

# Writing Out of Limbo



Writing Out of Limbo:  
International Childhoods, Global Nomads  
and Third Culture Kids

Edited by

Gene H. Bell-Villada and Nina Sichel  
with Faith Eidse and Elaine Neil Orr

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Writing Out of Limbo:  
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Edited by Gene H. Bell-Villada and Nina Sichel  
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*for the children—here, there, and everywhere*



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# DEFINITIONS

## **Third Culture Kid**

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.

—David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken

## **Global Nomad**

A global nomad is anyone of any nationality who has lived outside their parents' country of origin (or their "passport country") before adulthood because of a parent's occupation.

—Norma M. McCaig

## INTRODUCTION

### GENE H. BELL-VILLADA AND NINA SICHEL

The origins of this volume are truly serendipitous.

In 2008, Gene Bell-Villada organized a special panel entitled, “Writing Out of Limbo: International Childhoods, Third-Culture Kids, and Finding the Words to Tell about Them,” to be presented at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in San Francisco. Fellow panelists were to be Nina Sichel, Faith Eidse, and Elaine Neil Orr. It was, to our knowledge, the first strictly literary session to focus on 1) the experience of being raised outside of one’s passport country, and 2) the study of narrative works, fiction or non-, that call forth, recount, and reflect on that curious experience.

That November, much to our delight, we received a communication from Amanda Millar, of Cambridge Scholars Publishing. She had happened to see the panel listed in the MLA’s official published program. And she was writing to inquire if there might be a potential book that could grow out of our session.

Three years later, this collection comes as the end result of that initial inquiry.

When the two of us assumed full co-editorship of the projected anthology, our larger purpose in recruiting authors was to gather, for the first time, a suitable mix of personal essays and scholarly articles; of memoirs, “hard” researches, and thought pieces; of subjective evocations together with more objectively oriented psychological, or sociological, or literary investigations of the issue of growing up globally—and its long-term after-effects. In addition, we were aiming to encompass a wide geographical horizon, a broad spectrum of nationalities as well as a variety of parents’ occupational backgrounds. We thus hoped to include instances of business kids and missionary kids, of foreign-service children and so-called “military brats.”

We asked for vivid, compelling writing that would appeal to a general audience, writing free from academic jargon. We sent a call for submissions out through our various networks, and suggested individuals might forward the call to others. Responses came from around the globe. From these, we have selected thirty representative essays that, we feel, illustrate the spectrum of the Third Culture Kid/Global Nomad experience.

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How the editors initially made contact and then ended up collaborating on such a book has its own circuitous history.

It begins with Gene Bell-Villada noticing that his 2005 memoir, *Overseas American: Growing up Gringo in the Tropics*, was being paired on Amazon.com alongside a collection entitled *Unrooted Childhoods: Memoirs of Growing up Global* (2004), edited by Faith Eidse and Nina Sichel.

He ordered the volume; it arrived; he promptly devoured its twenty essays, all of them emotionally rich, thoughtful, sometimes broodingly and wrenchingly so. In the anthology, he discovered immediate points of contact that echoed some of the issues he had written about: childhood mobility, displacement, and loss; identity among the children of expatriates (as he put it in his memoir, “an identity that is in permanent dispersal”); and the paradoxical estrangement and enrichment that goes hand-in-hand with living an international life. Its roster included literary luminaries on the order of Carlos Fuentes, Ariel Dorfman, Marie Arana, Pat Conroy, and Pico Iyer, but also lesser known if equally eloquent wordsmiths. The memoirists all shared in common their having been raised...well...*global*, “unrooted” (a striking neologism not yet listed in the standard dictionaries), with no set home or even a country. The gathering served as yet another instance of a scattered demographic that Bell-Villada, while eagerly pursuing research for *Overseas American*, had begun to glimpse: a kind of “virtual community” of adult Third Culture Kids.

One essay in particular caught B-V’s eye: “Going Home,” a wistful account, written by Nina Sichel, the anthology’s co-editor, of her return visit to Caracas, Venezuela, where she’d grown up as an American. Inasmuch as Bell-Villada had also spent time there in the 1950s and graduated from one of the two local, overseas-American high schools, his response to Sichel’s story was immediate, personal, visceral. In her remembrances he recognized the capital city’s lights, the air; the home

deliveries of tropical fruits; the instant skyscrapers and boom-town atmosphere; the racial mix of the street crowds and the sad, squalid hillside slums; and of course the expatriate enclaves and the oddities of leading a family life in such a setting. And more: young Nina, as it turned out, had attended the other American school, the same one where Gene's kid brother Kanani had completed junior high (as it was called back then) some eight years before she'd started.

