

Introduction to the Special Issue, 'Migrant Voices: Community Collaboration and Telling Migration Histories'

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I came at Christmas, and I couldn't find work. When I first met my [arranged] husband, he had only ten dollars in his bank account. And I cry and I cry, I couldn't do anything. I didn't want to upset my father and my mother, and brothers. And I cried and I stayed in my room for three days, there with the people I lived with [in Redfern]. The lady came on the third day, New Years Day, she said don't cry, she made me coffee... I start crying more. This other lady came in and was named Poppi too, she came from a different island. And I cry, and I said: I couldn't believe it. These old houses! My house in Crete was so beautiful! I didn't believe that in one house [in Sydney], there were two or three families together. And I had to prepare to marry here... when I see all the Greek people the same doing labouring work, I feel sorry, but I couldn't go back... if I went back home the people wouldn't think I was a virgin anymore.¹

This is the voice of Popi Bolakis interviewed in 1985 for the Ethnic Affairs Commission (EAC) NSW Oral History Project, held by the State Library of NSW. With a consistent bang sounding in the background, and in a compelling mixture of Greek and English, Popi tells us about the dashed expectations of her youth as a young migrant woman sent across the world to marry a man she'd never met in a country she knew nothing about. Elements of her story are familiar to historians of migration to Australia – the stresses of resettlement, the different expectations

1 CY MLOH 91/8, Ethnic Affairs Commission Oral History project, interview with Popi Bolakis, no date.

placed on men and women, the workplace discrimination, the yearning for a place of one's own. And yet, we are aware of these issues (intellectually at least) via the assessments of others: source documents penned by bureaucrats, health workers, social scientists, and politicians, who occasionally draw on the anecdotes of their subjects, post-war immigrants like Popi, afflicted by 'nerves' but rarely listened to. If we, as oral historians, are to aspire to an empathetic emplacement of the subjective voice, the value of sitting with and hearing Popi's voice cannot be overstated.

In Australia, the presence of migrant voices has increased in galleries, libraries, archives, museums (GLAM) since the early 1980s, when the EAC conducted their landmark oral histories project, and various bicentennial-funded projects also boosted the migrant presence. Since then, the GLAM sector has also recognised the limits of a celebratory 'food and folklore' multiculturalism as a theme in exhibitions, and curators and archivists are all too aware of the biases in historically Anglophone collections established in a settler-colonial context. While proactive efforts by institutions and archives are underway and making significant progress in addressing these 'gaps' and biases, collections fall short of being truly representative of Australia's population, where almost a quarter of all households speak a language other than English in the home.

But migrants and their diaspora communities are far from silent. Community-initiated projects, sometimes funded by one-off government grants, do incredible work. There is no 'shortage of material culture' for migration in the storerooms and archives of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community groups across the country, and in community oral history projects.² Such collections can pose questions around ownership and accessibility (*whose heritage?*), as well as questions about marginality and power. Do recent moves from certain ethnic communities in Victoria to establish their own museums indicate a more assertive voice? Or do these practices underscore their exclusion and reinforce the 'otherness' of Other Australians, their separation from wider social and cultural forces shaping Australian

2 Context Pty Ltd and Way Back When for Heritage Victoria, 'Victoria's Post 1940s Migration Heritage: Volume 1, Project Report', August 2011.

life? Undeniably, these voices are important in order to challenge and expand core Australian narratives about settlement and belonging, about race and ethnicity, social justice and community relations or social cohesion. If we are to rely only on the material available in elite and mainstream cultural collecting institutions, our visions of Australia are blinkered.

The project of collecting, preserving and sharing migrant (and all non-Anglo-Celtic-Australian) voices remains important. Historically, racialised minorities have been most vulnerable to breakdowns in existing social systems, to economic upheaval, and to the failure of existing Anglophone systems of governance to account for difference in times of crisis and change. Recent migrant and ethnic-minority experiences with COVID-19 (especially in Melbourne's north-west and Sydney's west) are a case in point. Non-Anglophone Australia was marginalised during the COVID pandemic, whilst also being more heavily policed. A federal coordinating body to communicate COVID-19 directives to CALD communities was only established in December 2020; and even then, health directives and the benefits of vaccination and boosters were poorly communicated to non-English-speaking-background communities. Mortality rates among migrants were higher than for the wider Australian population.³ These moments in time are part of a continuum of neglect and dismissal, which are contingent too on historically shifting designations of ethnicity and race in settler-colonial Australia, of who is or is not assimilated into the category of White Australia for whom systems are designed. Symbolically and materially, the neglect is a symptom that extends into the archive, the historical record, the stories we tell and receive, and in this space, work remains to be done.

3 Violet Roumeliotis, 'From Multicultural to Inclusive: There's More Work to Do', *ProBono Australia*, 4 July 2022. Available at https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2022/07/from-multicultural-to-inclusive-theres-more-work-to-do/?utm_campaign=coschedule&utm_source=linkedin&utm_medium=Violet%20Roumeliotis%20AM.