Third Culture Kids are as complex and multi-faceted a phenomena as cosmopolitanism itself. Which is fitting, as they appear to be perfectly suited – a synergy of theorem and lived reality in an ever globalising and inter-cultural world. Cosmopolitans are generally understood to be individuals who possess the skills and ‘cultural competencies’ to effectively navigate different meaning systems (Roudometof 2005: 114). Third Culture Kids are prime candidates for this cosmopolitan status. They are the children of people working outside their passport countries, who are employed by international organisations as international business people, development experts, diplomats, missionaries, journalists, international NGO and humanitarian aid workers, or UN representatives.

The first culture of their title refers to the Third Culture Kids’ parental homeland(s), while the second culture incorporates the country or countries in which they spent their formative years, commonly referred to as their host culture(s). The third culture to which their title refers is the temporary, nomadic and multi-cultural space they typically inhabit as children, within an expatriate community and, in some cases, international schools. This ‘third culture’ is not a straightforward amalgamation of their first two cultural spheres of influence, but instead comprises a third space for their unstable integration and interpretation (Knörr 2005). Raised in this third culture, Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are nevertheless aware that employment, further education or indeed turning 18 for military TCKs, will propel them ‘back’ to their passport cultures. Third culture belonging, established in childhood, is to be negotiated in adulthood.

Growing up ‘in between worlds’ (Pollock and van Reken 2009), the TCK is typically uncomfortable with homogeneity (Killguss 2008) and instead seeks out diversity in the margins, in company with the cosmopolitan (Foner 1997: 73–4). Living in liminality, many TCKs achieve in childhood, and then maintain into adulthood, the ‘reflexive distance’ deemed prerequisite to a cosmopolitan worldview (Turner 2002: 57). Indeed, the multi-sited nature of TCK belonging facilitates an ironic detachment from any one particular worldview, and instead fosters a multi-sited approach to belonging. In this way, both the TCK and the cosmopolitan may be seen as building relationships with a ‘plurality of cultures’ and engaging with ‘the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience’ (Hannerz 1990: 239). However, the very plurality of the TCK’s cultural exposure may belie the rootedness of their cultural outlook. As members of a third space, are TCKs as culturally unattached as they seem?
Historically, cosmopolitans have been identified as elites, using high levels of mobility to consume high culture on the global stage, and have thereby opened themselves up to criticism as ‘rootless’, being both unconcerned and unaffected by local attachments and commitments (Delanty 2000: 54). Indeed, some TCKs claim that this disconnectedness from the local is fundamental to the TCK experience, both as children and on into adult life. However, Werbner argues that the ‘new cosmopolitanism’ has an ethical dimension, combining both local and global commitments in a bid for a more rooted orientation towards diversity (2008: 60).

In this way, Third Culture Kids offer an opportunity to explore the extent to which experiences of high mobility has predisposed them towards a cosmopolitan rootlessness or, if their strong identification with their ‘third culture’ has instead evolved, a kind of rooted cosmopolitan approach. For TCKs however, rootedness would be less based in territory, than in the expatriate communities and organisational cultures of their childhoods, and so they could confound and expand current understandings of the rooted/rootless dichotomy in the cosmopolitan narrative.

This chapter will explore this link between Third Culture Kids and cosmopolitanism, and the cosmopolitan nature of the Third Culture Kid experience and outlook. It will explore the structural and collective basis of Third Culture Kid cosmopolitanism, and the ways in which their experiences propel them, paradoxically, both towards transnational rootedness and territorial rootlessness. An analysis of continuing mobility in the lives of adult TCKs lends itself to a final discussion of ‘elite vagrancy’ and the ways in which this phenomenon suggests that TCK cosmopolitanism is a paradoxical set of cultural (in)competencies.

**A cosmopolitan upbringing**

Rapport speaks of cosmopolitanism as offering ‘emancipation’ from the ‘superficial differentiation’ of social categories such as ethnicity or class (2012: 104). For him, cosmopolitanism is the ultimate individualising projects; liberating people ‘to become themselves’ (2012: 101). This vision suggests that cosmopolitanism is an especially individual quality; a quality beneficial to and emerging from self-actualisation. However, Werbner argues that both normative cosmopolitanism, imagining a global society based on democratic republics, and cultural aesthetic cosmopolitanism, imagining a global ‘space of cultural difference and toleration’, stress ‘collective creativity’ (2008: 50–1). If we are to understand Third Culture Kids are collectively cosmopolitan, it becomes necessary to establish their cosmopolitanism as structurally facilitated, rather than a coincidence of individualisation. After all, the very identity of the TCK is structurally defined, with reference to the formal or informal expatriate communities around which the TCK’s experience of the world coalesces.

