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"Third Culture Kids": Detachment, Adolescence, and Yann Martel's *Self*."
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ABSTRACT

This article builds on Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock's definition of Third Culture Kids and on studies of adolescence in Developmental Psychology in order to analyse Yann Martel's third culture novel *Self*. Interdisciplinarity is an innovation in this piece, but the key insight presented in the article is the need to consider Third Culture Kid detachment in 3D. Often, Third Culture Kid is depicted in a Venn diagram, overlapping first and second cultures, as though all were terrestrial. However, I argue that Third Culture actually floats some distance above, cloudlike and unrooted in any nation. This is a new insight within Third Culture Kid studies; it is also the crucial element that distinguishes third culture from other types of international dislocation (diaspora, transnational, borderland, liminal) and their subtending preoccupation with (terrestrial) nation.

"Third Culture Kid" is a term used to describe individuals who, because of frequent international relocation during their developmental years, have a stronger connection to other unrooted individuals like themselves than to a geographic nationality. The term originates outside of academia and is most frequently approached through David C. Pollock, Ruth E. Van Reken and Michael V. Pollock's *Third Culture Kids* (2017, though the first edition of this influential text was published in 1999). "Third Culture Kid" has in recent decades been used increasingly prominently in such academic fields as Education, Geography, Psychology and Sociology. This interdisciplinary article uses studies of "Third Culture Kid" (abbreviated to TCK below) in tandem with literary analysis of Canadian/TCK Yann Martel's first novel. *Self* (1996) is a satirical (and thus critical) embellishment of, and reflection on, Martel's own life story. In it, TCK mobility and detachment are redolent of the privilege afforded the narrator by their parents' border-crossing diplomatic careers. I argue that Martel's work exemplifies both the international freedoms of TCKs and the way in which TCKs can become stuck in an adolescent phase of identity-formation.

In this work, I define TCK. Then, I compare it to literary-theoretical terms like “interstitial” and “transnational” to make a bridge to literary analytical approaches. Next, I consider adolescence as a developmental stage in order to argue that TCK experience prolongs this process, perhaps indefinitely. Finally, I conclude by considering Martel’s *Self* (1996). Literary analysis allows me to reconsider Martel’s novel and fruitfully intervene in scholarship addressing the vexed internationalism expressed in it. My work also furthers the scholarship on TCKs, especially as I engage with the idea that rootlessness itself can be a kind of privilege, and with the possibility that internationally disrupted adolescence renders ideological and national commitments permanently unstable.

Analysing Martel’s work in light of constructions of TCK is an important reframing of this author’s position as neither simply Canadian nor international in a way that might be included by terms like “postcolonial” or “migrant.” Jessica Sanfilippo Schulz describes the turmoil around categorising authors like Martel. She compares the “bio blurbs” used in the different nations in which his work is published and describes the outcome as “baffling” (2016, 12). She tells us that in different editions, “readers are informed that ‘Yann Martel was born in Spain but currently lives in Montreal’” and that Martel “is Canadian, but as the son of diplomats was born in Spain, and his childhood was spent in countries such as France, Mexico or Alaska” (2016, 12). Meanwhile, in the Italian edition of Martel’s novel,

The publisher stresses that the author has sojourned almost everywhere and lists “Alaska, Columbia Britannica, Costa Rica, Francia, Ontario, Messico e India.” Iran and Turkey are omitted (these countries are mentioned in the Arabic, German and Spanish editions) and instead of mentioning Canada, like all other editions do, this Italian version, startlingly, pins down the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario (Schulz 2016, 12).

Neither British Columbia nor Ontario is very close to Martel’s current home province (Saskatchewan), but that is beside the point. Apparently, without the geographic capaciousness of a term like “Third Culture Kid”, it is difficult for publishers to situate Martel and his work. Indeed, situating his own peripatetic upbringing is the central task of Martel’s novel, a bildungsroman in the irreverent style of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which follows the narrator through multiple countries, from his early childhood to his young adulthood, and chronicles a series of familial and then monogamous intimate relationships that, rather than connecting the narrator to a place and its people, serve to emphasise how disconnected the narrator is from any community around him.

Martel begins *Self* (1996) with a bilingual dedication:

à l’une survivante

to one who survived

à l’autre, disparue

to another who didn’t

Appropriately for a satirical and narcissistic fictional autobiography (titled *Self*, in case anyone missed the joke), the dedication is actually to the protagonist themselves. The French is gendered feminine: *une, survivante, disparue*. This is because there is a transexual shift in the novel's mid-section: for a few years of their life, the narrator is female. I do mean a shift in sex. The narrator physically metamorphoses: his male sexual organs wither, and female organs develop (1996, 105-7). After a traumatic rape, the female narrator then undergoes the process in reverse (1996, 313-15). The shift in sex is one among a range of identity shifts marked by changing geographic location, language (English, French, and Spanish are spoken by the narrator, though the novel also includes Czech, German and Hungarian), and even by shifting academic major when the narrator is of college age. The epigraph observes the disappearance of the female self, but this young woman is equally a cipher for many selves that have disappeared during the narrator's life.

