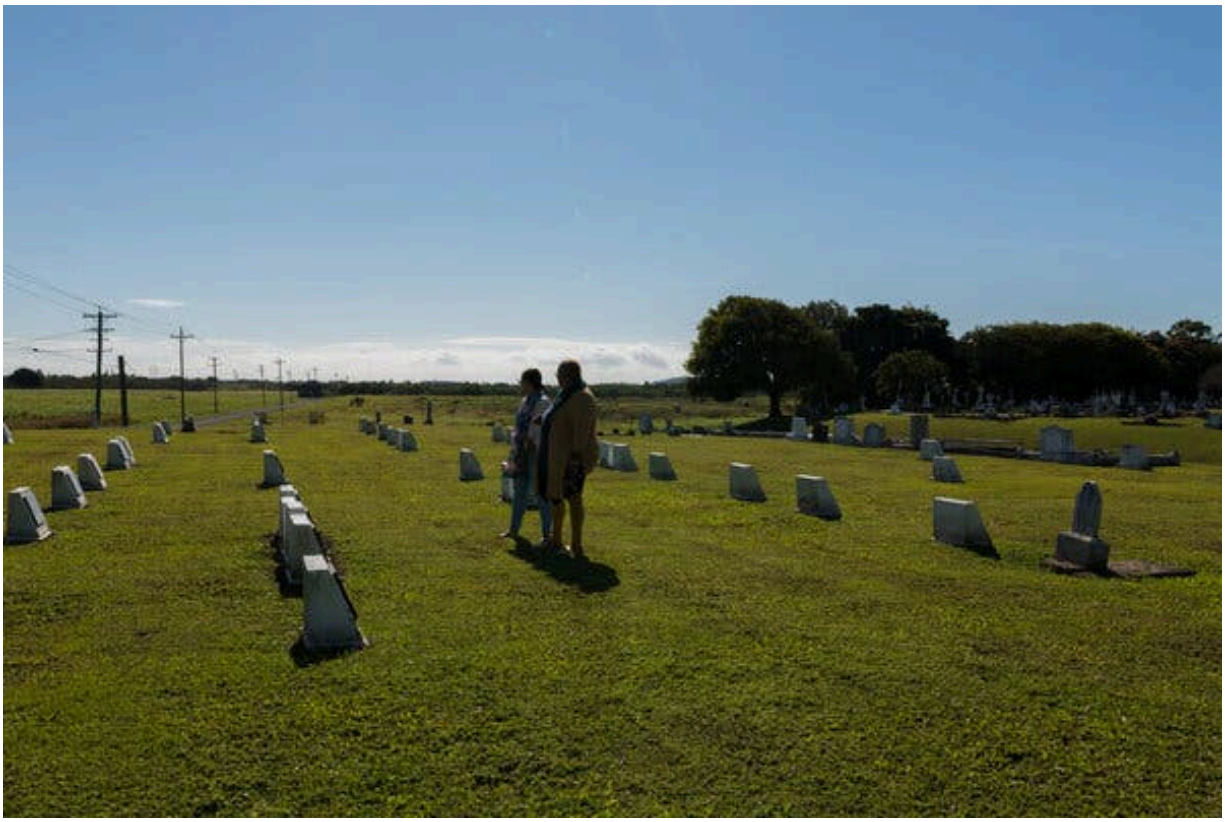
The New York Times

'No Slavery in Australia'? These Pacific Islanders Tell a Different Story

The Black Lives Matter movement has offered a rare moment for the descendants of plantation laborers brought aboard ships in the 19th century to make their family histories known.



