

Queer Third Culture Kids: how 'othering' forges spaces that can engender the use of ritual as a form of survival and healing.

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## Introduction

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The experience of growing up both as a Third Culture Kid (henceforth referred to as TCK) and queer has shaped my identity and sense of belonging, or lack thereof. TCKs inhabit a place between states of belonging as they have no ownership over or tangible link to the countries and cultures that they inhabit. A similar experience is had by many queer people who feel as though they exist only being able to view and superficially partake in the life being lived around them; yet never fully feeling as if they have a space in it. In both cases the importance of community, brought together through shared experience, is vital to the survival of a world that is not built to encourage such a thing. However, I have found that the intersections of inhabiting both identities do not grant access to either community and can disinvite you from both. This dissertation will explore the cultural and personal significance of being both a TCK and queer, and how the intersections of these identities form a Third space in which survival is accomplished through ritual and alternative faith-based practices- seen by the mainstream as a commodity, but by those within the space as necessary to existence.

I will explore this by engaging with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the Third Space of Enunciation in which an "in-between state of existence" (Bhabha, 1994) is created for those that cannot live within spaces controlled by the majority. I will also be employing Simone de Beauvoir's concept of 'Otherness' (Beauvoir, 1972) to better understand how minority and majority identities are created and how this necessitates the existence of a third space in which there is no ruling majority and so no subjugation. A space created out of exile and for prosperity.

I intend to explore the concept of exile through Christine Rasmussen's paintings as she seeks to signify a forced independence developed throughout her life; as an adult TCK

her work often focusses on letting go of feelings of a lost childhood. The feelings of exile from both the TCK and queer communities is what forces the creation of a Third Space due to facing displacement from all facets of identity. TCKs never feel as if they have a home regardless of current place or passport, and many queer TCKs can't find that sense of belonging in the queer community due to safety concerns regarding living authentically in the places they reside- this fosters an internalisation of self-censorship.

This self-censorship and internalisation of living in real or perceived danger is what leads many queer people, TCKs, and members of many 'othered' groups to explore alternative methods of survival and healing, such as ritual and forms of magic sometimes passed down through families. These practices will be traversed through Kevin Talmer Whiteneir Jr's "Queer Heresies" series- live performances that attempts to direct the ritual and form a space where queerness gains authority, gleaning power within an unbalanced social system (Whiteneir, 2019).

## Third Culture Kids

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Third Culture Kids (TCKs) have a unique experience of taking part in multiple cultures and realities whilst never being able to form complete bonds with their peers for whom their host culture is their heritage. The definition of a TCK as "a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture...[with] relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any" (Pollock, et al., 2009) puts the onus of creating a sense of belonging on the child who doesn't understand the complexities of otherness and ownership of identity.

Whilst living in this state of hybrid identity TCK's often feel a sense of belonging to multiple cultures and countries as they are surrounded by others experiencing the same

feeling. This often means that TCKs have higher levels of empathy and are more open-minded and accepting of others with different cultural norms and values. A study was conducted for the International Journal of Intercultural Relations (2013), in which 196 participants completed 2 web-based surveys utilising the Quick Discrimination Index and Social Dominance Orientation Scale. It showed that a small percentage (3%) of students measured in an International School in Southeast Asia held an ethnocentric<sup>1</sup> worldview, with most of their preconceptions being ethnorelative<sup>2</sup> (Melles & Shwartz, 2013). The study also highlighted the fact that the length of time that a participant had lived in a country didn't have much of an effect on levels of prejudice, whilst the number of countries lived in had a massive impact- showing the value in exposure to multiple different groups rather than prolonged exposure to one different group (Melles & Shwartz, 2013).

This shows that experience as 'the other' can affect how you navigate the world and interpersonal connections with others. TCKs are often a minority everywhere including their home country (in the sense that they may have spent more time outside their home country than in it). Yet they also often hold a position of privilege over the native residents of their host countries due to a large majority being from developed, democratic countries such as North America and Europe (Melles & Shwartz, 2013). This duality fosters a level of consideration not employed by many non TCKs due to a higher level of introspection (Melles & Shwartz, 2013)is what contributes to feeling 'othered' amongst peers in your 'home' culture.

