

# Being a migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand: Freedom of expression and racism

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In her article, Katja Neef reflects on her personal experiences of living as a mixed-raced Asian migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand and how technology and media can exacerbate racial stigmatisation and structural racism.

## Encountering New Zealand

My family migrated to Aotearoa in late 2013, and being of mixed descent—half Thai and half German—I have witnessed and encountered racism. From living in Aotearoa for the past decade, I can see that racism has become entrenched in our systems and society. Colourism and everyday racism are frequently experienced by Asian communities.

After having spent the first 13 years of my life in Asia, I ended up going to a majority white school on Auckland’s North Shore. I became aware of the misconceptions and gaps in understanding of the history of Aotearoa and the inequalities that have disproportionately affected Māori and Pasifika communities due to colonisation and racially entrenched systems. At my school, we only learnt about the Land Wars in Year 10 but never covered colonisation and its devastating impacts, its legacies within our system, or the need to decolonise. Learning te reo was not seen as important for non-Māori and, embarrassingly, we were never exposed to it.

It was not until entering university that I became more aware of the racism in our housing and our education systems through school zoning. I learnt about “redlining” and how real estate agents consider your job, ethnicity, and class and only show you properties based on where they believe you “belong”. When we first moved, we were looking at housing in West Auckland but were explicitly told we shouldn’t live there. Such attitudes foster the perpetuation of inequalities and attitudes that are persistent in our education system. School zoning allows those, who have the financial means to, to move to an area with

higher decile schools, whereas those in low socioeconomic areas may not be able to send their students to a higher decile school due to zoning restrictions.

## **An unequal starting line**

Not everyone begins at the same starting line and, even when public education is free, there are many disparities, including the unequal distribution of funds and teaching staff. When we fail to invest in students and their education, we also miss the opportunity to provide young people with a clear understanding of their positionality in Aotearoa and learn about their own history and how to navigate these spaces. The current reform of how Aotearoa's history is taught in schools allows for the reframing of our education system to critically reflect on the realities of colonisation.

Diversity and social inclusion need to be central to the social discourse in Aotearoa for, as a country, we are not only bicultural but multicultural. As a migrant, I have come to see that there is much to learn, and unlearn, to begin to understand the spaces and the land we inhabit. In Aotearoa, we all must find our own roles in honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi to enhance diversity and social inclusion.

Globalisation has made it easy for the wealthy and those educated in Western education systems to move between countries and settle wherever they can find work. Having grown up in Thailand and Japan, where I attended several international schools, gave me a first-hand experience of both advantages and disadvantages of globalisation at a personal level. As more and more people relocate and have identities that do not fit conventional social norms, the lines between cultural identity and sense of national belonging are becoming increasingly blurred. Yet, it is also important to not lose cultural meaning and values by becoming more globalised or cosmopolitan in our thinking.

Craig Calhoun (2020) is sceptical about cosmopolitanism and “the class consciousness of frequent travelers” in which travel does not necessarily equate to improved cultural understanding, especially when it is short-term. It can even reinforce stereotypes and foster skewed mindsets, such as in the case of the terrorist who attacked two mosques in Christchurch. The terrorist's extensive travel experience further radicalised him and amplified his white supremacist ideas rather than making him more appreciative of other cultures and beliefs.

Another point of contention with cosmopolitanism is whether a homogenised global society creates stronger unity or more disparities and tensions between successful global citizens and those left behind. Kwame Anthony Appiah's book, *Making Conversation* (2006), emphasises the fact that both globalisation and cosmopolitanism can be problematic and argues there is no ideal one-size-fits-all model for future global civil society. Instead, he proposes the position of partial cosmopolitanism because it highlights that maintaining cultural roots and preserving one's distinctive identity should be valued.

### **Stigmatisation and structural racism**

As a migrant, I have heard many people comment on why they do not need to care about racial tensions and the historical relevance of colonialism, as “we played no part”. However, I would argue we all have benefited from the violent dispossession and unequal systems that were put in place. I am able to live here without having my residential status contested, and my rights were never put into question. Having been born and raised in Thailand and having spent several years in Japan, I grew up within an international education system with strong cultural influences that highlighted cultural understandings and plurality. My tertiary training is grounded within a Western institution, which requires constant reflexivity in the way I generate findings—whose views I am validating, and whose voices I am centring within my work. Therefore, within my writing, I emphasise the need for critical self-awareness of how place, space, and identities are constructed, including within the media, and how we interpret the information that we consume.

