islanders*, which presented stories of South Sea Islanders working on sugar plantations in Queensland from 1863 to 1904, and acknowledged the determination and resilience of the Australian South Sea Islander community today.

### Biographies and coming to institutions

**Imelda Miller:** I'm Imelda Miller and I work at Queensland Museum and I'm the curator responsible for the Pacific and Torres Strait Islander collections. I've been working as a curator for nearly two decades now, and I really enjoy the work – but my main interest is around Australian South Sea Islander history and heritage and creating an awareness about that. My passion also is about not just working in museums, but how I can

do this work outside of the museum borders, looking at different ways of working in communities, with communities and for communities to tell the stories that they want to tell.

**Olivia Robinson:** My name is Olivia Robinson and I lead collection engagement in Queensland Memory at the State Library of Queensland. I have been working in cultural heritage with collections and with communities – telling stories about collections, for probably a couple of decades as well, and I love the opportunity to sit down with people and for people to tell me their stories – about family, experience and about communities and history. There is lots of laughter often times when people talk about things, and sometimes lots of tears as well. So when people are so willing to share their stories, I've been really blessed to hear them. For the last 20 years or so, I have been able to work with a lot of people, particularly a lot of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and more recently often times with Imelda working with Australian South Sea Islanders as well.

**Cameo Dalley:** You come from communities yourselves, and I wonder if you can talk a bit about how you came to be working in the institutions that you're in?

**Imelda Miller:** So I am a third-generation Australian-born Australian South Sea Islander and I came to museums really just through earning some part-time work and needing to make my way in the world, and during that time I learnt about collections. That's actually where we all met. I really enjoyed the community of the work and working together and learning from one another. I then discovered objects and how objects can actually tell stories about people's experiences, people's lived experiences especially. I learnt how objects they have these lives of their own and how that evolves over time. During my earlier years at Queensland Museum, I discovered the collections from the Pacific Island nations of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. They were from the islands where my ancestors come from, and I was really sort of taken back at the time and sort of thought, I really want to know more about this.

It was a time when I was exploring that side of my story, and it was through these collections that I was able to explore my identity and better understand the story of my ancestors. This experience or connection was something I wanted to share with other people, and not just with my Australian South Sea Islander side, but with the many communities who are represented in these collections. I could see it was important to bring people and objects

together to help better understand the stories the objects told, but for people, for communities, as I felt like there was just this one side being told within museum walls. I wanted to explore what communities wanted, how they connected to these objects and see what that meant to them when they're in their presence, because I believed that objects come alive and that they're just waiting for people to come along and activate them. I've just always been interested in going into archives and recognising familiar names and familiar places and connecting those things with people who will connect with it. For me that's what the work's all about.

**Olivia Robinson:** I'm Bidjara and my traditional Country is in south-west Queensland. Despite growing up in Brisbane I've always had quite a strong connection to Bidjara Country. I often visit. I went to university and I did a Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in history and nearing the end thought 'What am I going to do now? I wonder what they do at a Museum?' So I contacted Queensland Museum and I think they were very excited at the fact that I was a young Aboriginal woman who was coming to the end of my history degree, who was wanting to volunteer just to find out what was going on, and they said, 'Yep, you'll be right. Come in here'.

I volunteered at that museum for a while before working in community organisations. I eventually came back as assistant curator in the Aboriginal studies area at Queensland Museum and then I became senior curator soon after that.

I was quite young at the time, and it was an incredible experience. I learned so much about myself as well as about the collection and about how people interact with it, and the importance of people's cultural heritage, their moveable cultural heritage, that sense of identity that people have and, of course, I had the opportunity to work with communities on the repatriation of ancestral remains and secret sacred objects. It was a big responsibility, challenging, moving and very rewarding. It educated me about all the responsibility that community often take on today to try and fix the problems of the past, those questionable deeds that people did so many years ago. It's good to be part of addressing it and asking, 'Well, what can we do now to allow people to rest or to return those sacred objects that shouldn't have been taken?' It's a healing process and big responsibility that Elders take on to work with places like a museum or cultural and collecting institutions around their cultural heritage and its care.

