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RESEARCH

From Object to Subject Through Identity Collages: Journeys to the Metaphor-Informed Identity

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Abstract
This manuscript charts the emerging identity processes of refugee entrepreneurs in Luxembourg. It critically examines existing conceptualisations of identity and the self through a Western lens and highlights how non-Western frameworks, grounded in communal, spiritual, and relational understandings, can offer a more fluid and integral view. These frameworks meaningfully align with appreciating the complexities of identity development, challenging the individualistic, fragmented models of the self, prevalent in Western thought. Drawing on a phenomenological approach, the study calls attention to the central role values occupy in identity formation, finding their expression in metaphors. The identity journeys of six individuals were captured through the creation of identity collages, privileging participants in their expressions of an evolving sense of self that transcends traditional categories such as nationality, ethnicity, legal status, and socio-demographic features—commonly ascribed by external institutions and social contexts. The collages reflect an identity rooted in lived experience and self-determined meaning-making, achieved through reclaiming agency. By incorporating non-Western perspectives, the study provides rich, often unacknowledged, yet essential insights into the dynamics of identity in contexts of displacement and migration, reflective of participants' contexts of origin. The collage method offers a unique arts-based approach for exploring identity, enabling participants to articulate ineffable aspects in a multicultural and multilingual setting. Findings emphasise the potential of collage-making as a research tool and transformative medium with therapeutic and educational applications. We conclude by suggesting that further exploration of identity collages in longitudinal studies could provide richer insights into ongoing processes of identity formation and transformation.

Keywords Identity theory · Identity formation · Identity collages · Phenomenology · Selfing · Refugee entrepreneurs

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Introduction

> *In a real sense, participatory […] researchers need to know their own voice before they assume they can uncover it for someone else. More importantly, we need to heed* Freire's *(1985, p.199) words: "We need to be subjects of history, even if we cannot totally stop being objects of history. And to be subjects, we need unquestionably to claim history critically. As active participants and real subjects, we can make history only when we are continually critical of our lives" (quoted in* Montero-Sieburth, 2020*, p. 217).*

The initial research intention that informs this manuscript entailed a classically inclined qualitative research design, aimed at investigating the lived experiences of asylum-seekers and refugees engaged in business start-up activities in their new host country of Luxembourg. The research question aimed to elucidate processes of identity formation of those living through extreme periods of change in untenable circumstances of uncertainty, while simultaneously striving for agency through one of the most validating routes of recognised self-creating legitimacy: entrepreneurship. Negotiating such radical dichotomies held the promise of novel research insights—rare kinetic particles, coveted by theory-building innovators. Semi-structured interviews were to be conducted, and thematic analysis was to ensue, through which an abductive consideration of one or more identity theories was to be skilfully evaluated in light of the uniqueness of the case being examined. However, at the very penultimate moments of the 'official' research project, a sense of dread loomed, and it reached into the depths of my research efforts, burrowing itself into my research ethos. Although the research's composition was strong, upheld by inherited legacies that assured research integrity masterfully, I came to fear that I was unconsciously risking an unintentional silencing of the research subjects, who had entrusted me with their most guarded confidence, and I was potentially, on the verge of subsuming their contributions to my academically (Western-centric) cultivated thinking, reinforcing old research biases I had purported to confront (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019a, b, 2020; Iannone, 2019; Iannone et al., 2024). It seemed that the research had managed to objectify its research subjects, subjugating them to *my* research objectives, and that, became, untenable, for, me. It is precisely at this moment that I decided to defy all practicalities and reevaluate the research aims, preliminary insights, my positionality within the context, the research methods, the analytical strategy, the philosophical inquiry… Indeed, it all came to a head.

I took time to revisit my fieldnotes and diaries, reflecting more deeply on how to honour my participants' knowledge, as the incontestable experts of their own experiences, while balancing the theoretical demands of my research in a way that would be posited upon justice. I aimed to question conventional research boundaries through my participants' worldviews, striving for critique that is rigorous and, on the whole, necessary. The research thoroughly needed to reflect the realities of our changing societies and the emerging multiplicity of perspectives that are actively reshaping both global and local narratives. I sought to shift my position from the apex of knowledge production that is so commonly endowed to researchers, to one that would reflect a collaborative stance, elevating my research platform to give voice to what I perceived as veiled voices. Ethically, I could not see myself as merely a 'consumer' of their lived experiences, nor as the imperious interpreter of their knowledge. Their involvement throughout the research process, including methodological and theoretical considerations, was

vital and had to be integrated. They would have to be on an equal footing to validate what emerged from the research, guiding whether I would 'get it right' or miss the mark entirely.

