

Coming “Home”: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Third Culture Kid Transition

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Abstract

Born in the United States, I grew up in Senegal, West Africa, where my parents worked as missionary linguists. “Coming ‘Home’” tells the story of my return to the United States after graduating from high school. I frame my personal memories, shared in the form of poems (following the methodology outlined by David Hanauer’s *Poetry as Research*), with reflexive analysis (using the theory of David Pollock and Ruth van Reken’s *Third Culture Kids*). I examine the difficulty of leaving particular places and people from the “host culture,” as well as the challenge of transition back into the “home” culture.

Keywords

autoethnography, ethnographies, methodologies, arts based inquiry, methods of inquiry, investigative poetry

“Increasingly, we are becoming aware that putting closure on the overseas experience is the first step in making a comfortable transition home.”

—K. B. Eakin (1998, p. 78)



Photo by Betsy Barbour 2001

Involvement: Some Time Before Leaving Senegal

Sitting in a frangipani tree,
Settled into its branches,
Feeling the knots in my side,
Against my neck,
Feeling the sun on my face and arms,
Remembering . . .

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Sleeping surrounded by mosquito netting and mud brick,
 Hearing the scorpion scuttling across the vinyl floor,
 Playing soccer in the sand at twilight,
 Hiding from a man in a costume made of bark, shrieking and clashing machetes,
 Laughing at baby parrots fighting for food from a yoghurt cup,
 Listening to Mom or Dad reading aloud by the glow of a hissing gas lamp,
 Riding a bicycle over a bridge with a crocodile living under it,
 Taking a bucket bath,
 Climbing the baobab tree,
 Speaking Jola, the local language,
 Dancing to the djembe drums,
 Relishing the sound of rain on a tin roof,
 Seeing soldiers walking and tanks rolling into the village,
 Leaving the village,
 Giving candy and bread to beggar boys,
 Riding in taxis with cracked windshields and without floorboards,
 Watching falling stars while camping out on rocky beach cliffs,
 Swallowing bitter malaria pills,
 Hagglng in the marketplace for a watch or a calculator,
 Making tea with my brother on a thatch mat,
 Drinking Coke from a perspiring bottle,
 Wearing brightly colored trousers made for tourists,
 Learning French, the colonial language,
 Eating rice and fish and vegetables from a communal bowl,
 Sweating, always sweating,
 Swimming in the sea, dodging Portuguese Man-of-War jellyfish,
 Smelling the eucalyptus, the smoke . . .

I identify as an Adult Third Culture Kid (ATCK).

Working in India in the 1950s, social anthropologists John and Ruth Hill Useem coined the term “Third Culture Kid,” (TCK) and David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken (2009) developed the idea further, defining a TCK as “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture . . . build[ing] relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any” (p. 13). I met David Pollock when he visited the missionary school where I was a junior. He looked like Santa Clause in blue jeans, except that he had sad eyes. He told me and my peers that we were special, that we had an identity, a name that distinguished us. “You’re TCKs,” he told us. According to Pollock and Van Reken (2009), TCKs share several characteristics, including “being raised in a genuinely cross-cultural” and “highly mobile world” where they are distinctly, often “physically different from those around them” and from which they “usually expect at some point to return permanently to live in their home country” (p. 17). Furthermore, TCKs typically grow up in a “neither/nor world,” a world initially defined as a negative construction: “neither fully the world of their parents’ culture (or cultures) nor fully the world of the other culture (or cultures) in which

they were raised” (p. 4). For TCKs, the question, “Where are you from?” is difficult to answer.

I lived in Senegal, West Africa, where my parents worked as missionary linguists, from about 6 months of age until just before my 18th birthday. Every few years, we would return to the United States, my birth and passport country, for a furlough, but the majority of my formative years were spent in Senegal. For the first 10 years, we were based in a village, Sindian, in the southern part of the country, the Casamance. Then a civil war forced us to relocate to the capital city, Dakar, where we spent the next 8 years.

In particular, this autoethnographic essay explores my experience of leaving Senegal, examining what happens during TCK reentry—transitioning from life abroad to life in the “home” country. Davis, Suarez, Crawford, and Rehfuss (2013) point to their own empirical findings as well as to “decades of literature purporting that the experience of repatriation can be a difficult time fraught with feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress” (p. 134). Although my own experience was not as dire as some, there were difficult aspects to it. Gilbert (2008), analyzing manifestations of grief in the TCK experience, writes about how many TCKs frequently feel homeless, and reentry can highlight that

feeling: “The absence of a home in their life becomes most apparent when participants . . . moved to their passport country” (p. 105). I can certainly relate.