I extended my interest in collections and moved to the State Library eventually working in 'Queensland Memory', the part of the library that works with building and promoting documentary heritage such as photos, objects, books, documents and digital stories. Like Imelda, I really believe that these tangible objects are nothing by themselves. What brings them alive are the stories that people have about them, and so the great stuff and the stuff that I love is actually getting to that story and seeing the value that people bring to it – it's often the community that brings that understanding and value to objects.

**Cameo Dalley:** It's interesting hearing you both talk about the kind of potency of objects and of archives and of photographs in terms of people coming into the institution that you're working in and how powerful that can be as an experience. As you say, those spaces historically haven't always been hospitable to communities, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or South Sea Islander people. They've not necessarily been seen as places that those communities feel comfortable in or that are accessible. I wonder how you see your role, in sort of managing that or trying to change that for people when it might be quite difficult or confronting for people to come into those spaces?

**Imelda Miller:** Yeah, good question, Cameo, I think we, staff working in these organisations, talk about this constantly because community is a big part of our jobs. Well, working with community, and I think for me or from my experiences and working with my colleagues over the years, I have seen how people relate to seeing their own working in these institutions and that instant kind of rapport that our community visitors get when they visit. I think having your own people greeting you is really integral to people being comfortable, especially with some of the emotions people experience during a visit. It can be enjoyable, creative, traumatic and/or upsetting, then other times it can be healing. Everyone is different. I think having people who are Indigenous or First Nations or from that community, that no matter what community, that people see themselves there in that institution and see that 'Okay, so there's, you know, a possibility that I'm going to be understood here'. It's integral for cultural safety and the wellbeing of community when they're coming into these historical institutions. It's watching, listening, supporting and caring for your visitor while they're in this space that could bring up histories or lived experiences that might have been traumatic or emotional for them. For example, finding a photo of their ancestor, or their grandmother for the first time, and creating space and time for people to be

able to take in new information, but also to be able to give support to people with information at the times when they require it, so they're able to process their way through it.

**Olivia Robinson:** The other thing that I thought of too, Imelda, when you were talking about it, is that, as collecting and cultural institutions, state-owned institutions, we have a remit to collect the history and cultural heritage of Queensland, and for a lot of Australian South Sea Islander history, Aboriginal history, Torres Strait Islander history, often times those types of histories have been marginalised.

In many cases, our collections are donated by families or we've acquired them from the mainstream of the community, sometimes often wealthier members of the community, going back 100–150 years. What was amazing about the times that I've worked with Imelda, particularly around the Australian South Sea Islander community, when we marked the 150 years of the first South Sea Islanders to come to Queensland in 2013, and then some other work we've done, including *Plantation Voices*, is that it is about agency. We were able to acknowledge the fact that a lot of the material that we had in the collection, in the State Library collection, about Australian South Sea Islanders, was through the lens of Europeans and the way they saw the world around them. There wasn't anything in the collection that was by Australian South Sea Islanders, reflecting on their own history and culture.

So Imelda, as a curator of *Plantation Voices*, went through that journey of going, 'Well, this is our opportunity to do that'. Imelda, you're right in the sense that the collections that we have as state institutions really need to reflect the diverse community. There's a lot of work that we still need to do around that to even out the collection and perspectives in storytelling.

## The acquisition of objects and repatriation

**Cameo Dalley:** As you say, there's a lot of objects and archives and photographic materials that are held both where we are today, at the State Library of Queensland, and also Queensland Museum – some of those objects were acquired in ways that's really ... well objects were stolen.

**Imelda Miller:** Questionable, yeah.

**Cameo Dalley:** How does that history fit in with the relationship with communities? Do you get a sense of people still feeling that sense of kind of mistrust or distrust in the institutions given some of that history?

**Olivia Robinson:** Yes, I think so. I mean, it's generational, isn't it? It's been going on for a long time, and so there's been an acknowledgement of that, say, in the last 20 to 30 years, but there's still a long road to go down that path of understanding and the healing process because it seems like a long time ago, I suppose, when you talk about it, but it really isn't. It's only, maybe, one generation from where we are now.

**Cameo Dalley:** How important do you think repatriation processes and those sorts of things are as part of that journey, that healing journey that you talked about?

