

# JOURNEY BLONG YUMI

## Australian South Sea Islander

# 150

## Education resource



This resource has been developed for students to better understand the artworks on display in the exhibition *Journey blong yumi: Australian South Sea Islander 150*.

2013 marks 150 years since the first South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia. Australian South Sea Islanders are a distinct cultural group who are the descendents of people brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 from the Pacific Islands. They have a unique place in Australian and Queensland history, having neither an Indigenous nor an immigration heritage. Logan Art Gallery celebrates the ongoing contribution of Australian South Sea Islanders to Queensland, focussing on contemporary artworks made by South Sea Islander people who have made this region their home.

***Journey blong yumi: Australian South Sea Islander 150***  
**Logan Art Gallery: 12 July – 17 August 2013**

*This project has been funded through the Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF). RADF is a Queensland Government through Arts Queensland and Logan City Council partnership to support local arts and culture.*

**Image:** Kakae Pakoa, *Vakamatua*, 2013 (detail), rosewood sourced from Vanuatu. Photo: courtesy the artist.

# Blackbirding

## by Natalie Pakoa

Blackbirding: *n.* (Australian) the kidnapping of Pacific Islanders or Kanakas for work on, or for sale to, plantations – usually sugar plantations in Queensland, Australia.

Like most ethnic groups in Queensland, Australian South Sea Islanders are not indigenous to Australia; but neither were they born in the land of their ancestors. Australia is not their land or country, unlike the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are the traditional owners and custodians of this country. So, how did we arrive in Australia?

The journey of South Sea Islanders began in 1847 when they were bought to Queensland to work on the sugar and cotton plantations. It was said by plantation owners that, Islanders from the Pacific Islands would be better to work in the warmer climate of Queensland than white Australians. When the Pacific Islanders were bought to Queensland in the 1800s, they were forced and tricked to come onto the large ships. The captains of those large ships would land on the island and use items such as tinned meat, rum, tobacco and axes to entice the Islanders to come closer, since the Islanders didn't know what these items were. They were curious! When they came closer to the captain or the crewmen, they would be grabbed and put into chains and pushed into the cabin area of the ship and sailed to Queensland.

Many Islanders did not make it as far as Queensland. Some jumped off the ship, trying to swim back to their families and homes. Some became stricken with sea sickness and other diseases unknown to them. Between 1847 and 1904, more than 62,000 South Sea Islanders from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and other Pacific Islands contributed to the economy and community of Queensland today.

In 1901, the White Australia Policy was introduced due to the large number of migrants landing in Australia, including the continued recruitment of Islanders. Thousands of Islanders were then forcibly removed and deported back to the islands, but were dropped off to a different place, not from the island or village from which they were originally taken. The result of this separation was that the majority of Islanders ended up living in the Torres Strait Islands. Some may have even perished trying to stay in Australia.

In Queensland today, there are more than 40,000 descendants of the many young men, young women and children who were stolen from these Pacific Islands and were forced to live in a foreign land. The journey continues for the many descendants known as 'Australian South Sea Islanders' to visit the home of their ancestors and reconnect with a lost culture, find their families and to know where they come from.

We live in a multicultural society; many of us living in Australia have a story to tell of how our families arrived here. However, for Australian South Sea Islander people, our history and stories play an important role to help seek a deeper understanding of culture, a sense of belonging and connect to a new identity. Australian South Sea Islander people are a proud, distinct and strong community, as were our ancestors.

# Jasmine Togo-Brisby: *The birds won't tell*



*The birds won't tell (3)* 2010, acrylic paint on board. Photo: courtesy the artist.



*The birds won't tell (1)* 2010, acrylic paint on board. Photo: courtesy the artist.

## About the artist and her work

Jasmine Togo-Brisby is a fourth generation Australian born South Sea Islander, her great-great grandparents were James Togo and Fanny Togo. They were taken (blackbirded) from Santo and Ibong Islands in Vanuatu and brought to Sydney, Australia in the early 1900s. They resided in the Tweed district where they were forced to work in the sugar cane fields. Togo-Brisby's family's history of blackbirding captivated her at a young age and her constant intrigue inevitably led her to expressing this through her art.