The protagonist is a "child of diplomats" (1996, 8). They add: "so I carried my roots in a suitcase" (Martel 1996, 251). The protagonist observes

I changed schools, languages, countries and continents a number of times during my childhood. At each change I had the opportunity to recreate myself, to present a new façade, to bury past errors and misrepresentations . . . When I started to lose my baby teeth and was told that larger, more durable teeth would grow in their stead, I took this as my first tangible proof of human metamorphosis . . . I envisioned life as a series of metamorphic changes, one after another, to no end. (1996, 9)

Pairing the epigraph and its reference to transexual transformation with the protagonist's description of frequent relocation and metamorphosis reveals that the frequently relocated child has, not onion layers of self, one national cultural façade atop another, not Russian-doll selves, one inside the other, but rather a self expressed in the present, and a series of absent, displaced selves. Instead of an accretion of experiences leading to successful identity-formation, the frequently relocated child partially forms identities that never reach completion; that child also experiences these nascent selves as entirely separate from one another. In other words, there is a succession of partially formed identities that do not add up to a single coherent whole.

Martel's titular "self" is thus a problem: because of repeated national transitions, it is actually a succession of separate selves, each connected with a specific place. Each transition results in a "dissolution" of the previous self (Martel 1996, 108) and allows for a fresh start, which is the birthing of a new version of the self. In a state of repeated dislocation, "Change becomes a habit and habits are hard to change" (Martel 1996, 111). The "self" is always establishing itself, adolescent. It never arrives at a secure or established identity, national or otherwise.

Third Culture Defined

Sophie Cranston concisely describes a TCK as “someone brought up internationally” (2016, 30). Implied in Cranston’s summation is the TCK having a place of origin, but not living there during their developmental years. Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock’s *Third Culture Kids* (2017) remains the cornerstone text for those working with the term “TCK.” In the first two editions of this work, they define TCK as

a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCKs life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of a similar background. (Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock 2017, 15-16)

In their most recent edition, they strive for a more inclusive definition, describing the TCK as “a person who spends a significant part of his or her first eighteen years of life accompanying parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one parent’s passport countr(ies) due to a parent’s choice of work or advanced training” (2017, 27). The definition from the earlier editions offers the sharpest *analytical* tools, establishing timeframe (developmental years), dislocated context (outside parents’ culture/s) and two key effects (first: relationship to all cultures lived in, but ownership in none; and second: a sense of belonging with other TCKs). Both definitions are very similar in spirit, but for the exigencies of academic context, the narrower clarity of the earlier definition is the one that informs my understanding of TCK in this essay.

The extent to which TCK is *not* hybridity is significant. It does not result in an amalgam of experiences, but rather an emphatic separation of the developing person from both their home culture and the host cultures in which they live (Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock 2017, 4). Also significant is the construction of an identity-model in which TCKs can recognise affinity with other TCKs. As Cranston puts it, though TCK “refers to an international culture that is placeless” (2016, 27), the construction “produces a narrative through which people who have had a globally mobile childhood ‘discover’ their TCK self and, in doing so, find a comfort in belonging” (2016, 28). Similarly, Dana Tanu suggests that the notion of TCK provides “mutual intelligibility” amongst TCKs (2018, 9). Despite the different places in which people might have lived, the *experience* of relocation and displacement is common, part of what could be called TCK’s own culture. It is, as Tanu observes, “an emotionally powerful insider construct” (2018, 9).

“Insider” might be a fraught word choice, however, as the term TCK has grown out of reflections on a kind of displacement that initially involved a “privileged lifestyle” (Pollock, Van Reken,

Pollock, 2017, 21). The model implied missionary kids, military brats, children of businesspeople and individuals like Yann Martel, children of diplomats.

