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My Island Home:  
A study of identity across different  
generations of Torres Strait Islanders living  
outside the Torres Strait

Thesis submitted by  
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in June 2009

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Indigenous Australian  
Studies

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## **Statement of Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help**

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# Abstract

This thesis is a study of identity across different generations of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (also referred to as ‘Mainlanders’). The research aims, firstly, to examine the representation of identity across different generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait; secondly, to analyse critical aspects of this identity; and, thirdly, to explore new ways of representing ‘Mainland Islander’ identity in contemporary society.

Since the end of World War Two, the Torres Strait Islander diaspora, located on the mainland of Australia, has continued to grow to the extent that it now represents just over 85 percent (40,367 people) of the total Torres Strait Islander population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2007). The period immediately following World War Two marked the beginning of mass internal migration of Torres Strait Islanders to the Australian mainland. There are many different pathways and passages that Islanders followed in the journey from the Torres Strait to the mainland. Many Islanders, including my family, made the journey voluntarily as they looked for work and other life opportunities. Some Islanders were forcibly removed from their islands; the journey made under duress with circumstances that paralleled the oppressive conditions they experienced in the Torres Strait. Other Islanders arrived on the mainland because of environmental or historical circumstances, such as the evacuations required during the flooding of Saibai Island in the 1930s and later during World War Two.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of both Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies, this qualitative study focuses on the narratives of twenty-three participant Storytellers representing first, second and third generation Torres Strait Islanders (mainly) living outside the Torres Strait. The research sites included the mainland Islander communities of Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Brisbane and Canberra as well as Badu and Erub Islands in the Torres Strait.

A review of current government legislation and policies pertaining to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait reveals a form of identity politics that sees ‘Mainlanders’ positioned in binary oppositions and deficit cultural discourses. In contrast, this research articulates a story of ‘Mainlander’ relatedness, a multilayered and complex process of identification across generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. This story of ‘Mainlander’ relatedness represents a composite counter-narrative to claims of cultural and political dissolution and displacement for a population (increasingly) born and raised outside the Torres Strait. It is articulated through a strong sense of place identity, relating and connecting across generations, the shared experiences and memories of belonging to an *Island Home*. The relational aspect of place identity, in turn, informs our knowledge of who we are, our connections with ourselves, each other and our position in the world. This research presents key insights into the way Islanders negotiate and contest the contemporary ‘Mainlander’ experience in the everyday through utilisation of multimedia, the arts and technology in the creation of systems of representation, cultural expression and interconnectivity between individuals and the collective.



New political approaches must be open to ‘Mainlander’ representations of identity that are grounded in the connection to Island Homes but, at the same time, shaped, influenced and negotiated within the context of our experiences, history and connection to the mainland. We ‘Mainlanders’ are equally responsible for reviewing our own institutional systems and practices, critiquing the way we are positioned by others and ourselves in political and social discourses, and understanding how we might articulate the spaces from which we speak of our lived realities and experiences as *Ailan Pipel* (Islander People).

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