Togo-Brisby's heritage influences her artistic practice extensively and is evident throughout her work. She also takes inspiration from her own personal experiences with racism and identity. Researching issues of discrimination and segregation throughout history is a personal interest and is incorporated into her concepts. She is drawn to discovering visual links between past and present and the influence that history has made on today's society.

Togo-Brisby's work is a compilation of identity, history and culture. She predominantly focuses on portraiture using members of her family as subjects. Influences of modern culture are combined with the exploration of race and repression. Concepts are conveyed through the process of accumulating layers and washes in various mediums. Her work is a response to and a reflection of her personal experiences and her South Sea Islander heritage.

## Simone Togo-Brisby: *Blackbirding dress*



### About the artist and her work

Jasmine Togo-Brisby's sister, Simone Togo-Brisby, was inspired by the journey of their great grandmother, designing a blackbirding dress made of fabric resembling cotton sacks which may have been used by their great grandmother. The youthful design of the dress belies the horrific story of a stolen child, and indeed a stolen childhood.

Simone Togo-Brisby, *Blackbirding dress*, 2010, calico, felt and feathers. Photo: courtesy of the artist

## Sonya Hopkins: *Woven trumpet shell*



Sonya Hopkins, *Woven trumpet shell*, 2004, cotton, rope, lace. Photo: Carl Warner

### About the artist and her work

Sonya Hopkins is the daughter of the artist Fay Mooney. Recollecting the stories of how her ancestors spent time living in the huts along the riverside she has created a conch shell trumpet using woven lace and cotton as both a means of holding on to and reconciling the loss of ancestral practices, customs, rituals and languages of the Pacific islands.

# Fay Mooney: *Homeward bound*



Fay Mooney, *Homeward Bound*, 2013, acrylic on canvas. Photo: Carl Warner

## About the artist and her work

Mother and daughter Fay Mooney and Sonya Hopkins share stories passed down from their ancestors, many of whom lived in small huts located within the sugar cane plantations alongside the river.

As a child Mooney would visit her grandmother who would teach her grandchildren how to live a simple lifestyle alongside the river with only a gun, a pot a fishing rod and matches for survival. Looking back on this period the artist reflects on the reality of the situation that her ancestors found themselves in. Once their contracts to work on the plantations had ended they were then left to fend for themselves, having no means of income or legal rights to become a resident of Australia, as they were not officially recognised as Australian citizens.

Mooney soon realised why her ancestors had to resort to living in simple huts alongside the river. However despite all these difficulties and extreme poverty she never thought of herself to be poor. For her time spent swimming, fishing, hunting and playing with her siblings and cousins filled her life with joy.

# Rhonda Norman: *The strength tree*



Rhonda Norman, *The Strength Tree*, 2013, acrylic on canvas. Photo: Carl Warner

## About the artist and her work

Rhonda Norman developed a strong interest in art from a very early age. She is a self-taught artist who enjoys creating different artwork from both natural and man-made materials. Her work includes paintings, sculpting, and crocheting and string art.

Rhonda contributes to community events such as *Stylin' Up* that allows local Indigenous artists to showcase their art and crafts. She has also worked for approximately 10 years in local schools supporting students by providing regular art classes and producing large art pieces for annual events such as NAIDOC week.

Each of Norman's artworks is unique and a representation of her as an Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI). Norman deals with the idea of finding solitude during times of turbulence. The daughter of an Aboriginal Australian father and an Australian South Sea Islander mother, she grew up knowing little about either culture. Instead her strength comes from her faith in God and the ability of faith to pull her through times of difficulty.

Rhonda's participation in *Journey blong yumi* provides a platform for her to be recognised as a proud Australian South Sea Islander woman. For her a generation opportunities such as these regarding the appreciation of her individuality, her self-worth and her acceptance by others within the wider community were very limited.

