Centring relationality in South Sea Islander biography

MELINDA MANN, KIM KRUGER AND IMELDA MILLER

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>
> —Melinda Mann

This is an edited transcript of a co-presentation, 'South Sea Islander and Melanesian Life Stories', delivered on 21 April 2022 by ASSI scholars, curators and community leaders, Dr Melinda Mann, Kimberley Kruger and Imelda Miller. It took place on unceded Ngunnawal/Ngunawal and Ngambri lands at The Australian National University. It was hosted by the OWP of the *ADB*, and organised by Professor Katerina Teaiwa, Talei Luscia Mangioni and Dr Nicholas Hoare. The event was supported by The Australian National University's Gender Institute and Decolonial Possibilities, a Flagship project of the School of Culture, History and Language.

Dedication to Aunty Lillia 'Lily' Engstrom

Imelda, Kim and Melinda introduce themselves through photographs of family and ancestors in acknowledgement of the protocol of describing who you are, where you come from and who you belong to. Kim's photographs include her ancestors Kaurua and Nota who were brought from Tanna in the 1890s, pictured with Nota's daughter Lillia.

Kim Kruger: Thank you for the warm welcome. My name is Kim Kruger, and I am very excited to be here with Melinda Mann and Imelda Miller today. We start by acknowledging the Ngunnawal/Ngunawal and Ngambri peoples and paying respect to them by following their law, which is to look after the land and look after the people. Sadly, we learned overnight that Aunty Lily, Lillia Engstrom (née Noter), passed away yesterday on 20 April 2022, so we agreed to dedicate this workshop to her memory.[1] She was the last of the first generation of Australian-born South Sea Islanders in my family. She was born here in so-called 'Australia' and was of my grandfather's generation. It's important to acknowledge the lived history of our people, as the people we will be talking about today are known by and connected to people living now.

1 Lillia Virginia Engstrom, née Nauta/Noter, 1933–2022.

These are Aboriginal lands

Dr Melinda Mann: We want to position ourselves on Aboriginal lands for this workshop, and I want to ensure that we avoid referencing Aboriginal sovereignty in a way that thins out Aboriginality. The Secwepemc and Syilx documentary filmmaker Dorothy Christian highlighted the importance of recognising

> [the] specificity of Indigenous nations as a way to refuse entrenchment of the colonial story of the settler population that denies indigenous peoples long history or long relationships with the land.[2]

This point about refusing the colonial story of settlers is how we want to position ourselves today.

As South Sea Islanders, we are complex. We are neither colonial settlers nor visitors but the descendants of slaves. As storytellers, we refuse an anti-indigenous colonial narrative in the telling of who we are and how we came to be here. We know too well that settlers tell themselves lies about their own nation's history especially when comparing the enslavement of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander peoples with slavery elsewhere. In our refusal of anti-indigenous colonial narratives, we acknowledge that we've conducted South Sea Islander storytelling across individual nations of the continent's traditional and ongoing owners. Namely, we live on Wurundjeri, Yuggera Jagera and Turrbal, and Darumbal lands and are here today on Ngunnawal/Ngunawal and Ngambri lands. We recognise that it is not sufficient to simply 'pay homage' to unceded sovereign people and their lands. The issue at hand is biography and the biographies of people who were forced onto these lands for the white nation and for empire building. So, as part of my introduction, and before we commence this workshop proper, I want to sit in this acknowledgement of unceded sovereignty to explain what it means to recognise who we are, where we are and whose lands we are on.

Australian South Sea Islanders—past, present and those who are yet to be born—exist here on Aboriginal lands and islands throughout the Torres Strait. Regardless of how our forebears came, South Sea Islanders have become the beneficiaries of lands and waters stolen from Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. I'm reminded of my own South Sea Islander community and the land that was 'gifted' to South Sea Islanders by Paul Alexander Joske for what is now known as Joskeleigh. My great-great-grandfather, Charles Brown, married Susan Oba and was one of seven siblings from Oba Island, now known as Ambrym. Charles Brown was taken from Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, in the mid-1800s. We have family stories about how that old man bore scars on his legs from the chains that kept him captive. He was forced to labour

2 Dorothy Christian, 'Indigenous Visual Storywork for Indigenous Film Aesthetics', in *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, ed. Jo-ann Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan and Jason De Santolo (London: Zed Books, 2022), 41–55.

in the Yeppoon and Rockhampton area. He secured a parcel of land in Joskeleigh that he handed down to my great-grandmother, Rachael Brown, and then eventually to my grandfather, Cedric 'Wiki' Warcon. My mother and her siblings now own portions of this block of land. It will soon be handed down to my siblings and I and many cousins. This land is a tiny section of Darumbal Country. Darumbal Country is my father's peoples' land, so it has always been mine. Despite how land has been transferred from slave owners or their associates to enslaved people, Aboriginal sovereignty reminds us that my South Sea Islander family's land was never ceded by my father's family. Stolen Aboriginal lands cannot be gifted away to atone for the sins of those who organised, participated and benefited from blackbirding.