Marion Healy and her daughter, Dominique, in a field of headstones recently added to the once unmarked graves of South Sea Islanders in Mackay, Australia.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times

By Isabella Kwai

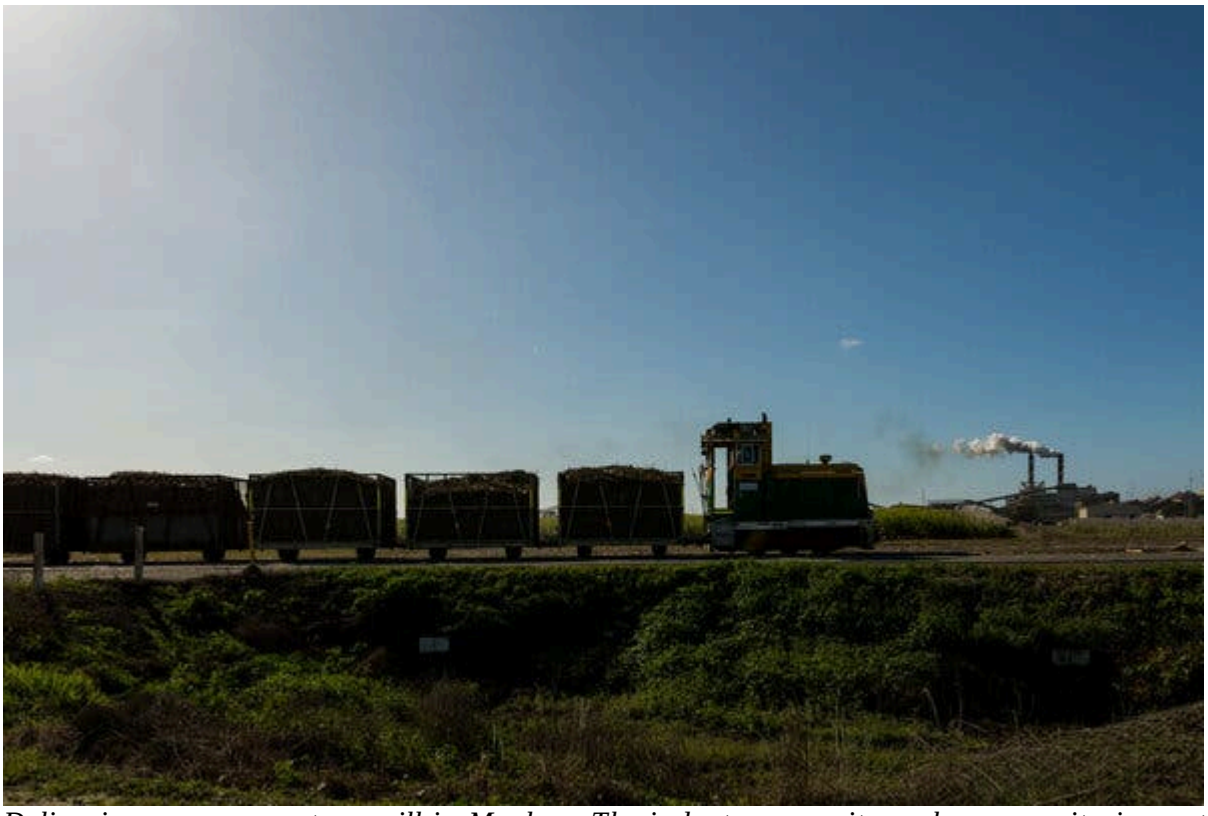
- Aug. 12, 2020

- MACKAY, Australia — Marion Healy's great-grandfather Kwailu was just a boy when "recruiters" took him aboard a ship on a beach in the Solomon Islands. The destination was Australia, where, for meager wages, he would do backbreaking labor planting and cutting sugar cane for white farmers.

  Thousands of South Pacific islanders like Kwailu were lured to Australian plantations in the 19th century, some through deception, others through force, and all through a colonialism that looted less-advantaged societies. So when Mrs. Healy recently heard Prime Minister Scott Morrison say that there had been "no slavery in Australia," she wondered whether her people's history, already little known, could be lost entirely.

  "How dare you say that?" she said of the prime minister. "I'm a bit frightened that we might slip out of their memory."

The Black Lives Matter movement, as it has swept the globe, has led Australia to look more deeply at entrenched discrimination against its Indigenous peoples and other minorities. Mr. Morrison's remark, for which he later apologized, focused particular attention on outwardly racist policies in Australia's past, a legacy many tend to overlook in a country that proclaims itself proudly multicultural.
Mrs. Healy and others descended from South Pacific laborers are often confused with Indigenous Australians, whose ancestors were the continent's first inhabitants, and have faced similar discrimination. Though South Pacific laborers were not the only ones engaged in such work, the prime minister's comment has created an opportunity for their descendants to cement a distinct identity.