# Kakae Pakoa: *Vakamatua*



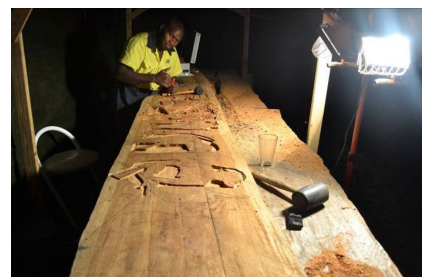
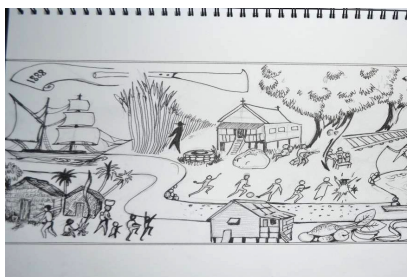
Kakae Pakoa carving *Vakamatua* at his studio 2013. Photo: courtesy the artist.

## About the artist and his work

Kakae Pakoa's impressive six metre wood carving takes up the main wall in the exhibition space. Pakoa was born in Vanuatu. He moved to Australia to be with his wife Natalie and he wanted to connect with the descendents of those people who went missing from the islands so many generations ago. Pakoa says that many stories of abduction and questions about where these people ended up still abound in the islands today.

*Vakamatua* encapsulates the journey of the South Sea Island people through time and space. This magnificent carving is a monument to those who had been lost and acts as a memorial for those who remain, and for those who return to their ancestral homelands and reconnect with families who are awaiting the arrival of long lost family members.

How *Vakamatua* was made:



1. Kakae sourced the rosewood in Vanuatu, carefully selecting and preparing it in his studio
2. Drew the design in pencil on paper
3. Transferred the design onto the wood and commenced carving

# Australian South Sea Islander Elders



**Uncle William Bolea**

Family name: Bolea

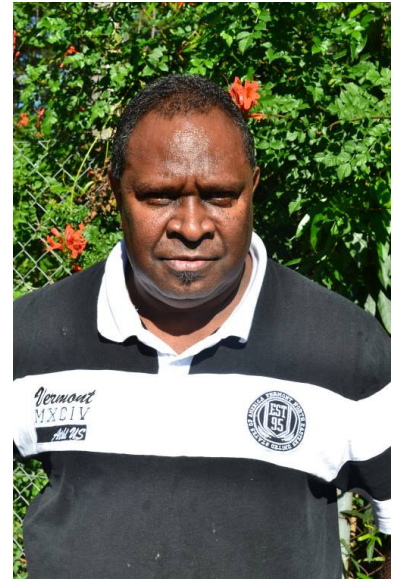
**Special message:** "I want all South Sea Islanders to be recognised, to know where they come from, especially the kids."



**Uncle George Blow**

Family name: Blow, Tamok (Tamook)

**Special message:** "We were always happy, we always had plenty of friends, and we didn't have any real enemies or anything."



**Uncle Abraham Saylor**

Family name: Saylor, Taiters

**Special message:** "My grandmother taught us to never hate people. No matter what they do to you...love them."



**Auntie Jeanette Kirk**

Family name: Eggmolesse

**Special message:** "Be very proud of our ancestry, don't forget the history and don't hesitate to tell people...let them know."



**Auntie Jenni Shepherd**

Family names: Ambertel, Nagas, Johnson

**Special message:** "My hope for children and grandchildren is to be recognised and to be proud to identify as an Australian South sea Islander with confidence."



**Uncle Richard Watego**

Family names:

**Special message:** "Make sure you get a good education; it will open up more opportunities in your life. Be fair to your own people."



# JOURNEY BLONG YUMI

---

## Australian South Sea Islander

# 150

---

## ASSI in schools

2013 marks 150 years since the first South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia. Australian South Sea Islanders (ASSI) are a distinct cultural group who are the descendants of people brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 from the Pacific Islands.

ASSI have a unique place in Australian and Queensland history, having neither an indigenous nor an immigration heritage.