The version of TCK that implied privileges like whiteness and anglophone-ness is *less* true than it once was. “Times and international assignments have changed,” Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock observe (2017, 21). Recent academic work is applying the term TCK to a more geographically, culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and economically diverse demographic. Indeed, Tanu’s study (*Growing Up in Transit: The Politics of Belonging at an International School*) investigates “sociocultural inequalities within the third culture community,” revealing biases that might, for instance, result in a Korean-speaking TCK at an Indonesian international school having less cultural capital than an English speaking TCK (2018, 20, 51). Despite these important diversifications and the recognition of different ethnicities and classes within what TCK can mean, many “western” TCKs continue to enjoy the privilege of being raised (or having been raised) in an “expatriate” culture. Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock ask “whether or not this view that the TCK experience is one of high privilege still holds true in today’s world” (2017, 21). One answer is that the TCK experience is not *always* privileged. However, one does not have to read too many international school websites, or follow too many Facebook pages like *Two Fat Expats*, to see that at least sometimes it is still quite privileged relative to host cultures. In other words, to answer that question another way, *not always, but definitely sometimes*. Where applicable, TCK research ought to consider privilege, just as whiteness studies revealingly and fruitfully consider white privilege.

In the media, there have been critiques of expatriatism. “Why are white people expatriates while the rest of us are immigrants?” asks Mawuna Remarque Koutonin in an article in *The Guardian* (March, 2015). There are critiques of TCKs too. A maelstrom of defensive comments and blog posts responded to Jason Wordie’s condemnation of Third Culture individuals in Hong Kong: “Among colonial Hong Kong society’s more pitiful by-products, the stereotypical adult ‘expat brat’ is probably the saddest,” states Wordie (2015). These children develop “an attitude of unthinking privilege” because they have “too much money” and too little parental oversight or corrective socialization in their community: “School friends vanish permanently all too often, and the emotional consequence of this constant disruption is a superficiality in human relationships; due to their experiences, they expect people will ultimately leave them, and so make little deep investment in others” (Wordie, 2015). Wordie strikes upon characteristics Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock acknowledge too: TCKs have a hard time with deep, long relationships because they are conditioned by repeatedly losing their entire social circle and community; TCKs can be detached from/ disinterested in/ irresponsible about the politics of their first and second passport homes. The blog “Criss/Cross Culture” rebuts Wordie by, surprisingly, reinforcing some of his arguments. “Our friends did leave and so did we,” the blogger writes, adding that this loss taught not callousness but rather quick intensity: “Ultimately, it has made many of us aware of just how little time we have with the people we love.” She adds, “Adult TCKs are

also — by dint of now being adults with hindsight — trying to correct the problems in their closed-off upbringing and reintegrate to local society” (*Criss/Cross Culture*, June, 2015). The blogger at Criss/Cross writes about TCKs in Hong Kong who choose, and are able, to stay on in Hong Kong after they reach the age of adulthood, a demographic that is the exception rather than the rule. It is far more common for TCKs to reach adulthood and for their temporary visas in their parents’ current country of work to expire. Thus, at eighteen years of age most TCKs repatriate, often going “home” for college to experience tremendous culture shock.

Focused on the difficulty of repatriation after any time abroad, and omitting the significance of childhood dislocation on adult perceptions of national belonging (essential components of TCK), is Naomi Hattaway’s alternative: the triangle. Hattaway develops the idea of the triangle in her viral blog post and now popular Facebook group “I am a triangle.” Her premise (explained more fully with diagrams on her blog) is:

One day, a Circle Citizen got on a plane and flew to Square Society. That Circle landed squarely (pun intended) in the middle of the Square Settlers and their Square Culture. **He or she slowly – and seemingly unconsciously – evolves into something completely different. The transformation to a Triangle Tenant begins.** (Hattaway’s emphases, Hattaway, 2013)

Hattaway’s triangle suggests incontrovertible change (“The Triangle remains forever a Triangle”) after a “slow” process of change in a foreign country (2013). Her image evokes the effect of significant acculturation experience(s) on the individual’s identity. While not using the term Third Culture Kid, the triangle is clearly articulating the same “thirdness” in its three-sided, three identity paradigm (circle, square, triangle), and its concern with the individual no longer fitting in (the triangle will not fit in a square or circle anymore).

The effort to express the specific dislocation experienced by TCKs (and, in Hattaway, triangles) as a *third* and separate thing, something that is not a hybridisation of two cultures, is distinctive. A *third* culture that is not only a blend of cultures one and two, makes TCK conceptually different from many other terms that express international dislocations and displacements.

“Third Culture Kid” (TCK) as a Cloud, in Relation to Terrestrial Literary Terminologies

The unrooted, even floating, TCK and the border-crossing transnational have different preoccupations. I imagine the Venn diagram in Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock that shows first, second and somewhat overlapping Third Culture (2017, 17), as most useful in three dimensions rather

than two. The Venn diagram has a circle each for “Home Culture: ‘First Culture’” and “Host Culture: ‘Second Culture’.” I imagine that these are on the ground: they are geographically emplaced. They have national boundaries. What if the third circle in the diagram, labelled “Interstitial or Third Culture: Shared commonalities of those living an internationally mobile lifestyle” (Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock, 2017, 17), floats above the first two, like a cloud? It could thus hover over both, or drift more to one side or to another. In my 3D re-imagining, this third circle does not have a fixed geographical place, nor does it have specific national borders. It shape-shifts and transforms but coheres, like cumulus clouds do. This floating cultural sphere, TCK, is not interested in redefining what nations are or what belonging to them might mean.