These feelings of otherness can be hard to reconcile as a child and leads to growing up with a fragmented sense of self; creating spaces like expatriate and TCK communities, where people who don't feel as if they have a home anywhere can exist without reproach or

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<sup>1</sup> Evaluating other cultures based on preconceptions from the standards of one's own culture

<sup>2</sup> Cultures can only be understood relative to one another, and behaviour can only be understood within cultural context

questioning of their motives behind assimilated personality traits, is vital to their survival. However, these spaces often exist in a state of liminality and become inaccessible if inhabitancy of differing and conflicting identities is discovered. This leads to necestiation of ‘third’ spaces of existence- a space that allows survival of both the world you’re trying to assimilate to and the world you never had a tangible space in

## Christine Rasmussen

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Christine Rasmussen is an American artist who spent most of her formative years in Pakistan and Vietnam, which informs her work exploring the space in between the familiar and imagined (Rasmussen, 2016). She uses her observations to explore the complexities and multiple identities of the inner lives often lead by TCKs.



**Figure 1.** Rasmussen, C., *Letting Go*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 36 x 60 inches

Her painting “Letting Go” investigates her experience as a college graduate “letting go of the idea of having a childhood home to return to, and all that that implies” (Hawthorne,

2020). This feeling of displacement with no rooting connection to childhood memory and nostalgia is what creates a sort of forced independence for many TCKs. “Letting Go” symbolises “a younger self helping my current self to let go of feelings of a lost childhood” (Hawthorne, 2020), a common feeling amongst TCKs who feel as if they must let go of the longing for an ideal experience of childhood and the frustration that this creates around having a lack of shared experiences with non-TCKs, contributing to a feeling of ‘otherness’.

This painting illustrates that sense of displacement and lack of stability by layering memories in a visually compelling way; the mountainous Pakistani background and American foreground the two points of reference she uses to imagine her memories. Having the image of herself as a child positioned between these two realities portrays the notion of being stuck between two worlds and the internal conflict that that can create in a developing mind- conflict between attitudes, realities, and cultures all vying for validity and never quite settling into the normalised preconceptions of heritage and home that don’t like to deal with the concepts of real or imagined boundaries and otherness.

## Queerness

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To fully understand what constitutes ‘queerness’ and what about that identity is othering, it’s important to understand Queer Theory and how it is perceived and managed by the majority as they control the narrative that we live in. The term ‘theory’ as a scientific method is something that can be tested, replicated, or proven (Anon., n.d.). Lauren Berlant’s article ‘What does Queer Theory teach us about x?’ posits that theory, as it relates to queerness, should be relabelled commentary. The former clinical term gives people the opportunity to legitimise the use of experiments and dehumanising language, just as was done

during the emerging narrative of queer activism after the AIDS epidemic (Berlant & Warner, 1995).

The labelling of queer as an abstract theory has the potential to let it be seen as a luxury rather than a necessity (Berlant & Warner, 1995). Separating the different territories of queer theory makes them insular and disaffected by 'real' life. This gives rise to fetishization of the normal – an imagined mainstream- where false progress and assimilation, at the cost of individuality, reign over acceptance and celebration of difference.

The danger of thinking of queer theory as an overarching theme is to forget, or rather neglect, to see the differences within it. This is done by not only erasing history and cultural context to fit a straight narrative, but also allowing people to become familiar with terms that aren't theirs to use. You allow queer to become one homogeneity in which intersectionality plays no part and understanding of experience is reduced to the acceptable and unacceptable. This is by design so that individuality and nuance are lost as stereotypes are born to make queer more palatable and understandable through a straight lens. Abstract spaces of existence are lost. Once created by and for us, as a third dimension in which to seek solitude from the straight world that doesn't work for us, they're now designed to eliminate us.

In this way indirection and euphemism become harmful and create privilege. The afflictions of the 'other' don't affect the sensibilities of the mainstream because they don't have to take notice. Only when AIDS began affecting hordes of the heterosexual (mainstream) society did the government even acknowledge it, and even then, as a disease that queers had inflicted upon them. This purposeful and political power shift creates the false narrative that that we, the 'other', wield the power to inflict a deadly 'disease' on the mainstream. This creates panic and a sense of danger, allowing the majority to take what little power over our own spaces the 'other' have created for ourselves. How can we be expected to understand ourselves and how we perform our identities if we don't even have control over



those identities and how they are created? Queer will always be inherently ‘othered’, but as long as we form our own spaces separate from the ‘othering’ of the mainstream we will be able to survive living alongside it, not within it.

