Free floating in the cosmopolis?
Exploring the identity-belonging of transnational knowledge workers

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Abstract In this article I explore what I call the ‘identity-belonging’ of transnational knowledge workers, a diverse group of serially migrating career professionals who have spent extended periods of time in at least three countries, usually following career opportunities. Unlike most recent writing on transnationalism, which focuses on enduring connections of migrants with their ‘home’ countries/places, here I explore a transnationalism that may transcend the national, and generally the territorial, principle, with repercussions for identity-belonging. In this context, how transnational knowledge workers position themselves towards belonging to a nation and towards the idea of cosmopolitanism is of particular interest. From data collected through in-depth interviews in Australia and Indonesia, I conclude that their globally recognized profession forms the central axis of their identity-belonging, alongside a weak identification with their nation of origin. The feeling of belonging to and identifying with particular locales and local communities was articulated flexibly and instrumentally in association with professional and wider social networks, while no primordial territorial attachments could be identified.

Keywords MOBILITY, TRANSNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE WORKERS, IDENTITY-Belonging, PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, COSMOPOLITANISM

Over the past several decades, the scope of global communication and spatial mobility has expanded considerably. In a recent address, Castles (2007) argued for a strong connection of migration studies with the major processes of social transformation. I apply the important, albeit largely neglected, heuristic role of spatial mobility to our understanding of the identity-belonging of a growing number of transnational knowledge workers (TKWs). TKWs are people who have lived and worked in at least three countries, including their country of origin, for at least a year, with a year implying residency rather than a visit."
The ‘three-countries’ rule is meant to differentiate TKWs from settlers (‘immigrants’), who, in the language of classic migration studies, move from a less to a more developed country with ‘permanent settlement’ in mind. They are expected to go through a process of ‘incorporation’ and ‘acculturation’ and in many cases also naturalization in the ‘host country’. Such migration is often associated with (at least initially) labour market disadvantage and a lowering of social status. My sample of TKWs, by contrast, consists of relatively privileged career professionals who do not migrate out of economic or political compulsion (but not necessarily without economic or political motives) and for whom crossing borders leaves unchanged or even improves their professional and social status.

TKWs are a subset of Western expatriates, although the individuals described in this article differ in significant ways from the expatriates as ‘outposts of imperialism’ that Cohen (1977) and more recently Fechter (2007) and Hindman (2009) describe. The latter are ‘organization men’ (less often women) physically and socially sheltered from their ‘hardship posts’ in developing countries within expatriate enclaves, where they often continue a neo-colonial relationship with the host community and its people (Cohen 1977). My interviewees are different for a number of reasons. Only two (out of 16) worked for a transnational corporation at the time of the interview. Many came from less-developed, small and/or non-English-speaking countries and were therefore sensitive to power differentials involved in transnational encounters and, as described below, some had a first-hand experience of a patronizing Western ‘colonial gaze’. Finally, the majority (see Table 1) had a Ph.D. or other higher degree that predisposed them towards a critical approach to transnational realities. A systemic reason why TKWs differ from neo-colonial expatriates is that globalization has enabled many more people, especially among the educated middle classes, to be globally mobile in a more autonomous way, outside rigid organizational (state, corporate and other) pathways. TKWs do not therefore have to be company transferees: given that their work allows and requires a high degree of autonomy and creativity, there is no reason why they would not use these abilities to manage their own transnational careers.

The TKWs described in this article are good networkers with an entrepreneurial approach to their careers, of which they see transnational experience as a natural part (Nowicka 2007: 75). One can see such increasingly individualistic global mobility as a response to a neoliberal requirement for employment flexibility as a prerequisite for success (Sennett 1999). Consequently, life-long or even long-term employment in the same organization has all but disappeared and the virtue of organizational loyalty seems decidedly old-fashioned. International work experience is increasingly becoming an expectation for career professionals, especially in English-speaking countries. While neoliberal frameworks that value flexibility, mobility and reward entrepreneurial individuals may oppress lower-skilled workers (and migrants) by withdrawing job security and causing loss of community attachments (Ong 2005; Sennett 1999), TKWs, who represent the crucial human capital in the global knowledge economy, skilfully navigate these frameworks with apparent equanimity. They are not, however, a ruling ‘transnational capitalist class’ (Sklair 2001). As shown below, even if they
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earn high incomes and (sometimes) travel in business class, they tend to retain a critical distance towards neoliberal globalization. This class-consciousness, in essence, derives from the fact that, though highly skilled and globally competitive, they live off selling their labour.

In a world divided into more or less fixed national population ‘containers’ with controlled borders, migrants are often seen as potentially subversive and transnational migration as anomalous (Favell 2007; Malkki 1997). As transient and relatively privileged movers firmly embedded in Western ways (even when of non-Western origin) and in possession of globally desirable passports, one can hardly look upon TKWs as subverting the global political and cultural balance of power. However, the type of mobility they represent, the values their mobility implies and the values they explicitly profess may become subversive in the longer term. This rather bold claim hinges on the fact that TKWs are not only a fast growing, but in the context of a knowledge society, also a functionally important group.