As an Aboriginal person and South Sea Islander, I recognise my dual blackness as Aboriginal and as South Sea Islander. As a descendant of Darumbal, Vanuatu and New Caledonian nations, I recognise that I am, and people like me are, the embodiment of the expansion of a violent imperial power that forced Black people together on this continent. We exist as a result of the colonisation of the Black Pacific. We are a reminder of the racist, capitalistic endeavours that drove the dispossession of Black lands here, which led to the dispossession of Black islands there—all for this place, now known as Australia. In my refusal of a settler narrative, I situate myself today through relationships with all my ancestors. I also acknowledge that, as an Aboriginal person and grounded in my father's Country, my Country, Darumbal, I am home. I was already here when my South Sea Islander forebears arrived to bring me the rest of my Black world.

However, for my mother and many South Sea Islanders, 'belonging' is not easy. They hover between places as if suspended in time, perhaps floating somewhere across the Pacific, where those old Kanakas voyaged against their will, belonging neither here nor there but to each other. And in speaking of those Black islands of the Pacific, we acknowledge that biographical work speaks of people from those places and that we are their descendants. I recognise the lands and waters of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, PNG and Kiribati. I acknowledge the sovereignty of those Pacific nations and that South Sea Islanders are indigenous to the Pacific but estranged from native lands and waters, and dispossessed of languages and cultural practices, birthrights, spiritualities and religions. The kidnapping and coercion of South Sea Islanders expedited the growth and wealth of early agricultural industries, particularly in Queensland, and occurred simultaneously with the dispersals, massacres and removals of Aboriginal people, weighing heavily on this work.

We recognise that the violent practice of blackbirding South Sea Islanders to these lands as slaves is not separate from, nor the same as, the massacres and dispossession of Aboriginal people, but it is related to these atrocities. In this relatedness and relationship with these experiences of these lands, we honour the unceded sovereign nations of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. And as the children of enslaved people today, we do more than acknowledge the unceded sovereignty of First

Nations peoples. We commit to undertaking any South Sea Islander biographical work we do to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of all generations and their lands and waters. In doing so, we honour our own histories of relationship with their lands. Today, we honour the Ngunnawal/Ngunawal and Ngambri peoples' love and connection to this place.

Telling the life stories of our 'game changers'

Imelda Miller: Having our ancestors with us in the introduction is important and probably helped bring the emotion out. As an outline of what I will cover today, I will explain who the South Sea Islander people are and why it's important to do biography work in our communities and write for the *ADB*. In addition, something that's been coming up a lot for us in all our different workplaces is the issue of protocols, especially who has the right to tell somebody's story. With a growing interest from academia in global histories of slavery connected to Queensland and South Sea Islander history, many outside our communities want to research us. Going forward, how do we manage, control and assert ownership over these stories? It's a practice we're trying to feed into the larger OWP for the benefit of our communities.

I wanted to start by saying thank you to both Kim and Melinda for positioning us here in this space and for the work we do in our community. I'm reminded that this is emotional work and traumatic as well. I wanted to thank the OWP for bringing us together and having this opportunity to talk with one another face-to-face to discuss protocols and how we want to do the work that is so important. I'd also like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and thank both of you for doing that on our behalf. Being on these lands is a privilege and our relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters are important to us. Our families are interconnected, and so too are some of our experiences.

As a curator, I don't always get the opportunity to work on South Sea Islander material and history. When I do, my work has been on ASSI identity and the creation of spaces around plantation material, culture, archival documentation and contemporary collections interwoven with personal narratives and memories to acknowledge a hidden history and to value an authentic ASSI voice past, present and future. People ask me why I work in museums: I feel that there's important work to do in archives because they tell our stories. It's really important for us as a community to reclaim that space and our narratives. I feel a big part of my work is not just me connecting to those collections but encouraging community to connect with the collections and archives that tell *our stories* as a collective. It is through this connection of people and objects that our community stories come to light. We are the experts and we know our families, connections and lived experiences. Some not so well, but that's why we'll come together and discuss them. I see the archives as a fantastic way to bring people together to talk about history. We're so busy living our everyday lives that we don't get time to sit in our history and talk about our history

to one another. At the State Library of Queensland, I did some work a few years ago as part of an exhibition—what we call a 'White Gloves Tour'. It's when people wear white gloves to look at original documentation kept in the archives. Normally, people don't get to see this original material. However, by creating spaces and pathways for community and archival collections to come together, you can begin to understand the significance and relevance of this material to community today. In more recent times, we have used a similar process to connect people to significant sites in places such as Joskeleigh and Ayr. We have hosted community days to encourage people out to these sites to connect to the places, to research and to empower people to understand their role in remembering or connecting to the histories and ancestorial stories connected to these sites.

Today, I wanted to do a '101' about South Sea Islander/ASSI community experiences in this landscape. This particular history has many narratives, and I'm only skimming the surface. The ASSI community was officially recognised by the Australian government in 1994, followed by the Queensland government in 2000. Very little is known about this recognition and Australia's forced enslavement of Pacific Islanders as plantation labourers between 1847 and 1904—these are our forebears who are called South Sea Islanders. Today, their descendants, ASSIs, all continue to follow a path made by generations before us to articulate our history, using our own words to change the narrative about South Sea Islander history, our communities and our lived experiences over the last 160 years.