**Olivia Robinson:** Repatriation is very important. Unfortunately, though, it's a complex situation. A lot of communities, they really want material returned to them, but they also acknowledge that they don't have land for a keeping place or secure access to land to put artefacts back on Country or to reinter their ancestors; somewhere safe where it isn't taken again, ending up in a collecting institution or in someone's private home.

In saying that, institutions have become more open and are increasing access. Many communities also know that their heritage is going to be looked after there and accessible. I think that gives people some comfort in the absence of having keeping places or safe spaces where they can bring material back to Country.

The repatriation of ancestral remains, however, is quite different and there's definitely a lot of healing that happens as part of that process. I've been involved in, over the years, a few repatriation ceremonies and there's really nothing like it in that sense of spiritual connection that people have, and it transcends sort of everything, the reality of our day-to-day work. To take a person who has been sitting in a museum storeroom or something like that, for 100 years or so, and take them back home and then lay them to rest on Country – how good is that? It's a privilege to be a part of it.

**Imelda Miller:** Yeah, I'll leave that with Olivia because she has more experience of working in repatriation. I think it – that word 'repatriation' is really interesting as it starts to then sneak into looking at objects and what is the definition of 'repatriation' when it comes to collections. How do museums or cultural institutions deal with repatriation of objects and deal

with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or Pacific Peoples being the owner of the cultural heritage, and I think there's a bigger conversation to be had around that in coming years, and I think that it's going to be a big topic. I think how we deal with that moving forward, there's going to be a lot of conversations with communities at the table to actually work out what does that mean and how does that take place, and what is suitable for everybody.

And I think, Olivia, you touched on something really good, which was just around access, and I think that's access and agency, and representation, and we've been talking about that for a little while. The R words.

We also, in talking over many years, talk about reclamation and that word 'repatriation' was one of the first words that we talked about when we talked about *Plantation Voices*. You know when we were sort of thinking about what that exhibition could be about. It sort of started with repatriation. The repatriation or deportation of South Sea Islander people.

## **Collaborative curation and *Plantation Voices* exhibition, State Library of Queensland, 2019**

**Imelda Miller:** *Plantation Voices*, that was an exhibition Olivia and I worked on here at the State Library in 2019. The full title was *Plantation Voices: Contemporary Conversations with Australian South Sea Islanders*. I was lucky enough to be brought over to the State Library of Queensland, and really acknowledge and thank the State Library for that opportunity to work here, to do that exhibition. It came at a time when I was looking for a new challenge as a curator, and to explore your own community stories is always an honour, and it is a privilege to be able to do that.

When Olivia and I first met and we sort of thought, 'Oh, well, what is this about?' We talked about repatriation of South Sea Islanders, the deportation of islanders, this mass deportation of islanders out of this country, one of the biggest mass deportations in this country's history, yet nobody knows about it. As part of the exhibition we thought, 'What are our themes going to be for this?'

And we thought about how one is recognising that path, then it was about the repatriation of islanders, and then we thought, the next big thing about reclaiming our own histories, you know, is through a recognition statement, through being nationally recognised and then, finally, the end part was about our – the next generation, like, the resilience that they now stand very confident in who they are, where they come from, where their ancestors come from and how they live. Today they're now telling that story through – and in this case – through their contemporary artworks. I think that was a really powerful moment, and then, you know, we're talking about repatriation, and I think that all that – it all kind of goes in together, and I think it comes also as a part of that recognition and how – and what – are the actions that we do as part of repatriation of stories or objects, what is the action that we're actually going to do to make that happen.

**Cameo Dalley:** The exhibition ran from February to September 2019, but there was a whole process of developing that exhibition that came before it, but before we kind of get to that collaborative process, for someone who didn't get to see the exhibition, can you give me a sense of what it was like as a physical space or as an experience moving through the exhibition?

**Olivia Robinson:** It was bright. Imelda worked with the designer who was appointed to the exhibition. When Imelda thought of the exhibition, there was lots of orange, bright colours, reflective, I suppose, of mangos, islands and flowers like frangipanis.

**Imelda Miller:** I suppose it was the idea of memory as well that when you're thinking of those who are dearest, it is usually around a sunrise or a sunset and you get that orange, and because we were presenting our ancestors in that case, through photographs and objects, it was about evoking a sunset where you think about those memories and those dearest to you.