Stigmatisation and othering have a long tradition in Aotearoa. During the notorious Dawn Raids in the mid-1970s, many Pasifika were stigmatised as overstayers, had their homes and workplaces raided, and many were deported (Barber & Naepi, 2020; Dunsford et al., 2011; Mitchell, 2003). Even people from the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau, who are legally New Zealand citizens, were affected by indiscriminate state-led assaults on Pasifika communities, confirming that most New Zealanders of European descent did not differentiate between Pasifika from different nations and territories (Mitchell, 2003). This dark chapter in New Zealand's immigration history has become a source of intergenerational trauma among Pasifika communities that persists today (Dunsford et al., 2011). The Dawn Raids have also caused

a deep distrust in New Zealand's government institutions among Pasifika communities (Dunsford et al., 2011; Mitchell, 2003).

While at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, blame was attributed to distant others, such as Chinese in Wuhan or Asians more generally (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2021; Stechemesser et al., 2020), many Pākehā shifted the blame quickly to the more proximate others—first to Chinese/Asians living in Aotearoa (Nielsen, 2021) and then to Pasifika communities.

Pasifika communities were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (Ioane et al., 2021; Ratuva et al., 2021). Being initially hailed for playing their important part as essential workers, Pasifika were later villainised by online haters and victimised by mainstream media when their neighbourhoods and churches were perceived to be centres of new outbreaks, particularly in the country's largest city, Auckland, where most of the diasporic Pasifika communities are located. During the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, Pasifika communities were also called out for trailing behind European New Zealanders in terms of vaccination rates.

While mainstream media outlets in Aotearoa New Zealand have come a long way from their deep racist underpinnings of the 1970s and now give more space to Pasifika voices in their reporting and call out Pākehā online haters for their interpersonal racist attacks, there is still a lack of understanding of how sensationalised, clickbait headlines and revelation of specific identities of Pasifika communities during a pandemic sparked renewed waves of hatred and reinforced stereotypes and stigma. Blame attribution and othering find particularly fertile ground and can infect society during a crisis where uncertainties and anxieties drive people to look for institutions and/or people to blame for these unsettling circumstances (Bhanot et al., 2021; Choli & Kuss, 2021).

Structural racism and the wounds of colonialism can be exposed through what may seem as banal or unremarkable media reports, yet upon closer inspection still reflect and embody racially driven sentiments. I argue that these sentiments are not static, but blame can be shifted from one ostracised group to another during a pandemic or any other form of crisis.

## Freedom of expression, inclusion, and diversity

It is important for society and decision makers to recognise the progress made in Aotearoa over the past few years as well as to take the further steps that are needed to enhance and promote freedom of *responsible* expression, to have open conversations and to learn from one another. I also think that creating spaces for youth, BIPOC, and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ could be done in a more genuine and empowering way. Oftentimes this can be tokenistic and more of a tick-box activity to engage youth and minorities in conversations without actively listening to, and providing the resources for, the change needed. An effective means of inspiring change to promote responsible freedom of expression is to create forums and encourage alternative ways to engage communities in the discussion of the importance of social inclusion and diversity.

The embracing of different and shifting identities needs to be central to the future social discourse in Aotearoa. As a country and society, we are not only bicultural but multicultural. We must begin by honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. I contend that it is part of our own individual responsibilities to recognise our own unconscious biases and whether we perpetuate negative stigmas on other cultural and community groups. Race relations cannot only be discussed between Māori and Pākehā but needs to be extended to all who have come to live on this land, no matter for what reason. Wider engagement is particularly important as racial prejudice also exists *between* minority groups which, in turn, perpetuates racialised stereotypes. We can only move forward as a nation and society if there is greater solidarity, understanding, and dialogue between all community groups and tangata whenua.

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