Werbner (2008) claims that cosmopolitanism acknowledges, and even relies upon, an understanding that so-called cosmopolitan individuals are, in fact, very much embedded in societal networks that have engendered particular worldviews that, in turn, encourage a cosmopolitan outlook. Indeed, the consistency with which adult TCKs display a propensity towards cultural aesthetic cosmopolitanism is certainly suggestive of a commonality of experience (Cason 2015). Writings on other societal networks, such as Hamnerz’s foreign correspondents, imply a structural bias may exist in certain sectors towards a cosmopolitan outlook, and that individuals may be involved in an attempt to collectively further the culturally aesthetic cosmopolitan values; ‘Some foreign correspondents, it seems, are quite self-conscious about their cosmopolitan convictions, going to work with the hope to educate’ (2004: 34).

The societal networks in which Third Culture Kids are raised are typically global in focus and encourage, in narrative at least if not in always in practice, a broad cultural awareness and inter-cultural discourse. These agencies and organisations openly acknowledge the inter-cultural
careers of their employees, their presence in a host culture, and the multi-cultural demographics of their own expatriate community. The extent to which these expatriate communities nurture a cosmopolitan outlook, a desire for ‘difference and toleration, multiple cultural competencies and shared communication across cultures’ (Werbner 2008: 50–1) may be variable, yet such an outlook is generally held to be positive.

Third Culture Kids are encouraged into a cosmopolitan identity by their sponsor organisations and educational institutions. They are defined by their difference from both passport and host country peers, and are encouraged to value their difference. They straddle cultural worlds, performing their different selves chameleon-like. TCKs learn that there is power in being different: ‘I am a person set apart, able to enjoy the benefits of the place without paying the taxes’ (Iyer 2004: 11). Henderson-James concurs, observing, ‘The rules evidently didn’t always apply to me, heady stuff for a teenager’ (2009: 121). TCKs are told from a young age that they are special, mature, with a unique perspective of the world, and possessors of exotic knowledge. Moreover, they are told they are ‘cross-culturally skilled and globally aware at the age of eighteen’ and that they are ‘prime candidates for . . . leadership roles’ (McCaig 2011: 45).

For many Third Culture Kids, identifying as different or unique is experienced as a significant strength. Bennett’s notion of constructive marginality (1993) goes some way to illuminating the mechanisms TCKs use to manage cosmopolitan identities. TCKs identify predominantly as marginals, both in their passport and their host country cultures, and while TCKs often go through periods of feeling encapsulated, limited and isolated by their marginal status, many feel able to enter into constructive marginality. TCKs typically report feeling ‘at home’ in various cultural traditions (Killguss 2008: 6), and able to constructively engage with the various facets of their cultural identities. They feel at ease juggling different identities, and learn to employ a flexible sense of belonging not unlike Ong’s notions of ‘flexible citizenship’ (1999). Rather than being culturally limited to territorial belonging, TCKs typically define themselves by their ‘multicultural sense of self’ (Killguss 2008: 6). In this way, they align themselves closely with cosmopolitanism, as having ‘an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other’ (Hannerz 1990: 239).

Transnational rootedness

Hannerz (1990) observes that some cosmopolitans may not simply be individuals in the process of navigating multiple territorial cultures. He suggests that they may be involved also with a supraterritorial culture, a kind of ‘transnational network’ (Hannerz 1990: 240–1). It is to this kind of cosmopolitan experience that TCKs appear especially affiliated, and in this way TCKs may typically be seen, paradoxically, both as rootless, in terms of lacking a clear territorial cultural ‘home’ in which they invest long term, and as rooted in a non-territorial transnational network composed of international organisations and a distinct expatriate cultural framework.

The use of telephone and internet video calling technologies allows TCKs to maintain intimate relationships with friends in geographically disparate locations. Indeed, for some TCKs, their effectiveness at maintaining transnational relationships may go so far as to negate a need for more locally based attachments. Through the use of these internet technologies and social media, including numerous dedicated forums, chatrooms and alumni organisations, TCKs experience belonging transnationally, maintaining links with a geographically disparate community of TCKs around the world. They mirror Glick Schiller et al.’s transmigrants, ‘whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders’ (1995: 48). Harnessing the possibilities of the internet, TCKs are typically expert at maintaining cross-border connections and, in so doing, they explore virtual spaces of belonging (Roudometof 2005). They experience marginality in solidarity with each other, constructively employing their experience of
marginality in ways that seek to connect their experiences with those of other highly mobile populations.

