

Big Small Steps

Childhoods on the Move

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*Tutti i passi che ho fatto nella mia vita
mi hanno portato qui, ora.*

- Alberto Garutti

In May, shortly before boarding the Milano Malpensa airport Express train at the station of Cadorna, a stone set into the floor caught my eye. Passengers of the Malpensa Express who have the time to take a closer look at the stone can read an engraved inscription in Italian and English: “Every step I have taken in my life has led me here, now” (Garutti). After a 50-minute train ride, the inscription can be found inside the Milano Malpensa airport too, emphasizing both the significance of transport and the places of transit for travellers. These works of public art by the Italian artist Albert Garutti inspire travellers to think about the deeper meaning and consequences of each of their infinite steps, journeys, actions and decisions. Why we are physically in this certain place, right now, is often connected to moves we deliberately chose to make in adulthood, for example, family or job related. Yet, for many individuals, moves which can determine the course of one’s life are made in childhood due to their parents’ choices. Thus some of the “steps” which have led them to certain locations were not taken of one’s own free will but involuntarily.

For work reasons, at the end of the 1960s, my British mother and Italian father moved to Liberia in West Africa, where I would eventually see the light of day. After eight years, due to the deteriorating political situation, my parents decided to move to Italy, where my siblings and I attended a British school. For love, years later, I moved to Germany. Due to my family’s background, relocating was not

an unknown experience and my first German steps were taken in Stuttgart. Subsequently in 2004, two weeks before delivering our baby, my husband and I moved to Münster, where I began my Bachelor studies in 2008. By virtue of my cross-cultural upbringing, I then decided to enrol in the Master of Arts programme “National and Transnational Studies”. During the very first weeks of this programme, whilst discussing the term *natio*, we were asked by a lecturer to explain what home meant to us. Many peers replied that home was where they were born or where they grew up. Somewhat perplexed, that same evening I immediately searched the whole Internet for the definition of home when one has multiple passports (in my case three), attachments and languages. Seconds later, Google informed me that having grown up “among worlds”, I am a Third Culture Kid.

In sociology, individuals who experienced high international mobility in childhood are referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Typically, TCKs are raised in a ‘neither/nor world’ (Pollock et al. 4) and accordingly a “TCK frequently builds relationship to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership of any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is [often] in relationship to others of a similar background” (Pollock et al. 15-16). The “third culture” to which the term refers is not only the mixed identity that TCKs assume, influenced by both their parents’ cultures and the cultures in which they were raised, but also “a way of life shared by others who also grow up living first in one culture and then moving to another one – maybe even two or three more – and often

back and forth between various cultures” (Pollock et al. 4). In adulthood TCKs (commonly referred to as “Adult Third Culture Kids” – ATCK) often face issues related to a lack of identity, to feelings of loss (due to their repeated separations from relatives, friends and possessions in childhood) and to restlessness.

After reading Pollock and Van Reken’s pioneering book *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up among Worlds*, as well as scholarly articles related to this phenomenon and various engrossing narratives of TCKs posted online, I finally grasped where my feelings of not belonging to a specific culture and my “neither/nor” status came from and, above all, I realized that I shared these feelings with a global TCK network. Wanting to focus my graduate research on literary and cultural studies, I was especially fascinated to see that the effects of an international hypermobile upbringing can be detected in numerous novels written by TCKs.

THIRD CULTURE LITERATURE

Many contemporary authors, such as Lesley Nneka Arimah, Valeria Luiselli and Vladimir Vertlib, were raised in multiple countries predominantly due to their parents’ career choices (e.g. in academic, business, diplomatic, military or religious sectors) but also due to external factors, such as political upheavals. Literary scholar Antje Rauwerda argues that the fiction of ATCKs often comprises common features that reflect the consequences of a displaced international childhood and accordingly coins the literary classification Third Culture Literature (TCL), which refers to novels that either deal with the TCK experience or that were written by ATCKs.

Having grown up in Spain, Alaska, Canada, Costa Rica, France and Mexico, Yann Martel is a TC author par excellence and in her book *The Writer and the Overseas Childhood: The Third Culture Literature of Kingsolver, McEwan and Others*, Rauwerda reads his novel *Life of Pi* through the TCK lens. Rauwerda innovatively demonstrates that Martel’s novel comprises five features that are common to TCL. For her, the common

characteristics of TCK novels are: international settings, losses, disenfranchisement and guilt (see also *Not Your Typical ‘Diaspora 20-1*). Previously, the TCK model had been predominantly adopted by social scientists, educators, psychologists and therapists to describe and assist TCKs, thus Antje Rauwerda is the first literary scholar who extensively examines the fiction of TCKs.