One aspect of such ‘subversion’ that came through strongly in the TKWs’ narratives is a transnationalism of the beyond-nation variety. In other words, TKWs do not fit dominant theories of transnationalism (see, for example, Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Portes et al. 1999) as a phenomenon that generates ‘transnational social spaces’ and ‘transnational social fields’ across national borders. Rather, the focus is on the other meaning of the Latin preposition/prefix ‘trans’ as beyond. The question that stems from this difference is whether TKWs are the first significant group of (post)modern movers whose lives may be transcending the territorial – primarily national – principle. Can a ‘space’ of professional work, networking and global professional recognition replace ‘real places’, such as cities, villages, regions and countries, where people in a sedentary ideological framework are supposed to belong? What form does identity-belonging take among intensely mobile people? The often-expressed idea that mobility challenges identities and communities comes from a deeply ingrained assumption, embedded in the norm of sedentarism, that they are both primarily place determined. While one certainly cannot fully dissociate them from space and spatial relations (Featherstone et al. 2007), Favell et al. (2006: 20) ask whether people with human capital mobility are able to exist ‘outside’ society. If so, does this mean they lead ‘cosmopolitan’ lives, unlike the ‘ordinary’ settlers who, even if inhabiting transnational social space and migrating repeatedly, are normally defined through national (or ethnic, place-determined) references? In my respondents’ articulations of their identity-belonging, professional opportunities and networks loomed considerably larger than national affiliations and local attachments. Territorial attachments were weak and primordial attachments (namely to where one was born, grew up, where one’s ancestors are buried or one’s nation) were marginal. I elaborate this in more detail below.

The term identity-belonging, which I use throughout this article, reflects an inextricable association between the two concepts: a feeling of belonging is understood as a central part of identity. Identity is a contested concept in the social sciences, but the modern free-choosing individual needs it as a mirror with which to
establish his or her social existence. In an ongoing process of achieving identity, a modern individual has to look for belonging beyond that granted at birth. Such individually chosen and built belongings mirror the process of identification: one belongs to a group with whom one identifies. Affiliations with groups (which we call communities if they have internal cohesion) that define us are not limited to those into which we were born or physically inhabit. Nor are the latter any longer necessarily the most relevant: communities conceived extra-territorially (professional communities and networks) or multi-locally (diasporas) become increasingly significant, as well as viable through internet-based communication.

Of course, the power to build and choose identity-belonging varies according to one’s social status, but we are ceaselessly bombarded by the idea that we can and should choose. This freedom and dynamism may be a blessing but it is also a burden, for identities are never fixed; they require constant work and attention. One way of focusing this quest of ‘self-management’, which, according to Grey (1994), is a defining feature of contemporary subjectivity, is the middle-class practice of building a ‘career’. There is an overlap between achieving a professional identity-belonging and belonging to social groups. At the centre of TKWs’ identity-belonging is their professional work realized in a transnational context – their transnational careers as it were. This is analysed in more detail below.

Australia, where I conducted most of the interviews, is a specific location in terms of the global mobility of professionals. Although geographically peripheral in relation to the global Western metropolises, it is a hub of global mobility. Australia is the second most attractive destination (after the USA) for ‘highly skilled expatriates’ from OECD countries: it received 12.7 per cent of the total in 2001, as well as a high number of the ‘global talent’ from non-OECD countries (OECD 2008: 74). The intake of long-staying scientists and academics to Australia grew fourfold in the decade between 1996 and 2006. Because of their cultural, economic and political connections with global metropolises, especially the main English-speaking countries, Australian professionals are outwardly looking and highly mobile, so the departures also grew, though less dramatically. There are nearly one million Australians living and working abroad and most of them are professionals (Fullilove and Flutter 2004). Australia’s large cities provide agreeably multicultural cosmopolitan environments for TKWs – probably more so than the main ‘Eurocities’, which, according to Favell (2003: 413), are ‘heavily assimilatory national environments’. New World settler nations, although different among themselves, are in this respect considerably different from Europe, where linguistic and cultural diversity signifies precious richness but also poses obstacles to communication and mobility.

**TKWs: the sample of interviewees**

Transnational professionals have only recently started to feature in systematic social research. They are referred to in the literature under various names, including ‘skilled transients’ (Beaverstock 2002; Iredale 2001), mobile ‘human talent’ and transferable
‘human capital’ (Solimano 2006). Hobsbawm (1999: 122) noticed a ‘global pool of players … recruited and shifted around the world in a manner that in the past only occurred for opera stars and great conductors’. Bauman (2001: 3) talks about ‘patricians of the globalization era’ and Connell et al. (2005) found that among the ‘intellectual workers’, the university sector was the most globally connected. Of course, a privileged and transient population of expatriates has existed as long as nation-states, but relatively massive middle-class transnational mobility is a recent phenomenon (Cohen 1977; Dulles 1966).

Academics, professionals and technical experts nowadays work in an array of transnational settings. These include multinational and transnational corporations of the international private sector, inter-governmental organizations of the international public sector and international NGOs such as aid, humanitarian and human rights agencies, and global professional service firms (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2007; Solimano 2006). Until recently, the majority of TKWs were Westerners, although this is changing as the global balance of power shifts away from the Atlantic axis. Still, the dominant culture of transnationals is a ‘Western culture’, the culture of late capitalism construed as global culture. The language of communication is English, the global lingua franca that privileges English speakers, especially native English speakers (Kennedy 2004: 168–9).2

Over the course of many informal encounters with serially migrating professionals, I became interested in the relationship between recurring transnational movements and identity-belonging. In several cases, I followed up the informal conversations with a formal interview. I derived the in-depth narrative data used in this article from 16 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008 in the Australian cities of Perth (4) and Melbourne (10), and in the town of Ubud on the Indonesian island of Bali (2). This exploratory sample is heterogeneous in terms of work roles and environments (see Table 1), but homogeneous in terms of education and age (all can be broadly defined as ‘middle-aged professionals’). Education and age significantly influence people’s values and identities (Haubert and Fussell 2006), so the relative homogeneity of the sample in these two areas served to focus attention on the impact of mobility. Among those interviewed there were two long-term married couples, one dual-career couple and one with a trailing spouse.3 The spouses were interviewed separately. This diverse sample was meant to secure an ethnographic richness in the analysis of the TKWs’ identity-belonging.