Melles and Schwartz (2013) observe, “With the burgeoning globalization over the last century, TCKs and ATCKs are becoming more common” (p. 261). Not only more common, TCKs and ATCKs are becoming more publicly visible. U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, is an ATCK, as were and are many members of his first and current cabinets. With more visible and just more members, the TCK and ATCK groups become more important to the cultures they inhabit—interacting with them productively requires understanding them, and vice versa. In addition, academic interest in the TCK experience, begun in the latter half of the 20th century, has continued growing, as evidenced by the number of studies published over the last decade.¹ In addition to contributing to the scholarly dialogue, my research should interest anyone who identifies as a TCK or an ATCK. It should also interest anyone who interacts with anyone in those categories, perhaps leaving few who would find this material irrelevant.

Denzin (2014) defines the subject matter of autoethnography as “the life experiences and performances of a person” (p. 1), specifically, the researcher—in this case, me. In particular, I chose to write a poetic autoethnography because, as Hanauer (2010) asserts, “Poetry writing is particularly suited for the exploration of research questions that address experiences with emotional content . . .” (p. 84) and “for eliciting succinct, emotion-laden understandings of self-experience” (p. 134). Perhaps poetry goes where prose cannot, straight to the heart of the matter. I hope, as Hanauer (2010) puts it, my poetic and performative autoethnography can “capture a moment of self understanding of past experience through the performance of poetic identity at the moment of writing” (p. 88), or, as Denzin (2014) describes, “capture, probe, and render understandable problematic experience” (p. 36). In addition, Anderson (2006) asserts that autoethnographies often provide opportunities for individuals to work through their “emotionally wrenching experiences” (Anderson, 2006, p. 377). My experience was certainly problematic, often difficult, and occasionally even emotionally wrenching, and I am grateful for the chance to confront the issues artistically and academically.

My methodological approach was simple. Although I never thought of myself as a poet, David Hanauer guided me through an established procedure to produce poetic data, summarizing “the poetry writing process [as] a form of inquiry in which meanings of personal experience are discovered” (p. 25). In a seminar titled “Life Writing,” and according to the method outlined in his *Poetry as Research* (Hanauer, 2010), Hanauer directed me to pick provocative prompts related to my topic, to use those prompts to generate as much raw material as possible, and to sculpt that information gradually into its final form for analysis.

Following Hanauer’s (2010) instructions, I collected and listed memories surrounding the experience of leaving Senegal. This was the Activation stage, “in which an experiential and/or associative process triggers the writing process” (p. 19). Next, through free writing, I fleshed out the memories with as many details as possible during the Discovery stage, “in which the writer finds new underlying meanings and gives new directions to the emerging poem” (p. 19). Then, I drafted and re-drafted the actual poems in the Permutation stage, “in which the poem develops through a series of rewritings” (p. 19) for aesthetic refinement. Finally, during the Finalization stage, I “produce[d] the last version of the poem[s]” (p. 19). Analysis followed.

It’s worth noting that, serendipitously, I discovered after the fact that the five poems I composed correspond precisely to Pollock and Van Reken’s (2009) stages of transition from culture to culture: involvement, leaving, transition, entering, reinvolvement (p. 66). I included these stages in the poem’s titles. Using the poems as data for my autoethnographic study (Hanauer, 2010, p. 81), I analyzed them, comparing the themes to current research on TCKs, and asking myself the question, “How does this poem position me?” In the answers, I referred again to Pollock and Van Reken’s (2009) stages of transition. So, for example, as I look back at my first poem in this piece, “Involvement,” I find it positions me as the involved TCK, feeling “settled and comfortable, knowing where [I] belong and how [I] fit in” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 66), reflecting on the many, powerful, nearly overwhelming sensations of living in Senegal. Humor dances with danger, the beautiful with the bizarre and the grotesque, and hopefully a general sense of satisfaction prevails over the moments of inconvenience, discomfort, and trauma.

