

Ab-normalising projects of third culture kid identity: Troubling the god trick

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Abstract

Over the last half-century, an industry of sense-making and psy-management has emerged to narrate an increasingly “special” population of third culture kids (TCKs): children with highly mobile formative contexts, living between countries and cultures. Producing categories of identification and models of development through dominant monocultural assumptions, TCK literature performs colonising epistemological disciplines of coding difference as risk and capital. In this article, we trouble the prevailing assumptions and frameworks that narrate TCK identity through a paradox of unrecognisability, integrating autobiographical responses to theorise questions about accounting for one another and ourselves as subjects of otherness. Decoding movements of posthuman commitments to disrupting universalising god tricks offer memories of encountering paradigms of ab-normality in TCK accounts as ruptures that open up new possibilities. Beyond restrains of normalising frameworks, unusual life stories flow in affirmative, relational, and creative accounts of responsive citizenship in between and among multiple countries and cultures.

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The “difference” expressed by subjects who are especially positioned as “other-than,” that is to say “always already” different from, has a potential for transformative or creative becoming. This “difference” is not an essential given, but a project and a process that is ethically coded. (Braidotti, 2008, pp. 12–13)

Projects of coding difference and sameness, embedded as they are through our daily conversations of accounting for one another and ourselves, emerge from normalising flows of meaning-making to become apparent through disrupting junctures of discovering otherness. In sites of exchange for encountering and establishing life experiences of the otherness of childhood expatriation, one repeating, troubling, juncture in my¹ social relationships has been the question “where are you from?”—my responses become disruptive as they violate the terms of the question, scrambling the codes that inscribe difference. Living the affectual tensions of my location between established cultures is moved through my engagement with third culture kid (TCK) literature and biographical memory work, which inspires political and collective responses and sense-making as a reflexive practice (Morgan, 2013). Repatriated in our passport countries, former expatriates may appear local (initially presenting through codes of national and cultural sameness), but our life stories and experiences of the world unexpectedly evoke terms of difference in processes of becoming (un)recognisable. When I am asked where I am from, I experience the disturbance of codes of positioning as a risk to my social relationships, deciding where on a spectrum from complete avoidance to lengthy and exposing life stories my answer will be most coherent and least distancing as I negotiate the demand to make myself known. Usually I offer a brief compromise: that I grew up a white sojourning foreigner in Central Asia and travelled a lot in childhood on my New Zealand passport. In the naming of multiple and distant places, what I have never accomplished is the naming of where I am from, as I produce stories that are both too much and insufficient (first to others, and then, at times, to myself) for accounting for myself. Invariably, my unexpected (dis)locating of myself disrupts normative flows of social relationships as the painful process of marking my difference begins in earnest; I have been asked how many languages I speak, how I received an education, which country I like better, why, how, who, and whatever for? The questions accumulate towards the ultimate concern of constructing human subjectivity as normalcy through definitions of sameness and otherness, where difference functions both to make “same” distinctive, and to locate moral axes of deviance (Braidotti, 2008). In the apex of one such recent exchange, after asking where I was from and hearing my attempt to formulate for him a recognisable response, a man asked me if I believed I was normal.

In the absence of a recognisable response to identifying questions, the conditions of my life become increasingly swept up in derisive and incredulous discourses establishing cultural, national, and experiential difference pinned to our individual bodies. I was not

asked if I *was* normal, I was asked if I *believed* I was normal: having already inscribed difference in me, the enquiring man wanted to find out if I knew about it myself, returning responsibility for the discomfort of my unusual account to my own internal psychological processes. Cued by the presupposition that made my status of normality a relevant follow-up, I acquiesced that I was probably not, and thus fell into a paradox of identification. Gently camouflaged in social relations (“where are you from?”), the paradox is constructed through cultural codes of identification, in which, if we cannot flow through, we become recognisable by our unidentifiability, caught up in a holding zone containing the other-than. Further entangling me in the social mire, my acceptance of abnormality was immediately disciplined, as I was counselled by the man that I must overcome my otherness by believing that I was normal. To relieve us both of the disturbance I had caused and claw back some social status, I was cautioned to relinquish my hopes of being heard on the terms I arrived with by altering my account both externally and through internal cognitive reconstruction.

The social precarity and anxiety I feel as I try to account for my mobile self has become interconnected with my status of MK (Missionary Kid), the name assigned to my formative (international evangelicals’ daughter) lifestyle of difference. Through books and mission group discourse, I came to know, too, that MK was a category within the wider TCK identity. TCK became absorbed into my body as a heuristic that held my difference, and, as a functional category of cultural otherness, began to also embed my stories with sameness, through identity work offering specific frames of recognisability and recognisable accounts that claim my body of difference into a system of knowledge. Here, our TCK unrecognisability becomes the primary form through which we are recognised, as an “abstract, interstitial culture” between more established ones (Tan et al., 2021, p. 82), due to our internationally mobile and multicultural childhood experiences. The paradox of being recognisable only through difference is tangled in my body, where memories surface and converge as I listen to voices that story my transnationalism. In this article, therefore, we question the parameters of accountability and recognition of TCKs through enquiry into the psy-discipline of literature that practises representational powers to ethically code domains of cultural difference and sameness.