Upon entering the field, many participants were suspicious of my motives. They wondered if I was working for the government or legal authorities, if I intended to use their stories to advance my academic career or secure a high-paying position at an NGO, or whether I would exploit their entrepreneurial ideas to become a competitor in their markets. Trust-building within the field took time, and I worked hard to explain my mission of authentically understanding their lives to inform practices and theoretical research gaps through *their* perspectives. I needed to demonstrate that I had no intention of 'capitalising' on them, monetarily or otherwise, so one of my first steps was to open myself up to their scrutiny and questions. They came to learn that I could empathise with their struggles, shaped by my own history, and that I was genuinely invested in their success. I attended social and cultural events, mentorship meetings, entrepreneurial training sessions, and spent time working on business plans and presentation decks with them. As a relative newcomer to Luxembourg myself, I could also reflect on the Luxembourgish system and actors in solidarity. Aligned to what Rodgers (2004) explores in his examination of "'hanging out' with forced migrants", I strove to build meaningful relationships. Over time, mutual respect and genuine care meant that I could not reduce the richness of their lives and perspectives to a transactional exchange. My prospective participants had transcended the objectifying facet of research, and I had to consider how this would influence my research outputs, which gradually became more ethnographic and relational.

In parallel, I had already adopted a critical stance on refugee entrepreneurship as an emerging research field, particularly concerning the imbalance between the dominant voices of Western researchers and the peripheral experiences of the populations being studied. This imbalance resulted in refugees being largely excluded in research and policy discussions that directly impacted their lives (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020). The introductory chapter of *Refugee Entrepreneurship: A Case-Based Topography* (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019a) had called for participant-guided theorisation. In examining the neoliberal undercurrents of entrepreneurship policy (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019b) and the dynamics of refugee entrepreneurship (Iannone et al., 2024), it became evident that refugee entrepreneurs in Western contexts rebuild their lives amidst paradoxical circumstances, where neoliberal activities are heralded as viable solutions for some of the most marginalised individuals, even as epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, 2016) persists in restricting their freedoms across multiple aspects of life.

Thus, by coextending an ongoing examination of positionality that was discussed with research leaders and peers throughout the project's life, rather than fearing the 'contamination' of bias, I embraced my embeddedness within the research context, recognising my own commitment to justice and ethical research: I chose to be led by my participants in exploring their identities and lived experiences. This shift allowed for a research process that, I argue, culminated in authentic, participant-driven insights that promote a 'claiming of history, present and future, critically' in identity processes. Hence, the following three sub-sections present the foundational—inherited—theoretical understandings of identity research that informed my initial outlook onto the study, followed by perspectives from non-Western ideologies, representing the majority of refugee populations, worldwide, including my participants. The latter broadened my conceptual perspectives, providing frames of reference for the actualised research and understandings therefrom, elucidated by participants through identity collages.

Examining Identity: Legacies

It is deeply human to introspect and extrospect—a constant, and sometimes frenetic affair, even. That may be because the endeavour holds the promise of delivering a very real understanding of the essence of who we are—from the outside and deeply, from within—what our individual and collective purposes and potentialities may be, and how we may morally and ethically *become* the best version of ourselves in the short amount of time we are tendered on earth. Such pursuits about self-knowledge and identity are socially constructed and inextricably linked to culture and cultural worldviews. The knowledge about identity and self-knowledge that serve as foundational to my research, I had been introduced to in my education in Canada, Denmark, Spain, the United Kingdom and Luxembourg.[1] The philosophies were ones that challenged my thinking, appearing as divergent enough to allow for a critical outlook upon phenomena across diverse contexts. My formation initiated with Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian understandings of the mind and soul, to readings from European and American philosophical, empirical and theoretical psychologists, to the Jamesian (1842–1910) (James, 1890) lineage of theories and conceptualisations of the existence of a distinguishable, distinct self, composed of both an objectified, empirical self, 'me', and a subjectified self, 'I', the ego. From there, I was introduced to behaviourism, complemented by cognitivist principles, which conceive of the object/subject as a system, defined in terms of dichotomies and Cartesian logic. What followed were deep elaborations on the subconscious aspects of the self and then humanistic, existential, phenomenological, transcendental, and dynamic psychology (see Taylor, 2012, for an excellent overview). Given that I studied in cohorts and could discuss learned topics interdisciplinarily and intergenerationally, my education in these domains was not exceptional across the geographies mentioned. However, I had begun sensing, already as a young learner and researcher, that various significant perspectives were missing from curricula. It was nevertheless my task at those stages, to employ and apply theories, interrogating tenets within changing glocal[2] contexts, while exploring non-Western perspectives peripherally. Such activities, also activated reflexively, imaginably lead to some small and other more important novel insights regarding paradoxes, complexities, aesthetics, and an appreciation for the tacit (Polanyi, 2009) dimensions of knowledge of the self. My own cross-cultural experiences had been challenging, which led to multidirectional changes, contemplations on meaningfulness (Landau, 2022), creativity (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2016) and learning about inheritances; how each of us may consciously and unconsciously internalise inherited perspectives and how we may also contribute to and work towards bolstering them, even through acts of disagreement. Thus, a more critical appreciation ensued of what I found myself sometimes contesting but nevertheless accepting as the playground of theoretical exploration. Looking back, there is a sense of engaging with Western theories while remaining within their structural confines, which characterised the initial stages of this research's inquiry. Redemptive was the conviction that little falls by the wayside when