When people think of us, they usually think of sugar, but we are much more than just sugar. Our community, like many others, has made significant contributions to the development of this country. These narratives must be more visible and accessible to the wider public and our communities. I hope today we can shed some light on how the *ADB* can be a platform to highlight the achievements of some of our 'game changers' in the ASSI community. South Sea Islander stories are often hidden, defined by a unique but under-researched history of South Sea Islanders and their descendants who were the backbone of Australia's sugar industry. Human trading of Islanders started as early as 1847 in New South Wales. However, the main trafficking of South Sea Islanders was in Queensland between 1863 and 1904. Our ancestors were mainly from the island nations of Vanuatu and the Solomons, but also New Caledonia, Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, New Ireland and Milne Bay provinces of PNG. Over 62,000 contracts were issued to South Sea Islanders—men, women and children.

Many came here by force, and others came by choice, particularly in the early stages. The practice of blackbirding involved the use of trickery or coercion to secure cheap or unpaid labour. Men, women and children worked for long hours in cotton and sugar plantations in what we now call Australia for little, if any, money, and for much less than white labourers. Some lived and worked in slave-like conditions, undertaking backbreaking work, such as clearing the land of scrub, trees and rocks ready for the planting of sugarcane, in tropical northern heat of 40°C in the summer and 3°C

in the winter. Surviving was no easy task. South Sea Islanders were exploited and discriminated against, and there was little protection from the work, the environment or the system. This was a new land, a new plantation and a new power system. Islanders had few rights compared to other workers.

Islanders came from different places, spoke different languages and were forced to live together under the plantation labour system that controlled their daily lives, including what they wore, where they worked, what they ate and how they lived. South Sea Islanders were employed all along the Queensland coastline and into northern New South Wales on what were called 'indentured labour' contracts. Many worked for 40 years. South Sea Islanders worked these lands and crossed backwards and forwards across the Pacific. The people, as I said, came from different islands and different countries. Once here, they tried to create a place by having families and creating a community. By 1901, some 10,000 South Sea Islanders were in Australia, and they were not just working—they were living and maybe even thriving here; some owned or had been gifted lands; they were making connections and establishing local relationships; they were marrying people on other islands; and they were marrying First Nations people, moving along the coastline and throughout the landscape.

However, in 1901, the government of the day brought about the so-called White Australia policy with the introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, which was designed to stop non-European immigration into Australia. This led to the mass deportation of South Sea Islanders. Many Islanders sought to stay in Queensland and fought to be granted an exemption from moving. I want to make special mention of this because our ancestors were 'game changers'. Some wanted to stay because they were making families and some were too old to go. The circumstances had changed. And so they were fighting for rights for people who had none. This is important. After all, when people think about what or who an ASSI is, this is a really crucial point, because family and making and creating a community are what changed us. By wanting to stay here, South Sea Islanders were saying goodbye to the island life they once knew. This led to the loss of languages, dances and cultures. I can't even imagine how that must have felt for them. However, in that, they were thinking, I suppose, of future generations. It was the likes of people such as Alick Malicola, Henry Tonga and other members of the Pacific Islander's Association, as well as members in Rockhampton such as William Petersen, who fought and put up petitions to the king in 1902–03 and prime minister Alfred Deakin in 1906, to fight against the deportation of South Sea Islanders. There are petitions with South Sea Islander names in the archives, proving that people fought for the right to stay or go. During this time, many Islanders who weren't granted exemption were sent back to the islands, with some 1,200–1,500 remaining here. The precise number is unknown because people hid in the bushes. We are the descendants of the South Sea Islanders who remained. And that is a really important point in our history and our identity.

The people who stayed weren't from 'here'; in opting to stay here, they had to say goodbye to 'there'—their island homes. South Sea Islanders then formed little communities hidden on the outskirts of coastal towns, perhaps reminiscent of a home they remembered from across the oceans, places where they could maintain a more familiar, self-sufficient island lifestyle, including fishing, growing market gardens, boat-making, carpentry, labouring, singing and playing music, and educating their children. South Sea Islanders were, thus, creating a new cultural identity. From 1910 to 1970, there is little documentary record of these new emerging communities, but people continued to face new challenges through discrimination and further exploitation. However, Islanders continued to support their families by going to work, some taking their children with them to help get money for their families. They went to war. They worked in hospitals and pastoral and maritime industries. Later, people found work in railways, mines, education and even politics. For 90 years, our South Sea Islander ancestors moved through their lives, settling communities along the eastern coastline in northern New South Wales and further afield. In 1994, the Australian government acknowledged the ASSI community as a distinct cultural group. A small contingent of our community went to Canberra, and I actually remember them saying: 'We need to go … We need to go there. This is a big occasion.' When I think about it and look at people like Uncle Warren 'Joe' Leo, I wonder what it meant for them to wait that long to be recognised, to be seen as a cultural group. It's because of them that I knew who I was from an early age, and I'm very thankful for these game changers, these role models, who took a risk and shone a light so that we could step in those footsteps.

Now, 29 years on, there's still little known about the achievements and contributions of Australian South Sea Islanders in this country. Such recognition is long overdue. Now is the time to continue the movement for visibility, starting with our South Sea Islander game changers and role models. It's wonderful to think that, one day, Australian South Sea Islanders might automatically be included in the conversation about Australia's history, rather than an afterthought. I think this game changing is history-making.