Feeling compelled to reach out to this kindred voice, Gene wrote Nina a long note of appreciation. Not knowing where she might be employed, nor able to locate an address for her via the Internet, he mailed the letter c/o her publisher, Intercultural Press, to the firm's Maine and London offices both. The missive, it seems, took an indirect, roundabout, meandering journey: she received it several months later. The envelope had been opened and then scotch-taped shut.

She replied promptly by e-mail; a lively correspondence ensued; B-V and Sichel became fast e-pen pals. Their exchanges started in mid-October 2006; they were writing each other at least twice a week as they shared past history and present insights relating to matters Third-Culture-Kid of every sort.

In the months that followed, Gene began conveying to Nina the thought of proposing a special session on the topic of TCK writing, to be held at the next MLA conference, with Sichel herself, her *Unrooted Childhoods* co-editor Faith Eidse, and memoirist Elaine Neil Orr as fellow participants. Personal reasons caused the delay of the panel; it was held the following year at the 2008 MLA convention in San Francisco (though Nina was unable to attend). The book was commissioned, its contents gathered. We are here.

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Readers of this volume will most likely possess some familiarity with its overall topic. Still, it won't hurt to spell out, if briefly, the subject matter being addressed in these pages. The phrase "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs), while far from a household item, is a handy bit of shorthand, a formula designating the children of couples who, because of a parent's expatriation due to professional assignments, have been raised and educated elsewhere than in their country of formal citizenship. Also applied to these subjects is the term "Global Nomads" (GNs).

The time-span a TCK spends abroad may range from as little as a year to the entirety of one's childhood and/or adolescence. It may have unfolded in a single foreign location, or in half-a-dozen of them, or more. (Such cases indeed exist.). Whether they are mobile TCKs who frequently relocate or stationary TCKs whose friends and social circles keep changing, these children grow up among worlds, transitioning in and out of places, cultures, and friendships, and the frequent changes in their lives can be as challenging as they are rewarding.

When TCKs do eventually repatriate to their passport nation—generally to attend university—they may find it culturally as alien as were their former places of residence. Such returnees who have gone “home” are occasionally referred to as “hidden immigrants,” and often find themselves more comfortable among international students, who typically have a wider-ranging worldview, than among their own citizens. Their reentry into the culture of “home” can be one of the most difficult transitions of their lives.

The terms thus denote a social reality that, though as yet unacknowledged by a wider U.S. culture, is accepted as fact among international educators. Organizations such as SIETAR (Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research) and NAFSA (Association of International Educators), university branches of Global Nomads International, and magazines and websites devoted to the subject have done much to disseminate information and expand awareness of these returning students. Interestingly, Japan has long had a program for returning students, and many U.S. universities and colleges are now accepting the need for transition services, support and recognition of these global citizens.<sup>1</sup>

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Although “TCK” as a concept dates only from the late 1950s, and has scarcely started to gain anything like broad cultural diffusion, the experience (the *vivencia*, as they say in Spanish) had long been out there, in great measure as a result of colonialism. The British and French empires, as a matter of policy, had encouraged sizeable numbers of European citizen-settlers to populate and “civilize” their overseas outposts. Many of these voluntary expatriates would in turn have offspring, who grew up as what we might today consider TCKs, and who might feel the

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<sup>1</sup> See essays by Norma McCaig, Ann Baker Cottrell, and Bruce La Brack for further discussion.

same conflicting emotions vis-à-vis their “mother country.” We can thus now look upon literary figures such as Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys, and (in some measure) Orwell in England, and Marguerite Duras, Camus, and Le Clézio in France, as *Adult Third Culture Kids* (ATCKs) whose work at times reflects TCK preoccupations and dilemmas. Hence, colonialism, in a sense, first created Third Culture Kids, along with the conditions and the settings for a TCK literature that chooses to take on such themes.