[1] Canada is where I obtained my bilingual (French and English) bachelor's degree and the other countries mentioned, in order of immigration passage, are where I had undertaken at lease one semester (and lived in for at least six months) of either graduate or post-graduate studies.

[2] The term describes, "the seamless integration between the local and global; the comprehensive connectedness produced by travel, business, and communications; willingness and ability to think globally and act locally" (Mayhew, 2023). For an academic elaboration on the distinction between glocal and global studies, please see Roudometof (2015).

undertaking self-examination, the study of others and researching our surroundings, motivating me for future research. And, there remains ample opportunity for theoretical contributions on identity perspectives.

Beyond this exposure, new or alternate perspectives necessitate cultural encounters (Murdock, 2016), research (Günther, 1998), or other private endeavours with the unfamiliar, which remain highly dependent on access, facilitated communication and support, e.g. through relevant resources such as texts, other materials, and the wider community. Thus, although a disparity between understandings of the self and identity work persists, particularly between Western and non-Western arenas, it has become evident that they all have foundational cultural roots, further characterised by migration. While acknowledging their interconnectedness to other roots through a rhizomatic network (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), also as suggested by the "first law of ecology" (Commoner, 1990), many elusive aspects await exploration. This is one of the main premises that forms the basis of the current study, undertaken through unique intercultural encounters.

Identities, Migration and Cultural Psychology

The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022) informs us that around 3.6% of the global population could be counted as migrants in 2020, representing three times the estimated migrants in 1970. Devastatingly, the UNHCR counted over 117.3 million forcibly displaced persons at the end of 2023, representing an 8% rise from 2022—following a 12-year continual rise, with 43.4 million refugees around the world, a tripled increase within the last decade, and 68.3 million internally displaced (within their home countries), totalling close to 60% of the forcibly displaced populations, globally (UNHCR, 2024). With exponentially increasing rates of migration and even greater migration flows to be anticipated, research on identity and the self has entered the context of cultural psychology and migration studies with implications that can shape the immediate futures of entire generations of incoming and receiving populations.

Within this context, and with people much on the move, Murdock (2016) has discussed how the development of self-related knowledge systems (identity) are a "life-long process" (p. 153), inter- and cross-contextually. Moreover, she posits that sources of self-related knowledge and its content continually evolve throughout development, inter- and intra-self. Such knowledge, therefore, comes to be assimilated in ways that enhance coherence and strives to maintain consistency across various contexts, while ensuring continuity over time. The overarching objective of identity work, thus, becomes an enhancing one, fostering an increase in self-worth on an emotional level while simultaneously achieving a sense of consistency on a cognitive level, even as we migrate. In turn, the lifelong project of self-enhancement as "a core human motivation" (Murdock, 2016, p. 153), carries significant behavioural implications and is completely idiosyncratic; self-assessment, or self-confidence, levels and stability differ, also in regard to the complexity and organisation of self-conceptualisations. Likewise, domains encompassed within any self-concept and the emotional significance attributed to various aspects of the self have also been seen to vary. Thus, identity's qualities of uniqueness, along with its developmental features, continue to make it relevant across cultures while remaining elusive, further demanding empirically informed outlooks.

