

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Children of the Sugar Slaves: Black and Resilient

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, (Waskam) Emelda Davis, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts, in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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ABSTRACT

This MA thesis is framed by the advocacy work of the Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson). Through grassroots access to local knowledge and Australian South Sea Islander oral histories, the research is informed by an adapted First Nations Standpoint theory. I draw on memories that link several generational stories from the nineteenth century through the twentieth. An 'inside story' one of Australia's best kept secrets, it is the first culturally appropriate academic study by an Australian South Sea Islander person that focuses specifically on the Tweed Heads area of northern NSW. Drawing on collective community memories, the thesis proposes the phrase 'Australia's Melanesian region' in recognition of South Sea Islanders first contact locations which are sites of historical cultural importance for the displaced peoples from the islands of Vanuatu, the Solomons, and the Torres Strait; and Aboriginal Australians and Australian South Sea Islander kinship groups created through intermarriage of our peoples. The naming an 'Australian Melanesian region' is a deliberate gesture to emphasize that the negative impacts of colonialism on SSI Indigenous peoples is not just an Australian story, but part of an ongoing catastrophic global history of post-colonial oppression.

The main section of the thesis titled 'Memory Work' has three chapters which investigate my own memories of the Tweed and integrates them with those of my family as part of a multigenerational history. It begins with my autobiography. This is followed by a biography of my mother and her activism; and finally the story of the Australian South Sea Islander community in northern NSW, particularly in the small town of Chinderah of her ancestors. It is intimate histories which rely on recent memory that have been pivotal in providing Australian South Sea Islander peoples with foundational knowledge and understandings to meaningfully and authentically reconnect with our traditional cultures and customary practices. We also develop ways to ensure that we can preserve these for future generations.

The final section titled 'Memory Activism' highlights the courageous leadership of generations of South Sea Islander leaders from the Tweed and discusses how we have used our past to amplify the voices of Australian South Sea Islander peoples across time. I argue that it is important to use our past to help strengthen our collective identity and give greater force to the community campaigns for social justice.

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To those that have gone before us, the foundation from which we build.

‘We will never forget you nor your teachings of custom and cultural practice that have anchored our determination and continued struggle for identity through Black resilience and contribution to the global history of slavery.’

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