Identity through industry

To the man asking me if I believed I was normal, that I was already “other” was an unquestionable assumption—through monocultural and nationalistic traditions of association, my stories were decidedly dislocated. Gathering up our life stories within the constraints of dominant normative narratives is an act of symbolic power that disciplines through naming, representing, and interpreting unusual life experiences. In the gathering motions, our stories are contorted to fit within the parameters of established forms of acceptable accounts. Identifying accounts of TCKs emerge with and within modern globalism movements, embedded in global histories of colonisation and white migration where TCK literature distinguishes itself from other child migration literature through unique models and specifically situated representations. North American scholarship in the 1950s–1970s included early anthropological accounts of TCKs as children of western expatriates working in new post-World War II formations of international relations

and business, and the long-term implications for those children once repatriated to the USA (Cottrell, 2009; Lambiri, 2005). Despite increasing awareness over the following decades of the need for more diverse representations of TCKs (Lambiri, 2005; Tan et al., 2021), the dominance of white European and North American legitimacy continues, and there is a notable lack of critical attention to colonialism, white privilege, and intersectional experiences of racialisation and racism among nonwhite TCKs (Pollock et al., 2017; Tanu, 2014, 2015; Useem et al., 1963). The TCK industry does not appear ready to confront how its seminal texts explicitly assume colonialism has ended, nor the implications of comparing white, Western cultures as “modern” and “complex” against “primitive” former “warriors, hunters, and gatherers” of other (indigenous) cultures (Hill Useem, 1999, para. 3; Useem et al., 1963). Tanu (2014) argues that colonial attitudes continue to dominate international relations, where “becoming ‘international’ overlaps with becoming Western” (p. 580), contextualising TCK perspectives and relations within global hierarchies.

It is through (unexamined, tacitly hegemonic) white Western imagination, then, that TCKs are referred to as “prototype global citizens” (Tan et al., 2021, p. 83) whose lifestyles will become more common through evolving globalisation (Donohue, 2022; Hartman, 2022; Moore & Barker, 2012), and the TCK identity emerges on a contemporary landscape as pioneering emergent troubles and possibilities of the 21st century. The power to narrate TCKs as globalising bodies of difference is a practice of contemporary power relations that emerges among epistemic politics of sociocultural imperialism intertwined with capitalist interests. Hill Useem (1999) wondered, from the 1950s, if TCKs could be “an untapped national resource” (para. 10), setting the stage for an emergent paradigm where TCKs (and other globalising subjects) become objects of curiosity with potentials embedded in the overarching interests of their dominant national cultures. These histories and contexts matter, as white Western nationalism permeates the ideological production of TCKs as a cultural category with our already-otherness maintained through the perpetuation of the dominant cultural paradigms we become “other” to.

TCK literature not only offers descriptive accounts of difference, it functions as a norm-producing body of knowledge that charts and categorises a cultural group through the production and reproduction of specific representations and essentialisations. Pollock et al. (2017) are self-proclaimed “absolute authorities on third culture kids” (see back cover); their self-help-style book is often considered “encyclopaedic” (Tan et al., 2021, p. 85) and appears frequently as an expert source in both lay and academic spaces. Borrowing academic credence through the reproduction of psychological theories in their book, as well as promoting their own models of TCK identity, Pollock et al. (2017) inform the understandings and assumptions of fundamental experiences and characteristics of TCKs in much academic work (Akhund, 2022; McGregor et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2020). Other private social, well-being, and educational organisations also hold significant positions of representation of TCK life experiences, providing resources, services, and courses for and about TCKs, including sponsorship, publishing, or supporting academic research, offering networking platforms for researchers, as well as advertisements, scholarships, and advice to people and groups interested in TCKs, for example Families in Global Transition (<https://figt.org/>), TCK Training (<https://www.tcktraining.com/>).

com), and Third Culture Kids International (<https://tcki.org>). The power of these organisations and the authored knowledge to direct and organise public and academic vision of TCKs in a private capacity enables encompassing representations of TCKs to gain moral authority and governing legitimacy over the TCK subjectivities they produce. Cranston (2017) argues that, managing academic, organisational, and personal spaces, TCK knowledge is industrially produced, with powers reifying identity through a “norm of experience” (p. 30). Recollecting and reproducing stories of our entanglements with questions like “where are you from?” through identity and belonging paradigms, emotional and social experiences of liminality are harnessed by normalising projects into accounts of difference that assign sameness within categories of difference. Academic research about TCKs should therefore be understood in the context of the wider TCK industry: an industry that is not accountable to scholarly works and the implications for the lives they narrate, but still conditions and interprets knowledge of culture, migration, multiplicity, and the markets of globalisation.

