



# My World, Diversity and New Zealand

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this plenary session of the Diversity Forum. I've been asked to talk about my world, diversity and New Zealand from an 'ethnic'<sup>1</sup> point of view. The theme of my talk is to 'Get lost'. There is something about going out of town to conferences and meetings that is very liberating. I feel like I am much more open to new experiences and meeting people because I am not stuck in my routines, tasks and schedules. Getting lost means stepping out of your comfort zone, and being open to expanding your internal and external boundaries.

Getting lost isn't really that difficult, some of us do it without trying! I always get lost in Wellington! My family has had a habit of getting lost. From my great grandfathers' who both went to Burma (who said that astronaut families are a new trendy kind of thing!). Then my grandparents got lost in Tanzania and so did my parents. I was born in a place called Tabora, which was founded by Arab slave traders in 1852, captured by the Germans in 1891 and a prosperous, thriving town. It was the administrative centre of German East Africa. From 1852 to 1891, Tabora was the slave capital of East Africa, ivory and humans were traded for guns, beads and cloth. Tabora is also famous as a base for many great explorers, it was the place where Stanley uttered those unforgettable words "Dr Livingstone, I presume."

In 1975, my parents decided to get lost again, this time in New Zealand and I have made it a habit to get lost regularly ever since! Migration forces you to 'get lost'. Disorientation and the loss of reference points mean that some people never survive while others thrive. Migration leads us

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to New Zealanders who are neither Māori, Pacific peoples or Pākehā.

to develop new reference points, networks, rituals and experiences. Depending on the kind of pre-migration experiences we've had we might be traumatised, grieving and exhausted. When we arrive, the reception of the receiving country can influence how happy we are about the experience and, equally, if our expectations are met. If not, we can lose heart and face. Yet, if we allow ourselves to get lost in the experience of resettling and be open to new ways of doing things we can benefit enormously.

There is an expectation that migrants need to find their feet. They are the ones who are lost and need to discover our reference points so they can become just like the receiving community. But, I would like to argue that all of us need to 'get lost' and on a regular basis! What I mean by this is that we all need to be willing to take a trip to a place we've never been. A new New Zealand where there are wonderful adventures to be had. We don't have to go around the world to get lost, as TV host Phil Keoghan says "just put yourself in a situation that is removed from your everyday life and become immersed in it. Go with the flow – it expands your horizons, opens you up to new influences, and tests your resourcefulness and adaptability'. Unless you prefer to hark back to the dark days of assimilation. I think this is the gift of migration. For migrants but also for the receiving community, who are given an opportunity to re-evaluate what they consider valuable and important without leaving home.

The opportunity to expand our internal and external boundaries is going to increase with the continuing demographic changes that are occurring in New Zealand. These changes are not only an increase in ethnic diversity, but also linguistic and religious diversity. They pose opportunities and challenges for not only receiving communities, but also for long term settled communities, like Chinese and Indian communities who have been here since the late 1800s. There are opportunities and challenges ahead for Māori and Pacific peoples who fear that their needs and aspirations might be lost among the competing claims that newcomers bring.

We've had very few conversations about how we are all going to live together; the only ones I've heard are about the Treaty partners, and those leave the rest of us out. There are additional issues for us to get lost in, such as moving from models of deficits to models of strength and resourcefulness. Examining multiple and intersecting identities, moving beyond what is a fashionable cause and hierarchies of deserving. I am thinking of a research project I've just completed which showed that white migrants struggle with being lost too. Their needs go unconsidered as it is assumed that they will 'fit in' and are a close match to people already here. How do we go about actively embracing the people around us, building bridges not walls or silos? Passive acceptance means we don't have to get lost; we don't even have to try. But we can then idealise or demonise the people around us because we've partaken in the highly consumable

aspects of their culture, the food and the festivals. Trouble is we can enjoy the food without caring about the cooks.

I'd like to suggest some ways forward, moving beyond discussions of bicultural and multicultural to consider how we can all live together and what vision can guide us. I want to draw on some ideas from Ghassan Hage about multi-cultural co-existence versus multicultural interaction. I then want to say something about how we become inter-cultural by, accepting the 'other' in ourselves. I think it is easier to identify the problems than come up with solutions so I'd also like to give an example of a successful initiative.

Hage says that coexistence involves existing alongside one another. We acknowledge each other's existence but this existence operates on the premise that we can respect one another as long as we do not rub up against each other. In effect we live in silos right next to each other but watch out if there is any seepage into the public arena. Interaction requires more effort because engagement and irritation are a necessary part of the process, it means getting to know each other as a living multiculturalism where we don't glorify or demonise 'others'. To move from coexistence to interaction requires all of the people who live in New Zealand to literally get lost, to step out of our comfort zones and to start getting to know each other. Messy, untidy, unpleasant bits included. This is harder than it sounds, very easy for the liberal middle classes who have the benefit of distance, harder when you are fighting for the same piece of socio-economic pie. Vin D'Crux tells us for this to happen we must make some internal shifts and embrace the 'other' in ourselves. Lorde agrees, urging "each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there." Only through a process of empathy and transformation can we live with difference. Going deep into ourselves to embrace our own loathing of difference requires us to get lost.

Richard Brecknock talks about moving from the multicultural, where we acknowledge and celebrate our differing cultures, to the intercultural where we focus on what we can do together as diverse cultures in shared space to create wellbeing and prosperity. An assumption of an intercultural vision is the recognition that diverse societies are more innovative, productive and competitive. Immigrants and ethnic communities have a greater facility to move within and between communities and high intercultural networking capacity. However, this capacity isn't always well optimised especially when there is no vision and where socio-economic inequalities exist and ethnic community groups are siloed, the challenge then is to enhance the abundance of talent and entrepreneurship in ethnic communities.

The Aotearoa Ethnic Network is a partner in the Human Rights Commission's New Zealand Diversity Action Programme, and aims to contribute to the dialogue on how we can all live together. An inter-cultural, inter-sectoral network with over 300 members from all over New Zealand, it provides a space for discussion and debate for those interested in ethnic issues. The AEN Journal, launched in July this year, promotes critical debate on issues facing migrants and refugees, ethnic, diasporic and religious communities. Race Relations Commissioner Joris de Bres writes about the genesis of the Diversity Action Programme in the July issue and the need to have "networks and spaces where people were able to meet across ethnicities or cultures, and that while many people 'wanted to do something' there were no readily available mechanisms through which to do so in concert with others". AEN goes some way to achieving this.

To conclude, thanks for a wonderful two days at this Forum. I know that we have identified problems and we have a way to go, but look how far we have come and how far we can go!

## Further reading

Aotearoa Ethnic Network. See: <http://www.aen.org.nz>.

Brecknock, R. (2005). *Intercultural city*.

See: [http://www.brecknockconsulting.com.au/02\\_projects/ic.htm](http://www.brecknockconsulting.com.au/02_projects/ic.htm)

D'Cruz, J.V. & Steele, W. (2001) *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia: Politics, Neo/Post-colonialism, and Fact/Fiction*. Monash: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University Press.

De Bres, J. (2006). Guest Editorial. *Aotearoa Ethnic Network Journal*. 1 (1).

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Keoghan, P., & Berger, W. (2004). *N.O.W. : No opportunity wasted : 8 ways to create a list for the life you want*. Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale.

Lorde, Audre. (1984). *Sister Outsider*. Trumansberg, New York: Crossing Press.