South Sea Islander life writing

Kim Kruger: We acknowledge the South Sea Islander biographical works that are already written and that we live and work in a continuum of biographical storytelling. Much of this work is in our community histories, like *Fragments of a Lost Heritage* (1989) by Noel Fatnowna. There are community histories from Mackay and from Kanaka Town in Rockhampton, and there are individual and family biographies. *The South Sea Islander Garden of Memories* and *Fields of Sorrow: Oral History of the*

Mackay South Sea Islanders (Kanakas) and Their Descendants are from Mackay too.[3] Everyone should know who Faith Bandler is. She wrote a biography of her father's experience called *Wacvie*.[4] It was about speaking back to the narrative that 'slavery didn't exist', the notion that the South Sea Islander experience was not one of slavery. These community histories and family biographies are important. Truth-telling challenges the dominant narrative.

In my research on my mother, Patricia Corowa's political life, these community biographies have been important, because they tell us who we are and what our cultural values are as South Sea Islander people. *Some* of these values are shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge that we are not starting something new and that storytelling and knowing our history and genealogies are all part of who we are. We know who we are through our stories. Our community biographers have left significant information for us. As an example, this morning Imelda showed me the book *The South Sea Islander Garden of Memories.*[5] The book includes an entry on Charlie Miller and his wife Mary Romud, who is my ancestor, providing new information to me and my family's history research. There is more of my family history in Lloyd Willie's *History of Kanaka Town*.[6] These community histories are our canon. There are many more community and family biographies than those mentioned here, and they are all important because these histories, based on our families' oral histories, are where we learn about and remember our role models and game changers and the history their lives embodied.[7] Waanyi author Alexis Wright's important essay 'What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else's Story?' makes clear that, as holders of our peoples' stories, we need to be in charge of telling them, not only because they hold ancient wisdom, but also because if we let other people tell them for us, they can become distorted or be used against us in the service of other peoples' agendas.[8]

Turning to the *ADB*, it is published in printed form, but there's also a large web presence with different sections. As a member of the OWP, I have been looking through the dictionary for South Sea Islander people. Using various search terms, I found about 13 people. I searched 'South Sea Islander' and 'Kanaka' as well as family names. There are a handful of entries on the Fatnowna family and a few more of other historically significant people. That's not many given our 150-year history on

3 Mackay City Council and Pat Hamilton, *The South Sea Islander Garden of Memories* (Mackay: Mackay City Council, 1998); Christine Andrews and Penny Cook, *Fields of Sorrow: Oral History of the Mackay South Sea Islanders (Kanakas) and Their Descendants* (Mackay: Australian South Sea Islanders United Council, 2000).

4 Faith Bandler, *Wacvie* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1977).

5 Mackay City Council and Hamilton, *The South Sea Islander Garden of Memories*.

6 Lloyd Willie, *History of Kanaka Town* (North Rockhampton Kanaka Town Reunion Committee, 1998).

7 See Carine Davias, 'Interconnected Spaces in the Life Narratives of Australian South Sea Islanders', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 38, no. 2 (2016): 63–71, doi.org/10.4000/ces.4892; Clive Moore, *Hardwork: Australian South Sea Islander Bibliography with a Select Bibliography on the Sugar Industry and Pacific Labour* (Sydney: Australian South Sea Islanders, Port Jackson Limited, 2019).

8 Alexis Wright, 'What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else's Story?', *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 136–39, doi.org/10.1002/aps.1576.

this continent. So, taking up Imelda's call to honour our game changers, and centring ourselves as experts on our history, it is clear that we need to write more entries on South Sea Islanders for the *ADB* that place our communities and our peoples' contributions on the record, thereby making our history visible.

The *ADB* online features different headings, signifying different parts of the dictionary. The blue headings are the 'official' dictionary; everything in that section has been commissioned by the *ADB* and research edited (fact-checked). New *ADB* entries (blue section) are published in hard copy every five or so years. Indigenous *ADB* entries (blue section) are overseen by the Indigenous Working Party (IWP), which Katerina Teaiwa has described as a sister group to the OWP. There is a green section called People Australia, which features biographical articles that have not been commissioned by the *ADB*, short entries on people about whom little is known and placeholder entries for people who will eventually be added to the *ADB* proper, and several other sections. The *ADB* (blue section) usually only publishes entries on people who passed away 25 or more years ago. It is currently working on entries for people who passed away up to the year 2000; however, some Indigenous *ADB* entries have been published for people who died more recently (e.g. Jimmy Little). In general, though, people like Aunty Faith Bandler, who passed away in 2015, are not eligible to be considered for the *ADB* yet. Instead, she has entries on People Australia, Obituaries Australia and Pacific Islander Biography.

The life of Aunty Mabel Edmund

Dr Melinda Mann: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entries can be found across all sections of the *ADB* online, and all appear in the Indigenous Australia section. Importantly, not all of the entries in Indigenous Australia have been commissioned by the IWP. Many come from the Australian Indigenous Autobiography Archive and take the form of notes under standardised subheadings.