The textual construction and normalisation of TCKs centres on defining, measuring, and problematising the development of TCK personal and social identity in contrast with hegemonic politics of nationalism and Western cultural universalism. We engage with the social discipline and epistemic power of prototype production by understanding identity as indexed and immobile codes of humanness crystallised around mythological objectivity that gathers up and constrains collective, fluid, and affective narrative flows of situated life through dominant visions and voices (Braidotti, 2006). Life stories of children living the ways they know and understand are textually reformed into models that know and understand in limited ways. For example, TCK developmental difference from national peers is pathologised as “delayed adolescence” (Hill Useem & Baker Cottrell, 1996, p. 23) characterised by choosing mobile or interesting lives over financial stability (despite good education); social eccentricities; failure to marry, buy a house, or “settle” in a job; or rejecting their parents’ lifestyle or beliefs (Pollock et al., 2017). The neoliberal, middle-class USA norms underpinning this deficit framing of apparent TCK life-course differences remains largely unscrutinised as the idea has been picked up, replicated, and supported in scholarly works and community spaces as an explanation for social and interpersonal friction (Fanoë & Marsico, 2017; Ketzeff, 2020; Rodrigues, 2020; Tan et al., 2021). Through Western developmental theory that understands identity as personal, singular, and nationalistic, TCKs are seen to have a crucial identity crisis that is “abnormal and challenging” (Miller et al., 2020, p. 417), and can lead to a “lack of a well-developed sense of identity” (Donohue, 2022, p. 48) if cultural commitment is not made in line with standardised expectations (Davis et al., 2015; Fail et al., 2004; Ragoonwala, 2019; Ressler, 2015). These perceived developmental identity deficits are attributed to lifestyle conditions of TCKs—childhood pressures to be well-behaved, lack of safety, and frequent moves and disruption (de Waal & Born, 2021; Donohue, 2022; Hill Useem & Baker Cottrell, 1996; Miller et al., 2020; Pollock et al., 2017)—however, responsibility for attributed identity problems remains individualised for a TCK to “come to terms” with (Kwon, 2019, p. 113). The nationalistic ideologies informing these interpretations of TCK difference reinforce the assumptions that make questions of accounting for ourselves socially via accounts of ourselves in places so difficult to answer for those of us who grow up highly mobile. For example, Pollock et al.’s (2017) claim that

TCKs have an “ignorance of home culture” (p. 148), where the home culture is defined as that of “their own” country, reflects an implicit rejection of genuine multiculturalism in developmental frameworks. These narrations of identity fail to imagine that a country or culture a TCK is in ignorance of may indeed not be their own home at all, even if they hold legal citizenship, upholding monocultural standards in measures of TCK identity development.

Universal assumptions denying the “interpretive core of all knowledge” restrain diverse expressions of knowledge by accounting for difference as otherness, through terms of the dominant cultural thought that hold the power to identify and reify difference, dislodging memories of lived experiences of marginalisation (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Homogenising accounts in which TCKs are located among the rigid classifications of sessile monocultural developmental norms obscure historical and structural politics of exclusion and networks of sociocultural power, so that the dominant TCK figure becomes primarily identifiable through ill-fit with hegemonic Western psychological norms. In this paradox of disidentification, I remember myself through the monocultural and sessile disciplinary gaze that a TCK friend described as being looked at like a horse with a broken leg who did not yet know it. This “looking at,” as sociocultural scrutiny, inscribes pathology on our bodies as figures violating normalcy. Whether we know about our brokenness (or believe in our abnormality) or not, the paradox points to a terminal conclusion—either of our style of accounting for ourselves, or of our social relationships as connections are distanced and severed through pathologising forms of recognition. The embodied experiences of knowing myself as unrecognisable through repeated encounters with my own abnormality become swept up in the flow of binary coding of sameness and difference, where questions of accountability, and the politics of citizenship they carry, are themselves unquestionable. The gaze that ascribes unrecognisability is at the same time recognising otherness and pathology through the universal application of a single language (Euro/American national development and lifestyle), “enforced as the standard for all translations and conversions” (Haraway, 1988, p. 580): It translates and converts the TCK subject as abnormal, incomplete, disordered, and out of place.

Working value-laden codes into daily life, authoritative claims with the power to represent without being subject to representation themselves perform a “god trick” in knowledge production (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). This is demonstrated by the moral directives present in the predominant binary of benefits and challenges replicated across many TCK texts (Tan et al., 2021), where TCKs must “maximize the great gifts” and “deal productively with the challenges” of multiculturalism (Pollock et al., 2017, pp. 139–140). The TCK becomes figured and knowable through neoliberal assumptions and disciplines, and, in this authoritative style of the god’s eye view, the codes of knowing are naturalised and essentialised—thus made invisible—through exhaustive and politically disembodied a priori representations. In the social disruption caused by our unrecognisable responses to “where are you from?” and the following recoding of our bodies into states of ab/normality, the TCK industry’s disciplinary loyalty to dominant cultural standards is an ontological and epistemological replication of structural violence. Figuring the TCK identity as a crisis of difference to be discovered and resolved through self-improvement (Cranston, 2017), the industry itself is maintained by our perpetual cultural marginalisation and incoherency as we account for our lives. The benefits and

challenges paradigm extends as key arms of TCK literature and services that deal with abnormality through pain management and resource optimisation, presented as near-symmetrical, but disconnected, life-course issues for the TCK viewed from a universalising stance. Categories of TCK experiences as cultural resource and pain coconstruct a framework that manages and narrates the TCK figure, not only dominating literature with the imagined prototype but informing and disciplining the lives of people who have unusual or unsettling stories of the world.