Rauwerda argues that a new classification is needed for authors such as Yann Martel, who grew up moving from country to country because, for her, categories such as diasporic, exile and postcolonial literature are unapt to describe their writings which are clearly born out of their third culture experiences in childhood and she thoroughly illustrates how TCL breaks away from existing classifications. The novels she analyses do, of course, comprise features common to diasporic and postcolonial writing but, for her, many existing classifications focus upon the notion of one initial and central homeland and therefore typically feature binary relationships (see *The Writer* 14-22).

Carly McLaughlin, who also writes about novels that deal with transcultural childhoods, clearly explains why the term hybridity is also inadequate for the TCK experience:

The transcultural reality in which many of the world’s children grow up indicates the need to develop other paradigms of cultural identity which move beyond postcolonial frameworks of cultural belonging. In the context of migration, hybridity, for example – used to conceptualize the new cultural forms arising from transcultural encounters between the colonizer and colonized, in a colonial context, or between the host and immigrant culture – arguably remains limited to a binary paradigm of a transcultural encounter, which is grounded in the existence of two

fixed, pre-existing cultural identities. Even if hybridity is understood as the merging of more than two cultural forms, it still defines identity in relation to a crossing-over, a collapse of two or more fixed, prior cultural identities. It is thus perhaps no longer useful in today's increasingly mobile and culturally complex world in which children, and indeed many adults, inhabit multiple cultural spaces (57).

Having originated by sociologists who were studying American communities in India in the 1950s,¹ the TCK perspective which both Carly McLaughlin and Antje Rauwerda refer to in their literary examinations has recently been condemned, not only for dealing with an elite group of white and Eurocentric "global" citizens but also for being race-blind.² In fact, because TCKs are typically the (white) children of diplomats, international business people and military staff, McLaughlin explains that:

the TCK model, ever since its first use in the 1950s and its reformulation in Pollock and Van Reken's study of 2001, has been criticized for being a model for a small, privileged group of children which bears little relevance for the world's children, who migrate under much more difficult, at times traumatic, circumstance (52).

At a time when scholars are intensively engaging with new patterns of migration, TCK scholars too must re-think the drivers of migration and thus move their previous restricted focus to include ethnicity, race, gender, socio-economic status, language, religion and political beliefs in their fu-

ture analyses. If the term TCK is currently used as a synonym for individuals who experience a high level of international mobility while they are growing up, it is wrong to assume that only elite groups of children are pivotal to TCK processes, because nowadays (as in the past) the reasons for migration are manifold.

CROSS-CULTURAL KIDS

A step towards bringing an end to the TCK model's negative critique and to update the innovative approach of examining the stories of children who are affected by global residential mobility is to adopt the Cross-Cultural lens. Coined by Ruth Van Reken in 2002, the term *Cross-Cultural Kids* (CCK) refers to individuals who are living or have "lived in – or meaningfully interacted with – two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during the first eighteen years of life" (Pollock et al. 43). As Carly McLaughlin points out, this updated model "takes into account the reality of the increasing number of individuals who grow up outside of a traditional monocultural environment" (65). The CCK approach and "discussions of the impact of frequent switching between cultural worlds during childhood" (Pollock et al. 48) is significant because it offers a valuable insight into how a cross-cultural "life can affect the way a child thinks and feels about their world, and how this different perspective may manifest in the way they interact with others" (Crossman, xxix). The table below demonstrates which children are included in the CCK model of 2017.³ I have also added to this table a description of the various CCK subcategories (as described by Van Reken) and the specific issues that the members of these sub-categories often face.