Dissimilarly, and perhaps counterintuitively, the transnational *is* invested in reconfiguring our understanding of “nation” and “national”. Nancy Greene writes that “transnationalism emphasizes the back-and forth-ness of interconnected ties” (2019, 47). Implied in “back- and forth-ness” is repeated border crossing. Similarly, Pier Paolo Frassinelli, Ronit Frankel and David Watson argue that “Transnationalism signals a movement towards the crossing and breaking open of national boundaries” (2011, 1) and Frassinelli and Watson characterise transnational literary studies as “cutting across the spatio-temporal coordinates of nation state” (2011, 191). With an emphasis on how they may be traversed, nations, boundaries and physical space remain central to transnationalism, and indeed to other theories of dislocation as I argue below.

In addition, Steven Vertovec notes that transnationalism frequently involves “a tendency towards claiming membership in more than one place,” or an ability to belong “both ‘here’ and ‘there’” (2001, 575). Contrastingly, TCK feels disconnected from both home culture and host cultures, “neither/nor” (Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock, 2017, 4). This disconnectedness is a source of grief, but the freedom to float above national border crossings, to move internationally with some liberty, is a feature of more privileged TCKs, those whose residency in host nations might be managed by an organization or whose financial status makes the cost of visa and passport applications feasible. These TCKs can be somewhat immune to the legal exigencies of terrestrial national landscapes and their borders.

Lilliana Meneses argues that committing to a single nationality “does not ring true for the Third Culture individual” as a process, but neither does it do so for people described as “transnationals” or “border people,” both of which groups are examples showing “that, in the same way that the concept of nation-state is no longer effective in today’s globalized world, our concept of identity is perhaps no longer appropriate . . . the idea that an achieved identity must necessarily have committed to **one** alternative seems unidimensional” (Meneses’ emphasis, 2006, clxxxi). Meneses notes that the literature on transnationalism “grew out of studies on immigrant and refugee communities and is currently being used to address migrant populations as well. In this literature, transnationals are those individuals whose lives and loyalties continue to be connected to or involved in both their

countries of origin and their new countries” (2006, xl). The transnational, to follow Meneses, is unlike the TCK who has no substantive connection to originary (first) home, or to new countries (second homes) but instead has a connection to the people and culture of the un-geographically located “third” culture of expatriatism. However, the transnational is concerned with the borders s/he crosses in a way which is not typical of TCKs.

The literatures on “border states” and cycles of repeating migration (as opposed to terminus immigration), particularly in reference to Hispanic populations and the United States (US), are, like transnationalism, preoccupied with location and geography. “What constitutes a border situation? How translatable and ‘portable’ is the border? What are the borders of words surrounding the border?” asks Ana Ma Manzanás (2007, 1). Crossing the border into the US conjures images of barbed wire, armed policemen and renegade smuggler-guides: the border in a real sense is a dangerous place. Abstracted, the border is about the internalisation, or to follow Louis Althusser, the interpellation of that patrolled zone of transition. It is about that place’s effect on a person’s self, and, thus, it too is different from TCK, which floats above the regulatory eye of the immigration police or Homeland Security.

Conceptually, the border Manzanás writes about is also unlike Homi Bhabha’s interstice, or liminal space between two other places, two territories. For Bhabha, those imply geography and movement from, for instance, place A to place B, but those also imply time. Place A is the past, perhaps, place B the future. Dwelling in between those places is also to dwell between those times. “Being in the ‘beyond,’ then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you” writes Bhabha, “But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also . . . to be a part of revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*” (2004, 10). For Bhabha, everything emanates from and is produced in the beyond. This place on the line inscribes the line itself, is the line, is the line between place of origin and new place of residence, is the present where it abuts the past and on its other side the future. Bhabha’s beyond is also between. Bhabha extrapolates from the implications of liminality, or marginality, for immigrant or diasporic identity.

Meneses reminds us that Robert Park introduced the idea of “the marginal man” in the 1920s: “many times a man of mixed blood but often an immigrant, ‘one who lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less a stranger’” (Park in Meneses 2006, xxxiii). There are two worlds, and the marginal man, stranger to both, lives between them. For both Bhabha and Park, there are two worlds and a line between them that forms the interstice, and provides a location for the “marginal” human.