Pain management

The power of TCK literature to organise accounts of our otherness hinges on the acknowledgement of pain through association with TCK identity. In the scramble, uncertainty, and resistance I experience as I try to account for myself, and in the isolating incoherency of becoming increasingly abnormal as I tell my stories, the TCK identity offers a refuge and community that affirms my experience as the legitimised pain of being different. Indeed, empirical and biographical accounts alike consistently report the significant pain of TCKs: grief, mental illness, social distress, even suicide are the markers of pain associated with unusual mobility and multiculturalism that repeatedly appear in TCK texts (Tan et al., 2021). Further tracing my encounter with the enquiring man, the process of encoding our difference (“where are you from?”) progresses towards diagnostic concerns of internal psychological conditions: Do we believe we are normal? Do we notice our differences, and, in the “moral and cognitive universalism” of hierarchical sameness (Braidotti, 2008, p. 14), do we therefore suffer?

I wonder how the Western knowledge-making god trick enables and constrains the meanings and potentials of our difference, as, through Erikson’s psychosocial development stage model, TCK lifestyle abnormality is perceived to “suspend” appropriate identity development (Miller et al., 2020, p. 418), causing high rates of depression and distress across our lifetimes (Baker Cottrell & Hill Useem, 1999; Davis et al., 2013; Habeeb & Hamid, 2021; Thomas et al., 2021). Recentralising dominant cultural norms, TCK abnormality and deficit is essentialised and individually problematised in figures of troubled bodies that divert attention from social power relations: Dewaele and van Oudenhoven (2009) report that “the fact that these children do not fit in automatically makes them feel less emotionally stable” (pp. 455–456). Other causes of poor mental health are attributed to grief, stress, and interpersonal difficulties, which are similarly seen as “integral” to TCK experiences (Trethewy et al., 2022, p. 291). Grief, particularly, emerges as a natural part of TCK lifestyles of mobility and subsequent losses of things, people, and places, which is often seen as “unresolved” (Davis et al., 2015, p. 171) and associated with feelings of rootlessness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other mental illness diagnoses (Gilbert, 2008; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2011; Habeeb & Hamid, 2021; Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Miller et al., 2020; Stone, 2021; Tan et al., 2021). This body of research paints a picture of TCK pain as inevitable and indelible, our othered experiences emerging in clear pathologising formations. In the absence of myself through other representations of culture and humanness, TCK identity becomes the coherent formation through which my grief and distress may be spoken, inscribing my body with difference as it narrates my experiences of pain.

Depicting disrupted identity formation and negative social experiences of rejection as an identity crisis of the proverbial ugly duckling, Pollock et al. (2017) issue an imperative for TCK reidentification. Their emphasis on seeking “accurate reflection of likeness and uniqueness” (pp. 134–135) as personal processes by which TCKs will come to terms with their troublesome differences reifies specific pathways for reidentification through dominant paradigms of sameness and difference, minimising the social conditions and hierarchies that exclude and marginalise on the basis of difference. The ugly duckling is made responsible for doing the internal work of seeing (according to accepted cultural frameworks) who they “really” are, in order to “affirm their place in the human experience” lest they become “terminally unique” (Pollock et al., 2017, pp. 111, 135). With epistemological adherence to the normative comparisons by which ugly ducklings are produced and then identified as deviant and deficit, the TCK industry’s powers of representation reproduce the conditions of TCK pain. The moral tale of the ugly duckling sustains the dominance of duckling (cultural and national) norms, and therefore is also complicit in naming TCKs as ducklings, and then as ugly (pathological, terminally unique) ones. Meanwhile, the conditions of the pond life escape scrutiny. Captured in this discipline of identification, we become individually responsible to dominant norms, where our difference is assigned as internal pain, and well-meaning concerns prioritise acclimation to that which is intolerant of us.

Understanding anew the enquiring man’s rejection of my taking up of an abnormal status, and his counselling towards my own internal reidentification, I hear the demand as embedded in the neoliberal disciplines of Western moral systems of citizenship. Moral disciplines can act to reinforce the power of the dominant gaze to assign meaning to struggle, to dissect and prescribe bodies of pain and dictate beneficent responses without ever becoming responsible to struggles, with the “conquering gaze from nowhere” of the god trick (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). The god trick of the ugly duckling paradigm dominates the TCK industry response to pain, as a self-help management of discomfort framed through neoliberal responsibilities. Shifting attention from conditions in which TCK experiences are othered and subject to exclusion methodologically isolates the hurting TCK from hurtful systems and narrows the burden of responsibility—the community conditions of the ugly duckling are de-centred from the story, thereby becoming unresponse-able to its progression. Assigning TCKs responsibility to complete grieving “tasks” in order to “successfully” resolve difficulties and experience belonging, TCK literature models TCK pain in essentialised phases of crisis and chaos that gather meaning through task completion and negotiation of moral demands (Trethewey et al., 2022, p. 295). The industry itself takes up a position of moral guardianship to emphasise and support internal processes of adaptation and self-improvement, including recommendations of psych-education, mindfulness, self-efficacy training, support groups, and reentry programmes (Davis et al., 2013; Ittel & Sisler, 2012; Purnell & Hoban, 2014; Tan et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021). Through these structures, TCKs’ personal well-being responsibilities include duties of obedience to social norms: Pollock et al. (2017) recommend that TCKs experiencing difficulty adapting and finding acceptance in their country of nationality should censor their own stories for palatability. “When your story has a ‘wow’ factor, understate it” (p. 309), they urge, so that TCKs might not confuse or alienate the dominant cultural population of their passport country after they return from overseas.