Table 1
Groups of Children Included in the Cross-Cultural Kids (CCK) Model

1 For the origins of this term, see Useem.

2 For insightful critique see both Khosroshahy; and Saija and Dervin.

3 For further information see Pollock et al. 45-48; and Van Reken.

	CCK Sub-Category	Description	Issues specific to this particular type of sub-category
1	Traditional TCKs	Children who move to another country with parents due to a parent's career choice or advanced training	<i>High international mobility patterns</i>
2	Bi/multi-cultural/ and/or multiethnic children	Children born to parents from at least two cultures	<i>Two cultures within family</i>
3	Mixed heritage children	Children born to parents from at least two racial heritages	<i>Complex racial identity</i>
4	Children of borderlanders	Children who cross borders frequently, even daily, as they go to school, or whose parents work across national borders	<i>Regular international interactions</i>
5	Educational CCKs	Children who attend a school with a different cultural base from the one they return to at home each night	<i>Change of cultures daily</i>
6	Children of minorities	Children whose parents are from a racial or ethnic group which is not part of the majority race or ethnicity of the country in which they live (privileged or marginalized)	<i>Prejudice from majority culture</i>
7	Children of immigrants	Children whose parents have made a permanent move to a new country where they were not originally citizens	<i>Permanent change</i>
8	Children of refugees	Children whose parents are living outside their original country or place due to unchosen circumstances such as war, violence, famine, other natural disasters	<i>Effects of trauma</i>
9	International adoptees	Children adopted by parents from another country other than the one of that child's birth	<i>Adoption issues</i>
10	"Domestic" TCKs	Children whose parents have moved in or among various subcultures within that child's home country.	<i>Invisible cross-cultural experience</i>
11	Other	This circle is left blank in Third Culture Kids but children of divorced parents who switch recurrently from one home to another are mentioned as examples of other groups of CCKs, and McLaughlin provides the example of " children whose parents have left them behind while they migrate for work " (54). Furthermore, discussing deaf culture, Oya Ataman innovatively argues that the children of deaf adults (coda) might also find themselves in several of the categories mentioned in the CCK model, thus innovatively expanding the CCK model to children of parents with impairments (see Ataman).	<i>Discrimination against disabled people</i>

The above sub-groups of the umbrella term CCK clearly show that an increasing number of children navigate multiple cultural worlds on a daily basis. Many CCKs belong to two or more of the abovementioned CCK subcategories. As Pollock et al. interestingly point out, Barack Obama (who was born in Hawaii to a US mother and a Kenyan father and who was raised in several US States and in Indonesia – where his stepfather came from) belongs to “at least six CCK circles – traditional TCK, bicultural, biracial heritage, domestic TCK, minority, educational CCK” (43).

It is important to bear in mind that TCKs, as depicted above, predominantly experience a high-level of international mobility whilst growing up and often have a privileged status in their host country (as opposed to, for example, the children of refugees, who suffer from effects of trauma, among other things). This sets them apart from many other sub-categories of CCKs. In recent years, numerous scholars have concentrated on the long-term effects of hypermobile international childhoods and consequently the majority of studies (mainly in the social studies) refer to the terminology TCK.

Although Tanya Crossman, who interviewed over one thousand TCKs, notices that many of her interlocutors “from vastly different backgrounds express the same sentiments, at times almost word for word” (xxix), every individual clearly responds in a different way to cross-cultural interactions. Thus Crossman rightly remarks: “There is no one-size-fits-all explanation of how every TCK has felt and who they will become” (xxix). It is therefore important to understand that the CCK model, just like the TCK one, does not describe a person but a perspective (Crossman xxv). These contemporary approaches help to grasp the unique and individual experiences of children who inhabit multiple cultures.

In their literary examinations, McLaughlin and Rauwerda use the TCK and CCK perspectives solely to analyse the works of Anglophone novelists. Yet, these approaches can be expanded to the

examination of non-Anglophone literary texts. An example of a third culture author who writes in German is the novelist Ilija Trojanow, who was born in Bulgaria and as the child of refugees lived in Yugoslavia, Italy and Germany until he moved to Kenya with his family as a young boy (where his father worked as an engineer). Interestingly, literary scholar Arianna Dagnino refers to Trojanow as a “transcultural writer”.

TRANSCULTURAL WRITERS

Discussing the link between increasing global flows and contemporary shifts in the literary realm, Arianna Dagnino affirms that there are currently more and more writers who have “experienced the effects of global mobility, transnational patterns, and neonomatic lifestyles” (*Transcultural Writers* 144). Like an increasing number of contemporary literary scholars, Dagnino argues that, nowadays, numerous novelists and their texts can no longer be classified according to one single nation. Drawing upon the concepts of transculture, transculturality and transculturalism and how they are developed by Epstein, Ortiz, Schulze-Engler, and Welsch (to name just a few), Dagnino innovatively names these transient authors “transcultural writers”.