Among my participants, the number of countries lived in varied from three to eight. Most respondents spent two or more years in any particular country. A large majority first moved outside their country of origin in their late twenties. At the time of interview, three respondents considered themselves ‘retired’ from itinerant life, while the rest were considering their next move. Half were native English speakers.

The interview schedule was divided into three parts, namely a demographic and professional profile; the history of transnational mobility; and issues of identity-belonging. Short quotes from interviews are used below to illustrate conceptual issues. Each quote is identified by the respondent’s number shown in Table 1.
Table 1: Characteristics of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID no.</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education &amp; Profession</th>
<th>Work sector</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Countries lived in</th>
<th>Marital status*</th>
<th>Dep. child.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Ph.D., environmental scientist</td>
<td>UN</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Indonesia, Australia, France, Japan</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Ph.D., chemist</td>
<td>university</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>France, India</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Ph.D., med. science</td>
<td>public res. institute</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>USA, India</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>BA, teacher/visual artist</td>
<td>trailing spouse</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>USA, Australia, UK</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>BA, teacher</td>
<td>trailing spouse</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Italy, France, Australia, Korea, Qatar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Ph.D., anthropologist</td>
<td>university</td>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>New Zealand, Ukraine, Australia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>BA, journalist</td>
<td>‘sea-changer’</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Jordan, Israel, USA, Indonesia</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>BA, teacher</td>
<td>retired</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>PNG, Indonesia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Ph.D., writer/academic</td>
<td>university</td>
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<td>Zimbabwe, Kenya, Australia, Uganda, UK, USA, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>MBA, senior engineer</td>
<td>TNC</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Croatia, Australia, Brazil, S. Africa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>BA, linguist</td>
<td>trailing spouse</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Croatia, Australia, Brazil, S. Africa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Ph.D., mathem./university economist</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Sweden, USA, Brazil, Australia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Ph.D., MD/medical scientist</td>
<td>public, medicine</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Tanzania, Sweden, USA, Brazil, Australia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>M.Sc. environ. scientist</td>
<td>UN/TNC</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Dubai, Vietnam</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Ph.D., architect/town planner</td>
<td>university</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Denmark, Austria</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Ph.D., town planner</td>
<td>university</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Kenya, Netherlands, Korea</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Marital status: S-single, P-partnered (but not living together), M-married.
Identity-belonging: a professional focus

In the third, central part of the interview, participants were asked about their sense of identity-belonging. To get a feel for the respondent’s intuitive priorities, I normally started this part with an open-ended question and continued with a number of prompts pertaining to various aspects of identity-belonging, such as nation/ethnicity, local communities, West versus ‘the rest’, culture/subculture, profession and religion. Respondents reflected on their sense of identity-belonging, how they saw themselves and presented themselves to others, the groups of people to which they felt they ‘belonged’ and how they thought others saw them:

In terms of identity … it’s a tricky one … it would be a job, my profession, that would define me … currently I’m in a bit of a void, just been disengaged from a job … but when I was an editor for years … this was what defined me.

(9)

For most participants, profession was the most consequential for their status, lifestyle and choices.

The axis of my identity is … the profession … it does not matter where … but it matters what [I do]. I’d mention the research project I work on … which I do all over the place [internationally].

(6)

In addition, they derived a significant amount of their norms, values and common culture from their profession (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2007: 255–6). Furthermore, as knowledge workers, most respondents related to their profession as a vocation, for it gave them social status, autonomy, intrinsic satisfaction and a means of self-expression. This may well hold for many sedentary professionals. Instead of theorizing about the essential role of consumption in determining social status in the ‘consumer society’ and the ‘death of class’ based on labour market position (Giddens 2006: 309–10 quoting Pakulski and Waters), I think it is probable that work plays a more central role in determining people’s identities, relationships and lifestyles.

The transnational context, however, teased out some novel aspects of professional identification. For example, respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds were more likely to emphasize their professional work as the most important element of their self-identification and self-understanding. As discussed further in the next section, this may have been because their national origins were less prestigious and more ‘visible’ in transnational contexts. Consequently, they felt that the gaze of others imposed their national origins on them. This may have made them defensive and prone to emphasize that nationality/ethnicity was not crucial for who they were and where they belonged. In this context, profession is also an identity focus carrying more prestige.

The fact that professional credentials represent TKWs’ global passport is likely to
reinforce their professional identification. A global system of both private and public institutions ensures that professional identity – embedded in educational qualifications, work experience and professional memberships – is globally valid and transnationally transferable provided it is achieved or at least validated in a Western context. In many cases, this transferability required a creative adjustment to local circumstances, but all respondents took this as a welcome challenge rather than as an obstacle.

The way professional itinerants conceptualize their attachment and belonging to territorially-defined communities seems consistent with and complementary to their deterritorialized professional identity-belonging axis.

Attachment to a place … no … no. … I’ve never spent more than ten years anywhere. … I am absolutely non-attached to a place … as a place. … I’m attached to certain places in New Zealand where I did my research.

