**A question of cultural identity**

**Salient** *feature writer* ***Elle Hunt*** *talks to third culture kids about what it means to be Kiwi—or not.*

**“W**here are you from?”

That question never fails to trip me up, because the truth is—I’m not sure.

I was born and raised in England to (very) English parents. I continue to speak with that accent, and I drink four or five cups of tea per day—but I haven’t been back there for almost a decade.

Between the ages of nine and 13, I travelled with my family around Europe, the Caribbean and the South Pacific, spending a fortnight or so in each country we visited.

In 2004, we found ourselves in New Zealand, where we’ve lived for the past six years. I’ve survived NCEA; made lasting friendships; toured the length of the country; and even been confirmed as a citizen—but I’m still not sure if I consider myself Kiwi.

New Zealand is full of people like me: people who have no concrete sense of belonging to any one nation. Does this mean that there is no such thing as cultural identity? Or, alternatively, does it have such specific boundaries that it excludes more readily than it includes?

**Culture shock**

Fairooz Samy is in her second year of studying Political Science, International Relations and Media Studies. Her mother is Algerian; her father, half Turkish, half Egyptian.

“I was born in Cairo; I speak Arabic, French and English; and I’m a citizen of Egypt, Algeria, New Zealand and Britain,” says Fairooz.

“We immigrated to New Zealand in 2001, when I was 10, basically because my parents wanted somewhere nice for them to retire and me to grow up.

“It was a little odd at first, coming from Cairo to settle in quiet suburbia, which just doesn’t exist anywhere in Egypt. Everyone was nice, down-to-earth, super casual. You don’t get that level of ‘laid back’ in other countries.”

In Egypt, Fairooz had attended a British international school, “where there was this giant emphasis on the cultural differences between everyone.

“In New Zealand, I was this little freak who couldn’t even say ‘yes’ the same way they did,” she remembers. “I was accepted as the token ethnic girl.”

Fairooz recalls making a “conscious decision” to start speaking with a Kiwi accent when she was about 11.

“Nowadays, sure, I totally identify as a New Zealander—even more so when I’m overseas, but that’s probably because there isn’t anyone there who can tell me that I’m not,” she says.

“I’d be visiting family in Algeria and feel like a total tourist, starting every sentence with ‘Back home in New Zealand’, and feeling patriotic whenever we’d eat New Zealand lamb.”

Despite being well established in her second home, Fairooz hesitates when I ask for her definition of a New Zealander.

“I’m not sure if I’m the best person to answer that,” she confesses. “Is it all about backyard cricket, and school Kapa Haka?

“Maybe it’s as simple as the TV One ads make it out to be. Maybe New Zealanders are just that: laid-back, hard-working, generous, no-nonsense people, with such a population that there’s a tangible sense of camaraderie and dependability.

“Cheese on cheese, I know, but it’s giving me the warm fuzzies,” she says wryly.

Needless to say, Fairooz knows the advantages of having a couple of identities to select from.

“Whenever I get frustrated with some aspect of Kiwi life, I still roll my eyes and sort of thank god that I have a couple of other cultures to fall back on,” she remarks.

However, this has its drawbacks.

“It can get confusing, and I feel disloyal for taking such a pick-and-choose approach to who I consider myself to be,” admits Fairooz.

“I can’t escape the fact that racially, I’ll always be Arabic… but ironically, I’ve never met an Arab who really thought of me as authentic—Arabic isn’t even my first language.

“I’ve always felt a tad phoney.”

**From Fire and Ice, to the Long White Cloud**

Daan Kjartansson, a second-year student, was born in New Zealand to a Kiwi mother and an Icelandic father. He grew up in Iceland, but moved to Wellington to study at university. He is a citizen of both countries, and speaks Icelandic and English fluently.

He says he had no problems adjusting to Kiwi life, and that “it just happened”, as people at his university hall were interested in finding out more about his culture.

“The only problem is that I think in Icelandic, and always have to translate it into English, and I often forget the English words for something.”

Although he admits that he’s “becoming more and more Kiwi every day”, Daan sees himself as an Icelander.

“I still see Iceland as home, and all of my family still live there.

“I’m very interested in Norse mythology, which has played a big role in Icelandic history,” he says.

“And Icelanders are all about soccer, and I play a lot of soccer myself.

“Icelandic music also influences me quite a lot, and I try to listen to some daily, so I don’t forget about Iceland.”