Delivering sugar cane to a mill in Mackay. The industry owes its early prosperity in part to South Sea Islander laborers.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times

"It's a chance to have our story told," Mrs. Healy said. "We need to take that opportunity."

That story begins with the need for inexpensive labor in Britain's colonies, which pushed Australia as close to abject bondage as was allowed after the British Empire abolished slavery in 1833.

Chattel slavery, as practiced in America and elsewhere, meant that enslaved people were treated as the property of their masters to be bought, sold and exploited. The children of the enslaved were automatically born into slavery.

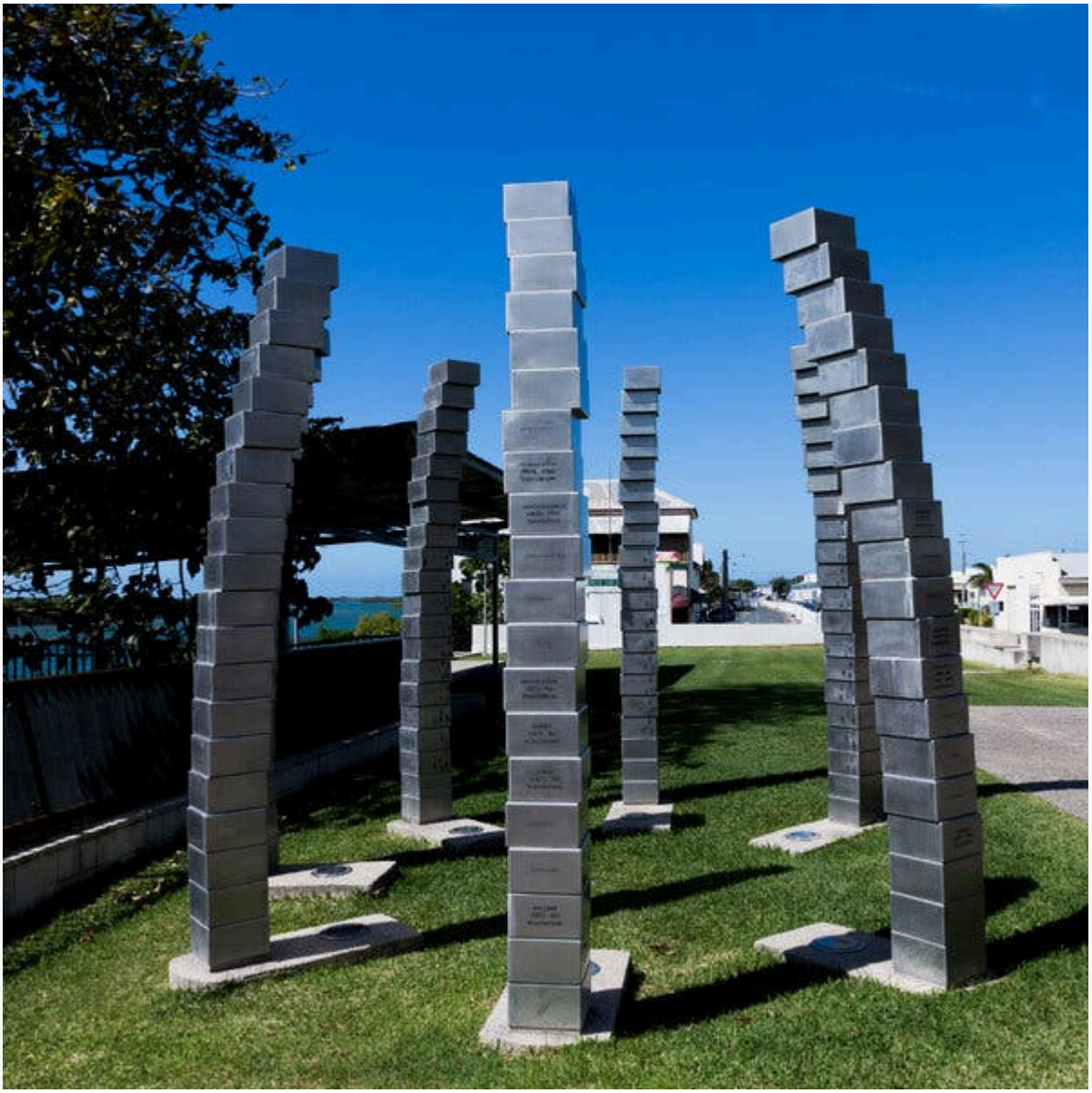
But in Australia, the British found cheap workers in the indentured labor of Indigenous Australians, Chinese, Indians, white convicts and South Pacific islanders.

