A Community in Limbo: Negotiating Notions of 'Home' and Belonging amongst Third Culture Kids

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> *A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.* (Pollock and Van Reken 2009: 13)

They are called Third Culture Kids; children of the diplomatic corps, missions communities, the military, international corporations, and other occupations which require a peripatetic lifestyle from parents and their families. Anthropology of late has witnessed a flurry of research and writing on cosmopolitanism (Rapport and Amit 2012: xi), which Hannerz notes has to do with a "sense of the world as one" (2007: 83-4). As such, members of a group created by global processes, TCKs have become true cosmopolitans. They are citizens of two worlds: *polis* and *cosmos;* their life is dominated by strange tensions between the 'local' and the 'global', as well as those between the particular cultural ambits they have been raised in. The "first culture" in this model comes to be the parents' 'home' culture, whilst the host culture where they relocate to acts as a "second culture". Therefore, the interstitial or hybrid culture, a product of global movement, comes to be that "third culture" which TCKs embody (see Appendix fig.1).

This topic is close to 'home' for myself – daughter of Colombian parents, born in Curaçao, raised between Uruguay and Amsterdam, and solely Dutch by virtue of my passport. One might ask: "*but don't you want to belong somewhere?"* – a question that percolates through the discourses of this investigation, and which encapsulates much of the TCK experience. As such, I position myself as one of these TCKs, and have allowed my familiarity with the subject to lead the semi-formal conversations that

conformed the ethnographic data. I have used guiding questions under an agenda that uses *community* as a polythetic concept to 'think with' in order to productively probe intersecting issues in the 'limbo' of cosmopolitan tangles. As is the case with all controversial words, the ubiquity and range of vague everyday invocations that reference community have been taken as a most problematic aspect of its conceptualization. I propose, however, akin to Amit (2012), to use it as merely a "titular concept" that encompasses a wide range of situations and concepts. Its ambiguity can be placed as an analytical resource to engage with useful inquiry about affective and social consequences of displacement, pertinent to the TCK lifestyle.

In this sense, Calhoun's understanding of community seems a fitting framework that implicates the above strands in the fabric of TCK experience: community as a "mode of relating, variable in extent" (1998: 391). In my effort to develop some concepts that will permit a productive analysis of the TCK 'community in limbo', I want to identify some intersecting points at which such ambiguities necessarily arise: notions of place, 'home', belonging, and identity. The interpretation of the data and my conclusions are thus largely couched in the discourse on personal narrative, focusing on how the informants accommodate conceptualizations of such analytical nodes.

But one must start somewhere – where to begin to pull out the threads from the tangle? In the eloquence of Crites, home can be postulated as a "sacred story" (1971: 295) of sorts – a pervasive theme in autobiographical narratives that underscores the vastly diverse stories of the everyday, yet stable in itself so that it becomes indispensable for my informants in constructing a coherent narrative. None of them disqualified home from their discourse; rather, they reformulated their understanding of it to suit their nomadic upbringing. It took on an elastic nature with a semantic scope that deserves full attention in itself. However, woven like a thread through the various accounts, the individual's search for a place called 'home' was subdued by a sense of belonging that was almost entirely de-territorialized.

How might we productively use the ambiguities entailed in a concept such as 'place' to posit questions about the challenges of 'belonging' in a global, de-territorialized manner? The dimension of *place* incorporates physical localities as well as associations, memories, feelings and practices – all essential elements in place-making and thus of peoples' notion of what constitutes 'home' as well (Brun Norbye 2010: 145). This ambiguity complicates place in relation to notions of home and belonging, in that the analytical facet of comparison comes to rely largely on the *meaning* of a place rather than its physical locality.

Amelie, one of my informants, was adamant in stressing this point when asked where she considered 'home' to be. The daughter of Scottish and French parents, she was born in England, but grew up between Hong Kong and Singapore where she attended international schools. Her 'condensed' answer to the question "*where are you from?"* habitually boils down to 'France' – where the majority of her summers have been spent. A migrant of identity, she has formed homes in movement, but has not entirely thereby sacrificed identification with places. Rather, it is that *place* is not exclusively singular (Rapport and Williksen 2010: 3). When asked what and where home was for her, she did not hesitate in her reply: "Home in its purest sense is where most of my memories are. So, for me, that's Singapore". As such, Amelie's personal discourse invokes a home constituted through memories and affective ties. It is worth noting that the terms 'home' and 'origin' – implicated in the question "where are you from?" – are not transferable in her rhetoric. Each encompasses a semantic field with distinct auras of sentimentality and notions of belonging. To confuse matters further, Amelie told me she could *never* be Singaporean; there she is seen as an *ang-moh* – literally "golden hair" in Hokkien, one of the local dialects. But she is also a "semi-foreigner", as she put it, in both France and Scotland. We should take caution in assuming that this implores a sense of homelessness; Amelie is no more a citizen of *a* place than a 'Citizen No-Place'. Yet this state of permanent limbo to which Amelie alludes appears to be a reasonable description of the interstitiality that can result from this partial de-territorialization.