One of the ways in which many TCKs construct a sense of collective identity independent of the nation state (Featherstone 1996) is through a return to the ‘abroad’ as adults. Paradoxically this is a return to the familiar, rather than to the exotic Other as it would represent for many of their compatriots. Faist describes transnational communities as ‘connected by dense social and symbolic ties over time . . . based on solidarity’ (2000: 9). These connections and shared experiences draw TCKs back to the third space of their childhoods. After all, where all members of the expatriate community are strangers to their locale, belonging may be negotiated on a more equal footing than in the TCK’s own passport country, where strangerhood is lonesome.

Given their high rates of return (Cason 2015), these expatriate communities are increasingly made up of Third Culture Kids for whom home is the broader expatriate field. Should one field abroad eject them due to habitation or citizenship limitations, for example, another will accept them. For some TCKs, the field of anthropology, arguably cosmopolitan in itself, provides a social and cultural framework with which to re-enter the mobile communities of TCK childhoods. Certainly, the process involved in belonging, through perpetual and perpetuated marginality, hints at a kind of rooted cosmopolitanism. This rooted cosmopolitanism combines the desire for diversity, global perspective and regular challenges to concepts of self, identity and belonging, with the easy familiarity born of early engagement in just such social contexts and experiences via expatriate organisational cultures.

Theories around rooted cosmopolitanism have centred on the idea that an open, inquiring attitude towards diversity, alongside a commitment to universal issues, does not preclude enduring commitments on a local, territorial or communal level (Appiah 1997; Werbner 2008). While Molz claims the nation to be central to the way in which ‘travellers develop their cosmopolitan orientation to the world as a whole’, it is arguable that transnational networks do this for the TCK (2005: 523). Through the experiences of Third Culture Kids, it becomes possible to see this kind of rooted cosmopolitanism as tethering the individual, not to territory, but to a transnational network or community.

A cosmopolitan skill set

The transnational networks and expatriate organisations that are so culture-defining for the Third Culture Kid also equip them with a cosmopolitan skill set. This skill set enables them to move from childhood mobility as structurally (or externally) motivated onto a perpetuation of ongoing mobility into adulthood. Woodward and Skrbis posit that a strong link exists between cosmopolitanism and a ‘particular set of cultural competencies’:

being cosmopolitan itself is a culturally located competency, perhaps even a strategy, that affords individuals the capacity to see, identify, label, use and govern dimensions of social difference in ways which reproduce patterns of cultural power.

(2012: 130)

In this way, these authors suggest that cosmopolitanism is less an outlook than a skill set arising from a specific set of environmental circumstances. Being able to access and engage with the cultural subtleties of the society around them, be this a host country familiar to them, or their own expatriate community, gives TCKs access to ‘cultural power’. TCKs, by virtue of their highly mobile upbringing, have had exposure to, and engagement with, multiple cultures. This mobility
has afforded them a cosmopolitan skill set, a mechanism or strategy through which they can harness social difference and gain cultural power and influence.

In a somewhat similar vein, Hannerz argues that this cultural power offered by cosmopolitanism broadens the individual’s locus of control:

Competence with regard to alien cultures itself entails a sense of mastery, as an aspect of the self. One’s understanding has expanded, a little more of the world is somehow under control. (1990: 239–40)

Cultural competence equips TCKs with a strong sense of multiple rootedness; they feel rightfully embedded in multiple geographical and cultural locations. They become skilled in the management of global relationships, through the use of email and webcam, and learn how to navigate in new cultures skillfully, engaging effectively with the means of nationally based rights of belonging, passport and right-to-work paperwork.

If TCKs have the cultural resources necessary to expand their field of belonging, a good deal of the world may appear tamed under their well-practised hand. It is true that the cultures through which the Third Culture Kid moves shifts its cultural expectations and behavioural norms as well as its borders. However, the third space that contributes to the destabilisation of the TCK, also teaches them the complicated sequence of steps that enables them to dance, rather than stumble, on the global stage. Mary Edwards Wertsch (author of Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress, 1991) in an interview for the documentary film Brats: Our Journey Home (Donna Musil Films 2006) makes this observation: ‘What these children learn to do very well is to read other people and then to become the manifestation of that person’s wants/needs/desires’. This statement points to the highly developed adaptive skills of TCKs who, as children, have learnt how to adapt in many different cultural contexts. While this ability is predictably problematic on a personal level, as potentially complicating agency in adulthood, it is a highly prized skill that facilitates active inclusion and engagement in cultures other than one’s passport culture.