Some historians say that the more than 50,000 South Pacific islanders who worked largely on the sugar plantations of northeastern Australia from 1863 to 1904 were not technically enslaved because they were paid for their toil, albeit typically much less than white workers. Some laborers, including Kwailu, who returned to their home islands in the South Pacific ended up coming back to Australia.

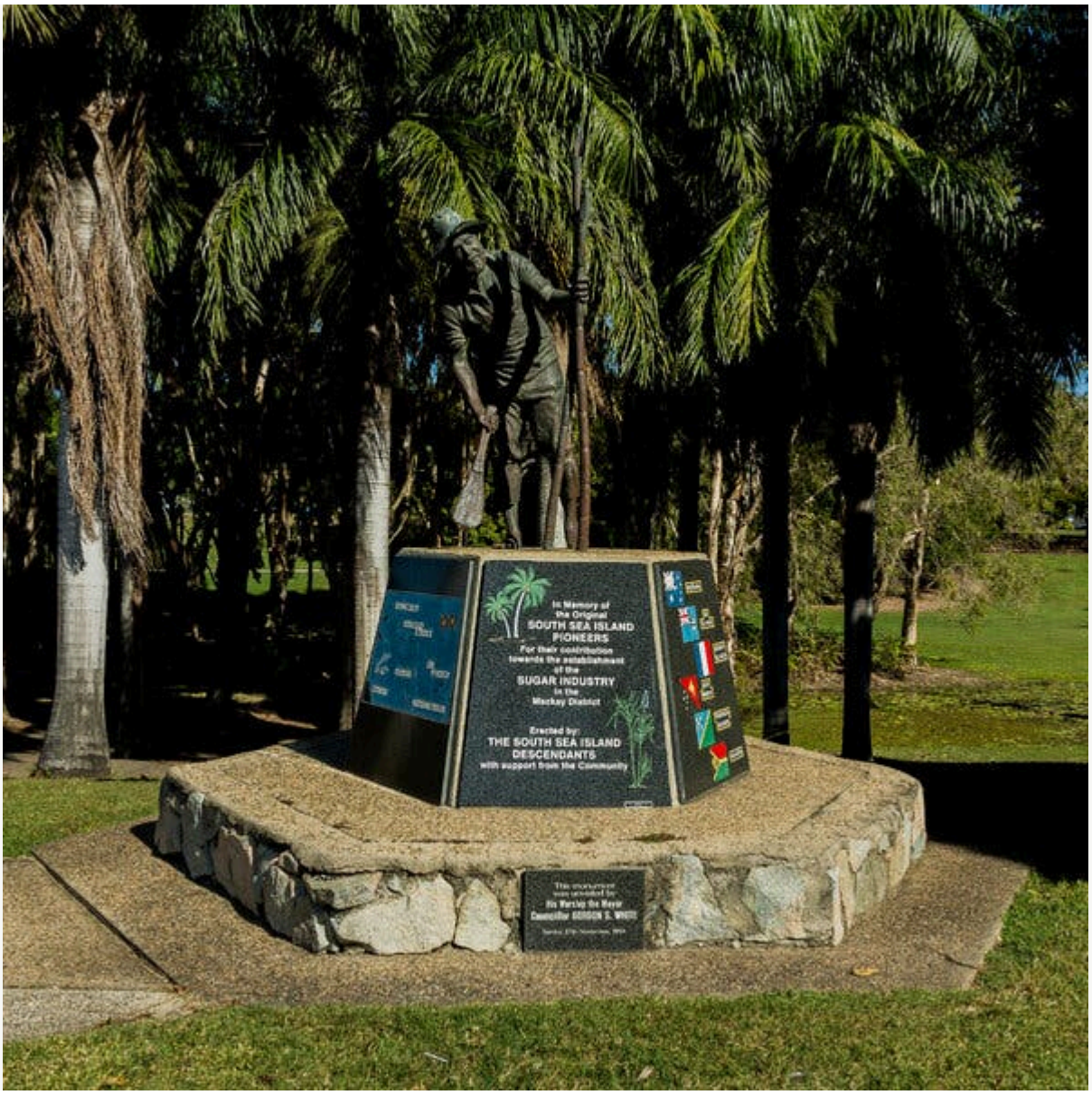
“But there was kidnapping. Nobody would argue against that,” said Clive Moore, an emeritus professor at the University of Queensland who has extensively studied the history of the laborers, known in Australia as South Sea Islanders.