Leaving: Shortly Before Leaving Senegal

My friend leaves Senegal before I do.
 We have pictures of us together as children,
 Playing Legos,
 Practicing martial arts.
 Now he poses alone for a going-away photo,
 Wearing his multi-color patchwork pants,

His dark blue suit jacket,
 His Bob Marley beret.
 He looks funny.
 He wears rings too,
 One his parents gave him,
 Gold, with an inscription of Africa on it,
 And a tiny ruby for Senegal;
 One I gave him,
 The copy of which I wear myself,
 Much less grand,
 A simple, silver band,
 With a friendship knot woven into one side.
 He smiles widely.
 Later, probably close to midnight, at the airport,
 We hug goodbye.
 And then he is gone.
 On the ride back to the Center, where I live,
 I struggle to hold back tears.
 Back at the Center, where I live,
 I climb the wooden stairs to the roof,
 Sit in a corner, alone,
 And cry,
 Feeling the cool brick against my back,
 The hot breeze against my face.
 He was my childhood.
 He was my Africa.
 And now he is gone.

Pollock and Van Reken (2009) write, “TCKs usually place a high value on their relationships” (p. 136). Some say it’s hard for TCKs to form strong relationships in the first place. Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014) studied TCK commitment and reticence in interpersonal interactions, concluding that, because of frequent moves, often “the only stable relationship for TCKs was within their own family” (p. 9), and their research subjects “could not reach a deep level of friendship as they were constantly on the move” (p. 11). I don’t doubt their research, but I was lucky, for a long time. Although my family moved frequently, it was usually just from the village to the city or vice versa, with occasional visits to the United States. While I did my fair share of bonding and breaking away, I did not suffer quite the same level of “repeated patterns of forming friendship and of saying goodbye” (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014, p. 2) due to the “constant state of flux” (Gilbert, 2008, p. 99).

Furthermore, throughout most of the moving, my friend Ibu (his adopted Senegalese name) was as constant as anyone besides my family. His parents were my parents’ work partners, and their moves often mirrored ours. In the village, his family lived only about a 40-minute drive away. In the

city, they were even closer. Here was the flip side of TCK relationship potential: “A positive relationship between friends and family in terms of social bonds was also observed” (Ittel & Sisler, 2012, p. 490). Perhaps this potential is a result of the increased social sensitivity that Lyttle, Barker, and Cornwell (2011) documented, in comparison to monocultural individuals. Hence the pain of parting that I, like many TCKs, experienced: “When returning to their home country, they may grieve over relationships and environments that belong to their host country” (Hoerstring & Jenkins, 2011, p. 19). Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014) second the observation: “For TCKs every farewell was difficult, as it entailed grieving the loss of friends” (p. 13). The poem “Leaving” positions me as the grieving TCK, as “life begins to change” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 67), remembering good times with a good friend, the devastating reality of separation settling in only after the fact. We would remain friends, of course, but in those moments there was only the unrelenting absence. After Ibu left, I felt as though I wasn’t really present anymore in Africa. It was like an out-of-body experience—an out-of-country, off-of-continent experience: I remember walking around half-wondering where I was.

Transition: Leaving Senegal

My turn at the airport comes,
 And I feel ready.
 I carry my beat-up backpack,
 And other luggage.
 18 years weighs a lot.
 There are more friends to bid farewell.
 We exchange gifts,
 Hugs.
 I drink a Coke.
 I ride the bus to the plane.
 I notice my last step on African soil.
 My foot moves from the ground
 Onto the steel staircase to the plane.
 I slump into the window seat.
 The lights on the continent fade.

Although after Ibu left I already felt absent from Africa, my actual parting was more difficult than I anticipated. As Moore and Barker (2012) observe, “Detriments of the third culture experience include . . . having to say goodbye to friends, the pain of leaving what is familiar” (p. 558). I had already said goodbye to friends, and I said goodbye to more, some who would be following me soon, some who would be staying on. The repeated pain of parting was expected, but I had no idea how it would feel to physically walk off of Africa, to leave and lose everything familiar in an instant. Gilbert (2008) comments on that experience:

Moving from the country they lived in as TCKs was a commonly cited loss. The smells, tastes, cultural rituals, site-specific opportunities, in addition to the physical aspect of the country—geography and climate—were noted as elements of what was then missing in their lives. (p. 100)

The poem “Transition” positions me as the TCK in transit, “begin[ning] the moment I leave one place” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 69), the neither/nor immigrant/emigrant carrying an old life to a new place.

Entering: Shortly After Arriving Stateside

I was born on the 4th of July,
 A real, live nephew of my Uncle Sam.
 Tomorrow I turn 18.
 I will be an adult,
 Celebrate my own independence on Independence Day.
 Tonight we eat at a Chinese Buffet,
 And go to Blockbuster,
 Across the Parking Lot,
 The sky darkens.
 A storm rolls in.
 I am excited to rent movies:
From Here to Eternity,
A Streetcar Named Desire,
The Graduate.
 I don't remember cake or presents.
 I remember watching movies:
Yankee Doodle Dandy.