This year we celebrate the ongoing contribution of the Australian South Sea Islanders to Queensland, focussing on a contemporary art exhibition, research with ASSI Elders and community engagement.

In conjunction with the 150th anniversary celebrations Logan Art Gallery partnered with Vanuatu Australian South Sea Island Community (VASSIC) to develop a series of programs that engaged the community.

Key members of the VASSIC community and gallery staff visited local primary schools to celebrate the South Sea Island culture and diversity. The aim was to raise awareness and promote recognition of the contribution of the South Sea Islanders from past generations, and provide a positive community connection for future generations.

Young people listened carefully to fourth generation descendants of South Sea Islanders who shared their own personal stories of tradition, culture and the 'Blackbirding' experience. They watched demonstrations and were encouraged to create artworks and write text in response to these stories.

### **Participating schools:**

Marsden State School, year 6  
Kimberley Park State School, prep/year1  
Kimberley Park State School, year 2/3  
Harris Field State School, year 5

Thank you to the schools who invited us into their classrooms to spend valuable time with their students.



Australian South Sea Islanders Natalie Pakoa and Aunty Bernetta who shared their stories in the ASSI in schools program.

# ASSI in schools: *Blackbirds, Cotton fields and Buntings*

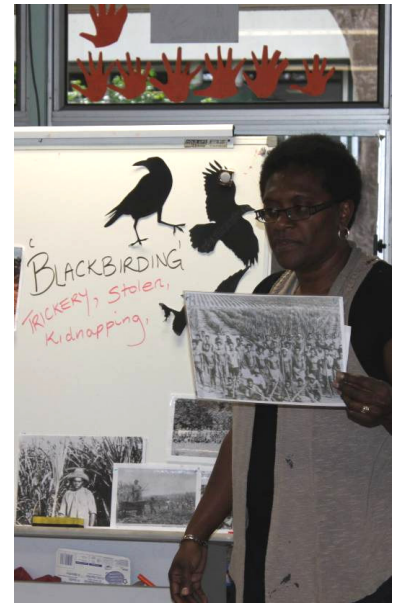
*Blackbirds* were made with white pencil on paper.

## Background:

'Blackbirding' is a term was used to describe the kidnapping of Pacific Islanders or Kanakas to work on, or be sold to, sugar plantations and cotton farms in Queensland Australia. Between 1847 and 1904, more than 62,000 South Sea Islanders from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and other Pacific Islands, contributed to the economy and community of Queensland today.

## The activity:

Students thought about their personal journeys and were asked to talk and write about where their families had originated from. For some, this 'journey' occurred many generations back, but for many others it was a much more recent experience. Students were encouraged to discover the stories and journeys taken by their own family members and were asked to record these stories on the blackbird motifs.



*Cotton fields* were made from cane, cotton fabric, calico fabric, raffia, cotton thread, hessian, jute and string.

## Background:

Many South Sea Islanders were taken to work on, or be sold to, sugar plantations and cotton farms in Queensland Australia. Students heard stories from Australian South Sea Islanders and created individual artworks to form a collaborative artwork that references the cotton plantations of Queensland.

## The activity:

Students worked with cane, cotton fabric, calico fabric, raffia, cotton thread, hessian, jute and string. They wrapped, twisted, intertwined, interlocked, plaited and stitched this natural material in a creative and innovative way. The objects created are their interpretations of the cotton plant itself and they also reference the hardship endured by the people who were forced to work under such terrible conditions and under such horrific circumstances.



*Buntings* were made from acrylic paint printed onto calico fabric.

## The activity:

Prep and year 1 children from Kimberley Park State School heard stories from Australian South Sea Islanders, watched demonstrations and created artworks in response. They made individual hand-printed flags using hand-cut stencils and acrylic paint. The flags collectively form a string of buntings to create a celebratory and festive atmosphere. Motifs used were taken from South Sea Island traditional symbols such as shark's teeth, birds, fish, flowers and sugar cane.





# Student activity

Look at these two details from Kakae Pakoa's carving *Vakamatua*. Write what you think the people in the pictures are doing in the space underneath each picture.