Large numbers of the cane workers were “blackbirded”: lured from their island homes, some with the promise of items like axes and knives — valuable goods in a less industrialized society. Many of the South Sea Islanders did not survive their years of labor on the plantations.

Their toil helped make the colony, and later the state, of Queensland prosperous. But instead of recognizing the South Sea Islanders for their contributions, Australia sought to erase them from the record.



A sculpture with the names of the ships that brought South Sea Islanders to Mackay, alongside thumbprints of their descendants.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times



A monument erected in 1994 to honor the South Sea Islanders who helped establish Mackay's sugar cane industry.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times

One of the country's first acts as a new nation in 1901 was to enact frameworks intended to keep the country ethnically European, the so-called White Australia policy. The country deported a majority of the cane workers and banned their re-entry. A small number received exemptions, while others hid from immigration agents with the help of sympathetic farmers.

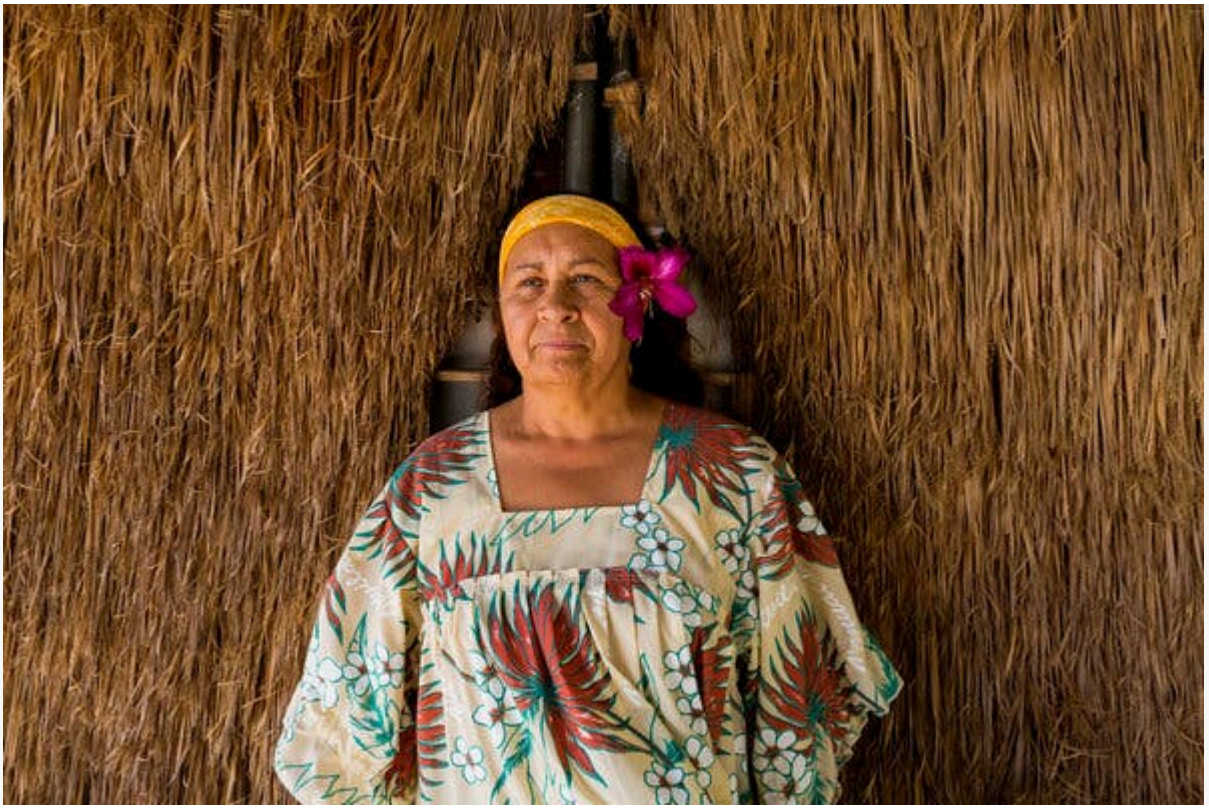
Those who remained in Australia were often reluctant to revisit the past as a result. That has meant that younger generations are sometimes unaware of their family histories, with gaps in the oral histories that are traditionally handed down.