(6)

Belonging … may be something as simple as walking down the street and understanding what everyone is saying, walking to a café and knowing how to order things … just things like that, you know. … Commitment to a local community? Yeah, maybe the southeastern suburbs [of Melbourne]. A civic commitment? Not really … My strongest networks are from my profession … definitely stronger than the local networks.

(3)

TKWs were hesitant about constructing their narrative of community life with a reference to one particular, ‘home’ community:

There is more than one place that I would call home, but Melbourne probably tops the list at the moment. Perth is on that list too, probably second. … K [the home town in Germany] is more like ex-home. Quite frankly, there are things in K that alienate me.

(15)

That respondents were middle-aged people with firmly established career paths and able to negotiate the global professional labour market with relative ease, which is an essentially individualistic pursuit, may have further weakened the territorially-defined collective identification. Collective, parochial and primordial references were remarkably absent, and there were no expressions of nostalgia or articulations of diasporic belonging, unlike what Wiles (2008) reports on 'skilled New Zealanders' in London (see also Kennedy 2004).

Home – it must be Norway … not [my hometown] but perhaps Oslo … but I do not feel I am especially attached to Oslo either. I am not at all homesick when I am here far away. … I do not feel commitment to any sort of
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... but if I live somewhere I feel obliged to contribute, and I always do.

(12)

Only one interviewee (16) expressed nostalgia for her native city. She was, however, a peculiar case: after being a TKW she became a trailing spouse for a few years and then stepped into an ‘immigrant’ category in her husband’s country where, without being a citizen, she did not feel fully included in civic and political life. Importantly, being in a situation of a settler unable to ‘integrate’ fully into her ‘host country’ was what created her nostalgia, a phenomenon well documented in settler migration.

Some authors take a critical view of the mobile elites’ lack of community commitment and belonging. According to Lasch (1995), mobile elites promote individualism at the expense of society. Bauman (1998; 2001: 2) diagnosed a ‘secession of the successful’ from local affairs and saw global elites as ex-territorial, emancipated from local constraints and thus unaccountable. Favell (2008: 8–10) considers a relentless mobility in pursuit of career opportunity to be ‘American style’, while Europeans are less mobile and highly value ‘locality and diversity’. These views imply that mobility is associated with individualism and is detrimental to the community and to the colourful local cultures that inevitably fade in the face of the onslaught of the global uniformity.

I could detect no sign of anti-communitarianism in the accounts of the TKWs I interviewed. They gave the impression of mental independence from parochial attachments, centrality of self-direction and professional identity-belonging, but showed no detachment from or disregard for local interests. On the contrary, most expressed intense interest in local cultures and explained that they actively sought a meaningful interaction with locals in every new locale. The focus on career and opportunity to keep in touch with people across the globe did not oblitera a need for spatial propinquity and a warm, immediate presence of other people. Unlike the settler migrants, ‘incorporation’ was not a necessity for them – they did it freely, for intrinsic reward, rather than to secure status, which was (already) achieved through their predetermined professional role.

There were regrets, however. Women more often than men deplored the fact that a succession of temporary residences inevitably fractured long-term close friendships:

I think I’ve lost it [local community] by being such a rolling stone, so I do not have extended networks of friends here in Perth. So when I think of friends I start thinking of people in Thailand or people in Paris … and I find that a bit sad because I know those people I cannot pop in and see.

(2)

I suppose the main thing for me is friends … that’s the toughest thing. … You make new friends, but you always lose that fabric [by moving]. … Leaving jobs too … but you’re taking your shell [profession] with you. … Moving becomes a way of life, what defines you.

(9)
One participant saw it almost as a moral flaw that the idea of home – as the fixed point in space where one ‘belongs’ and supposedly always longs to return – may have, for him, lost its naturalness. He observed:

No, unfortunately [sic!] not, I do not think there is a place that automatically springs to mind when you say ‘home’. A place that I miss, somewhere where I would want to stay forever, or where I long to return … no, not really. It’s nice to go to Zagreb [home town] and visit. Some of our old friends never left from there … they seem content without going anywhere. … But if we really longed to live there, we’d do it.

(10)

The last two quotations suggest that the construction and embedding of identity-belonging in professional work might to some extent compensate for the idea of home and an everyday face-to-face community. Profession, the achieved and portable habitat (Colic-Peisker 2006), is something one can take along like an ‘identity shell’. In addition, people can maintain friendly networks based on shared professional work across great distances (Kennedy 2004):

Community … hard to say … most of my friends do similar work and are highly mobile. … We communicate over the email [and] see each other occasionally. I would not call it community because sometimes I do not see them face-to-face for two or three years. But when I do we’re on intimate terms in two seconds.

(6)

Belonging to a community? No. No. I am not in a social, or ethnic or religious group, something larger than my family. I have family, I have friends but, if anything, I belong to a profession … which is a small one and it is bound by values, it has a mission to save the world … the only thing I would say I belong to is that environmental sustainability profession.

(14)

When discussing the difficulties and costs of a mobile life, extended family obligations, especially caring for ageing parents, often arose. Especially the women considered telephone calls and email inadequate replacements for a physical presence (Wilding 2006). However, the general view was that personal choice, self-expression and professional advancement had become the moral equivalents of such obligations. The nuclear family or a committed relationship seems to remain the only social ties not sacrificed to mobility. Those with families/spouses moved together with them while those who were single expressed a readiness to compromise and limit their mobility to create an opportunity for a committed relationship to develop:
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My [Australian] girlfriend has a fashion business down the road [in another Balinese town]. So I think I’ll hang around for a while and see how things develop [laughs]. Perhaps we’ll decide to leave Bali together one day and move to Australia.