**These people are** .....

.....

.....

.....



**These people are** .....

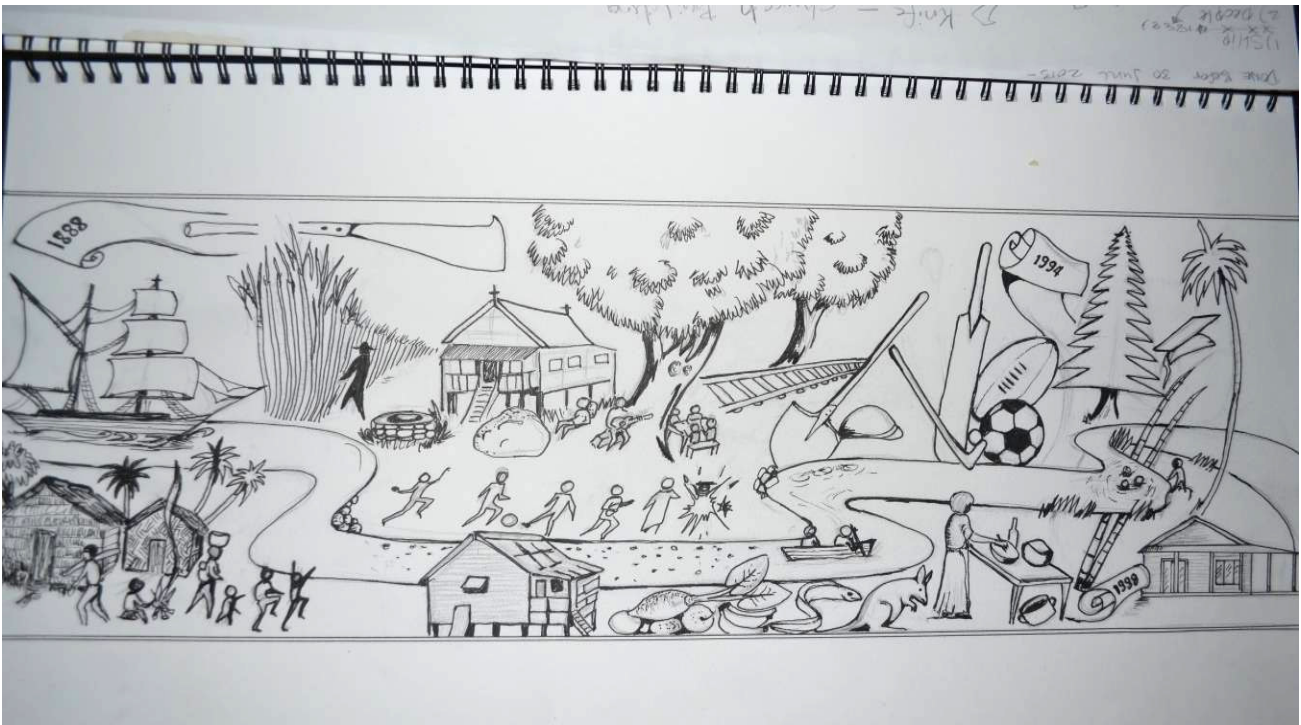
.....

.....

.....