"I didn't know my cultural identity until later on," said Cody Bobongie, 26, who, like many younger South Sea Islanders, finds the legacy of trauma a daunting weight to carry. "It's like I lost something I never had."

The country's largest population of South Sea Islanders, who number an estimated 20,000, live in the Mackay region of coastal Queensland. It is a place speckled with reminders of the legacy of blackbirding, but also a painful awareness — reinforced by the prime minister's slavery comment — that without a fight, memories will fade.

A traditional hut near the city's lush gardens has become a cherished meeting place. A mural showing Mackay (pronounced muh-KAI) through the years depicts the South Sea Islanders' journey by ship and their symbolic transformation into blackbirds. A plaque on the banks of the Pioneer River marks where South Sea Islanders were taken "for bidding and haulage to various sugar plantations."

And in Mackay's heritage-site cemetery, a field of fresh headstones bearing the silhouette of a kneeling man with a blackbird at his side stands separated from the rest. Before a 2016 project to identify them, the graves of about 160 workers who died while cutting cane were largely unmarked.



Raechel Ivey in front of a traditional hut in Mackay that has become a cherished meeting place.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times

"I used to ride across here for a shortcut and not realizing I was riding over my own ancestors," said Starrett Vea Vea, the chairman of the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association.

He led a team that looked through cemetery records to help identify the graves. "These were the ones that never went back to the islands," he said.

Mr. Vea Vea said he dreamed of creating a heritage trail that would lead people through the area's significant sites, from the graves to the cane fields.

Another resident, Raechel Ivey, who works for the regional government, is also hoping to pursue education efforts. As part of this, she is hosting a program where elders teach students how to weave traditional fishing nets.

Ms. Ivey grew up with her great-grandmother, who was brought to Australia at the age of 8 and became a maid for a white family. She was kept and fed, but not paid more than that. "She used to hold up the atlas and tell me that she was from New Hebrides," now known as Vanuatu, Ms. Ivey said.

Many in Mackay know little about this history, she said, “which is why we’re the forgotten people.” She believes that passing on the culture to all Mackay residents, not just South Sea Islanders, is crucial.

The city’s population of about 80,000 has grown increasingly diverse, with nearby mines underpinning the arrival of new workers, some of whom are unaware of the area’s history. The mayor, Greg Williamson, said that Mackay should be forthright about how its prosperity had come at the suffering of South Sea Islanders.