In the U.S. case there were subtle differences. The United States was not a “world power” until after 1945, though it did have its sphere of influence in Latin America (where American schools had existed dating back to the earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). In addition there were religious missionary efforts all over the world. (Publishing tycoon Henry Luce and novelist Pearl Buck, for instance, were each of them the children of missionary parents in China.) It was only with the post-War expansion of the U.S. global presence that larger numbers of young Americans started being raised abroad, whether at the expanding corporate compounds or on the 700 military bases, as well as in the more traditional faith-based missions. As a result, several million American youngsters have grown up as TCKs, though without necessarily being aware of the fact. Not accidentally, the very term “Third Culture Kids” was coined in the 1950s by American sociologist Ruth Hill Useem after having been stationed with her family in India, where she studied both Western-educated Indian citizens and American professionals assigned for work in that newly independent nation.

Of course, Useem was writing largely from an American perspective. Yet the term she devised was never intended as necessarily U.S.-specific. Indeed, as several of our contributors demonstrate with a wealth of data and testimony, there are also Japanese, Finnish, Brazilian, Danish, Monagesque, and Iranian TCKs—and others, not covered here—with issues both shared and very much their own.

This leads us to a new stage, a whole new setting for what Bell-Villada in his essay refers to briefly as “the Third Culture Kid condition,” namely, the rise and spread, since 1989, of what has been dubbed “globalization:” the increased interconnectedness of the world through international finance and trade, through entertainment media and information technology, through employment outsourcing and voluntary legal migration, and with English as the dominant lingua franca. The trend was vividly summed up

in the catchy title of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's 2005 best-seller, *The World Is Flat*.

As a side result of this inexorable wave, educational institutions across the globe have been seeing an increasing international and cultural diversity within their student ranks. Many of these budding minds presumably have not yet worked out in full their personal identities within this new, still-fluid and developing situation; they may well spend years sorting out the various strands in their cultural make-up. The Census Bureau recognizes this trend and adds new categories of ethnicity and race periodically to reflect the changing U.S. population.

And what comes next? What of the larger, evolving picture? Even as globalization "flattens" the world, and more and more people relocate across boundaries and borders and time zones, it is no longer simply a movement from one culture into another. Nations are becoming increasingly multicultural, migrations and immigrations altering the texture and tone of a place as new people pass through or settle. The cultural mosaic that is humanity blends and expands, and new self-definitions are dizzying in their variety and complexity—cross-cultural, bi-cultural, multi-cultural, inter-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-national... As Ruth Van Reken states in her essay, perhaps a new language or model is needed in order to talk about the many permutations of individual identity.

Such dilemmas and confusions are implicit in the intentionally ambiguous title of our collection, *Writing Out of Limbo*, an evocative phrase coined by contributing editor Elaine Neil Orr. Its prepositional phrase could be construed either as "Writing *from* Limbo," a simple matter of location (or of perspective), or as "Writing *One's Way Out of* Limbo" and hence a kind of active quest, a struggle analogous to that of "*Finding One's Way Out...*"—and with the pen, using the written word as the means of scouting, discovering, emerging, and, at long last, arriving.

The many shades of meaning are reflected in the contents of this book. Here, then, are foundational works that have defined Third Culture Kids and Global Nomads, and that expand our understanding of cross-cultural childhoods; memoirs that reflect the arc of TCK experience, from childhood mobility to adult identity; analyses and explorations of the many issues that TCKs and Global Nomads face, in their lives "abroad" and their reentries "home;" and reconfigurations of artistic expression as interpreted through the unique TCK lens.

## Foundations

We begin our collection with the writings of foundational thinkers. It is useful to step back and see how concepts have evolved about this “other” identity, and how they continue to grow and change and be applied to various groups of internationally mobile children. We see how the theorists grapple with contemporary anthropological and sociological frameworks in their attempts to articulate what it is that pulls together a group of such far-flung, disparate people, whose individual narratives encompass the globe, yet who share some traits—not language, not geography, not culture, not religion, not history—in common. Who are these outsiders? What is it that they share? And where do they find common ground?

Ruth Hill Useem, the originator of the term Third Culture Kid, and co-author Richard Downie, write of “the interstitial culture”—what others call “liminality” or “neither-here-nor-there”—that is “created, shared, and carried by persons who are relating societies, or sections thereof, to each other.” This is the Third Culture, and this is where transnational children feel most naturally themselves. They observe that, while children of families with stable roots find continuity in the culture of their homeland, TCKs find their sense of continuity primarily in family, international schools and the sponsoring organizations that are the stable parts of their lives, rather than in the culture around them, which changes with every move. They grow up to value their cosmopolitanism, even if it is not recognized by others in the dominant culture. Useem and Downie conclude their piece with recommendations for schools to help TCKs make use of the skills they have learned in their travels, as chances are they will want to continue an international life.