My consideration of South Sea Islander and Melanesian life stories focuses on ethics and protocols. To do this, I consider the overlap that exists between Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander populations via the Indigenous Australia entry for the late Mabel Edmund, which comes from the Australian Indigenous Autobiography Archive. It details her birth in 1930 in Rockhampton and her cultural heritage as both Aboriginal and ASSI. Under education, it notes that she attended two high schools in North Rockhampton. Her occupations are recorded as autobiographer, memoirist, Indigenous leader, Indigenous rights activist, Labor Party organiser, local government counsellor and artist. She was a member of the Order of Australia and helped to establish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service in 1973, serving as district president, state councillor and, eventually, state secretary. She was appointed to the Aboriginal Loans Commission and her political affiliation was with the ALP. Mabel worked on various sheep and cattle stations including Bombandy station near Rockhampton, and Rosedale station near Jericho

in Queensland. She served as a local government councillor for the Livingston Shire Council, which takes in the Yeppoon and Capricorn Coast areas to the east and north of Rockhampton. Mabel wrote the autobiography *No Regrets*, which was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1992.[9] In 1996, she published *Hello, Johnny!: Stories of My Aboriginal and South Sea Islander Family*.[10] As an artist, she had her first exhibition at the Rockhampton Art Gallery during National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week in 1987, and, in the following year, she had another show at the Rockhampton Art Gallery. In 1989, her paintings were displayed at the Walter Reed Community Arts Centre in Rockhampton, and an exhibition of her works at the Rockhampton Opera Gallery in 2002 was titled *Life Has Been Good: The Art of Mabel Edmund*.[11] In 2022, the Rockhampton Regional Council opened its new public Museum of Art facility. One of Mabel's works was exhibited at the inaugural exhibition *Welcome Home*, featuring the most significant works from the Rockhampton permanent collection.

Today, I want to talk about biography and the way that biographies have been created, defined and used in my community. I'm focusing on Mabel Edmund because we are from the same Aboriginal and South Sea Islander communities and families. Her Indigenous Australia entry is based on excerpts from her first autobiography, *No Regrets*, published in 1992. This was the year of the Mabo decision and prime minister Paul Keating's Redfern Address. *No Regrets* was written during an extraordinary decade for race relations and Black politics. It continues to have an influence 30 years since its publication and 15 years since Mabel's passing. I anticipate that Mabel's written and artistic works will grow in influence over the coming decades as her stories become reference points and sources of evidence for future generations.

For personal context, Mabel Edmund was my paternal grandfather's youngest sister. My grandfather was one of the 'Johnnys' she wrote about in her second memoir, *Hello, Johnny!*, published in 1996. We spent a lot of time with Aunty Mabel, who had a very special bond with both my parents but particularly my father, Robert, who is mentioned in her books along with some of his siblings, Marcia, Carol, Bill and George. Aunty Mabel was incredibly generous. She took time to visit us when we lived interstate. She was so much fun, one of those aunties we wanted to be around all the time. When she came to visit, she would often take care of my siblings and I when our parents worked picking fruit. On one occasion, I recall her addressing a racism incident that I had been involved in at my primary school. I was in Grade 5. She had heard me sharing with my family that sometimes students called me racial slurs instead of my name and that it had become almost constant. Aunty Mabel took it upon herself to meet with the school principal and then asked if she could address

9 Mabel Edmund, *No Regrets* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1992).
10 Mabel Edmund, *Hello, Johnny!: Stories of My Aboriginal and South Sea Islander Family* (Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 1996).
11 Mabel Edmund, *Life Has Been Good: The Art of Mabel Edmund: 18 March – 5 May 2002* (Rockhampton: Rockhampton Art Gallery, 2002).

the class, to which he agreed. I was sitting at my desk towards the back when she walked into my classroom. She was tiny in stature and had the sweetest voice but her determination to talk about the impact of racism made her look 10 feet tall to me. It was the mid-1980s and from that point forward I knew I wanted to be like her.

Aunty Mabel became my most trusted guide and she continues to inspire. She was the person I went to when I was deciding if I should go to university in the early to mid-1990s. In fact, she was the only person I knew who had any idea what a university was. I talked with her about getting married and I remember her hesitating when I asked her that question. I probably should have paid more attention to her hesitation. She was also one of the very first people I brought my babies to visit shortly after they were born. In telling my stories of her, I want to respect that Aunty Mabel's legacy belongs to her children and her children's children, and that they continue her work in our community, leading to significant changes. Her family are strong advocates for infrastructure for Aboriginal and South Sea Islander communities, especially in the work to reinstate names of Darumbal places.

Of particular value to the legacy of Aunty Mabel are her artistic works. Most of her works are acrylics on canvas and feature land and waterscapes, animals, families, societies and non-human forms, representations of customary law and practices. Images of the everyday lives of Darumbal people prior to colonisation add depth to Aunty Mabel's written autobiographical work. Her paintings of slave ships arriving in Queensland loaded with human cargo position her as one of few central Queensland artists, perhaps the only one in the region's history, to paint first contact invasion and blackbirding. Through her art style, she also depicts the relationship between Aboriginal lands and these events. In this discussion about biography, I want to point out that autobiography—the act of self-writing—especially for Black people, is a process that involves family contributions and negotiation around the ownership of specific stories. Imelda talked a bit about that and how such stories are retold, how they're allowed to be retold. Self-storying impacts not only family but also the broader white community and how it knows itself, as well as Indigenous scholarship and Black activism.

Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in her seminal text *Talkin up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, references Aunty Mabel's autobiography several times. Similarly, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an acclaimed poet and storyteller, wrote about Aunty Mabel's life in an award-winning short story.[12] Drawing from numerous self-writings by Indigenous women, Moreton-Robinson points out that Indigenous women have been writing books about their lives and their families, kin and community—the people, places and events that shaped each *her*story—since the 1970s. She writes briefly of Aunty Mabel's experiences as an Aboriginal girl, woman, wife and mother, and as the granddaughter of a blackbirded

12 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), 10, 14, 27. See Edmund, *No Regrets*, 71, for information on Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Edmund's relationship.

Kanaky man. Moreton-Robinson points out that Aunty Mabel married into a large South Sea Islander family. She writes of Mabel's experiences of isolation and exclusion by other South Sea Islanders because of her mixed Aboriginal and South Sea Islander ancestry, her work as a domestic servant and stock woman, her experiences of racism and her career as an artist. Moreton-Robinson's illuminations show how Indigenous women have, by their own hand, made themselves the subjects of their own writing. In doing so, they have reduced the power of anthropological analysis by offering their own expert accounts of their humanness and humanity.

This act of literary resistance is both personal and political. As the colonial project on this continent continues to develop, the warning by Jan Larbalestier in 1991 that 'living Black and writing about it can be seen as a process of political confrontation' really comes to the fore, making complex the writing of Black experiences.[13] We see how this manifests now with Indigenous and diasporic Pacific communities, where the politics of knowing has moved away from lived experience based on relationality and accountability to a position as the 'one' or 'the only one'. Professor Chelsea Watego, Munanjahli and South Sea Islander woman, explains her reason for using storying as the basis of her book *Another Day in the Colony.* She states:

> there is an increasing volume of Indigenous scholarship that involves the extraction of Indigenous experience in order to become the ultimate knower of it. All of these examples exact violence on Black people, Black communities and Black consciousness because they are a colonising practice, of discovery, and of claiming something that doesn't belong to you–yet, or not at all.[14]

So, what I posit here is that, in the collation of biographies for the *ADB*, the objective should not simply be to gather a representative collection of South Sea Islander profiles. Instead, the goal should be to create a process situated in a relational protocol for South Sea Islander communities themselves to recount the lives of individual South Sea Islander peoples. South Sea Islander stories are inherently connected to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands and waters. A relational protocol in a biographical writing process ties the storying to the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their lands. This approach moves the work from extracting individual lives from families and communities to expressions of lived experiences—from 'one' story to 'everyone' storying. It ensures that the major beneficiaries of South Sea Islander biographies, even before they become *ADB* entries, are South Sea Islander families and communities. In the absence of a great breadth of South Sea Islander literature, biographies may become the critical recordings of South Sea Islander lived experiences from which future generations might infuse other literary forms. Regardless, refusing colonial narratives in biographical writings necessitates activation of relational protocols.

13 Jan Larbalestier, 'Through Their Own Eyes: An Interpretation of Aboriginal Women's Writing', in *Intersexions: Gender/Class/Culture/Ethnicity*, ed. Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche and Jeannie Martin (London: Routledge, 2020), 75–91, doi.org/10.4324/9781003116165-5.

14 Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2021).

Perhaps even more importantly, a community-led approach to the collection of biographies for the *ADB* could entrench a deeper sense of South Sea Islander belonging. For South Sea Islanders, in the absence of ancient and ongoing geographical and ancestral ties to this continent or elsewhere, 'belonging' needs to be grounded in community-specific relationships and accountability to each other. Building the capacity of South Sea Islander communities to create and hold biographies of their loved ones could and would generate opportunities to reinforce reciprocity, obligation and shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory. So, I argue that the additional layers of Aunty Mabel's artistic contributions to her written biographical works increase the depth of her storytelling and her breadth of works. These combine to be key signposts she has left for us to follow or be inspired by. One of these signposts is to be deliberate in biographical endeavours by considering all of the ways written and artistic biographies contribute to remembering.

Aunty Mabel Edmund's Indigenous Australia entry on the *ADB* website also benefits the wider population. As a biographical sketch of a Darumbal woman, it increases the visibility of people who are both First Nations and South Sea Islander, highlighting the contributions of both to Australian history. It showcases the demographic reality of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander coexistence. Aunty Mabel's legacy of organising and advocacy fuels some of the strongest voices among Aboriginal and South Sea Islander mob I know. The life stories of South Sea Islanders may do the same or they may, just as importantly, simply bring back to our collective memory those who have come before.

The life of Lisa Bellear

Kim referred to images from Narrm's Warrior Woman Lane, named for Lisa Bellear, that depict a mural by Charlotte Allingham of Lisa riding a bike wearing badges from various causes, her photographs and poetry flying out of a bag behind her and the poem 'Hanover Street, Brunswick' in which Lisa refers to herself as a warrior woman. An image of the short biography of Lisa from the Victorian Women's Trust's, 'Women in the Life of the City'[15] *project, was also referred to.*

Kim Kruger: I now turn to the Indigenous *ADB* entry that I wrote on my cousin Lisa Bellear, published online in 2023.[16] Lisa was a Goenpul, Noonuccal and South Sea Islander woman, a political activist, radio broadcaster and prolific writer and photographer. Her grandmother, Aunty Sadie Bellear (née Corowa), and my grandfather, Arthur Corowa, were siblings. Lisa and I are two of only five people in our very large family that were born in Melbourne and lived there permanently. We are a long way away from the rest of our family in northern New South Wales

15 Victorian Women's Trust, 'Women in the Life of the City', 2018, www.vwt.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Women_Life_City_2018_small_web-2.pdf.