I have a lot of friends everywhere but I think now I need my roots and with this lifestyle it is difficult in terms of family. … If you have a partner then it is very difficult, you know, because you always move around and therefore, for me … from now on I’d like to live in one place with my partner. We’ll continue to do teaching and training but we’ll only have to travel for one week a month, not all the time.

A majority of respondents were married or partnered but only five had dependent children. All three trailing spouses stated that they could stop the couple’s itinerant lifestyle if they ‘had enough’, which confirms their equal status in the relationship and by implication, the relevance of the partnership to their husbands, whose careers, alongside family finances, were the reason for frequent moves.

Although TKWs occasionally seemed almost apologetic about not having a strong sense of attachment to one particular home and place, they implied in their discourse that sedentarist norms were changing. They seemed reconciled to the fact that the ‘safe’ world of life-long employment and marriage and a permanent place of residence was shrinking and that they navigated the expanding world of mobility and change.

**Identity-belonging: national identity and cosmopolitanism**

The TKWs I interviewed considered national identity ‘unavoidable’: the issue of ‘country of origin’ conventionally arose in transnational social encounters and national identity was therefore reinforced through the gaze of others. In addition, it is hard to forget about the nation-state while traversing the globe: despite the numerous transnational corporate and professional structures in place to facilitate movement, nation-states still issue visas and are therefore the final arbiters of transnational mobility.

Once outside one’s country of origin, national identity was hard to ignore:

I certainly identify myself as Australian, but you see I am a terribly conventional looking Australian … a tall, white, blue-eyed male.

The interviewees reported using nationality as a conventional, and often convenient, presentation of self in transnational contexts, rather than feeling deeply that their identity-belonging hinged on their nation of origin.
I could say I’m Norwegian if I had to say something [to describe myself when outside Norway]. But I do not really know what that means … apart from meaning that I was born there.

(12)

However, not everyone was comfortable about the national labels. One respondent (of Vietnamese origin, also holding EU and Australian passports) expressed her anguish at attempts to align her with a particular nation:

When people ask me where I come from, I hate this question because I do not know where I come from. It depends what you want to know … where I was born, or what is my nationality or where I work … it’s all different, you know … so people give me weird looks, they probably think ‘something is wrong here’.

(1)

As mentioned, the readiness to accept national identity as a defining feature seemed related to how desirable or advantageous it was perceived to be in the transnational context. The prestige of an individual nation is a slippery issue and varies in time and space. However, some stereotypes are rather enduring and widespread, for example being eastern European or Asian may be seen as less desirable identity-belonging than being western European, Australian or Scandinavian.

If I work in the EU and turn up with the Croatian passport, I’m paid 30–40 per cent less at the very start. … if I am a New Zealander, then it’s a different story. It’s discriminatory. … Also, you are much more likely to be regarded as an expert if you come from a ‘proper’ Western country.

(6)

The hierarchy of national identities has not been fully transcended in the professional transnational context, despite this context being considerably more multicultural than 30 or 40 years ago and much less overtly racist and colonial. The hierarchy persists because of the vast economic and political disparities between countries, especially ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’. Therefore, although the environments in which TKWs meet may be multicultural and cosmopolitan in an everyday sense, they are not cosmopolitan in a normative sense: the nation, and its (at least) implicit position in the hierarchy, remains a firmly entrenched point of reference.

The temporary and transnational aspects of the everyday lives of TKWs reinforce nation/ethnicity as a point of reference, which is largely proscribed in the Australian work environment because of all the settler migrants of many different origins. Somewhat paradoxically, the right of immigrants to be included as having an ‘Australian identity’ reinforces the cosmopolitanism of the Australian workplace, whereas emphasizing their national origins is considered implicitly to exclude them (Colic-Peisker 2008). A different dynamic of cosmopolitanism versus national identity-
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belonging may therefore characterize the transnational and national contexts, namely those where one, usually the ‘local’ national identity, is dominant.

The relationship between localism/patriotism/nationalism and cosmopolitanism is complex and has been debated extensively from various theoretical and ideological positions. Most authors see these two value perspectives as inversely correlated (Nussbaum 1996; Roudometoff 2005), but others, especially those who look at the issue from a ‘subaltern’ perspective (either a non-Western-middle-class perspective or a working-class perspective), do not necessarily see the contradiction (for example Werbner 2006; Yegenoglu 2005). Appiah (2006), for example, proposes ‘cosmopolitan patriotism’ and ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ in the context of the Ghanaian anti-colonial struggle. Cheah (2006) criticizes the alleged opposition of nationalism and cosmopolitanism as an oversimplification. Delanty (2000) argued for a ‘limited cosmopolitanism’ and ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’ practised in real lived civic communities – a cosmopolitanism opposed to ethno-nationalism but not to national belonging as such.

The populist critique of cosmopolitanism, often related to the anti-globalization stance, sees cosmopolitanism as an unpatriotic elitism. Lasch (1995) argued that highly mobile elites, who ‘are at home only in transit’, are estranged from ‘the people’ and from the middle-class nationalism and patriotism that used to provide a common value frame of reference. Cosmopolitanism can also be associated with the mentality of the neoliberal ‘global bourgeoisie’ that runs, or at least services, global business with little regard for other legitimate interests (Sklair 2001). Cosmopolitanism can also, however, be lived as a countercultural ‘marginal’ position that rejects dominant systemic institutions and forces (such as capitalism, science, consumerism, nation-state and conventional morality), as D’Andrea (2006) reports on ‘expressive expatriates’ and Cohen (1977: 27) on anti-establishment ‘artists, bohemians and drop-outs’ among expatriates. My sample of TKWs occupies a position between these two poles – the business-class-flying ‘global capitalists’ and Western countercultural rebels. I return to this issue in the conclusion.