Ruth Van Reken, together with David Pollock, took Useem’s concept of Third Culture Kid and refined and polished it into its current definition. Their now-classic *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* was the first book in the field of intercultural studies to describe in detail the experience and general profile of the TCK. But as more and more people began to study the profile, and to find themselves to some degree reflected in it, Van Reken began to search for a more inclusive name, an umbrella term that would cover not only traditional TCKs, but also any number of other groups whose identities are formed by crossing cultures in their childhood years. Her essay describes how she moved from her work with Pollock to an expanded view, one that calls for

a new language and a new model: the Cross-Cultural Kid, the new prototype for an interconnected world.

Norma McCaig coined the term Global Nomad to define anyone who had moved internationally because of a parent's career. She advocated for recognition of the leadership these people could provide—people “whose vision and experience extends beyond borders,” who are “cross-culturally skilled and globally aware.” Focusing on how these children internalize the transnational experience, so very different from the ways their parents do, she calls on schools and universities to recognize the many gifts these children bring and to recognize that, though they may live outside the mainstream, they belong “to a functional rather than dysfunctional marginal reference group.”

Ann Baker Cottrell, at one time a student of Ruth Hill Useem's, breaks down the various labels we have for expatriate children and analyses them in close detail. She then compares two vastly different societies in their understanding of and treatment of their TCKs: the United States, a multicultural, multiethnic society founded on principles of individualism, and Japan, a culturally homogeneous society that values conformity far more than individuality. Her study looks at socialization of the TCK within the “home” culture and concludes that, as the world becomes more globalized, both nations “increasingly value lives transcending cultures.”

## **Reflections**

Who are these Global Nomads and Third Culture Kids? And how do they remember their experiences of growing up global? What does it feel like to live outside the mainstream? How do they build identity?

Even as we reach for universal statements about the lives of TCKs, and as we attempt to articulate the common denominators of TCK identity and create a “typical” profile, the fact remains that each child is going to have a very different experience, and the way that their childhood informs their adult choices is as unique and as individual as their character. Interpretation of what may seem to be the same childhood experience varies from person to person even within families. To illustrate this, we have included the writings of two sibling pairs: Elizabeth and John Liang, and Faith Eidse and Charity Schellenberg.

Elizabeth and John Liang share the same moves, the same background, basically the same family history. Yet their approach to writing for this collection, the issues they focus on, and the ways the experience has formed them, are radically different. Elizabeth Liang has taken her multiple identities—and her ease with change and adaptability—and created an acting career where her very identity changes with each role she takes on. It is a way of bending her history to her purpose. In the world of theater, she finds a home that reflects the TCK experience. But John Liang, frightened by each move he made with his family, struggled throughout his childhood to tamp down his anxiety and what he calls his feelings of “out-of-placedness.” The many strands of his multiculturalism—his mixed ethnicity, his multilingual names—mark him as different with every move. Who he is, ultimately, is challenged by a trip to Taiwan, where he expects to enjoy a sense of belonging and where he feels like more of an outsider than ever.

Faith Eidse and Charity Schellenberg return to their childhood home in Congo to celebrate their mother’s legacy after her death. Yet the journey, though a turning point for each of the sisters, leads to very different outcomes. For Eidse, the trip is the dawn of a new awakening as she pulls away from childhood resentment and pain and begins to understand the depth of her missionary parents’ service in Africa, and to ponder how she can mirror their commitment at home in the U.S. She takes in a homeless woman, manages her care through surgery and recovery, and is able to “reframe” her own history from a new perspective. Her sister, Charity, is forced to confront the submerged and unacknowledged grief she experienced as an adolescent when she left Congo for Canada. Cut off for years from her past, she is unable at first to even recall the language that would open doors of communication. When she does, suppressed memories and pain flood through her with such force that she is swept away in a tide of confusion and unhappiness. With the support of her husband, she emerges from this experience newly resolved to return to Africa, and they move back on a permanent basis to devote themselves to building a life in Congo.