Western neoliberal structures of moral responsibility prioritise systems of universal thinking in the pursuit of norms and objectivity (Braidotti, 2006), industrially managed by the TCK industry's self-preserving principles of reidentification.

Bringing into view the power relations that form the conditions of living in different bodies requires attending to relational practices that enable different responses and response-able actors (Haraway, 1988, 2008). Paradigms of pain, which remain grounded in nationalistic and monocultural values and norms, only enable certain kinds of responses, limiting scope for systematic critique and structural change that may become possible through alternative perspectives that address local and global conditions in which TCKs are hurting. When TCKs are seen to resist the prescribed adaptation and self-improvement work, intensified pathologisation serves to discipline through reinforcement of moral rules of behaviour and to overwrite voices of disruption. Pollock et al. (2017) describe four responses to identity challenges, dividing TCKs into Chameleons, Wallflowers, Adapters, and Screamers. While Adapters find comfortable middle grounds, Chameleons mimic their changing environment, Wallflowers withdraw to nonidentity, and Screamers form a problematic "different from" identity. The Screamer response, particularly, is attributed to personal pain, described as a result of unresolved grief and delayed adolescent rebellion, antisocial behaviour intent on letting people know that "they are not like them and don't plan to be" (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 75). This pejorative label of TCKs who openly resist the cure of reidentification and draw too much attention to their pain (rather than complete the suggested healing and improvement tasks) has spread to other areas of the TCK industry, repeated in a number of websites, blogs, and even a podcast and sermon (Andersson, n.d.; Barrett, 2013; Hubbard, 2022; Kay, 2015; Lilly, 2009; Roughol, 2021). One website extends overt condemnation of so-called Screamers, calling them "aggressive" and "unco-operative" (Pilgrims for Jesus, 2010, paras. 26–30). Screamers, then, in their resistance to co-operating with identity rules, are ugly ducklings who draw attention to the sides of their social pond and pose a risk to the believability of the dominant narrative and its underpinning structures of already-known ways to live, develop, and socialise. Paternalistic dismissal of resistant voices as pathological (disordered), and naturalising pain (inherent to difference) individually within TCKs, frees up social and institutional systems to continue their business, un-locate-able and un-response-able, in narratives of TCK trouble.

Presenting accounts and explanations of TCK pain through dominant cultural paradigms of psychological norms, the TCK industry constructs a mandate to intervene by offering support to TCKs at individual levels to build resilience, adapt to new environments, and overcome hardship. Disciplined into particular, normalised, and even essentialised social and emotional responses, TCKs are guided to take on responsibility to heal and improve themselves (Cranston, 2017). Enabled by the authority of the TCK industry to define the language and meanings of living as a TCK, supportive mechanisms emerge as parameters of intelligibility and subjectivity that continue to subjugate expressions and experiences of cultural and national difference. Produced as inherently vulnerable, the figure of the TCK is offered, in addition to the diagnosis for distress, a cure through further engagement with the industry: "after all," says Cranston (2017), "this is what keeps the industry going" (p. 32). The benefits and challenges paradigm in

TCK literature extends symbolic powers of identifying articulation and rearticulation as pain management to modes of capitalising on difference.

Resource production

With the diagnostic power to gather up TCKs through affective moments of guided self-discovery, the TCK industry holds the power to define, intervene with, and meet the needs of the vulnerable TCK subjectivities it produces through paternalistic modes to protect and enhance bodies as cultural commodities (Cranston, 2017). Colonising systems of Western cultural values and knowledge form classifications that homogenise TCK traits (and distinguish them as positive or negative) and accelerate management of TCKs through both suppressive (of disruptive difference) and extractive (of profitable difference) tactics. As TCK disruption is disciplined, our differences are redirected through human resource paradigms that offer an alternative account of our lives as profitable diversity, where the TCK industry pitches our transnationalism and multiculturalism as manageable and accessible (to be tapped) sources of cultural knowledge and skill in a globalising world.

TCK research is shifting from a dominant interest in TCK problems (especially mental health issues) towards enquiries of character, trait, and ability, so that “employers and schools can thus further develop and tap TCKs’ strengths” (Tan et al., 2021, p. 96). Research with TCKs most often engages adults rather than children, but some research has begun measuring TCK aptitude and desirable traits from childhood and adolescence, including cultural sensitivity and identity, academic excellence, multilingualism, and adaptivity, arguing that these measures will evolve into useful skills (or what McGregor et al., 2013 call “asset and influence,” p. 125) in a globalising world (Dewaele & van Oudenhoven, 2009; Morales, 2017; Tan et al., 2021). In addition to preparation to join an international workforce, as children, TCKs have been identified as important commodities in their own expatriate parents’ job sustainability. Unhappy and poorly adjusted children (including those with poor schooling arrangements) have been identified as a significant motivation for expatriate family repatriation and a threat to foreign worker retention in corporate circles (Hill Useem & Baker Cottrell, 1996; Lazarova et al., 2010; Sterle et al., 2018; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010; van der Laken et al., 2019). This dual perspective of TCKs as bringing both possibility and risk to employers fits with Pollock et al.’s (2017, p. 139) “profile” of TCK benefits and challenges as distinct but interconnected pairs: an expanded worldview but confused loyalties, three-dimensional global perspective but painful awareness, cross-cultural enrichment but ignorance of home, and wealth of experience but emotional and psychological difficulty.