**Olivia Robinson:** Listening to Imelda talking about her vision for the exhibition, it was also around how people would sit and talk. Imelda spoke about how Australian South Sea Islanders would plant mango trees and then sit under them and use them for shade and talk. So mango trees were a big part of people's stories across Queensland.

**Cameo Dalley:** It sounds like it was a rich kind of visual experience, very colourful and bright and attractive. In some of the images that I've seen online [of the exhibition] there were also some historical photographs, black-and-white photographs, taken of South Sea Islanders working in the cane fields. Some of that imagery is also quite difficult or challenging for



people. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how you balance between what we might think of on the one hand as these kinds of bright attractive, seductive aesthetic with also this quite difficult and traumatic history, those two things sitting alongside each other?

**Imelda Miller:** I think we are very happy people and I wanted people to feel that and, yes, we do have this dark history. It is important to understand that this exhibition built on a project from 2013. I was at the museum, Olivia was here at the State Library, and Ruth McDougall was curator Pacific Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art, and we joined together for a project called *Memories from a Forgotten People* during the 150th commemoration of South Sea Islanders coming into south-east Queensland. We digitised the collections and we engaged the community with the collections and the institutions. There were many stories and perspectives as well as many mixed emotions. However, for me I saw how resilient the community is and how we have come out the other side.

Going into *Plantation Voices* was about celebrating that, so it was about acknowledging it and then it was about celebrating who we are and how resilient we are as people. Our history is safe, with our young people going forward, I didn't want it to be emotionally dark because it is a dark history, the lightness or brightness of the orange background was about seeing us as well, so in contrast to the black-and-white photographs. We did some life-sized photographs to say to our audiences, 'Don't walk around our history anymore, look at us'.

We started off working through a bit of a timeline, but then what we realised is that this history, these historical photos, are not just about something that happened in the past, it is intrinsically connected to who we are today as part of our identity. I think using that bright colour to connect everything together, the past and the present and the future, I think was powerful.

**Olivia Robinson:** I would watch Imelda as she was curating the exhibition because we had so much material in the collection, photographs, and how do you distinguish what should go in an exhibition and what shouldn't? Imelda was quite savvy because I think with each selection, Imelda wanted to make a point with it. You [Imelda] wanted it to be meaningful and for it to say something to a person that was viewing it. So, I remember this one photo that you [Imelda] were particularly keen on including, and it was of the mother in the field with her child.



**Figure 9.1. South Sea Islander woman planting sugar cane in a field.**

Source: State Library of Queensland Collection, negative number: 142325.

**Imelda Miller:** Yes, I remember that photo. That photograph has been with me since I started in my museum days it was probably one of the first images I saw – and it started to ignite that kind of drive in me to find out more. Like, seeing her picture, and I remember standing in front of it one day. It was a large-scale photograph (Figure 9.1). I probably first saw it in the 1990s and I remember standing there with my parents, she had this little baby in the field at her feet and she was smiling in that photo, and I remember us saying, ‘I wonder if she was really smiling?’, and because there is another photo and she is not smiling, but when you look at that photo, you see this mother with her child at her feet in a sugar plantation and half the field has been ploughed and there’s still half the field to be done. I wondered about her story, what happened to them and where did they go.

I remember sitting in the office trying to write the first words about the exhibition. I sat for four days, and I didn’t write a thing, but then I really had to confront in myself, well, why can’t I put pen to paper here. I looked at this photo of the woman and child; people on boats and cane fields. What I ended up writing actually became a quote in the exhibition, and it was about seeing those photos for the first time and that I wondered who they were and who were their families and where did they go and what happened to them, and for me it was just, like, I get emotional now talking about it.

**Cameo Dalley:** I can see some tears there.

**Imelda Miller:** For me it was, like, ‘Oh my, I’ve been looking at these photos for 20 years and I’ve finally seen them’, they’re really real, and they’re part of who I am, and I think the line was – I’m trying not to cry – but I think the line was that ‘I exist because they did and they now they exist because I do, 150 years on’, and I thought that was kind of a magical moment for me, yeah.

## South Sea Islanders and Australian history

**Cameo Dalley:** Memory is very potent for a lot of people, but particularly in this history, which is a history of South Sea Islander people being, in a lot of situations, forcibly kidnapped and brought to Australia to work as slaves. This history is not a benign history. It’s one of violence and of the forced movement of people, the kidnapping of people.