Nancy Dimmock also returns to her African roots, bringing her missionary background forward in a new and unexpected way. She and her husband first settle in Lesotho to direct a health care facility. They later move to Malawi, where Nancy has a vision that she turns into reality, starting a clinic to save the lives of sick and starving infants, and to find new families that will adopt the orphans. Along the way, she creates her own

peach-and-brown family, giving birth to two children and adopting six others.

Knowing who you are and who you will be, developing and nurturing a solid sense of self, can be challenging for children raised moving around the globe. They dip in and out of sometimes conflicting cultural worlds and values, and for some, this causes confusion, and for others, it is exciting and enriching. Their personal growth becomes more than simply an education in the ways of the world, as they question and select from the various influences that shape them, and cobble together a unique identity.

Moving back and forth across North and South America as a child, Kathleen Daniel continues moving to and through places as a young adult, following a spiritual and healing path that takes her from the study of psychology to yoga to acupuncture to personal coaching to women's leadership—and back to her ancestral home in Budapest. It isn't so much re-invention as it is expansion of self, opening up to the many cultures she immerses herself in while simultaneously following her own true north. She stretches the boundaries of self with new learning and expression, continually shaping and reshaping who she is.

Cathleen Hadley's memoir is the story of a similar sort of journey, though its focus is one of artistic expression. In her sojourns through the Americas and Indonesia, she pieces together an artistic identity that merges expressive visual art with a traveling life. Painful lessons of dispossession and outsiderhood teach her that she, and her art, can survive, that art is both process and identity and can be taken from place to place, expressed with the objects and materials at hand—and then released. "I use art to inhabit the worlds I move in," she writes.

Emily Hervey applies her personal experience of being raised in Chile, the U.S. and Kazakhstan to her studies of cultural adjustment among TCKs around the world, and contributes an essay that is part-memoir and part-research, delving into topics that so many TCKs are familiar with: the loneliness of being an outsider, exposure to danger and uncertainty abroad, the pain of too many farewells, the struggle to articulate her experience to uncomprehending friends and family, the entire transition experience.

The topic of home surfaces and resurfaces in the memoirs of TCKs, though "home" is a concept that shifts and slides depending on who is writing about it. "Home is an ephemeral place... my sense of home is a plural

concept,” writes Anna Maria Moore in her memoir of constant relocation. Moving across continents and cultures (and she has covered the globe: South America, North America, Europe, Asia, Africa), she creates a sense of home from fragments of her past—her collections of letters, shells, rocks, pieces of cloth—talismans that remind her of where she has been. She carries these “like a shell upon [her] back,” a shell which can expand with every move and hold within it all her memories.

Nina Sichel writes achingly of missing the sensuality of the tropics after moving from Venezuela to a small town in the northeastern U.S. for college, where she encounters the culture shock typical of the “hidden immigrant.” Moving from place to place after college, she wonders when she will find the America she has been taught to believe in, and when she will feel she is part of a community. Eventually, she comes to accept that she feels most comfortable as an outsider. For her, home is not a geographical place, but a comfort zone, a sense of familiarity she shares with others raised outside the dominant culture.

## Explorations

Our third sub-section brings together articles that are the result of rigorous empirical researches; that deal with TCKs within corporate or academic contexts; that explore in some theoretical way the larger question of TCK-ness; that offer practical counsel for interested parties (children, parents, college administrators)—or that provide some combination of all these.

The authors of most of the essays employ to some extent the method of the survey, whether written or via personal interview. The statements by their interviewee subjects can often prove quite powerful and moving. Patricia Linderman conveys a perspicuous, bird’s-eye glance at the entire, years-long process of being, literally, a Third Culture *Kid*—the preparation for the move, resettlement, schooling, finding (and losing) friends, outside-school activities, visits back “home” and, finally, the uncertain future that awaits them. Her expertise in the field, and her own experience as a mother of two TCKs, come together in an essay offering both background knowledge and concrete advice.

Danau Tanu applies the participant-observer technique in carrying out her ethnographic study of an international school in Indonesia. She captures the complex web of relationships that arises between the enrolled Asian students and their Western peers and non-Western parents both, as well as

the ways in which tensions involving race, nationality, and language play themselves out day-by-day on the school grounds.

Nancy Henderson-James, who herself grew up as a Missionary Kid (MK) in Africa, surveys a number of adult MKs and traces the divergent paths they have taken with regard to their parents' religions—from intensification of faith to loss of belief to various positions in between. The results she comes up with are often surprising; and her own recollections of experiencing doubt as a university student, and of opening her mind to the philosophical tradition from Socrates onward, brings a personal touch to her thoughtfully objective study.