The ‘paradox of belonging’ exemplified by Amelie’s discourse grounds itself in several theoretical propositions enframed by ‘community’. Delanty notes that cosmopolitan communities, based on discourses of belonging constructed in a highly open-ended manner, result in the “unhappy consciousness” which Hegel believed characterized the human condition: its basic aspiration – the desire to belong – can never be fully realized (2003: 132). However, the desire to belong in itself is a common ‘attribute’ amongst the TCKs I spoke to, and one that I myself can myself identify with. The paradox of belonging thus lies in navigating the incongruities of a world in which civil entitlements still remain to be quite firmly positioned within state boundaries (Amit-Talai 1998: 52), whilst a sense of belonging, and even ‘home’, becomes increasingly denationalized.

Bruna, a friend of mine with whom I went to the International School of Amsterdam, displayed a similarly complex perception of her notions of ‘home’ and belonging. Her place of birth is São Paulo, yet her parents are Colombian, yet she grew up in Amsterdam and finished her secondary education in London. From my conversations with her, it seems she identifies to some extent with all of these entities that represent various ideas of home; her belonging to São Paulo is grounded in reminiscence, similar to Amelie’s Singapore; her belonging to Colombia is akin to a nationalistic sense of home that stretches past state boundaries, as presented by Holy (1998); and to Amsterdam and London, her belonging is based mainly on affective and social ties. This exemplifies how the idea of ‘home’ undergoes dramatic change in terms of global movement. Multifaceted conceptions of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ are at work – ones which include various ways of allocating belonging and emotionality – even in one single person’s discourse.

But transience of place, and the perpetual physical and social maneuvers it involves, can also operate *within* state boundaries as well as across them. Max, an American army brat now studying at the University of St Andrews, punctuated his account of moving across the United States – from Indiana, to Maryland, to Kansas, to North Carolina, back to Maryland, then to Florida, New York and finally Massachusetts – with recurring mentions of ‘houses’ in the stead of ‘homes’. In

contrast to the idea that home is where you reside, Max deemed these places he lived in to be ones he was just familiar with. Familiarity enhances a sense of belonging but is not synonymous to feeling 'at home'. The notion of 'home' in his trajectory deserved a much more layered conceptualization than its temporary physical or architectonic manifestation: the longest he had lived in a house was four years, the shortest a mere six months. This narrative noticeably contrasts with Rapport and Dawson's discourse, in which a far more mobile notion of home is invoked, one "that can be taken along whenever one decamps" (1998: 27). Nonetheless, Max's case is not a matter of stubborn insistence to not attribute the 'H' word to "just places [he's] lived in", neither is it just a case of definition. It echoes a similar sense of limbo, of not having yet arrived at a real destination of permanence, which pervades the descriptions offered by other TCKs. Max is upholding the sentimentality that subtends this convoluted notion of 'home', which he managed to crystallize in saying that *"home is people*". This claim confers home as a cognitive matter rather than just one of space, hence more performative in nature, in line with arguments postulated by Berger (1984).

These "people" that Max speaks of, those TCKs who form social bonds with in the various places of residence, come to serve as affective anchors. The experience of friendship, from which a sense of community is derived, comes to play a central role in the peripatetic lives of TCKs. Having no spatial or temporal foundations, an "emotional community" of friendship is able to exist in the flux of nomadic life (Delanty 2003: 111). Friendship is flexible, de-territorial, and can be easily mobilized - all analytical coordinates parallel to those that govern the migrant lifestyle. This way, belonging takes on a less fleeting form. Bruna noted that her friends from Amsterdam, São Paulo, and London, despite not knowing each other and not being involved in any kind of collective effort, featured in her life as a solid – albeit spatially dispersed – transcultural ground for feeling 'at home'. In other words, through friendships TCKs negotiate a sense of belonging that is thus porous and mobile.