**Imelda Miller:** In a nutshell, between 1863 and 1904, some 60,000 South Sea Islanders ... predominantly from Vanuatu and the Solomons, but also from New Caledonia, Fiji, Kiribati and some parts of Papua New Guinea, were brought to Australia to develop – to be the backbone of – the Australian sugar industry. Some were ‘blackbirded’; some came by choice. They were brought over here to clear the land. The work was hard, the land was tough. People were coming to strange new places without their families.

So ‘blackbirding’ is people [South Sea Islanders] being tricked or coerced into getting on board these ships that brought them over here to Australia, and there are many stories in the community about this history. This happened mainly early in the history and then legislation was brought about to try and control this behaviour of movement of human labour across the Pacific.

Some were young, men, women and children coming over here, and the weather conditions that they were working in were not very different to their home island ways, their clothing was different that they had, they were exposed to diseases that they’ve never been exposed to before, and some of the conditions that they worked under. They faced many levels of discrimination and exploitation.

You try to imagine what would it be like, being young on an island and then coming out here to a place where you don’t speak the language, you now talk with a whole heap of people who speak other languages and now expected to work together and get along. In the exhibition you try to put

people in that place to think about how you cope in that situation as a human or your child or your son or daughter to go and do that. The other part of this history is about that deportation and then what happened to the community after that deportation.

1901 brought about the White Australia Policy and the implementation of the *Pacific Island Labourers Act*, which brought about legislation to deport South Sea Islanders back to their home islands and, at that time, in the early 1900s, there's probably about 10,000 South Sea Islanders living here in Australia. South Sea Islanders fought for people to stay here because they had families, they had made lives here, some had been here for 40 years, some were elderly, some could no longer go back to their islands, and other people were exempt from going. Some 1,500 people remained here in Australia and my family and many others like my family, who are now called Australian South Sea Islanders, are descendants of those 1,500 who remained here (Figure 9.2).



**Figure 9.2. Australian South Sea Islander community looking at the petition of 1904, when South Sea Islanders were campaigning for exemptions from the deportation.<sup>1</sup>**

Photographer: Joe Ruckli. State Library of Queensland.

1 This petition is currently held at the National Archives of Australia, NAA: A1, 1906/6324, [recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=7379](http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=7379).

**Cameo Dalley:** That's a great precis. I wonder if there was an intersection, through this history, between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and South Sea Islander people.

**Olivia Robinson:** Absolutely. They lived nearby and intermarried basically all up the coast of Queensland. Unlike a lot of the other states, we had quite a large population of Australian South Sea Islanders, and, like Imelda said, they were the backbone of the sugar industry in Queensland, and Australia really, so it was really important. For us at the State Library of Queensland to be able to help to expose that part of the history – to support Australian South Sea Islanders to tell that history – which was very much about a forgotten history. There were and still are lots of people who didn't know anything about Australian South Sea Islanders and their history in Queensland. It's an ongoing story – the fight for recognition continues.

**Imelda Miller:** So Australian South Sea Islanders were recognised by the federal government in 1994 and then the Queensland Government acknowledged Australian South Sea Islanders' contribution to Queensland's history in – officially in 2000, and I think that today even people, you know, the community, still go, 'Well, but what's happened, you know, from 2000, which was 21 years ago, what actions have actually happened to the – for the betterment of our community?', and so I think still having being recognised is still a big part of that story, but I think the other part which I think we were just talking about a moment ago was the relationship between – with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders as Olivia said, we're all interconnected, and, you know, through marriage, and I think that there is a shared experience there.

But I know that in 2013 we worked hard with the program for *Memories from a Forgotten People*, to sort of create awareness about the history, but also then try and make it okay for our children who have got many identities to be okay to be those many identities. I think that was the great thing when we did *Plantation Voices* is that we did have the likes of people like artist Dylan Mooney and photographer the late LaVonne Bobongie who all have this mixed heritage and who could all be a part of the exhibition.