16 Kim Kruger, 'Bellear, Lisa (1961–2006)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published online 2023, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bellear-lisa-32123/text39693.

and north Queensland. Lisa's mother, Aunty Jocelyn, died when Lisa was a baby and she was adopted by a non-Aboriginal family against the wishes of Aunty Sadie. I met Lisa through the Melbourne Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community when I was 17 years old. We found we lived around the corner from each other, and she employed me in my first job out of high school at the University of Melbourne. From then on, we would spend most weekends together at community and family events. We were in each other's lives a lot. Sadly, she passed away in 2006, aged just 45, a devastating loss for all who knew her.

After being adopted out, Lisa was introduced to the Melbourne Aboriginal community through Aboriginal students at the University of Melbourne and people at the hostel where she lived. They helped Lisa find her family in Sydney and back in the Tweed. This was done through genealogy experts in the community—the aunties in the Fitzroy pubs—and community organisations that helped to work out connections using oral history. The aunties had been doing that ever since there was a community in Fitzroy. When they heard that Lisa's mother had passed away, she was informally adopted by a Torres Strait Islander family, and she became very active in the Aboriginal community in Melbourne and nationally.

Lisa was an extremely driven person. She qualified as a social worker at the University of Melbourne. Then she became the Koorie Liaison Officer and created an amazing environment for Aboriginal people on campus. She was essential in supporting some of the first Aboriginal lawyers and the first Aboriginal doctor in Victoria, all significant game changers, and, importantly, she brought grassroots community into the privileged place that is the University of Melbourne. It was where the elite went to study, and she just broke it open by bringing the aunties out of Fitzroy and onto campus. They went about telling people how to behave and teaching Aboriginal protocols to people who came in from all over the continent.

The creative arts were very important to Lisa. She wrote poetry constantly, took photos everywhere she went, took a turn in stand-up comedy and promoted the work of artists in all fields. She was a community radio broadcaster. She had a radio show called 'Not Another Koori Show', which she started with her sisters Destiny Deacon and Janina Harding, covering Indigenous news and issues. The show ran for over 20 years. She was politically involved, especially in Stolen Generations work. Since her passing, there has been a lot of commemoration of her. Lisa was a really dynamic person; she had her finger in many pies, yet, she was also very unassuming. A lot of her work was unpaid; often, she didn't have any money, so she'd be riding around on a bike, getting from one meeting to another, carrying all sorts of things with her.

The City of Melbourne named a street after Lisa. That was a funny thing because they approached us about naming a street after her following advocacy by Koori Women Mean Business and the Victorian Women's Trust. They said: 'We are trying to get more women's contributions to civic life recognised in the life of the city.' They came up with a list of 100 women, of whom 20 were Aboriginal. Lisa was the first person

to be commemorated from their recommendations. However, the City of Melbourne said: 'We can't use Bellear. We can't call it Bellear Lane because there's a Bellair Street five kilometres away. People might get confused.' So I said: 'OK? Well, can you call it Lisa Bellear Lane?' They said: 'We don't use first names.' This was odd because they wanted to recognise this woman, but they didn't want to name her. So, we came up with Warrior Woman Lane[17] from a line in one of Lisa's poems. So they named the lane, and the sign was stolen about four times because everyone thinks of Xena or has their own warrior woman in mind. So we went back to them and said: 'You need to tell them who this warrior woman is.' And so we got the City of Melbourne to install two temporary artworks in the laneway to provide context. We included the poem, entitled 'Hanover St, Brunswick', in which Lisa called herself a warrior woman in the mural by Wiradjuri and Ngiyampaa artist Charlotte Allingham, which represents all of Lisa's many interests and tells her story.[18] Lisa's Aboriginal, South Sea Islander, feminist, Black power and Stolen Generations–survivor interests, as well as her ties to Torres Strait Islanders, are all represented in the badges on her lapels. Some of her photos are in the bag flying out of the back because she was kind of chaotic, and she would rush around from place to place.

Part of Lisa's practice as a photographer was to take photos in the community and give them back to the community. They were for the community, not for white people. She was writing her PhD about undoing paternalistic practices in photography of Aboriginal people and articulating her practice of 'countering erasure'. She was looking at colonial photographs that were captioned 'black boy' or 'pickaninny' or similar for her PhD, so she made sure to always name the people in her photographs and return the images to the people in them. I worked on an exhibition of Lisa's photographs, *Close to You: The Lisa Bellear Picture Show*, drawn from 15,000 of her images, at the Koori Heritage Trust in Melbourne.[19] They are significant because they record the Aboriginal community from an insider perspective at a time before every phone had a camera.

Writing the entry on Lisa for the Indigenous *ADB* grew out of the experience of these two projects, the laneway commemoration and the photographic exhibition. Narungga poet and academic Natalie Harkin, an IWP member for the *ADB*, recommended I write Lisa's entry. Natalie is part of an amazing group of artist scholars, The Unbound Collective from South Australia, and I got to meet her through the Australian Association for Pacific Studies. Thus, Indigenous relationality operated in both the commissioning and writing of this entry, evidenced through my demonstrated knowledge of Lisa, community links and the process of checking stories and facts through trusted and reliable networks of people.