As such, Bruna's account seems to echo Max's idea of rooting oneself not in spaces or places, but in people. Places don't move, but people can, and do. Bruna told

me she does not truly miss places, because “without people, places are just familiar emptinesses” – perhaps at some point ‘home’, but, ultimately, always leavable. Amelie tangentially made a comment that adds scope to this particular point on egocentric communities. Having only attended international schools, and therefore being surrounded by people who were in a similar situation, she normalized the experience of transcultural movement:

> All my friends had moved as often as I had. No big deal. I don’t know…it just doesn’t seem that unusual if everyone else has to go through the same.

The versatile quality of these friendships speaks for itself, but nonetheless a sense of belonging remains the capital force of sociality in such an account. To paraphrase Delanty, identity is problematized when the ‘self’ is formulated in the recognition of difference rather than in sameness (2003: 106). Different cultural backgrounds and life trajectories substantiate this diversity. But the “third culture” cannot be reduced to the sum of the fragments of the ‘home’ and host culture. If this were the case, each TCK would inevitably be alone in their transcultural experience. In Bruna’s case, and reiterated in the other accounts, identification with others who had moved around was anchored in a shared understanding; the ‘self’ was not fractured by the continuous relocation, rather, made by it. A notion of home and belonging penetrates this search for identity, which involves movement in both body and mind, “within and between abstract spaces that are identified as home” (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 20). The emphasis on a relationship between identity and fixity is thus challenged by representations of the relationship between identity and movement. TCKs’ cosmopolitanism stems from mobility, by which they transcend place, and the subsequent cultural blend engenders identities that are constantly in the process of definition (Delanty 2003: 126).

It is through the continuity of movement that these TCKs continue to make themselves ‘at home’. Almost all of Amelie’s university friends have “chameleon identities”, as she put it, in that none is simply defined in terms of ethnic, national, or

linguistic criteria. Max and Bruna, like Amelie, also seek out other people with a history of displacements, or other identity "chameleons", with the premise that their commonality will reside in movement and/or the multifaceted cultural gamut that they embody. In its realization, thus, the community of TCKs is "a community of exceptions" of sorts (Finkielkraut 2001, in Rapport and Amit 2012: xv). In essence, they are being international kids *together*, in a set of encounters that are decontextualized from both the local practices, traditions and frameworks of the place they are residing in, as well as from milieu in their respective countries – if they have them.

They conceive their lives in terms of a moving-between: between identities, relations, cultures, and environments; as a dialectic between movement and fixity. Herein enters another important concept into the tangle of narratives that pervade this topic: that of personal choice. Berger addresses this in saying that "without a history of choice no dwelling can be a home" (1984:64). This posits the individual actor as existing beyond particular sociocultural arrangements, and capable of authoring personal identity. Moreover, the reference points for identity in a world in motion have become "unstuck"; that is, the capacity for autonomy is no longer contained by rigid structures such as class, nation or ethnicity (Delanty 2003: 105). Amongst my informant TCKs, it seems that a community of lived experience emerged – one that is, undoubtedly, geographically liminal. The sense of belonging amongst TCKs – including, here, military brats like Max – thus creates a feel of community that resists attempts to pin it down in an institutional or spatial structure, since it is something that is only mutually experienced with others.

But, does that relegate this 'community in limbo' as an imaginary order? Does this ethnographic portrait of transience and spatial displacement engender new forms of imagined community, even when 'old notions' of home lose their salience? If our discussion were to take this turn, Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' (1991) becomes focal in an analysis of these contemporary forms of collectivity. Such accounts of community stress the fluid nature of community as an expression of modalities of belonging. But we could say the same of many other new forms of

belonging; no longer bounded by place, people are able to belong to multiple communities based on interests, sexual orientation, or political concerns, to name a few. One can be part of communities that don't necessitate face-to-face interaction and which are based on a mental image of affinity between the members (Anderson, 1991). Such considerations form the basis for Cohen's (1985) postulations, ones that define community as a symbolic order rather than an objective reality. Community as a symbolic construction avoids reductionism – that is, community is not relegated to institutionalized social arrangements. Instead, it is seen as an open system of cultural interpretation.

However, one must also admit that there are limits to the social imaginary. Symbolic boundary-making, the process by which the community differentiates itself from others, stresses its exclusive nature. In considering the emergence of new forms of 'limbo' collectivities that act as "mobile social anchors" (Amit-Talai 1998: 55) for those in unsettled motion, it is propitious to consider our analytical perspective. The ambiguity of 'community' is a frame for interrogation at its outset, but risks being taken for granted. That is, the theory of imagined communities treats community primarily as a categorical entity rather than as an interactive collective. Similarly, community as a purely symbolic entity falls short of fully encapsulating the social basis of the transnational encounters upon which a TCK community is built upon. It is true that there is a social transience about it – a degree of liminality, we might say – but community would not exist in any symbolic or real dimension without the crossing of paths, no matter how temporal. None of my TCK informants felt that they belonged to a grand and imagined overarching community of expatriates. Rather, their affinity was experienced and consolidated through contact. As Bruna said,

> I instantly feel a connection when I meet someone who has moved a lot. It's like, no matter where they've been, we've come and gone.