Three-dimensionality makes clear how this liminality is different from TCK: in TCK, first and second cultures might share a border, but the third culture, the shared experience of TCKs, is not on that line between the two of them. Though Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock use “interstice” like Bhabha does, they are not quite right (2017, 16; Bhabha 2004, 13). Third Culture is superimposed

over first culture and second cultures (and there might be many second cultures, many different host nations); it floats above. It does not reside on a line. It is not a hybridity, nor a transitional condition, nor an interregnum. It is not even the connective tissue between past and future. It is a third space, like a cloud, passing over everyplace and anyplace, timeless, comprising individuals with similar experiences of being in transition, rootless, floating, airborne.

Globalisation investigates “enmeshed webs of intercultural relations, developing both within and without the nation-state” (Zamorano, Hansen, and Nordin 2013, x). It asks whether national boundaries are becoming, at least culturally, more porous, whether within nations cultural complexity is possible; it focuses on the webs at ground level. Bhabha’s vernacular cosmopolitanism “measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective”—it watches movements (of people as well as shifts in politics and ethics) on the globe’s ground level (2004, xvii). Ideas like *littérature monde* instead of postcolonial Francophonie replace a geographical hierarchy (colonial centre/ former colonies) with a geographical flow (Francophone literature united by language, despite borders), but remain rooted in how we deal with history’s embeddedness in geography and if we can shift our assumptions about nations and national difference. Wai-Chee Dimock suggests how we might describe American literature as more globalised: “Rather than being a discrete entity, it is a criss-crossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures” (2006, 3). Pathways and geographies, *on ground level*.

When privileged, TCKs have good back-up plans and exit strategies. To be a resident non-national with a visa and a passport for somewhere else is a “get out of jail free” card or, “get out of the nation” card. It is a freedom that lets TCKs be detached from politics, from local laws, from feeling trapped or being scared. Comedian Catherine Tate frequently portrays a character who is a smug high schooler. “Lauren Cooper” has a few buzz-phrases, one of which deflects critique but also exempts Lauren from having to obey rules. “I’m above it,” Lauren will say, when confronted about failing a French test, or when she has wronged someone, or when she has acted like an idiot. “I’m above it” is the consummate “you can’t touch me.” In the cloud-like culture above nations, some TCKs are “above it” (in terms of national identity development they also echo the adolescence of Tate’s character).

Adolescence

What is the effect of moving during one’s developmental years on identity formation? Is the self lost, overwhelmed by too many adaptations in the name of acculturation? Is the self unable to complete its adolescence because of too many instances of starting over, creating the self anew for a new context?

Hubert Hermans argues that “Self and culture are conceived in terms of a multiplicity of positions, among which dialogic positions can develop” (2001, 243). When individuals acculturate to multiple cultures, they create multiple identities (2001, 258). When multiple self-identities are in dialogue with multiple cultural positions, the complexity, the clamour of dialogue, becomes intense. Hermans muses about the effects of *too much* dialogic interaction: “does this flow and flux lead to an empty self, or a saturated self?” (2001, 255). *Empty* and *saturated* are fascinating notions: the self that is evacuated by too much interaction with the rest of the world; the self that is confusingly over-filled.

Donna Velliaris writes about “development in context”, and how the disruption of developmental structures affects TCKs in particular (2015, 41). She builds on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s four ecological systems: Micro- (family, school, church), Meso- (connections between microsystem elements), Exo- (social and economic setting) and Macro- (overarching cultural setting). She concludes that the TCK experience is “not necessarily detrimental,” but also indicates that the research she conducted may suggest that “the developmental ecology” of TCKs “can be inhibited” (2015, 54).

The influence of the school environment on the development of the child is enormous, but Martel’s descriptions of these contexts is, like his description of all his protagonist’s relationships, intense, but fleeting. Many of the schools in *Self* are international schools, with little interaction between host nation and school curriculum. Kindergarten in Costa Rica (“where most of my coevals were white”) features a friend named Noah who the protagonist “marries” (1996, 22, 25). However, this contract does not ensure permanence. Noah’s family is transferred: “Noah disappeared from my life as suddenly as he had appeared” (1996, 26). “My school in Paris was attended mostly by children of diplomats and foreign business executives,” remarks Martel’s narrator (1996, 46). After a sparse, and problematic, description of racist camaraderie at the school in the form of boys calling each other the N—word (1996, 46-47), the protagonist moves on, leaving Paris for Ottawa: “As I climbed the steps to the plane and turned . . . I didn’t know that it was not only Europe that was waving its hand good-bye to me, but my childhood. I was twelve years old” (1996, 50). Adolescence marks a time when “the idea of choice, real, personal choice, was introduced,” but also acne, body hair, sports and masturbation (1996, 50, 67). School becomes a refuge, “the sacred September to June school year” (1996, 55).