Four of the essays work in the best traditions of empirical social-science research, deploying their fresh insights with a wealth of detail. Kathleen Gilbert and Rebecca Gilbert illuminate a hidden, mostly scanted aspect of TCK life and its perpetual state of “liminality:” the unacknowledged grief, the unceasing feelings of loss—loss of relationships, loss of identity, loss of a home. Multiple childhood losses, both recognized and ignored, are the submerged downside of the mobility, flexibility, and cosmopolitanism of TCK existence; and sorrow over these losses can continue to trouble TCKs into adulthood, a long process that the Gilberts bring clearly into view.

Laila Plamondon's study puts the spotlight on TCK delays in maturity and in identity formation, and the ways in which these postponements impinge on the course of reacculturation and repatriation, and on the ties with one's parents. In a finding that might surprise readers, she notes that the numbers of years spent abroad, and of countries lived in, actually make no discernible difference in identity development, whereas frequent repatriations “home” can in turn lead to increases in a TCK's confusion. The essay is especially remarkable in having originated as an Honors Thesis at Smith College.

Most TCKs tend to be competent in two languages or more. In the field of academic linguistics, bilingualism is an established subspecialty, but Liliana Meneses breaks new ground in her provocative look at how the fact of having different languages interweaves with issues of social identity, group membership, the life of inner emotions, and the construction of a personal narrative. (Language, then, as signifier both social and affective.)

Anu Warinowski's article, with its highly theoretical and graphics-rich apparatus, brings an unusual perspective in examining the problems unique to TCKs from Finland. She sets forth the special characteristics of Finnish families at home and abroad, and brings into view the manifold interactions with the host countries and diverse expatriate groups, and, inevitably, with international schools that, in their curricula and language of instruction, may be entirely alien to Finnish children just beginning their experience of expatriation.

The situation of returnees and their identities as post-adolescent or adult TCKs are the focus of two of these pieces. Bruce La Brack deals with a question of academic policy for these hidden immigrants: Are they, or are they not "international students?" If so, then, should their curricular requirements differ accordingly? From his home institution, the University of the Pacific, he offers one plausible set of solutions.

Alice Wu, having organized conferences of Global Nomads at Cornell University and produced videos of those events, cites from them to give us some eloquent oral testimonials from her widely diverse participants. Covering a period of almost fifteen years, her longitudinal report presents the views of a dozen or so TCKs on matters of career choice, spouse choice, and children, and their thoughts on home, friendship, and community. It is a rare glimpse of the current lives of ATCKs when they are well beyond being, as it were, "kids."

## **Reconfigurations**

Our fourth and final portion assembles essays by eight TCKs of varied stripe, who bring their mixed backgrounds to bear on the concrete realm of culture—literary classics, physical artifacts, even creative products of their own making.

Maureen Burns, in the most theoretically oriented of the articles, takes on the larger topic of mobility in a world where migration at many levels has become commonplace; she forcefully demonstrates the importance of maintaining any sort of documentation (e.g. photos, a ring) as a means of articulating identity via representation. Many TCK readers will discern here their own past attachment to small, portable objects—a toy, a book, a scrapbook, musical recordings—that they clung to with each subsequent move abroad, elsewhere.

Greg Clinton in turn tells of consciously channeling his TCK past into the study of philosophy and, later, the teaching of literature overseas, dramatically demonstrating to us that a 9<sup>th</sup> grade group of 15-year-olds at an international school in Sudan, four centuries later, can still be gripped by the ending of *Romeo and Juliet*, can be profoundly moved to pity and fear by the death of the star-crossed lovers. The great works of the past are alive and well, he suggests, in TCK enclaves.

Perhaps not accidentally, Shakespeare's contemporary and artistic equal, Cervantes, becomes the medium whereby Leyla Rouhi, with her kaleidoscopic mix of Persian, English, Muslim, and French backgrounds, and with Spanish added latterly, finds a living mirror of herself in the fluid identities captured in *Don Quijote's* ever-shifting world. In her search for roots and a transnational "family" following the upheavals in and her displacement from Iran, she sets out to locate a long-range historical precedent to her own being, first in medieval Spain's Muslim past, and then in Cervantes's complex and subtly subversive "take" on early-modern Spain's submerged Muslim present.