Often referring to Pollock et al.’s (2017) authoritative profile, the industry identifies profitable benefits and aims to mitigate against challenges, expanding knowledge about how TCKs can enter the global workforce to “add value to organisations” (de Waal et al., 2020, p. 177). Nash (2020) summarises the human resource view of TCKs as “the ideal partner to address the supply shortage in demand for international positions and to deftly navigate workplace diversity” (p. 320). Adult TCKs have been identified in corporate research circles as the “preferred type of expatriate” (Lauring et al., 2019, p. 394), “useful in international negotiation roles . . . [and to] host . . . important foreign visitors”

(Lam & Selmer, 2004, p. 119), “effective multicultural and multinational leader[s]” (Boush, 2009, p. 3), and “opportunities for human resource development” (Bonebright, 2010, p. 351). Interest in consuming TCK labour can be seen across a variety of platforms beyond academia, including LinkedIn articles (Sergent, 2019), human resource news sites (Smith, 2019), business insurance advisors (Lindeman, 2018), and women’s business media (Matthews, 2021). These texts all reference and naturalise traits and identity categories that are defined and promoted by the TCK industry as a “silver lining” (Sergent, 2019, para. 8) to the “problems with their own identity” (Lindeman, 2018, para. 16). The (Christian) missions world introduces a further spiritual and religious element of interest in TCK (specifically MK) skills for work, to “help secure all of them [MKs] for significant Kingdom business” (Sharp, 2006, p. 148), exploiting MK familiarity with mission organisations, exposure to spiritual powers, and values of service and material simplicity. Interest in MKs as religious resources, which begins when the MKs are still children,² follows their developing abilities to become independent missionaries as adults (Bikos et al., 2014; Huh, 2023; MK2MK, <https://www.mk2mk.org>; Pollock, 1997; Sharp, 2006; Ward, 1989). The faith of missionaries is in part demonstrated by their willingness to take their children overseas (Ward, 1989), which in turn may increase church and community offers of financial and social support, and act as a testament to depth of commitment to religious (expansionist) duty. Cameron (2006) calls for mission organisations to actively recruit adult MKs into missionary work, and to “intervene during their childhood years to thoroughly nurture and disciple them in ways that will develop missionaries of highest competence” (pp. 149–150) in the performance of their faith and work. The figure of the TCK as a competent and committed worker can be found even beyond the TCK-specific literature, where TCK difference is specifically highlighted as beneficial to employers, but comes with a warning of the “disadvantages” of identity problems (Tarique et al., 2022, p. 302). Omniscient and non-response-able positions of moral authority are normalised through the god trick (Haraway, 1988), as dominant social bodies exert and maintain power, marking “others” as “disposable commodities” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 44). Tensions of sameness and difference are distributed through the silver lining. Our problems of accounting for ourselves are articulated through parameters of acceptability, narrated through hollow capitalist forms where human value is measured by ideological alignment with and profitability for powerful structures we are recruited into. Transforming my abnormality into service for the dominant cultural structures of contemporary globalisation, the list of places that do not sufficiently answer where I am from is reidentified as a documentation of aptitude.

Other literature focuses more directly on extracting from TCKs, exploring TCK consumer socialisation and susceptibility (Saputri & Wandebori, 2014; Sit & Chan, 2005). One comparison of TCK and non-TCK consumer susceptibility concluded that TCKs are more thoughtful and investigative consumers than non-TCK nationals (Indonesians), and more influenced by parents than peers, suggesting that businesses interested in tapping the TCK market should adjust advertising accordingly and particularly focus on influencing the parents of TCKs (Saputri & Wandebori, 2014). Further, Saputri and Wandebori (2014) encourage marketers to use an “emotional hook” to “take advantage” (p. 619) of TCK desire to be part of something bigger, citing Pollock and Van Reken’s (2001) characterisation of TCK “rootlessness” as a consumer vulnerability that can be

exploited. Sit and Chan (2005) likewise note TCK “longing for connection” (p. 62) as relevant to consumption habits. The individualising and self-help approaches of the TCK industry to TCK pain also enable the opportunity for extraction of TCK time and money as TCKs seek help from professionals. Counsellors who specialise in TCK issues, self-help workshops (including a workshop to help TCKs talk to parents about childhood trauma), and of course many books and camps have emerged as sources of help and relief for TCK pain, but also as work opportunities (Alliance Counselling, n.d.; TCK Counselling Network, 2023; TCK Training, 2023). That is not to say that work to create resources and support for TCK mental health and social well-being is exploitative or unhelpful, but rather to point out how the TCK industry is engaged in cyclical patterns where the naturalisation and pathologisation of TCK difference as pain is interwoven in the ecosystem of the industry. Dominant and accessible accounts of TCK life depend on the maintenance of nationalistic frameworks; We are offered a story of being an “ugly duckling,” and a counterstory suggesting hope for reidentification as a swan. Through a human resources paradigm, however, the TCK becomes more of a golden goose.