# Student activity

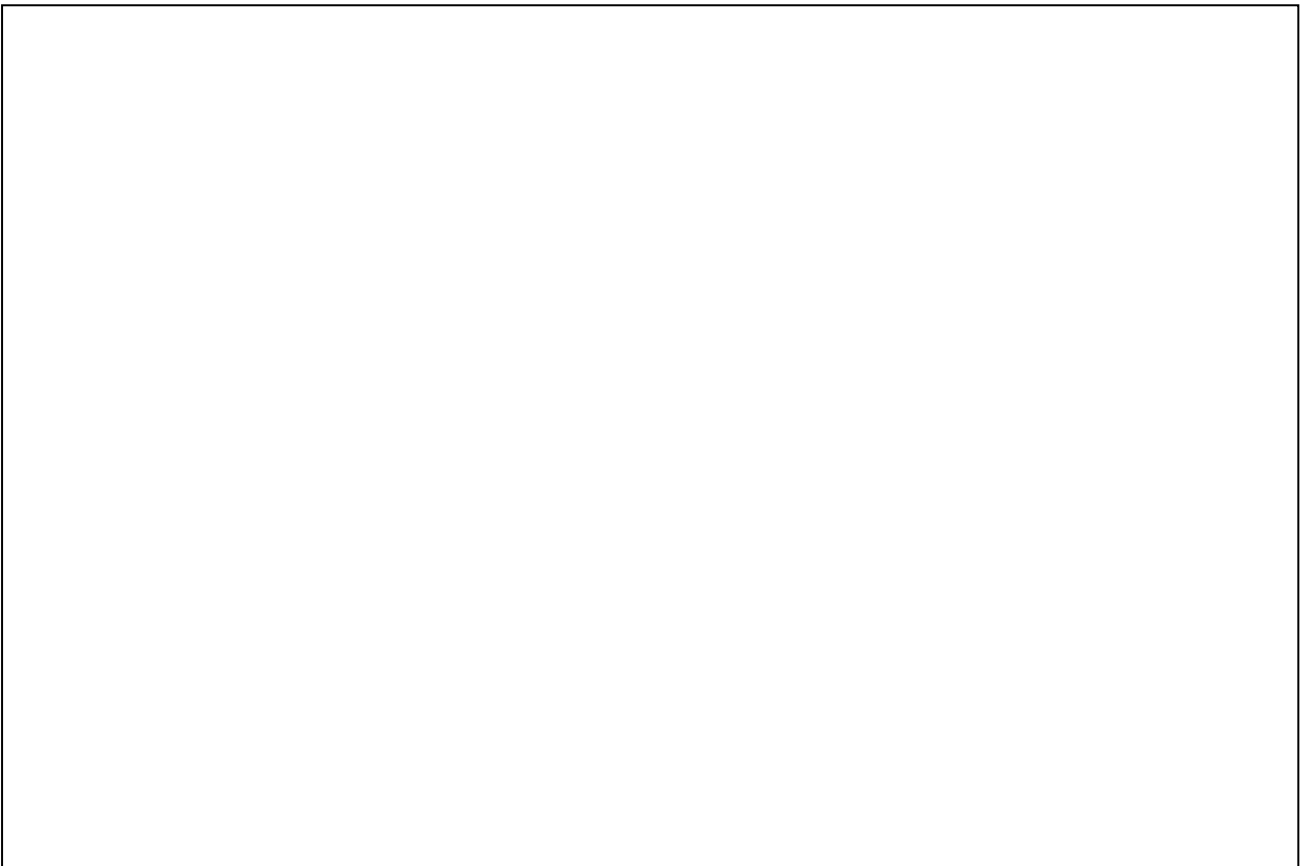
Look at the preliminary drawing Kakae Pakoa created for his carving *Vakamatua*. This drawing helped the artist plan out the design layout for the large wood carving.



Kakae Pakoa, *Vakamatua preparatory drawing*, 2013 (detail), pencil and ink on paper. Photo: courtesy the artist

## Create

In the box below see if you can create a detailed line drawing of a significant event which has occurred in your and your family's life.



# Student activity

Select one of Fay Mooney's paintings. Write down the title and describe what you see. Tell us in your own words what you think the image is about.

.....

.....

.....

.....

## Create your own drawing

Fay Mooney's childlike paintings of river scenes and ocean views remind us of childhood stories of life along the riverbed, of making the best of a difficult situation.

Create your own drawing which represents a special event or memory you have of a happy time you have shared with your family.



## Describe...

Tell us about your picture, what is the story you are representing?

.....

.....

.....

.....

# Student activity

The Elders in South Sea Island communities, as in many other cultures, play a very important role in family life. Elders are greatly respected and looked upon as incredibly valuable members of the family. They are treated with great respect and honour by all of their offspring.