Cosmopolitanism and nationalism/patriotism were discussed in depth during the interviews. Respondents were asked about their sense of national belonging and about cosmopolitanism (it should be noted that eight participants had two or more citizenships). Only one participant expressed patriotism and ‘pride’ in being a member of a particular nation (Australia). Several participants observed they felt patriotic only when they thought their nation (either original or adopted) was being unfavourably stereotyped. Feeling ‘patriotic’ towards one’s nation of origin was generally rejected: it was implied that one’s critical faculties prevent idealizing one’s country and that patriotism is a domain of particularistic and potentially conflicting passions. The following comment by a Norwegian academic was a typical take on the issue of patriotism:

I suppose there is some kind of national pride in everyone, but as soon as I start thinking like that I analyse it. Like, for example, Norway took 15 gold medals in the winter Olympics. But what does that have to do with me? I
didn’t do it; I didn’t go there; it wasn’t my achievement. I am happy to have been born there; it’s a rich country but ‘pride’ is not my thing. Patriotic? No. No … no. There’s too much ambivalence about how things are done there to be proud.

When asked what the idea of cosmopolitanism meant to them, the participants associated it with an ability to move and work globally, with cross-cultural competence and, to a lesser degree, they saw it as an ethical commitment to humanity. They did not fail to notice the ambivalence that marks the idea of cosmopolitanism. It was generally acknowledged that being a citizen of the world should be a good thing, but several interviewees observed that cosmopolitanism often implied pretence and privilege and were therefore reluctant to stick the label on themselves (Ossman 2006: 562):

Citizen of the word? I do not know, it’s a difficult question. Cosmopolitan? Does it mean a nomad, a globetrotter, wherever I lay my hat is my home? Hm, I’m not really that type of guy. … I come from a humble background. I associate cosmopolitanism with money … the word has a ‘lots-of-money’ sound … like having a house in France and second home somewhere else and you’re very interested in art and you’ve just come from India experiencing all these wonderful things [laughs].

Cosmopolitanism was conceived in various ways, as illustrated by the following quotations: as valuing other cultures and learning from them (8, 12); valuing the preservation of cultural diversity against Western/American dominance (10); being comfortable in the globally dominant Western culture (12); having a transnational frame of reference (14, 16) and being able to cross national boundaries with ease (3):

It’s important to learn the local language … I have learned a lot from the people I was supposed to teach [in Papua New Guinea]. … It was an eye-opening experience. We [Westerners] think that we know everything … and have solutions for all problems … but then you see these other people doing things differently and you think ‘no, we definitely don’t know everything’.

[It is a] good and important experience to see how things are done elsewhere, for example how they work in hospitals [here in Australia].

Yes, I am cosmopolitan. This means that I appreciate and enjoy diversity of cultures and I think it should be maintained. Not like … we eat this nice breakfast in a nice hotel in Santiago [de Chile], the service is great and all that,
but we have to put up with this American [US] music in the dining room morning after morning. … When we asked why they don’t play Chilean music, we were told [that] ‘most guests expect this’.

(10)

If cosmopolitanism means being part of a global pop culture, sort of eating hamburgers in every corner of the globe … that’s the Western civilization spreading all over … but if it means sitting in a tent and drinking tea in inner Mongolia … I’ve never tried that [laughs].

(12)

Yes, to a degree I was cosmopolitan even before I went anywhere … that was probably part of the attraction of going overseas. But certainly very much so after being over there. … I am taking it as probably having interest and values and other things that are really drawn from [a] much wider field, globally almost, than one particular national groups … and I probably do that in terms of tastes, interests, sports, food, movies, a whole range of things.

(14)

Cosmopolitan … hmm … having a more global view, not being nationalistic. … Yes, I see myself being like that … I’m not going around saying Australia über alles [laughs]

(16)

Do I see myself as a citizen of the world? Pretty much, yeah, I mean what do you mean by ‘citizen of the world’? Well, I’m proud of the fact that, you know, I can get on the plane and go anywhere pretty much, I had enough knowledge or whatever it takes. … I’m not constrained in that respect.

(3)

A minority of interviewees expressed a strong ethical cosmopolitan commitment. They used universalist words like ‘humanism’ and ‘humanity’ when referring to the community to which they were committed. One participant referred to her transnational work for a UN agency as ‘service’ [to humanity]:

What enables me to work all over the world … well, I speak languages … but I think, also, people appreciate me for my humanistic values. … I work with people and I always appreciate very much what these people do to me, you know, teach me things, and I try my best, you know, to serve.

(1)

Another interviewee described a universalist feeling as an identification with humanity, in an ethical sense (through commitment to human rights) and then also in an ontological sense (being a rational being):
I feel strongly about human rights … it’s a global commitment if you like, not local. I would not feel more strongly about the Oslo chess community [of which I am a part]. … A strong reference point of my identity … is perhaps that I am a rational being. … I’d always fight irrational solutions … sort of let’s see the facts and see what we’d do. … Perhaps that’s my idealized version of myself. I may be highly deluded … you should ask my wife or children [laughs].