The imaginative literature begot by colonialism, and the emergence of what we now recognize as Third Culture Kids, are closely addressed by three of our contributors. Elaine Neil Orr links up a concept of an identity that is dual (one of the two an inner "stranger") with her own upbringing as a Missionary Kid in Nigeria and with her readings of works by three very different novelists: Jean Rhys, J. M. G. Le Clézio, and the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga. Orr highlights in novels by these authors the conflicted relationships between their youthful European (or Europeanized) protagonists and the local, non-white folk they deal with every day.

Bell-Villada for his part revisits the life and oeuvre of Rhys alongside that of novelist and essayist Barbara Kingsolver as instances of the TCK phenomenon; in the very plots and characters of their more outstanding books he discerns analogous patterns from the cultural dynamics and the shattered family history of his own, problematical TCK youth in the Spanish Caribbean.

Alice Ridout examines in special depth the autobiography of Doris Lessing—the latter a natural subject for TCK literary studies. Ridout at one point takes note of a scene of the child Doris seated serenely in a tree in the Rhodesian bush—a memory of innocent bliss that will be dashed by

the Nobel-Laureate-to-be's avowed future struggles to locate a "home" and by her clashes with her mother (who serves almost as an allegory for England's less savory side).

Two of our contributors reflect on their own creative, artistic efforts at making sense of their respective TCK experience, while the sole author in our "End Paper" evokes one of its more nuanced complications via a lyric poem. Elizabeth Liang, who grew up in six countries, draws commonalities between that multiple-identity existence and her chosen profession as an actress, and tells us of her one-woman play-in-progress that aims to give dramatic shape to her childhood peregrinations and confusions. Her childhood moves between Panama and Guatemala, her first exposure to Moroccan Arabic, the shock of winter cold in Connecticut, the woes of a street cyclist in Cairo or Philadelphia—these and other roaming experiences form the fabric of a vivid stage monologue.

Donna Musil, the only "military brat" among our authorial ranks, conveys the "feel" of growing up military in the 1960s and '70s (the racial politics on the bases, the constant relocations, Vietnam), then goes on to narrate the harrowing logistics of producing the first documentary film ever made about that life—and finally the amazement and shock at the range of responses (negative and positive, angry and sympathetic, hostile and joyful) that such a movie can elicit from military wives and children.

We close with a poem by Maya Goldstein Evans, who grew up Jewish in Egypt, where she attended French schools, and then later emigrated to Venezuela, there graduating from an American high school. In the subtle rhymes and rhythms of her crystalline verse she captures the inner linguistic battles familiar to many a polyglot TCK. Given their composite souls and complex personal trajectories, TCKs at some point may find themselves faced with two or more languages and having to choose from among them the one in which they prefer to dwell, and Evans's lyric meditation lends eloquent artistic shape to such a conscious decision.

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We the editors take pride in this meeting of minds and experiences, of straight facts and inspired epiphanies. It is our hope that other TCKs, their relatives, friends, and colleagues, and readers both familiar with and new to the topic, will all profit from savoring these highly variegated writings, and the fresh and unusual glimpses they bring of a world in flux.

We gratefully acknowledge the following: Faith Eidse and Elaine Neil Orr, for their invaluable help in reading and editing manuscripts; Elaine Orr, again, for having first suggested the title of our volume, and Cathleen Hadley for allowing her luminous painting *Arrival* to grace the cover; Amanda Millar of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, for making the volume possible; Carol Koulikourdi, also of CSP, for guiding us through the process; our families and friends around the world who encouraged and supported this effort—and, above all, the contributors who responded to our call for submissions, many of whom have bared their souls about information with which they may have been less than comfortable.

**PART 1:**  
**FOUNDATIONS**

## THIRD-CULTURE KIDS

RUTH HILL USEEM AND RICHARD D. DOWNIE<sup>1</sup>

“The first day, the teacher stood me up in front of the class and said I was from Singapore. The kids at that school were tough. They started calling me Chinaman and harassing me. I didn’t like being called that. I thought it was something bad to be. I did well in school, though. The teachers liked me, and the school was easy. The schools I went to overseas were tougher.”