When his parents are sent to Cuba, the protagonist remains at a Canadian boarding school. For ten pages, he lists things he likes and dislikes about the school, ranging from the beauty of the grounds, to the unpleasantness of the pranks the boys play on each other (1996, 79-89), and then the protagonist’s parents die in a plane crash: “My parents’ sudden, foreign deaths struck me not as the tolling of a bell, but as another stage in my ever-expanding, metamorphic life” (1996, 93-94). Endowed with their life insurance payments, the narrator next goes to Ellis University (another school), and takes extensive journeys in the summer vacations.

To follow the narrator’s schooling is to follow something like a list of intense experiences (good and bad) that are above all fleeting aspects of a “metamorphic life.” We circle back to none of the

experiences, none of the school friends become significant at later stages of life, and even the death of his parents is primarily the catalyst for another metamorphosis. There are no characters, except for the narrator, that last for more than a small, vignette-portion, of the narrative. There are no places that are returned to.

In terms of schooling and identity formation, the impression Martel's fiction gives runs counter to what one might expect: school communities *ought* to influence the adolescent, but in this TCK case they ultimately do not do so in an enduring way. In *Self*, what matters most of all is the abruptness with which each school experience ends, and then is never reflected upon again. One could suggest that the intense school experiences remain unresolved as the narrator moves on (accumulating unresolved experiences at each transition).

Hermans and Velliaris both investigate the complex of influences that make the self. Both acknowledge that exposure to and acculturation within different cultures complicate the development of the self. Complications take time to resolve, which is perhaps why "prolonged adolescence" is a phenomenon already well acknowledged by TCK researchers.

"Ironically, while in many ways TCKs seem advanced for their years, there are also many ways in which they lag behind" observe Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock, who go on to cite a study of 700 adult TCKs conducted by Useem and Cottrell, which found that "it wasn't unusual for TCKs to go through a delayed adolescence, often between the ages of 22 and 24, and sometimes even later" (2017, 216). Fiction like Martel's shows us that for the TCK in particular, defining the self, looking for the self, being unsure of who the self is, feeling the self fragment across multiple places and perspectives and even losing the self altogether, are perpetual, irresolvable, problems.

Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock also write that TCKs are chameleons, the consummate performers in different cultures (though perhaps so good at adapting that they lose a firm sense of what their "own" culture might be) (2017, 154). Martel, uncannily, uses this same image. His narrator describes herself "not so much as a hybrid as a chameleon" (1996, 238). Chameleons change their skin colour, but Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock suggest that mutability beneath the surface is significantly destabilising: "TCKs may adopt so many personas as cultural chameleons that they themselves don't know who they really are" (2017, 155). A sense of innate self is lost with inner shifts, changes and transmogrifications as well as changing surface appearances. Adolescence might be the perfect analogy: it is a time when the body changes, inside and out. It becomes something new. In being what John Bancroft calls "a time of complex and often obscure interaction between biological and sociopsychological influences," adolescence is like being a TCK experiencing the "often obscure interaction" between one's racial or ethnic identity as well as "obscure interaction[s]" between the sociopsychological influences of first (passport), second (host) and third (expatriate) cultures (1990, 3). Adolescence comes with abrupt changes in how we see ourselves as *selves*, and how we understand who we are in the world beyond the family. It is a time of "confusion and uncertainty" for "the self-concept"

(Brown 1998, 99), even without major dislocations, geographic relocations and cultural or religious dislocations.

Self

Oana Sabo (2014) strives to read Martel's novel *Self* (1996) as transnational literature, arguing that the linguistic manoeuvres the text makes in incorporating not only English and French, but also Spanish, Czech, Turkish, and Hungarian, represent the "intertwining" of "several geographies" and "linguistic and gender-based mobility" (2014, 91-2). Sabo makes the point that "multilingual texts transnationalise national canons" (2014, 90). In other words, she reads *Self* (1994) as Canadian literature, transnationalised by its linguistic and geographic fluencies. However, the transnational does not quite accommodate Martel's work, as even Sabo intimates. "Martel actively blurs the locations from which he writes," Sabo notes, and the novel is "skeptical of the power of languages to create peace, community" (2014, 94, 97). Something is not quite right, not quite terrestrial, not quite rooted, hints Sabo, even as she makes her argument about the text's transnationalism. Things are blurred, and sceptical: I would argue they are distanced, cloud-like, and consummately TCK.