Many respondents were critical of the idea of cosmopolitanism and questioned whether it really was possible to be a citizen of the world:

Citizen of the world … yes … hmmm … yes … but which world? There is a cosmopolitan world where people who would answer ‘yes’ to that question hang out … and another half of the world which is not cosmopolitan. … A cosmopolitan community perhaps only uses half of the world for its activities … perhaps Europe, America and parts of Asia … where there is a substantial share of the population who travel and have contacts with other cultures … but this cosmopolitan community is a minority in every country.

Discussion and conclusion

Having based this article on a pilot project, I do not attempt to give authoritative answers to the many questions involved. Rather, I seek to contribute to filling the ‘lacunae’ (Favell et al. 2006: 3) in global and transnational studies about the growing population of transnational knowledge workers. I suggest some conceptual distinctions as well as juxtapositions and indicate possible directions for further research.

In the context of the ‘contemporary condition’ of globalization (Appadurai 2003) the transnational knowledge workers described here are relatively privileged, sought-after movers generally outside the host nation’s nomenclature of (potentially problematic) foreigners/immigrants versus locals/citizens. I argue that their transnational mobility has a new conceptual quality of rising beyond rather than stretching across national borders; this, in turn, may represent a transgression of deeply entrenched nation-centric and sedentarist norms and (at least some) associated anchors of conventional place-framed life.

The ability to move across national borders with relative ease has always been a sign of privilege and nowadays it may be a way of telling itinerant winners from the ‘grounded’ losers (Bauman 1998: 2). As Monaci et al. (2003: 478) observed, those ‘tied to some physical space … suffer globalization’ while those ‘more advantaged’ develop into ‘globalized actors’. While ‘free floating in the cosmopolis’ remains a hyperbole, TKWs seem materially and mentally unfettered as much as this is possible while navigating the structures of global capitalism and of the nation-state’s regulation of border-crossing and visa types.
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From in-depth conversations with TKWs it became apparent that their profession was the main anchor of their identity-belonging, for it facilitated the life-long project of a career and, in building a CV, transnational experience adds an impressive edge. For knowledge workers, professional identity-belonging and career-building may serve as substitutes for sedentarist fixities and sources of identity, anchoring and continuity. While career may give meaning and structure to their global roaming and a sense of permanence, or at least continuity, to their lives in the face of temporariness and change, it remains a dynamic quality. It changes through new professional opportunities, expertise development and, significantly, through adjustments to new countries, cities and ‘cultures’. Unlike many (Western) expatriates who are shown to avoid the ‘problem of strangehood’ and ‘stranger anxiety’ by retreating into ‘prefabricated enclaves’ (Nash 1969: 574–7. See also Cohen 1977; Fechter 2007; Hindman 2009), my sample of TKWs was considerably more non-conformist as they welcomed or actively sought the opportunity to explore new environments. Learning about the Other they encountered was normally seen as developing their cosmopolitan credentials alongside their professional ones. Rising beyond the nation as a mental horizon is essentially cosmopolitan, even if cosmopolitanism fails to develop into a conscious ideology; what is important in conceptualizing the connection between professionalism and cosmopolitanism is that such transnational life has been made possible through profession as a global passport.

On the other hand, one should acknowledge that professional career is a fixed, conventional reference, firmly embedded in and conforming to the mainstream late-capitalist knowledge economy. My sample of TKWs are not the ‘hypermobile’ countercultural nomadic subjects D’Andrea (2006) described, or ‘drop-outs’ going native in ‘exotic’ (non-Western) places (Cohen 1977) – they are also not activists of the global civil society and certainly not revolutionaries.

Rather than ‘suffering globalization’, as do many lower-skilled workers, my interviewees skilfully navigated global opportunities. They accessed these mainly through semi-formal professional networks, which gave them greater autonomy in career development and allowed them to approach the ‘problem of strangehood’ differently from expatriate ‘organization men’. While an openness to cosmopolitan explorations contributed to my respondents’ decision to embark on a global career path, the process of encountering the cultural Other, both in formal professional settings and informally, further reinforced and developed their cosmopolitanism.

While a transnational career normally secures a decent income and professional prestige, in most cases status and pecuniary motives could be satisfied without moving, or at least without many moves. A cosmopolitan career, however, seems to provide more material for self-reflection and self-actualization through the chance it gives to develop a cross-cultural, cosmopolitan outlook. One interviewee expressed this simply by remarking that ‘there is so much more to the world than one’s home town’. Importantly, however, a distinction between extrinsic (income, status) and intrinsic motives (professional/vocational development and cosmopolitan self-actualization) may be blurred in people who often experience their profession as a vocation and the pivot of identity-belonging. In other words, the profession is at the

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same time a source of middle-class status and consumption as well as a source of self-understanding and meaning; in people engaged in creative pursuits, professional career development overlaps considerably with self-development. By implication, professional communities not only serve a pragmatic networking purpose but are also carriers of certain values and Weltanschauung. My interviewees reported a significant overlap between the professional and social networks and communities to which they felt they ‘belonged’. These networks were usually cross-cultural.