The foundational identifications of TCKs through concepts of difference and internal psychological deficit, along with Hill Useem’s (1999) recognition of potential national benefit, extend into various fields of knowledge and practice that aim to arrange and exploit TCK difference as a cultural resource. Pollock et al.’s (2017) god trick of determining the parameters for measuring and distinguishing TCK benefits and challenges has laid out values and expectations taken up by researchers and organisations who seek to improve and profit from the TCK figure they produce. Exploiting identified TCK vulnerabilities and desires and intervening from childhood to encourage TCKs into certain work, an extractive relationship upholds the TCK industry through labelling difference, producing knowledge, nurturing resources, and managing TCK capital. Neoliberal lenses that code lives into profit (workers, skills, consumers) or cost (risk, disadvantage, attrition) produce care of TCKs as a task of sustaining global business, while the experienced pain of TCKs is suppressed and silenced through distracted individualisation that labels and commodifies painful experiences. Through reflexive ethical relations with these disciplining narratives, however, and considering how they are embedded in wider global processes, we can reconstitute dominant TCK knowledge systems as possibilities to engage with contemporary colonial codes of neoliberal Western nationalism and, subsequently, as possibilities to encounter ruptures in the codes that flow into creative differences. Reconsidering the individualistic approaches that contribute to the exploitation of TCKs and protect and maintain structures of epistemological violence, we open up painful stories as new sites for exchange that bring conditions of otherness into recognition through processes of working storytelling movements into new terms.

New possibilities

Transformative relations emerge from being able to recognise ourselves and each other in new ways, and the potentials of affirmative relations mobilise recognisable accounts in different spaces. The recognition of difference as a “negatively framed fraction of the same” embedded in our systems of humanness (Braidotti, 2008, p. 13) offers stories of TCK difference as marginalisation, pain, or capital among nationalist standards. This

process of recognition through opposition with dominant norms grants the TCK industry narrative power because it is embedded in the lived experiences of hearing our accounts of ourselves as unintelligible or intolerable to authority figures. It is our experiences of social rejection and incredulity, and our familiarity with nationalist paradigms that TCK literature reproduces, that make the ugly duckling a relatable figure. As we understand the particular stories and knowledges of TCKs produced through the dominant perceptions and systems of a large portion of TCK literature as politically situated and culture-bound, the coding of our difference is unravelled into threads of material conditions and power relations. The unravelling movements affirm that “it matters what stories tell stories, what knowledges know knowledges” (Haraway, 2019, p. 570), opening up disruption in mainstream nationalist identity and development paradigms as indications of the presence of different stories and knowledges. Disarticulating the captivating imperatives of the god trick and rearticulating the dominant literature as value-based and embedded in global conditions and histories, watertight models are ruptured by embodied flows of knowing and experiencing other than the normalising modes of living they uphold. Paying attention to the systems that tell particular stories and disturbing their naturalised assumptions is a task of ethical relations, reenvisioning subjects through transformative social engagement where we discover the possibilities for different systems of knowing that could tell different stories (Braidotti, 2008).

Emerging considerations of the sociopolitical contexts of TCK experiences begin to unsettle the “methodological nationalism” (Cranston, 2017, p. 32) of the TCK industry and its regimes of recognisability. Memory-bound and partial, situated knowledge requires constant movement (Haraway, 1988): the undoing of codes of neoliberal nationalism that enable certain recognitions of TCKs is a dynamic network of enquiring and imagining transnationalism in new ways. Through life-story interviewing, Moore and Barker (2012) encountered stories that challenge the cultural identity confusion attributed to TCK development differences, while Donohue (2022) points out the limitations of applying Western developmental theory and normative assumptions to TCKs to suggest that “TCKs are not culturally confused themselves, only culturally confusing for others” (p. 53). Such research reveals potential for producing affirmative alternatives when dominant pathologising norms, familiar and recognisable though they are, are disrupted to make way for other interpretations of TCK experiences. That repatriation is identified as a major trigger of distress, and that suicide rates within the TCK community peak in the year following repatriation (McKeering et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2017), calls our attention to the social conditions in which TCKs are feeling pain, particularly the violence of nationalism and the restraints of national identity that inform our conditions of being heard. Research that engages with TCKs who resist systems and norms must ethically attend to the conditions in which TCKs are screaming out. Approaching the disciplining label of the “Screamer” itself with scrutiny and turning our gaze back on the powerful institutions that hold the power to designate meaning to the TCK voice enables recognition of excluded accounts through relational practices of listening to hear differently. The critical potentials of situated knowledge open ethical methodologies that are disloyal to dominant norms and cultural assumptions, remembering how the ugly duckling knows the reeds, ripples, and texture of the mud at the edges of the pond, not only that it has been sent there in exile.