Smaro Kamboureli similarly suggests that Martel's novel does not quite fit the terms available when she discusses the ways in which elements are and yet are not fully cosmopolitan and transnational (2007, 956). She singles out the privilege expressed by the protagonist's cohort at school (2007, 956) and is disdainful of the noncommittal narrator who, "highly mobile," enjoys "wanderings from one city and continent to another" (2007, 958). Indeed, this unnamed protagonist "moves through different ethnocultural sites with relative ease, if not disinterestedness" (2007, 944). Kamboureli is, like Sabo, inadvertently pinpointing the detachment and privilege which indicate some of the ways in which Martel's *Self* (1996) is TCK.

Certainly, Martel's novel suggests that the result of so much international transition during the narrator's developmental years is complete ideological plasticity. *Self* expresses ideological unshaping in its most exaggerated form when the protagonist changes sex in the novel, twice (male to female to male). The shifts are, unsurprisingly, accompanied by confusion but, surprisingly, the first, which does not arise traumatically, is also accompanied by a sense that confusion is a comfortable, appropriate state. The French-speaking male teen changes into an Anglophone woman overnight, observing "I was confused, I couldn't remember anything . . . my identity was tied to the English language. And I knew that I was a woman," and then adding "What I remember most clearly of this confusion is the feeling that came upon me afterwards, the feeling that everything was all right . . . a deep sense of peace sifted through me, so deep that it felt like a dissolution" (Martel 1996, 107, 108). Confusion, a complete change of identity (language, gender) and peace that is like *dissolution* are all experienced,

simultaneously. The state of radical transition, complete transmogrification of self and culture, is beatific. For a TCK, accustomed to repeated and absolute changes, this makes sense. For most, more rooted souls, it might not. Martel's protagonist experiences "a befuddlement such that no degree of reasonableness could assuage it" (1996, 116). Non-committal uncertainty prevails.

Meneses observes in her phenomenological study of TCK adults that "The issues [regarding problems with identity formation] that emerged among adult Third Culture individuals appeared to be connected to a difficulty with commitment, possibly due to the high mobility experienced by these individuals in their childhood and/or adolescence" (2006, clxxx). However, this lack of commitment is not what it seems: in not choosing, TCKs are not *disinterested* but rather reject the supposition that they must choose, particularly in regards to national identity: "What appears to be a lack of commitment to a national identity is . . . more of an unwillingness to conform to the socially mandated concept of nationality and not a lack of personal investment in the choices" (2006, clxxx).

Martel's protagonist's ideological plasticity is also exemplified by her intense, almost obsessive interest in university catalogues because of all the different potential types of selves one might shape oneself into. She is unable to commit to any of them:

I became a periodic, compulsive reader of university calendars, those Yellow Pages of civilization . . . I would attend the University of Toronto and graduate as an anthropologist. No, McGill, as a Russian literature specialist. Cambridge, soused in Greeks. Or perhaps I would start philosophy all over again, but at Oxford this time, and all the way to a D.Phil on Hobbes. No. Mathematics at Canterbury, in New Zealand. Or playwriting at Tufts . . . On my good days I felt this scattered approach was extensive, nearly Renaissance; on my bad days, superficial. (Martel 1996, 239)

Each of these different disciplines is paired with a different place, as though the narrator can imagine herself as different people in different places: a playwright at Tufts, a mathematician in New Zealand. There are completely different cultures (disciplinary and geographic) represented, and the narrator commits to none of them. Interestingly, what this leaves the narrator of *Self* is authorship: "I was left with writing—not the first item on my list, but the very last. The only thing that had never failed me" (1996, 239). Authorship of fiction—creating as many worlds as one wants, inhabiting as many perspectives as one wants, and not having to commit to a single specific reality—may represent a TCK ideal.

Returning to the protagonist's self-description as "not so much a hybrid as a chameleon" (1996, 238), one sees a careful distinction being made, one in line with writing on TCKs and the "third-ness" of the cloud-like space they inhabit. *Self's* protagonist is *not* a composite self, made up of bits of "Greek, Portuguese, Yiddish, Spanish, Arabic and . . . Anglophone university students, the

hipsters, cool people and wannabees, and the Francophone Quebecers” (1996, 238). Instead, she transforms into distinctly different selves, which she can deploy, but individually and in response to context.

Interestingly, the above quotation is followed by a description of the protagonist’s *inability* to fully assimilate to any group (the chameleon disguise only takes her so far): “unfortunately my Quebec accent has never been very good for having lived in France as a child, so sometimes, far from fitting in, I stood out all the more” (1996, 238). This is a useful addendum to the idea of being a TCK chameleon: it can only get you so far before your own internationalism trips you up and reveals you as an outsider. The protagonist *can* speak French, but even though she is a Canadian by passport, she has travelled to France and has a French rather than Quebecois accent. The initial chameleonic effect has a second step that actually serves to accentuate her difference, the fact that she is not “really” from Quebec anymore. Add a few more chameleonic disguises, and Martel’s narrator accrues a few more degrees of alienation: “In chit-chatting in Spanish, as I did a few times at a local *dépanneur*, I delighted the older generation but affronted the younger, who probably thought I was questioning their ability to speak French. Such are the pains and pleasures of living close to borders” (1996, 238).