## Community engagement and exhibition development

**Cameo Dalley:** I wonder if we can switch a bit to talk a little bit about sort of the community engagement side of the project, and there were some crowd sourcing as part of the exhibition in terms of the use of Historypin and Flickr in terms of images. I'm interested to know how you used these technologies to place these memories and photos in there, in the context in the geographies, the places that they came from.

**Olivia Robinson:** At the outset can I say we couldn't have done it without Imelda curating *Plantation Voices*, but we started in 2013 when Imelda worked with us on the 150th anniversary program, *Memories from a Forgotten People*. We had some amazing content in the collection, everything from publications and rare books to photographs and documentation, diaries, manuscripts, everything like that.

We went on a journey in 2013 of digitising content, putting it on our catalogue and online on the website Flickr Commons. Anywhere we could, we wanted to get the content out there. We used every platform at our disposal like Historypin, and we also did things like creating an Australian South Sea Islander blog at the State Library with Imelda as the guest editor. It was a great way for Australian South Sea Islanders to share their history, stories and our collections and activities. Imelda wrote lots of posts about the 150th anniversary year and what was happening in community at the time.

**Imelda Miller:** We had guest bloggers as well, from the community – writing about what was happening in their communities at that time, talking about their community projects that they were curating and developing to acknowledge that event. This blog was reactivated again in 2019 as part of *Plantation Voices* to continue that legacy of documenting what was happening out in the community.

**Olivia Robinson:** During that time in 2013 we did a talk series, we had a large public forum, full-day symposium, and there were exhibitions. It was a big precinct collaboration in Brisbane between the State Library of Queensland, the Queensland Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art. The Queensland Performing Arts Complex (QPAC) got involved at one stage too.

**Imelda Miller:** They sure did.

**Olivia Robinson:** We took over part of the QPAC building, basically, the outside, and we had lots of different exhibition panels in there as well ... It really was an activation of the whole precinct coming together to mark this important milestone. Fast forward to *Plantation Voices*, it was really a matter of let's bring all those resources together, put them in one spot, sort of add to them as well. That's what you see when you go on to the State Library of Queensland website, on the *Plantation Voices* page – you can access all this content. It was about getting the content out there, let's get it digitised and get people being able to access it.

We wanted to let Australian South Sea Islanders in our community know that in this place, in this building, we have all this stuff about their history, all this documentation, all these photos that maybe they had never seen before. Queensland is a big place, so we were trying to get people involved no matter where they were located. We wanted people to know that they could interact with this content and map out their connection to Queensland and its landscape, and bring meaning to it – what does that start to look like in connection to the documentation that's available.

We held a 'White Gloves Experience' for the Australian South Sea Islander community in the lead-up to the exhibition. We sometimes have these events at the State Library where we put the white gloves on, get all this material out of the repository, lay it all out, and people can look through it and interact with it. We did it in 2013 and it was a huge success, and then again in the lead-up to *Plantation Voices*. I remember just before the White Gloves Experience started, I said, 'Imelda, it's only, quarter past 10 and there's a line-up of people waiting to get into the room'. That's quite rare. The community were just so keen to come in and to spend the time with the historical material. I think sometimes these big collecting institutions can be quite daunting to people but having it all laid out for you to see was great. There were so many discoveries made that day, people found their relatives or made those connections, seen things that they had never seen before (Figure 9.3).



**Figure 9.3. 'White Gloves Experience' at the opening of *Plantation Voices: Contemporary Conversations with Australian South Sea Islanders*, State Library of Queensland, 16 February 2019.**

Photographer: Joe Ruckli. State Library of Queensland.

**Imelda Miller:** Yeah, it was pretty special. This event was only supposed to go for two hours, and it ended up going for four because a storm came, and nobody could go anywhere. Also, I think a big part of the day was actually watching everybody interact with one another, and you could see people making connections with one another and going, 'I met your cousin'. I think that's the power of this kind of event. Creating spaces for people to come together and talk about the past. As a community we don't get time to spend talking about our history, as we're too busy trying to live our lives and survive. This leaves little time for learning about our own story and our own history. These kinds of times are so precious because it's a couple of hours where you sit down and everyone could actually come together and share their stories. I think the same could be said for bringing community to do digital stories or creating spaces to invite artists with Australian South Sea Islander heritage to tell their perspectives through their work. Bringing the community voice to the forefront was critical to this exhibition. It helps to connect the historical with the present.