“When I was 16, I came from Japan to a small town in Indiana. I remember the first time I was out on a date—all we did was drive around to McDonald’s and different places. The whole night! I never really got involved much in the school life. A lot of the kids were not planning on going to college, and so we didn’t have much in common to talk about. I think I was pretty strange for them, too.”

“I think part of the problem when I came to the States was I looked American but I did things that were not quite American. I had fun trying to be an American. It was an act in a way.”

No, these are not the observations of new immigrants or foreign visitors. These are the reactions of American third-culture kids (TCKs) who have come “home” after living abroad as dependents of parents who are employed overseas. Although they have grown up *in* foreign countries, they are not integral parts *of* those countries. When they come to their country of citizenship (some for the first time), they do not feel at home because they do not know the lingo or expectations of others--especially those of their own age.

Where they feel most like themselves is in that interstitial culture, the third culture, which is created, shared, and carried by persons who are relating societies, or sections thereof, to each other.

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<sup>1</sup> This article appeared originally in *Today’s Education*, September-October 1976. Reprinted by permission of the National Education Association.

Although some Americans were living outside the United States before World War II, the great burgeoning in numbers of Americans moving overseas began after the War. Now, there are approximately 300,000 school-age American children overseas. Their fathers are missionaries; visiting professors and teachers; representatives of the U.S. government (e.g., employees of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, etc.); employees of international and multinational corporations and financial institutions (e.g. Exxon, First National City Bank, Bell Helicopter); and American employees of international organizations such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF. These fathers are usually highly educated or highly skilled people who are forging the networks that intertwine and interrelate the peoples of the world. (The mothers may be employed overseas, but in most cases, the families have moved because of the fathers' employment.)

To be sure, Americans are not the only ones involved in third cultures. For example, Japanese businessmen work and live in the United States and in Southeast Asia, and diplomats from all countries represent their governments in posts all over the world. Their dependent children can be found in university communities, in the United Nations International School in New York, in the capitals and large cities of the world, and in some of the same overseas schools as American children. In this article, we shall limit our discussion to American TCKs.

The parents' sponsor in the overseas area is crucial in determining the specific part of the third culture in which the TCKs live, the kind of school they attend, the host nationals and third country nationals they will know, and the languages they will learn. These children even have labels that reflect their parents' sponsors—"Army brats," "MKs" (missionary kids), "biz kids," and most recently "oil kids."

Overseas, one of the first questions a TCK asks a new arrival is "What does your father do?" or "Who is your father with?" The answer helps to place young people socially. If, after returning stateside, a TCK asks such a question of a young person who has been reared here, the latter's reaction may be one of puzzlement or resentment. Unlike that of TCKs, the social life of young people reared here is not directly influenced by the father's employer.

TCKs are attached to the third culture through their parents' employers, who hold parents responsible for the behavior of their offspring. (If a dependent

grossly misbehaves, he or she may be sent home, and the employer may reassign the father or terminate his employment.) Therefore, fathers take an active role in their children's lives and in making family decisions.

In one study of third-culture families, only six of 150 TCKs reported that their mothers always or usually made final decisions about family matters. (It should be remembered that almost all overseas American families have both parents present.) Fifty-three percent of Department of Defense dependents claimed that only their fathers made final decisions; 41 percent of children of missionaries said their fathers had the final say in family decisions; and the others involved in the study, including 75 percent of children of those representing the federal government, reported that both parents, and occasionally the children themselves, were involved in decision making.

Most children and youth overseas do not resent strict parental controls, because all of them attached to the same sponsor come under similar rules and, hence, there is community reinforcement. Besides, the overwhelming majority of TCKs (close to 90 percent) like, respect, and feel emotionally attached to their parents.

There are many reasons for this. The high mobility of third-culture families, who usually move every one, two, or four years, seems to have the effect of bringing individual family members closer together. They share the common experience of moving into unfamiliar territory and offer each other mutual support in the face of change and strangeness. Parents are often the only people with whom TCKs have a continuing relationship as they move from one location to another.

American families overseas spend more time together (unless the children are in boarding school) than do their stateside counterparts—and the time together is often not taken up with mundane aspects of living. Mothers are home managers rather than housewives, because they usually have servants to clean up the spilled milk, make the beds, cook the meals, and chauffeur the children. As one overseas mother said, "It's amazing how pleasant conversations with children can be when you are not frantically trying to get the supper on, answer the telephone, and nag the children to pick up their clothes."

The family provides one form of continuity for TCKs. The schools offer another.