While defining “nation” and its boundaries is not a concern for TCKs—disconnected, dislocated as they are—this is not to say that nations do not matter to them. National borders do matter, tremendously, but perhaps most of all in a *Self*-centred fashion. Each place is associated with a different version of the self, a version of the self left behind when the TCK leaves. But the TCK can leave, and assumes an ease of drifting from place to place, an exemption from commitment. “I’ll be back, though not here, somewhere else” muses Martel’s protagonist, glibly, “China? India? South America?” (1996, 111). There will be a return to starting over as a new person, fashioning themselves afresh in a new place. The protagonist comes “back” to a metamorphic condition in which their identity can be rewritten. “China? India? South America?”: choosing a location is whimsical, unbounded by immigration laws or material constraints. Light as a cloud, the protagonist drifts away, and chooses somewhere, someone, new to be.

In this continual recreation of the self, the subject is always full of potential and seldom constrained by or held to a committed version of themselves. Martel’s protagonist, and their continual self-fashioning, lets one see both the privilege of TCKs in their freedom of movement, and the adolescent nature of continually going “back to the beginning” of one’s identity.

Martel’s novel shows the vertiginous rootlessness at the heart of such “freedoms.” “On my good days I felt this scattered approach was extensive, nearly Renaissance; on my bad days, superficial” the protagonist says (1996, 239). A reader may see here that both good and bad days are unanchored, and that the limitless freedoms become a limit of their own in placing the onus on the protagonist, the self, to make something, anything, manifest. This, then, is the bind Martel delineates: cloudlike freedom, youthful plasticity, choice and possibility. We see *too much* choice and possibility, subtended

by a lack of commitment. This amounts to a perpetual adolescence, one exacerbated by the discontinuity of all the selves one may have been in previous places.

“Childhood experiences are important for consolidating identity development, especially those experiences that involve identifying with cultural, ethnic and racial groups” write Raquel C. Hoersting and Sharon Rae Jenkins (2010, 17). “Repeated cross-cultural moves” as are typical for TCKs, may result in individuals experiencing “difficulty finding groups and a culture to which they feel a sense of belonging and being understood,” which may result in turn in “cultural homelessness” (Hoersting and Jenkins 2010, 18). In *Self*, after the traumatic rape that catalyses the protagonist’s reversion to masculinity, he is devastated. He flees his current home city (Montreal) with just an “abruptly and untidily” packed back-pack that includes “without thinking, tampons” (1996, 315). Strikingly, the severity of his geographic dislocation is in this instance presented as analogous to the devastation of being raped. They both result in radical, complete restructuring of the self.

“I stayed in the Prairies,” writes Martel near the end of *Self*, “Am still here. A roving existential monkey” (1996, 317). The juxtaposition of Martel’s phrases bears out Hoersting and Jenkins’s point: even though Martel’s protagonist stops moving, he is not at home. He describes himself as “roving”: he still feels unsettled. He describes himself, unflatteringly, as an “existential monkey.” It is a comical, but bleak description of himself as less than fully human, and as preoccupied with the *why* of his existence.

“Changing aspects of one’s identity to accommodate new information . . . can sometimes involve alteration in the individual’s sense of self” (Hoersting and Jenkins, 2010, 18). In Martel, the loss of all the *selves* that went before, of all the people that got left behind when the narrator kept moving on, results in sadness and mourning: “I was sitting in a cemetery with my head in my hands. Sadness was sifting through me, touching every part of me. My feet were sad. My palms were sad. My eyelids were sad” (1996, 327). The novel culminates with the narrator’s arrival at “thirty years old,” with no internal sense of self at all: “I weigh 139 pounds. I am five foot seven and a half inches tall. My hair is brown and curly. My eyes are grey-blue. My blood type is O positive. I am Canadian. I speak English and French” (199, 331). These descriptions are observations from the outside. Having achieved the age of thirty, Martel’s protagonist is, implicitly, void inside, overwhelmed by what Hermans (above) might have seen as an excess of dialogic identity-formation. For the (satirised, privileged) TCK like Martel’s protagonist, buffeted by an extremely plastic and long-lasting adolescence, there *is* no more self.

Notes

¹ Koutonin explores the prevalence of transitory labour, and wrongly attributes the distinction between “migrant” and “expatriate” to race (non-white/white) rather than class (poorer “migrants” are often employed in manual or low-paying work, while wealthier white collar workers tend to be “expats”).

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