Community responses that engage with the political conditions of TCKs' confusing differences and social resistance as material conditions of TCK pain also offer alternative responses to the primary approaches of individualising self-help and pathologising systems. Telling stories that highlight the silencing of TCK voices and struggles of navigating nationalistic ignorance, including structural maintenance of child abuse in international organisations, accounts of TCK difference and pain become contextualised through empowering activist paradigms that highlight hurtful social systems and hierarchies (Anonymous, 2015; Haviland, 2020; Missionary Kid Safety Net, <https://mksafetynet.org>; Pugliese, 2021; Rabb, 2020; Suttee, 2023). This has resulted in legal action (Belz, 2023; Missionary Kid Safety Net, <https://mksafetynet.org>) and social movements (such as the use of #missionstoo or #mktoo to highlight the abuse of missionary families) that challenge the naturalisation of TCK hardship and offer possibilities for structural change that lifts the burden of resilience of "others" to a collective level of responsibility. I recognise, here, the paradigms of the ugly duckling, Screemers, and identity deficit being told in new ways: the stories of memories of hurt enable the telling of stories of hurting conditions that are neutralised and rendered invisible through the normalising god trick. Alternative recognitions of TCK difference and pain unravel their relationship and enable different responses as we hear TCK accounts as the embodied experience of political conditions and relationships. The pattern of relationship between the deconstruction of normative nationalistic hierarchies and the disruption of pathologising discourse in TCK literature highlights the potentials of looking beyond the god's eye view: a different account of life among systems where the systems themselves become accountable to the life among them.

Narrative-based and reflexive approaches offer new possibilities for hearing TCK voices as transformative accounts of global conditions. Creative research with TCKs develops imaginations of the self among multiples of places and cultures, including writing-over exercises of empowered renarration (Long, 2020), embracing the liminal and authenticating the out-of-place in the curation of a transnational garden (Fehr, 2015), and transcending categorisation in TCK song analysis of a "cyber-global trip" (Sanfilippo-Schulz, 2018, p. 19). In these texts, I recognise myself differently: rather than a familiar social mirror to my cultural distortions, I feel affective harmonies with the complex and dynamic negotiation of multiplicity and unexpected accounts the authors remember. For example, the dominant representations of TCK literature enable recognition of the question "do you believe you are normal?" as produced by my developmental failure of accounting sufficiently for myself both internally and externally; Fehr's (2015) exploration of inauthenticity, and the "sigh of relief and an emotional gasp of longing" (p. 170) of knowing unnameable in-betweenness, breathes (sighing, gasping) life into the strains and possibilities of recounting our TCK life stories. With Fehr, I reimagine my response to the question beyond a binary (accepting an abnormal status / striving to become normal), wondering how to decode the building blocks of the cultural norms I was referred to and use them to recreate a contemplative space that makes in-betweenness habitable on its own terms. Other creative accounts of TCK life can be found beyond academia, as TCK artists express affective experiences of immigration, foreignness, and citizenship, winding memories through space, producing moving stories that bear witness to multiplicity, fracture, discomfort, and loss without pathologisation or distinction from

connection and joy (Gu, 2019; Khan, 2015; Yiu, 2010). Gu's four-frame comic, "Orientation," depicting the tension between their dual identities of foreignness and localness resolved by demolition into their own new pathway, reflects their own / our TCK desire to reform the rigid terms of questions of accountability. Imagining with Gu the potentials of their rupturing-beyond movements from identity categories, I recognise again the ugly duckling paradigm and the figure of TCK Screamer, this time through forces of desiring agency and transformative styles of resistance and disturbance that accommodate rather than discipline different cultural shapes. Creative rearticulations of TCK subjectivity through embodied memories split off dominant cultural pathways into imaginations of transcultural and transnational potentials, taking up paradoxical experiences of recognisability only through difference into desire for recognition based on curiosity and connection. Exceeding the constraints of the singular story, creative accounts give rise to aspirations for knowing TCK life on new terms, terms of curiosity and fluidity that are additive rather than categorical, affirmative rather than normative.

Attending to the power relations and interconnected conditions of globalising neoliberalism as colonial and capitalist through narration of TCKs calls accountability to academics to question the moral rules by which we respond to cultural others and relate to emerging forms of global citizenship. Asking questions back to cultural centres, and listening for the reverberations and reflections, we can unmask the god-like vision from nowhere and locate assumptions and norms as ideological, giving a clearer view, too, of the alternative ideological situations from which to understand TCK differences affirmatively. The TCK industry offers, to formatively multicultural people, thorough explanations and frameworks for knowing how we are different and describing the paradox of identification we live in our daily encounters. We cannot extricate ourselves from the paradox that is identification through difference by working within the binaries of its constructive gaze, and so, in the moments we rupture and unsettle these social protocols, we also have the opportunity to slip through and make something new of the interstitial. Ethical relations with stories of difference release bodies from the constraints of capitalist extraction and nationalist norms and listen for the unfamiliar as mandates to imagine differently, to become equipped with aspirations of accounting for TCK living beyond states we are already other to. Moving with the troubles of TCK accounts towards undoing the reification of "where are you from?" as an identifying question, there emerge opportunities to know global subjectivities with new knowledges. The everyday questions and our lifelong struggles with them, then, are where to begin the transformative work of creating new accounts of becoming knowledgeable of the world, of ourselves, and of the conditions in which we are heard.

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Notes

1. Biographical memories in this article are the voice of the first author.
2. Although public and private accounts of missionaries' children acting as missionaries themselves are circulated, we have chosen not to contribute to the exposure of children's lives and relationships by referencing any specific media.

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