I think even after 2020 last year (COVID-19), you know, connecting with people, we can see how important that is to our wellbeing, and our healing. And that action of creating spaces was definitely a big push in developing a community engagement plan for the exhibition.

**Olivia Robinson:** I think you realise, too, through community engagement just how generous people are. There is this real positive sense of wanting to share and wanting to be better informed or to be part of that education of other people about their history as well. What you think is going to take an hour, it takes all day, and because people just want to sit down and have a yarn and talk about memories and talk about their history.

**Imelda Miller:** People want to be heard and people want to be recognised and they want to be acknowledged. In the work we did back in 2013, I went out with Ruth McDougall from the Queensland Art Gallery who did some digital stories for an exhibition called *Sugar*, and during that time one of the last questions I'd always ask is about 'Do you have anything else to contribute?' Some of the people were, like, 'Oh, you know, thank you for asking me about my story', you know, 'In my 63 years no one has ever asked me what my story is'. It's such a privilege to do what we do. I'm a true believer in everybody has a story to tell, and we can acknowledge people's stories. As professionals in these institutions, we have the privilege to spend time with people and listen to their stories, this can be very healing. They give their time to us, but that's something that we can give back, and I think that these are the relationships that we're developing. They're not just about taking, that we're also giving back, and that it's a relationship in the way that community sees relationship, and that there's actually an exchange, but it's not a transaction. We need to be givers as well when we're in big institutions, and this action needs to be seriously considered in the development of these kind of projects.

**Olivia Robinson:** Some of the communities we worked with know what an exhibition is all about, know what a digital story is all about and how you can go about doing it. In fact, one of the communities that we work with – that we worked with for many years now, on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland – they are now developing their own digital stories with a filmmaker. They can see the value in that, and recording their history and Elders and sharing that with people. It's about strengthening those historical and contemporary memories for their own community. They are right into it, which is great.

**Cameo Dalley:** Well, that seems like a really lovely point to finish up on. Unless, of course, do you have anything else you'd like to contribute?

**Imelda Miller:** No, well, you know, I suppose the next step on from that work is the Australian Research Council (ARC) grant that I am currently am working on, which is about archaeology and collections and Australian South Sea Islander lived identities. I think that's going to be really exciting, because I think that's stepping the work that we've done and taking it out into those locations and working with communities.

I suppose what I'm sort of trying to do now, next step on, is about – I suppose because with *Plantation Voices* we went from people taking photos of us, to people taking photos with us, to us taking our own photographs and telling our own stories in our own ways. I think now, stepping into the ARC project, it's about us participating in our research as researchers and as equals, and that that knowledge that we carry be acknowledged, and finding ways within that research framework to actually think about, okay, how can this be done, and trying not to settle too early, that we try and have that respected.

**Olivia Robinson:** *Plantation Voices* I think reminded me about how powerful someone like Imelda can be. Someone who is Australian South Sea Islander, who is a curator, who comes from community, but at the same time knows about cultural heritage and about these institutions. How powerful that combination can be in telling stories and sharing stories. Like we said earlier, *Plantation Voices* is the gift that keeps giving, and it does. It was this exhibition, like you said, that went from February to September [2019], and so many things have happened around that, so many interactions. We've had visitors from Vanuatu come including the foreign minister for Vanuatu. We've had countless community people come through. We've had so many people now better informed about the history of Queensland, about Australian South Sea Islander history. It goes from strength to strength. I think the key part of it is about community, because they own it as well and they're proud of it, and they can see themselves in it and they can see themselves in the collections that we have too.



**Figure 9.4. Olivia Robinson, Cameo Dalley and Imelda Miller at the State Library of Queensland, 2021.**

Photograph: Imelda Miller.

**Imelda Miller:** It's just been an absolute pleasure and privilege to be able to do this work. I see the community is proud of what has been done. But it is a privilege to work with the community and to honour these stories and to tell it how they like it to be told, but sometimes it can't be done on your own and you need great colleagues to work with. Part of being great colleagues is about all having the same agenda and being on the same page, and I've been very lucky to have that. Going forward, we've built this great relationship and who knows what might happen next, but it's been an absolutely great ride to be on.

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