James Cagney sings and dances
About the grand old flag,
And I remember . . .

Performing a sociological self-exploration, TCK Kate Russell (2011) reflects, “Moving back to the United States . . . proved to be one of the more difficult transitions for me” (p. 32). She is not alone. Limberg and Lambie (2011) concur, citing Kotesky (2008), “Anxiety and depression are prevalent diagnoses of individuals who transition into a new culture” (p. 48). Pollock and Van Reken (2009) write,

one of the factors that distinguishes the TCK experience from that of a true immigrant is the full expectation that after living for a significant period of their developmental years outside their passport culture, there will come the day when TCKs make a permanent return to that country and culture. (p. 225)

I anticipated returning to the United States at the end of my high school years, and I even looked forward to it at times, especially during those many moments of challenge specific to living in a developing country—anything from lack of electricity and running water to evacuating a war-zone. However, my hopes, like those of many, were complicated by the attendant unrealistic expectations Pollock and Van Reken (2009) assert TCKs often carry back to their passport culture, along with their more material luggage. Some expect a “dream world” (p. 226), associating the passport culture with furloughs or vacations of the past, during which residence was temporary and so, often, idealistic. (I did—America was the land promising fast food and film stores galore.) Some expect to fit right in to their passport culture, and they are frequently met by similar

expectations from others—after all, they are “coming home,” right? They don’t expect what Pollock and Van Reken (2009) call “reverse culture shock” (p. 227), being alienated by elements of the passport culture, from small differences like “slang or idioms that mean nothing to the returning TCKs” to “deeper levels of cultural dissonance” like lackadaisical attitudes toward food waste (p. 228). Moore and Barker (2012) put it bluntly: “When returning to their passport countries, TCKs often perceive themselves as culturally marginal and terminally unique” (p. 555). I did.

But film helped. About a year before I returned to the United States, I started cultivating an interest in film. I didn’t think this at the time, but in retrospect I wonder if I was already trying to build a bridge of some kind with my passport culture, a way to relate to America. In any case, when I arrived in the United States, the first thing I wanted to do was to watch movies. Having had access to relatively little film in Senegal, I was amazed by the wealth of choice. Also, turning 18 and reaching (legal) adulthood, I was finally able to watch what I wanted to watch, not what my parents allowed me to watch. I celebrated my coming-of-age with cinema, and for a long while after, my strongest connection with my passport culture was through movies. The poem “Entering” positions me as the arriving TCK, “feel[ing] a lot of ambivalence” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 72), and gorging myself on the delicacies the new country offers, perhaps in an attempt to satisfy a craving that can actually be satisfied as opposed to one that cannot.

Reinvolvement: Some Time After Arriving Stateside

Just a few days before starting my new job,
Cashier at a grocery store,
Ibu was visiting.
How wonderful to walk and talk with him again.
I woke up,
Excited to spend another day with him.
I walked out of my room,
And met my mom.
She said something had happened.
Her voice was tense.
We went to the TV.
We watched the second plane hit.
We watched the towers fall.
I was shocked,
And afraid.
But as I saw the flags unfurl,

And shared the shock, fear, and awe with my neighbors,
I thought,
I live here now.

I have wondered what impact 9/11 would have had on me had I still been living in Senegal. Senegal is a mostly Muslim country, but, like many other Muslim countries, the general response of the populace was one of sympathy with the United States. Senegalese culture places a high priority on peace, but still the American school I attended introduced new security measures—armed guards at the gates and higher walls. I wonder how I would have felt to witness these changes in person. Probably like something good had been spoiled, soiled, somehow.

In any case, I wasn't living in Senegal. I was living in the United States, albeit for less than 6 months at the time. I had already attended a week-long TCK reentry seminar, led by David Pollock. We talked a lot about what it means to be a TCK returning to the passport culture. We shared our personal

backgrounds and found many similarities. Davis et al. (2013) note that these seminars can lead to drastic reduction in feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress, and indeed the week helped me feel more acculturated. However, I believe it took 9/11 to truly bring me "home." Sharing the fear of a nation has a powerful acculturative effect. Now, I find myself not entirely comfortable with this perception, as I have since confronted the problematic aspects of nationalism. Retrospectively, I balk at the particular brand of patriotism that flared during those days of shared fear. But it happened, and I was a part of it. The poem "Reinvolvement" positions me as a TCK in the final stage of transition, a time when "[I] once again become part of the permanent community" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 73), settling, and experiencing a moment of identification with the culture around me.