17 'Honouring Warrior Woman Lisa Bellear', Warrior Woman Lane, warriorwomanlane.com/.

18 See Lisa Bellear, *Dreaming in Urban Areas* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996).

19 Virginia Fraser, Kim Kruger and Destiny Deacon, eds, *Close to You: The Lisa Bellear Picture Show* (Melbourne: Koorie Heritage Trust, 2016).

I want to explain the process of writing the entry, because there are some lessons the OWP can learn from the IWP that I found helpful. For example, the IWP provided a style guide. It had some suggestions of things to include, which helped me start writing the entry. The IWP adheres to the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research,* which is framed by the principles of Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous leadership, impact and value, and sustainability and accountability.[20] These are good principles for the OWP to consider. The style guide also gave starting points, like including the person's primary name and all the names they went by, their clan and language group, and their community and significant family in the first paragraph. In Lisa's case, I included information about her mother and father, as well as her uncles, as they are well known, but are not in the dictionary. One of her uncles, Robert (Bob) Bellear, was a judge, and another, Sol Bellear, was a significant activist in the Aboriginal community.

These style points helped me to get the first draft done. I drew on everything I'd already written about Lisa. And I also read a lot about her. She's very significant to many Aboriginal feminist poets and writers. They're grateful to her for smashing down doors and changing the way they think and talk about themselves. I wanted to acknowledge what she meant to this next generation of writers, people like Ellen Van Neerven and Timmah Ball.[21] I wrote about shared lived experiences, like all the meetings she dragged me to, the fights she had and all that sort of stuff. In keeping with the ethics protocol, I wrote the draft and then sent it to Lisa's family, because I'm not her direct family. A process of back and forth followed, with the family advising what they wanted to be kept in and taken out. A research editor at the *ADB* then fact-checked everything and made suggestions for changes that I passed to the family. It was a long process! It was good to do it during the pandemic and not to have tight deadlines on everything because it allowed more time for the process of back and forth with the family. I wanted to bring these reflections to this workshop for us to think through further, because we want to discuss protocols and things. It's like the steps involved in a peer-reviewed article, except, instead of peer reviewed, it is family reviewed.

Another work in Warrior Woman Lane has a QR code that links to further information about Lisa and her work, and you can also listen to her voice on one of her radio broadcasts. This is a form of living archive, a dynamic biography. I was so honoured to be approached to write the *ADB* entry. For me, it was significant to write from what I understood to be Lisa's worldview, which, really, reflects our shared worldview. People can fact check for themselves by listening to her radio broadcast and reading her writings. Thinking about the role of the *ADB*, and its use as a reliable starting point for researching people, my entry on Lisa will likely be read by school

20 See AIATSIS, *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (Canberra: AIATSIS, 2020), aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research.

21 Ellen Van Neerven (they/them) is an award-winning Mununjali poet. See Timmah Ball, 'Imagining a Black, Queer Aboriginal Melbourne', *Literary Hub*, 12 December 2018, lithub.com/imagining-a-black-queer-aboriginal-melbourne/.

students and others. Touching on what Imelda spoke about, we need to increase our visibility as a community and not erase our people. As a bonus, writing an *ADB* entry means I have a publication credit. It's a great way for emerging researchers to develop their writing. Writing *ADB* entries is a way to build up emerging South Sea Islander scholars' publications. At the same time, we're laying some ground for people coming after us regarding what the old people did for us.

The presentation concluded with a discussion of the key takeaways discussed throughout.

This discussion of our work, the genealogy of biography or life writing for South Sea Islander peoples and communities, the importance of telling our own stories, comes from grappling with the ethics and protocols of writing our people into the *ADB* and onto the historical record. Our starting point is our positionality, as a distinct cultural group that has only been formally recognised by the state in the last 30 years, as 'neither indigenous nor immigrant', but with many shared impacts of settler colonialism on our histories as well as cultural values shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on whose land we now live.[22] We understand our obligation to nurture good relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, respect their sovereignty, and live in solidarity and reciprocity.

We can learn much from what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have established in written protocols for life writing: having the right people tell the story; family permission; and writing from a place of community and collective self-determination, empowerment and strength. We can also draw on the protocols developed by South Sea Islander organisations, like Mackay and District ASSI Association's 'Drumming the Story: It's Our Business'. These protocols were developed with 78 families from the district and emphasised open communication, recognition of other community priorities and waiting to be invited rather than setting the agenda as a researcher. We are also mindful that there are protocols from home islands in the Pacific that may also need to be observed.

We brought these considerations to this workshop to see what protocols other participants had enacted and to offer our findings as a starting point for the OWP to develop its own protocols and for our South Sea Islander communities to tell us what they need to help tell their stories proper way. We don't need to crash in and reproduce extractive practices that cause harm in our communities. As South Sea Islanders with long associations, including intermarriage, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we are well placed to offer a way forward for all Oceanic communities living on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands to demonstrate reciprocity and good relationality in all that we do, including our life writing.

22 Kim Kruger, 'The Black Power Activism of Patricia Corowa at the Intersection of Aboriginal and South Sea Islander Political Organisation' (unpublished manuscript, 2020).

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