However, cultural competence in cultures other than the passport culture should not be confused with any kind of permanent allegiance to it; the cosmopolitan ‘has . . . obvious competence with regard to it, but he can choose to disengage from it. He possesses it, it does not possess him’ (Hannerz 1990:240). With a chameleon-like ability to pick up and shed cultural allegiances with remarkable ease, TCKs often adjust their personas to fit the cultural circumstances surrounding them (Pollock and van Reken 2009; Cason 2015; Crossman 2016).

Crucially, success in meeting these social expectations is dependent on a TCK’s competence at assessing the cultural environment rather than a reliance on a shared set of cultural expectations. Even when a TCK does seem to have settled into one particular culture, it is often a temporary settledness; ‘the cosmopolitan may embrace the alien culture, but he does not become committed to it. All the time he knows where the exit is’ (Hannerz 1990:240). Settledness itself may be enforced by physical, emotional or legal restrictions on the individual’s mobility rather than long-term investment in a society based on a set of shared cultural values. For many TCKs, cosmopolitanism is experienced as a set of cultural competences developed out of a need, and a desire, to effectively harness the effects of high mobility in childhood, and to maintain access to diversity in adult life.

**Territorial rootlessness**

If TCKs are rooted cosmopolitans, embedded in the transnational networks of their childhoods, they also present as rootless cosmopolitans, perpetuating highly mobile lives into adulthood. The
The concept of a ‘rootless’ cosmopolitan has historically been used to denigrate those who seem to hold few territorial ties, and who are thus seen to be threatening commitment and investment in local, social and economic structures. Ideologically, however, cosmopolitanism lends itself to an inherent rootlessness; a lack of strong local attachments and identification is precisely what encourages an openness towards the ‘Other’ that might threaten a more fixed, territorially based identity. This willingness, or even desire, to engage with the Other marks TCKs as a traditionally cosmopolitan group, rootless in that they resist the more bounded national identities of their passport country peers.

Rootlessness is a defining feature of many TCK life stories (McLachlan 2004: 15). An internal compulsion to mobility, an internal inescapable restlessness, is so seminal to the impact of the TCK experience on adult life that mobility actually constitutes a welcome relief in a world that would otherwise threaten to suffocate many TCKs with stability. Knell writes that ‘TCKs often develop a migratory instinct — they soon get itchy feet after being in any one place for a time. This can affect their academic lives, career, family and marriage’ (2001: 19). Indeed, Laird Knight (Brats: Our Journey Home, Donna Musil Films 2005) revealed that once anything in his life, such as work projects or personal relationships, settled down to became established and steady, he would develop an urge to move on and create change. Indeed, commitment of any kind is particularly challenging to TCKs (Knell 2001). Instead, many TCKs seek to retain a sense of perpetual impermanence. For some TCKs, however, this internal compulsion towards mobility, while integral to their cosmopolitan identification and sense of belonging, is not unproblematic. After all, committing to a particular course of action is difficult when one’s base assumption is that the only certain thing in one’s life is that the future is uncertain.

The rootlessness, or restlessness, common to Third Culture Kids could ‘affect their academic life, career, family and marriage’ (Knell 2001: 19). While all of these aspects are of interest, most writers on TCKs focus on the relational impact of frequent mobility. Eakin speaks of how TCKs are often able to avoid problem-solving throughout their relationships, confident in the assumption that, at some point, one or other participants in the disagreement will leave to move on to another country and other relationships (1998). For this reason, TCKs sometimes appear indecisive and noncommittal or find establishing and maintaining long relationships to be challenging (McCaig 1994). For some TCKs, beginning any new relationship can seem like a betrayal of past loyalties and a huge risk in the face of ‘future separations’ (Gould 2002: 152).