Anymore

Anymore, I blend in.
Anymore, people are surprised when they learn I grew up in Africa.
"Why don't you have an accent?"
But if you listen carefully, I still do.
When someone sneezes, I say "Maas."
When I like something, I snap my tongue against my soft palate in a glottal click.
When I don't want to do something, I bend my arm at an angle and jerk my elbow back,
Muttering "Imangut."
These are Jola words, Jola gestures.
And I've adapted to other cultures, adopting from other places I've lived since Senegal.
For "thanks," I may say the Great British "cheers" or the Finnish "kiitos."
American winters don't seem so harsh, anymore,
After London's brutal damp and the dry frigidity of Helsinki.
I still watch movies, but not as many, anymore.
I don't feel the need to connect with American culture that way, anymore.
Instead, I binge-watch TV shows, on Netflix, or Hulu.
Very American.
The last time I visited Senegal, I told people trying to sell me over-priced souvenirs:
"Je ne suis pas touriste, moi."
"I'm not a tourist, me."
And I'm not
But I don't live there, either, anymore.

Being a TCK certainly comes with benefits. Straffon (2003) showed that students attending an international high school tested at high levels of intercultural sensitivity. Sheard (2008) compared TCKs and "gifted children" and found they share many of the same characteristics, including "knowledge beyond that of their classmates" (p. 31).

Dewaele and van Oudenhoven (2009) found TCKs tested higher on measurements of "Openmindedness" and "Cultural Empathy" than did "monoculturals." Moore and Barker (2012) believe being a TCK "makes it a lot easier to adapt to new situations and environments" (p. 560). I can't claim all these advantages, but I am grateful for whatever

positives my experience entails—the compulsion to travel, if nothing else: after growing up overseas, I spent a good chunk of my young adulthood abroad also, studying performance in Europe. Yet these benefits come with a cost. Hoersting and Jenkins (2011) write, “The literature on cross-cultural childhood experiences supports the argument that such experiences can lead to feeling suspended between cultures, cultural membership uncertainty, and CH [cultural homelessness]” (p. 20). I can attest to those difficult feelings, and I am glad to have had the opportunity to confront and bring closure, or at least balance, to some of them through the course of this autoethnography. As Art Bochner (2013) puts it, “the question of happiness is the most urgent calling of autoethnography” (p. 53), and while I won’t assert any absurd level of happiness from my study, I believe it has brought me substantial satisfaction. Autoethnography, according to Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2014), allows practitioners to better understand “how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience” (p. 1). I am grateful for the insight the form has provided me.

Not all TCKs fare so fortunately. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) observe, “In spite of the growing efforts to help current TCKs to better understand and use their cross-cultural experiences, many ATCKs . . . have grown up with little assistance in sorting out the full effect of their third culture upbringing” (p. 249). These ATCKs struggle to make sense of their experiences, for one reason or another, or many. On the other hand, “many ATCKs have successfully found their way through the morass of conflicting cultures and lifestyles, come to terms with the inherent losses, and developed a positive sense of identity” (p. 249). I hope I have done so.

One of the ways I have incorporated my past into my present identity is by teaching a course called “In and Out of Africa.” In this seminar, in which we explore writing from and about Africa, we encounter the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor (1991), Senegal’s first president, and one of its finest artists and academics. In “Que m’accompagne koras et balafong” [“To the music of Koras and Balafon”] Senghor evokes “Paradis mon enfance africaine” (p. 282) (“Paradise my African childhood” [p. 17]) and how his home “reçoit l’enfant toujours enfant, que douze ans d’errances n’ont pas vieilli” (p. 291); (Receive the eternally childlike child who has not aged/In twelve years of wandering” [p. 24]). I never considered my African childhood Paradise, and when I returned after not quite a dozen years away, I felt comfortable, but not at home. I’ve moved on, or moved forward, or moved away, or something.

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1. Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014), Melles and Schwartz (2013), Davis, Suarez, Crawford, and Rehfuß (2013), Moore and Barker (2012), Ittel and Sisler (2012), Russell (2011), Lyttle, Barker, and Cornwell (2011), Limberg and Lambie (2011), Hoersting and Jenkins (2011), Pollock and Van Reken (2009), Peterson and Plamadon (2009), Dewaele and van Oudenhoven (2009), Sheard (2008), Gilbert (2008), Fail, Thompson, and Walker (2004), and Straffon (2003).

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