Image

A mural depicting the so-called blackbirding of South Sea Islanders brought to work on plantations.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times

Image

The artifacts room in the South Sea Islanders' hut in Mackay.Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times

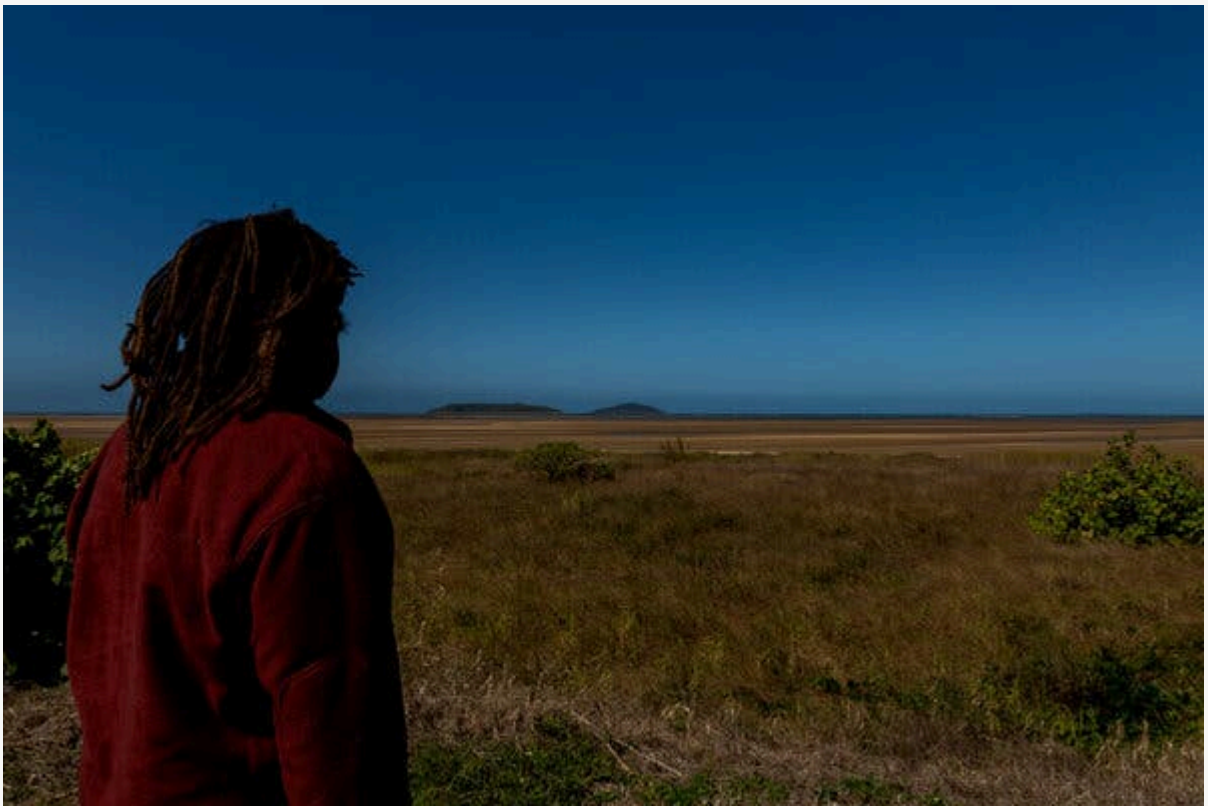
"There's absolutely no sense in denying any of that happened," said Mr. Williamson, an independent who, along with South Sea Islanders, invited Mr. Morrison to visit Mackay for a history lesson.

The city, he added, had investigated whether its namesake, a Scottish-born explorer named John Mackay, had any connection to blackbirding. Mr. Williamson said that he and the Mackay family were fairly confident he was not involved, but Professor Moore has found evidence indicating that he was.

Instruction in South Sea Islander history, unlike lessons on Aboriginal Australians, is not compulsory in Australian schools. Mrs. Healy and others in Mackay believe that should change.

The importance of preserving these stories struck Mrs. Healy a few years ago when she visited Malaita, the island in the Solomons where her great-grandfather was born. As she approached the village he had been taken from so many years ago, she heard drums and singing: a welcome from the village people that brought her to tears.

“It made sense to me, when you hear Aboriginal people talk about going home to country,” she said, referring to a concept of returning to and connecting with one’s traditional lands. “Then did I feel like I was home.”



Starrett Vea Vea looking at islands where his ancestors landed after being brought from the South Pacific. Credit...Faye Sakura for The New York Times