## What can I do?

Talk to one of the elders in your own family group: your grandparents, great aunties or great uncles. Ask them if they would let you ask them a few questions about their family back ground, for example:

Where were they born? .....

What year were they born? .....

How many brothers and sisters did they have?.....

Where did they grow up?.....

Did they travel to other countries?.....

Where did they go to school?.....

Can they share a bit about their life as a young child?.....

.....  
.....  
.....

Can they share a happy memory from their childhood with you?.....

.....  
.....  
.....

What do they love the most about living in Australia? .....

.....  
.....  
.....

What are their hopes and dreams for the future? .....

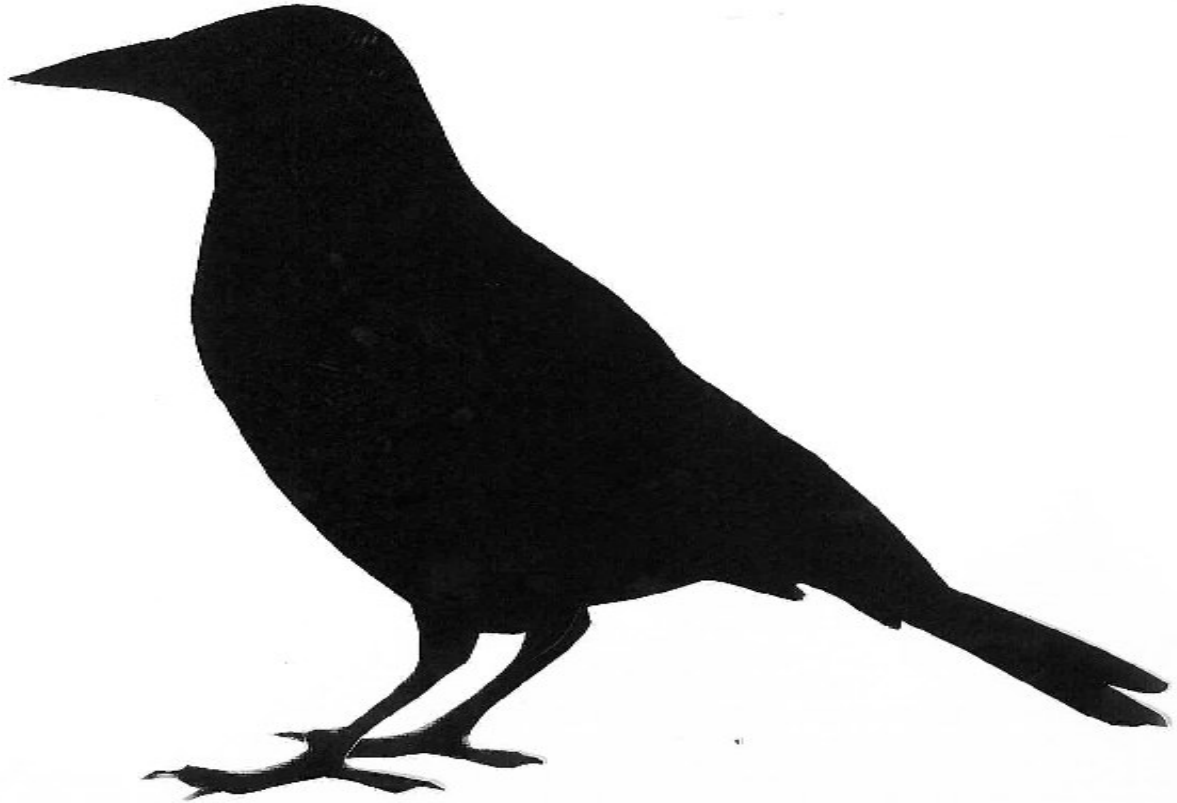
.....  
.....  
.....

What are their hopes and dreams for you?.....

.....  
.....  
.....

# Student activity

My story: Write your story across or around the blackbird image. Tell us about your family's history. Which country did your family originate from?



**What is your journey?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....