Taste in music is one of the biggest differences Daan has noticed between his two cultures. Although he’s quick to point out that he can’t generalise New Zealanders, he’s noticed that most are interested in “rugby, drinking, and listening to reggae.

“The music produced here is quite different—there’s a lot of reggae and dub, which is probably influenced by the sun.”

Certainly, it’s hard to imagine The Black Seeds hailing from Iceland, where the climate is described as ‘sub-polar oceanic’.

**Best of both worlds**

Felix Hallwass, an Honours student, moved to New Zealand from Germany when he was six years old. He identifies strongly with both his birth country and his adopted one.

“I see myself as a German Kiwi, as I know my morals and personality are a combination of what my German parents have taught me, as well as what I have experienced as part of growing up in New Zealand,” he says.

Felix admits that while he considers home to be where his family live, “I’d always call Bremen my hometown, not Nelson. In sport, I’d always support Germany.”

I ask Felix how his cultural identities affect him on a daily basis.

“My parents, sister and I are German citizens, and speak mostly German at home, although it has slowly become an English-German hybrid.

“Having two distinct cultures to identify with, I’ve been able to decide the aspects or attitudes of each culture that appeal to me, or I agree with,” he says.

“The result of this is an interesting synthesis of ideas that influence how I interact with others, and this has given me a greater appreciation of diversity.”

**Open mind, common sense**

James Burtin, a second-year student of Psychology and Criminology, found himself in New Zealand in 2005. He was born in Grasse, France, to an English mother and a French father, and considers himself “a big mixture of hopefully all the good aspects of each culture”.

His diverse upbringing has influenced him in several respects.

“Probably the most important way is that I always try to be friendly to whoever I meet—especially if they’re new to the area, as I know how hard it can be to adjust to new places,” he says.

Felix agrees.

“I think my background allows me to empathise well with different people.”

“Apart from an identity crisis here and there”, Fairooz says that her background has made her “curious about the world”, as well as more tolerant.

“I try not to pigeonhole,” she says.

“I think that’s because I always expect people to have preconceived notions about me.”

This open-mindedness is a recognised characteristic of ‘third culture kids’ (TCKs): those who, as children, spent a significant period of time in one or more cultures, and now integrate elements of those into a third culture. TCKs often experience this ‘identity crisis’ that Fairooz refers to, as they’ve invariably never fully experienced one culture.

Fairooz empathises with my description of third culture kids.

“It’s ticking most of the boxes,” she says. “I can definitely identify with the global culture thing.

“But do I feel incomplete? Not really. I wouldn’t want to socialise with just other TCKs, either. Wouldn’t they be just as mystified as I am?”

“I don’t feel that I have to be friends with other TCKs exclusively, or that it’s easier to befriend them,” agrees James. “I just enjoy meeting others, as it fascinates me as to how they’ve adjusted to life in a different culture.

“I think I fit into the third culture category to some extent,” he adds.

“I can quite easily go from one clique to another without too much hassle.”

**Future plans**

I ask James where he sees himself in ten years’ time.

“I see myself living in another country,” he says. “I yearn for new experiences. I’m not sure where, but I’d enjoy living somewhere different.

“I will, of course, return to New Zealand, as out of the three places I’ve lived, it’s definitely my favourite.”

Daan concurs.

“I’ve got no idea what the future has to offer, but I’ve got a feeling I’ll still be in Wellington,” he says.

“I can’t see me going back [to Iceland] for good in the near future, but definitely for visits. The weather’s just a lot better here.”

Fairooz is more definite, when I ask her whether she intends to return to Egypt for good.

“God no!” she exclaims.

“My dad just got back from a month stay there, and he said it was like coming back from hell.

“I’d go back for a holiday—Egypt is an amazing place to visit, but I feel as though the only way I can have any pride in my cultural heritage is if I’m not living in a daily reminder of why I left it behind in the first place.

“In ten years, I have no idea where I’ll be,” she says. “Maybe in Europe, maybe still in New Zealand. It’s not such a bad place, after all.”

Questions for discussion

1. Do you identify with more than one culture? Is culture important to you?
2. Do you agree with Daan that most New Zealanders are “interested in “rugby, drinking, and listening to reggae”? How would you describe a New Zealander?
3. Do you think that it’s a good thing to be a mix of cultures? Why, or why not?

Theme study response

Write a theme study response for this article. Use the headings below to help you.

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This text links to the theme of “cultural identity” because… for example…

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