As such, culture in its broadest sense is a way of life shared with others (Pollock and Van Reken 2009: 16); and it is indubitable that in spite of geographical differences, TCKs from numerous countries share remarkably similar life experiences

through the very process of living in, and among, different cultures. In the specific case of TCKs, sites of sociocultural exchange like international schools primarily aid this. These schools offer an 'international environment' of a certain hybrid or liminal type, parallel to that "third" culture TCKs embody. In my personal experience at the International School of Amsterdam (ISA), a palpable cultural reality was in place – one that facilitated exchange of cultural norms and hence cushioned that 'culture shock' phenomenon known to many TCKs. Language buddies, cultural cuisine clubs, and 'Global Village Day' – a school holiday of sorts – all padded the disparate collision of cultures that composed the student body. In my conversations with my informants, they corroborated some of these ideas; Selina, a Canadian senior at the ISA, said, "through all the multiculturalness of our school, it's like we developed a school culture". In reference to refugee camps in Lebanon for Palestinians following the Israeli occupation, Peteet comments that a sense of community with shared experiences arising from displacement emerged (2000: 200-202). Comparatively – albeit in a context of privilege, not need, as incentive for displacement – international school kids bond over their peripatetic lifestyles. But, whilst the factor of liminality predominantly characterizes the refugee camp, which is usually inhabited by a homogenous national or ethnic group, international schools are mostly defined by a certain hybridity – that "third" culture which is an in-between cultural compound.

To conclude, even though it is difficult to say that one has reached the core of another's self-narrative, I feel that what I got was at least a glimpse. Of those impressions, the conclusions reached here should not be seen as representative for *all* TCKs; rather, this discussion can act as an initial exploration – as well as a self-exploration – of the narratives of an interesting social group. Additionally, the fact that the migratory experiences of these students are not unique, but increasingly ubiquitous, only makes them the more urgently considerable, relevant as they are to a significant portion of the world's population.

Most interesting, perhaps, is that their social community was highly bounded within the host culture – but once movement was entered into the equation once again, and spatial bounds were transgressed, a 'limbo' state of belonging became

salient in their narratives. My informant TCKs seem to be living a healthy irony, one of a certain domesticated liminality akin to what Marc Augé (1995) deemed characteristic of "*non-places*". In our conversation, Amelie brought up how much she enjoyed and related to airports. Past the passport control, she was in an "international space", in a sort of cosmopolitan limbo; neither here nor there, and everywhere. This ease with which TCKs encounter the flux of global movement thus grounds their commonality. Maybe what sustains this community in limbo is a certain reflexive moment that underscores the recognition that they are all *in transit*; like commuters that, despite being on different trajectories, create a certain community that is abstract, self-conscious, and grounded on mutual identification.

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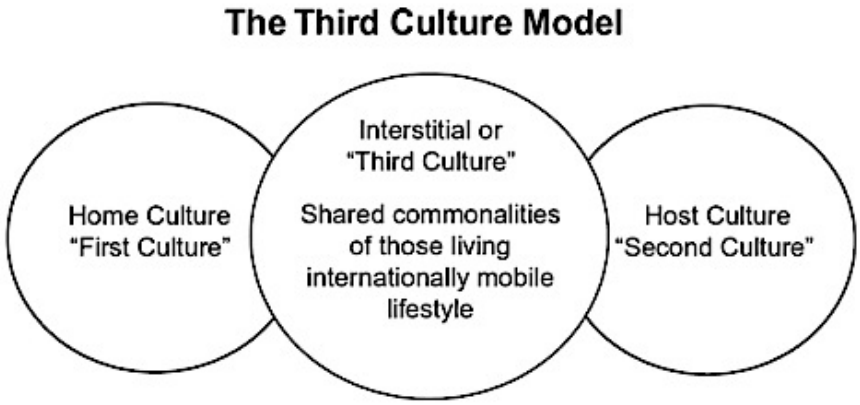
Appendix

Fig. 1: The Third Culture model



Source: Pollock, D. and Van Reken, R. 2009. *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds.* Boston, London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing. p. 14.