For most of my interviewees, ‘being a citizen of the world’ (a shorthand definition of cosmopolitanism adopted during interviews) is understood as a ‘rational’ common-sense universalism opposed to particularistic, especially nationalist, passions, as well as an ability to move across the globe. Consequently, as individuals, TKWs seemed unusually liberated from the weight of tradition and the community into which they happened to have been born, and from primordial attachments to the ‘blood and soil’ of a nation or native locality. My interviewees kept a distance from their own ‘culture’ – it could be said they ‘inhabited it from afar’ (Szerszynski and Urry 2006), a stance close to Turner’s (2002) ‘cosmopolitan virtue’ as ‘irony’. Their cultural reflexivity and semiotic skills acquired by living in different environments may have translated as a cosmopolitan-style cultural hybridity that is, according to Bauman (2005: 29), an ‘ideological gloss on achieved or claimed extraterritoriality’ that ‘seeks its identity in non-belonging’. Bauman’s ironic take on a possibility of ‘extra-territoriality’ implies that belonging has to be defined territorially. While accepting that having a ‘home’ and a ‘community’ is an undying need of most (sedentary) humans, and that belonging to a nation-state guarantees important rights, in this article I seek to show that a voluntary ‘extraterritoriality’ does not have to be a ‘loss of roots’. Instead, it may be a route to a new global – and perhaps cosmopolitan – sense of identity-belonging. The participants were accomplished professionals, in tune with the progressive side of the late-capitalist Zeitgeist and seemingly at peace with themselves, having struck (at least at that time) a satisfactory balance between mobility, autonomy, community and belonging. A need to belong to everyday face-to-face communities was not absent, but the effects of intense mobility modified it: co-moving nuclear families or partners generally assumed heightened importance. In a majority of cases (but not all), the shared experience of mobility and cosmopolitan learning seemed to replenish the emotional resources of these smallest, most immediate, units of support. Single people fulfilled the need for social support through the maintenance of long-term friendships, often created through professional education and work.

The cosmopolitanism nurtured through cross-cultural encounters consists of a conscious close engagement with the ‘Other’. It is a real rather than a virtual experience and therefore presumably a more powerful source of a ‘cosmopolitan consciousness’ than television and other mass media whose constant circulation of global imagery is, according to Szerszynski and Urry (2006: 121–2), supposed to have the same effect. The interviewees’ appreciation of how things are done ‘elsewhere’ is the ‘connoisseurship’ [emphasis in original] of places people and cultures’ that
Szerszynski and Urry (2006: 114), drawing on recent work on cosmopolitanism and their own empirical research, count among ‘cosmopolitan predispositions’. The cosmopolitanism of my respondents is more ‘cognitive’ than ‘ethical’, although global inequalities were often mentioned and most engaged practically with global causes in minor ways (contributing, for example, to transnational developmental and charitable NGOs).

Cosmopolitan and professional orientations are both important in understanding the identity-belonging of TKWs: they reinforce each other. This synergy leads back to Merton’s (1968: 448) dichotomy of cosmopolitans and locals, which connected cosmopolitanism to professional identity. He argued that cosmopolitans are more ‘ecumenical’ and seek social status outside the local community, usually from their professional peers, because their local (or national) community cannot (fully) validate and reward their professional competence. By extension, cosmopolitans are more (transnationally) mobile (Merton 1968: 449). Although mobility is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of cosmopolitanism, intense mobility coupled with strong professional identity-belonging is likely to challenge the conventional geographies of identity. Some recent research shows a similar implication of connection between professionalism and cosmopolitanism: the transnationally mobile and those with transnational connections, as well as those who are better educated – the categories that heavily overlap – are more likely to adopt cosmopolitan attitudes and be more tolerant towards the ‘Other’ (Haubert and Fussell 2006; Mau et al. 2008; Savage et al. 2005). This study points in the same direction: these two orientations – professionalism and cosmopolitanism – are mutually reinforcing through the identity-belonging and networking practices of TKWs. Professional networks are inherently transnational, opened to anyone in the same professional ‘class’ regardless of ethnic and national boundaries and affiliations. Supported by internet communication, these networks have a real potential to become nodes of cognitive and ethical cosmopolitanism, especially for people in scientific, artistic, developmental and other non-corporate and ex-governmental sectors. The profession is the TKWs’ ‘cosmopolitan passport’ to connectivity and mobility. On the other hand, achieved and intrinsically individualistic professional identity-belonging seems to work against the salience of national affiliation and other primordial, acquired-by-birth aspects of identity-belonging. The immersion in various transnational contexts made possible by prolonged residence and work experience and the attitude of openness reinforce each other in diminishing local and national affiliations.

It is possible to imagine (and I hope this is not just wishful thinking) that, when their ranks swell further and involve more intense mixing of ‘West’ with ‘the rest’, transnationally mobile professionals may represent the kernel of a cosmopolitan avant-garde of the era of globalization. After all, the world is very different from and much more interconnected than it was 30 to 40 years ago. If globalization-induced excitement about an emerging ‘world society’, ‘global imaginary’ and ‘cosmopolitan culture’, as well as the expressed need to use ‘cosmopolitan imagination’ and switch to ‘methodological transnationalism’, are not just emanations of a theoretically delusional state, TKWs should have a significant stake in these processes.
Notes

2. The largest numbers of expatriates originate in English-speaking countries, especially the UK, with its tradition of ‘expatriating’ colonial officials (‘colonials’) during the British imperial era. Regardless of one’s culture of origin, the professional education, career and transnational connections are likely to make people from non-Western countries into at least ‘partial Westerners’.
3. ‘Trailing spouse’: in the past decade this gender-neutral term that has come to replace the ‘business wives’ of earlier decades (see for example, Dulles 1966). A number of websites, some interactive, are devoted to the experience of trailing spouses, for example http://www.trailingspouse.net/, http://www.liveabroad.com/articles/trailingspouse.html/.

References

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