## Intersectionality of Identities

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Whilst living internationally I never felt the need to choose between two cultural identities as everyone around me shared in the same hybridity of experience. However, when away from others in the same position, I felt the need to choose the identity that I appeared to have the most connection to and ownership over. This had the effect that I stopped using the Arabic and Urdu words that had shaped my lexicon. I also stopped sharing anecdotes that conveyed understanding of specific traditions or identifiers of cultures not my own. I subsequently lost the connection to many memories that shaped my childhood. I had no frame of reference for the norms and identifiers of ‘British culture’ and equally was not considered to have a place amongst my peers who shared a Middle Eastern or Southeast Asian culture.

My experience as a queer person living internationally further complicated the matter of finding a space in which to comfortably exist. Whilst it would be common for TCKs to seek community within the expatriate throng, it becomes invariably more dangerous to do so as a queer person. Living in such a community means that the lives of you and everyone around you are intertwined, also differently with that of the people native to your host country. In Saudi Arabia, for example, there was no comfort to be found in the TCK community as queer became too dangerous a subject to touch for fear of recrimination, so it was erased completely. There was a queer community, incredibly cloaked due to the nature of the punishment for homosexuality, however membership was barred to non-Saudis. Your

status as an expat made you too far removed from word-of-mouth intel that was only passed between trusted friends.

Simone De Beauvoir's concept of 'otherness' can be employed to describe both of these experiences, as well as how they relate to each other. She defines otherness as "an expression of a duality—that of the Self and the Other... no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" (Beauvoir, 1972). Otherness doesn't define what one is, but rather what one is not, brought about through unequal political power held by those that call themselves a majority.

This rejection of acceptance is what forms Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the 'Third Space of Enunciation' (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha proposes that it is an impossibility to find a single, pure culture. Through colonialism and the displacement of people cultures have always and will always mix; this hybridity of culture poses a threat to colonial power and so cannot exist within prevailing contexts controlled by that power. Bhabha argues that all outcomes of hybridity are articulated within the Third Space of Enunciation- a non-representational space of expression, categorised by its unreachability by colonial authority (Sitauze, 2020).

## Ritual Practices as a Form of Survival

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Thinking of the 'third space' as a form of speaking as well as a non-site is what enables the 'other' to create their own rituals. Rituals for survival and healing the traumas gathered from their exile from, and existence between, identities.

Ritual has long been used as a tool for survival and healing by those considered outside the majority (Liebes & Curran, 2008). The modern use of sigils is said to have taken shape in the medieval period when they were seen as natural healing magic (Mebane, 1992).

However, their origins can be traced to druidism and early paganism, the use of symbols as a source of harnessing energy to help promote healing and the fruition of intention even dating back to the Neolithic era (Bradshaw Foundation, n.d.).

During the medieval period, healing (white) magic was said to be practiced by medicine men, monks, and priests and was closely tied to and controlled by the Catholic church. Whilst most of their salves and potions consisted of herbs, they were often blessed by the incantation of a Catholic prayer during their creation (Rider, 2011). Whilst this also may have been true for some sorcery (black magic), it was largely accepted that sorcerers rejected the help of God in their magic and instead favoured the help of the Devil. Interestingly, at the time there was not much to distinguish a magical healer from a sorcerer, so it was often assumed if a patient of a healer died that they did so because the healer was actually commanding 'black' magic and had wished for the patient to die (Rider, 2011). Also, at this time it was common for women to disproportionately be accused and convicted of witchcraft over men (Horsley & Horsley, 1986). It was at this time that the use of magic in a protective and survival sense began to be used more widely. Many protective curses, sigils, and incantations date back to this era simply because they were used by witches to create spaces where they could survive the persecution that they were under.