Although many literary classifications “co-exist, interact, and often overlap” (Dagnino, “Global Mobility” 137), Dagnino argues that her new coinage is preferable to existing terms such as cosmopolitan, diasporic, transnational and postcolonial literature (see *Transcultural Writers* 15-16). Echoing the words of Antje Rauwerda, Dagnino argues that these older distinctions are still very dependent on the notion of one specific centre. In transcultural discourse however, binary oppositions are disrupted and replaced by multiple belongings. Dagnino’s transcultural writers “do not belong in one place or one culture – and usually not even one language – and . . . write between cultures and are interested in the complex dynamics of cultural encounters and negotiations” (*Transcultural Writers* 14). Dagnino also draws upon the research

of Braidotti and the scholar's concept of new nomadism. Like Braidotti's nomadic subjects who are not tied to home territories and who deconstruct any sense of fixed identity, Dagnino argues that the cultural orientations of her transcultural writers "tend to be reflected in their creative works, thus fostering the emergence of a transcultural mode of writing through which cultures are seen as vastly fluid, confluent, and collective identity networks" (Transcultural Writers 14).

Whilst discussing his transcultural upbringing, along with his feelings of belonging and fluid identities with Dagnino, Ilija Trojanow remarks:

They ask me about my roots, but I am not a tree. Identity is rather something dynamic, a fluid concept, even if many people tend to think only in terms of belonging. At the beginning I suffered from this not belonging of mine. Now I have understood that all this constitutes a richness (*Transcultural Writers* 158).

In adulthood Trojanow has thus learnt to appreciate his diversity and seemingly has achieved an all-embracing transcultural state of mind (for further information regarding the difference between the notion of multiculturalism and transcultural awareness see Epstein). Yet, it is difficult to accept one's "differences" in childhood and the research of many developmental psychologists have shown that whilst growing up one strives to be part of peer groups (see, for example, Erikson). Suffering from feelings of not belonging during this significant stage can have lasting emotional effects. Furthermore, the research of medical scholars has demonstrated that residential mobility in childhood can lead to mental health issues in adolescence and early adulthood (see Tseliou et al.).

MOVING CHILDHOODS

Residential mobility in childhood and growing up "among worlds" is clearly a contemporary and critical topic, which is worth examining across diverse disciplines. As seen above, in the literary field, encounters across cultures, nations and languages are given various names, and I have mentioned only a handful of them. Cross-cultural, multicultural, neo-nomadic, transcultural, cosmopolitan, third culture or indeed postcolonial authors?⁴ What is the most fitting label for authors who frequently migrated as children and texts which deal with hyper nomadism in childhood? Due to the fact that many classifications already overlap, does the literary world need a new term for these authors and their literature?

The experience of encountering manifold cultures and languages as a child is indeed unique, yet paradoxically it is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon in our globalised world. Both the TCK steps that I have taken in my life, and witnessing how my child tackles the experience of transiting between three cultures and languages on a daily basis, have prompted me to agree with Carly McLaughlin. Perceptively, McLaughlin argues that notwithstanding its flaws, when discussing migration, the TCK model merits acclaim because it "recognizes the fundamental gap between the experiences of parents and those of their children" (51). As a literary scholar, I also understand Rauwerda when she asserts that academia and the publishing world could benefit from acknowledging the literary classification TCL "and its distinguishing features" (*The Writer* 5) because this functional category ultimately paves the way for further exploration into the results of globally mobile and cross-cultural childhoods.

Bell-Villada befittingly points out that the term TCK "is not exactly household fare – even for many TCKs themselves – as yet. It remains to be seen whether the phrase, or any equivalent formula,

⁴ See McGillis and Khorana who argue that "children and their literature are always postcolonial, if by postcolonial we mean that which stands out and in opposition to tradition and power" (8).

will catch on and become standardized and recognizable in years to come. Still, as French intellectuals are wont to say, there is *le mot et la chose* (the word and the thing)" (424). It is open to question whether the mot will spread further or whether it will be replaced by a new one. What is clear is that within the literary realm it is timely to explore the numerous advantages (and at times disadvantages) of growing up in between multiple cultures. Therefore, name the chose as you wish, but do not forget to acknowledge the impact of small yet significant childhood steps.

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