For other Third Culture Kids, rootlessness has a different relational impact. The perceived lack of longevity in their relationships can encourage them to ‘move quickly through superficiality into deep emotional investment’ (Gould 2002: 153). This eagerness to forge significant relationships quickly can sometimes be misunderstood as a desire for intimacy, much to the non-TCK’s confusion. Margo Knight (Brats: Our Journey Home, Donna Musil Films 2005) said: ‘I don’t believe that trusting and telling people stuff are necessarily the same thing’. Indeed, because of the constant ‘newness’ of their lives, TCKs share very little historical connections with their peers and, upon making a new acquaintance, will often be eager to share in detail, the intimate facts of their lives. This however, does not necessarily equate to trust. Wertsch observed that this sharing was a strategy learnt by many military brats, and was one that elicited mutual disclosure, thus establishing friendship quickly (1991). Where friendships are social currency, this is a necessary skill set for the highly mobile child. Indeed, TCKs can sometimes harbour a deep distrust of their peers, particularly when residing in their passport countries; they are never quite sure of where they stand in relationship to them (Knell 2001: 53). In the words of one TCK, as he gave advice to those ‘going home’ to their passport countries: ‘Be on your guard. They’ll try to trick you’ (Knell 2001: 61). For these reasons, amongst others, TCKs often wrestle with settledness throughout
adulthood, aiming for stability but finding the emotional demands of it challenging. The TCK is, in fact, most comfortable when rootless, and ‘foreign’ (Killguss 2008).

**Elite vagrancy**

The rootlessness, towards which many TCKs feel regularly propelled, can become a heavy weight. The internal restlessness and compulsion towards mobility described by many TCKs echoes the constant and relentless propulsion of vagabonds, as described by Bauman (1996). One difference here, however, is that the TCKs rootlessness is typically internally motivated, while the rootlessness of the vagabond is in response to external pressures. In many ways TCKs seem bound to maintain into adulthood the high mobility of their childhoods, transforming them into ‘elite vagrants’ (Cason 2015). These elite vagrants are a seemingly disparate group of people who are nevertheless united by early childhood experiences of high mobility, rootless and homelessness in terms of territorial boundedness, yet who are in constant search for the familiarity and rootedness of community.

New constructions of fluid third spaces enable many TCKs to perpetuate the inner compulsion towards movement, a compulsion that propels them away from settledness and towards a more familiar and comfortable marginality as ‘elite vagrants’. Applying Bauman’s notions of vagrancy (1995, 1996, 1998) to the TCK experience illuminates the processes by which TCKs interact with, and move through, the world around them. Bauman describes the vagrant as ‘a stranger; he can never be “the native” . . . whatever he may do to ingratiate himself in the eyes of the natives, too fresh is the memory of his arrival’ (1995: 94). This effectively aligns with many accounts of TCK strangerhood (Pollock and van Reken 2009; Eidse and Sichel 2004; Ender 2002), but goes so far as to suggest motivations for the perpetual movement of TCKs into their adult lives.

Where Bauman’s vagrants are typically compelled in onward motion through lack of resources, TCKs experience an inner compulsion towards rootlessness—a restless and constant seeking after the novel. TCKs are raised and rooted in several specific territorial landscapes, and also in the social and organisational place(s) of their parents’ employment. They were, initially, rooted in the lands of their employers. Upon entering further education, or coming of age, they were expelled out of their parents’ lands and here many began living out their careers of vagrancy.

For many TCKs, the urge to wander is as innate and inescapable as the longing for a place of their own, for they may never return to the places of their childhoods. The only ‘return’ available to them is in perfect replication of their parents’ careers, or through a certain mirroring of these through other internationally oriented career paths. TCKs, unlike Bauman’s vagrants, are typically welcomed by sedentary populations as elite contributors to social and financial economies, possessed as they are with the cultural competencies that facilitate successful wandering. Yet the unpredictability of their wandering and their perceived lack of comprehensible allegiances may well display their relative incompetence around social and emotional settledness, and compromise relationships with their settled peers.

**Conclusion**

Third Culture Kids are almost inherently cosmopolitan, raised as they are ‘in between worlds’ (Pollock and van Reken 2009). Their outlook on the world traverses the limits of the nation state and reaches for the cultural influences of their myriad host countries. However, their outlook, open as it is, is nonetheless rooted in broad transnational fields, and in the organisational cultures of their parents’ employment. Their rootlessness, more traditionally associated with cosmopolitanism, arises in later life when, expelled from the agencies of their childhood, they begin to
wander the globe as professional nomads, or ‘elite vagrants’ (Cason 2015). Possessors of a cosmopolitan skill set and competent in the ways of nomadism and transnational belonging, TCKs nevertheless display a certain cultural incompetence in the field of settled relationships and local engagement. The paradoxical nature of their cosmopolitanism, the rooted/rootless dichotomy they demonstrate, is just one of the many contributions Third Culture Kids have to make to our understanding of belonging, identity and place.

References