In this way magic and the use of ritual has always aligned itself with the 'other'. Something is always seen as heretical and dangerous when you can't govern or constrain it from the outside; "As an assumed disciple of an unsanctioned god, the witch is viewed as dangerous to the Christian state" (Whiteneir, 2019). Whilst the term ritual can often mean a mundane task that is repeated and carries with it some sense of intention, it carries the weight of collocation with dangerous practices, unsanctioned by the mainstream. The same can be seen with queer practices and identities throughout history being seen as a danger to the nuclear family and so the basis of heteronormative society. Because of this shared

demonisation and history of persecution, many today seek to reclaim magic and its queer history for protective and healing power.

## Kevin Talmer Whiteneir Jr

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Kevin Talmer Whiteneir Jr. is an interdisciplinary artist and art historian based in Chicago, USA. His work explores the relationships between gender and queer experiences relating to race, the effects of (neo)colonialism, and its alignment with magic, religion, and witchcraft (Whiteneir, n.d.). Whiteneir's performance art focuses on the building of altars and creating worship spaces that draw upon the rituals of witchcraft to highlight their connection to queer identities and experiences. These rituals comment on the consequences of colonialism that continue to impact contemporary communities (Whiteneir, n.d.) by exploring and highlighting hidden parts of history that can be used to shape our present and future. It is



**Figure 2:** Whiteneir, K.T., *Queer Heretics: Witches' Sabbath*, 2017, Performance at the School of Art Institute Chicago, Photography by Jean Sonderand

an intervention into the contemporary art world as a queer artist and art historian of colour that implements the rituals of witchcraft.

The project "Queer Heretics: Witches' Sabbath" serves as a ritual embodiment of the themes it's discussing. In the performance, Whiteneir embodies the Black Devil (a position curated in European and coloniser witchcraft histories) in a way that attempts to direct the ritual and form a space where queerness gains authority. By embodying an avatar of this archetype, he performs through the lens of a queer person of colour trying to glean power within an unbalanced social system, rather than through a colonist lens (Whiteneir, 2019).

In this he invokes a sense of unashamed occupation of identity within spaces built to discourage such ownership being taken over oneself, enabling people who exist outside of the majority to garner self-sovereignty and healing.

## Conclusion

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To be a Third Culture kid means to exist, almost exclusively, in the liminal space created between cultural identities. This inherent 'otherness' ostracises you from all points of connection through shared experience and can leave you vulnerable to adopting 'the other' as an identity- created for you by the majority that excludes you. Artists like Christine Rasmussen bring to the fore the emotional struggle that comes with growing without roots through her paintings, which invite the audience to view them through her eyes and interpret them through the levels of their own understanding. This notion of being 'othered' is mirrored in the lived experiences of queer people who also inhabit a space peripheral to the relative safety and comfort of the majority. Queerness is inherently contrary to the mainstream as its reality is rooted in the antithesis of heteronormativity. However, queer people have always fought against the prescribed 'other' of the majority's creation, in favour

of creating their own radical acts of failure (of the family, society) (Halberstam, 2011) that form a new inclusive 'other' to give ownership over one's own life.

To be a Queer Third Culture Kids means to exist *only* in the space between. Between identities, memories, and shared experience. This makes the creation of 'third' spaces vital as it gives the 'other' the ability to build room for themselves. Room to not only survive their encounters with the majority, but also to heal from their accumulated traumas. Without those created 'third' spaces, over which the individualised 'other' has complete sovereignty, the majority would control every aspect of the 'other's' existence. These spaces are set up with the intention of protection and healing and one of the ways that this has been utilised throughout history is with ritual. Whether pagans, druids, or medieval natural healers, magic in different forms has always been connected to the 'other', specifically to queerness, through its demonisation and shared history. Kevin Talmer Whiteneir Jr depicts his exploration of healing and community through his ritual performance art, the purpose of which is to reclaim and reappropriate the dogma that has been used against him as a queer artist of colour. It is only through this self-forging of spaces that the 'other' can begin to exist wholly in each of their identities, rather than feeling lost between them.

## List of Illustrations

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**Figure 1:** Rasmussen, C., *Letting Go (2010)*, Christine Rasmussen Art. Available at:

<https://www.christinerasmussenart.com/blog/2016/9/11/out-of-the-ashes>

[Accessed January 22, 2022].

**Figure 2:** Whiteneir, K.T. & Sonderand, J., *Queer Heretics: Witches' Sabbath*, Available at:

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