From a cultural psychological standpoint, we make trouble as we reify the 'self' and an 'identity', as these are culturally co-constructed, carried forward by interpretivists. To help

resolve this discord, Valsiner approaches the self as a semiotic frame that enables us to perceive unity in our processes of *selfing* through personal experiences (as cited in Murdock, 2016, p. 154). Attuned is the view that the self exists reflexively, emphasising the social significance in our acts of Valsiner's *selfing*. Therefore, through the many processes of experience, one develops a capacity to reflect upon one's self and therefrom, elucidate self-knowledge. From this vantage, the notion of self becomes utterly overtaken by the significance of self-knowledge and understanding—also eclipsing the boundaries of cognition.

Thus, another important premise about identity this research builds upon is a liberating feat that departs from the elusive reification of the self. It embraces a more pragmatic, but also theoretically interesting concentration on one's meaning-making processes and what Murdock (2016) highlights as one's innate motivation for self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) in an ongoing processual endeavour of striving and *selfing*. This does not preclude the existence of a self, but rather, it bridges our appreciation for rational acts of cognition and action. As a consequence, the research aims to amplify the space for alternate expressions of identity, being open to divergent or contradictory notions its non-Western participants may share. In turn, this transfigures the objectification of research participants—asylum-seekers and refugees—into fully legitimated subjects, holding full agency they can exert throughout the project's open framework, with knowledge that may reach beyond the Western-contextualised theoretical playground that characterised my own starting point. Thus, in line with Yang's (2006, p. 328) graceful recommendation:

> *The indigenous approach advocates that non-local investigators put aside their past training and experience and their habitual way of thinking and understanding things in order to examine local people from the native's point of view. Local investigators need to put aside any western frameworks they adopted while receiving their social-science training in western countries, and examine their own cultures from within.*

Glimpses into the Unfamiliar

As noted in the "legacies" section above, some perspectives overshadow a richness and depth of thought that have not easily entered more panoramic discussions about identity and *selfing*—signalling a potential enshrouding by hegemonic Euro-American, Western-centric and neo-colonialist structures that continue to marshal our attention. As Hwang (2011) succinctly explicated, there is an imbalance of knowledge production in the form of publications from WEIRD[3] (Henrich, 2020) societies, representing merely 12% of the global population. To counterpoise our considerations on the phenomenon, I will invite some non-Western notions of identity and the self to our general reflections, as a kind of glimpse of the sun's rays from deep within the allegorical cave (Plato, 2017) I found myself in.

Firstly, I draw upon the notable works of Nwoye (2006, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2022a), who has devoted much research and teachings on the distinctiveness of "African Psychology" and of the "African self", which he entwines with "Africanity", personalising a multilingual, multicultural people who have a collective experience of trauma, in need of a post-colonial, revitalised understanding of their psychological and cultural identities (Nwoye,

[3] Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD).

2022b). His multidimensional "synoptic theory" distinguishes eight co-penetrating dimensions that compose the African self[4] who, in turn, interpenetrates and is interpenetrated by the wider community and culture; importantly, "in which neither has full primacy" (Nwoye, 2006, p. 129). The African self's beliefs and traditions are therefore inextricably linked to deep-seeded cultural characteristics, such as the significance of the embodied self that extends to bones and dust from places of burial, an agentic component that seeks expansive growth and symbolic value, an interdependence or symbiosis of selves that includes the living and those who have passed—thus also comprising ancestral souls within the developing nature of the self—and the mutuality of self-fulfilment and community-fulfilment. He contends that there is an active part of the self that also seeks ongoing amelioration through imagination, meaningfulness and abstraction, through the suffusing of a *thick present* (italics from the original text, Nwoye, 2006, p. 133). The structural dimension of the African self refers to one's thinking, emotions and will, which are also integrated with one's head, heart and liver or stomach, considered as "seats of life-forces" (Nwoye, 2006, p. 137). This can also be present in one's clothes, touched objects or one's cut hair—thus, one must ensure items of the material and embodied self do not fall into the wrong hands (Kpanake, 2018; Nwoye, 2006). Complementing this perspective, Kpanake (2018) highlights three types of agency of the individual that express themselves in the realms of the social world, such as through the transmission of *Ubuntu*[5] values and collectiveness, the cosmic world, where spiritual forces such as God, ancestors and other divinities and spirits influence the individual in a symbiotic relationship, and the self. This has also been discussed in the context of indigenous healing and shamanic archetyping (Geils, 2011). Emphasis is placed on the interconnectedness and legitimacy of personhood to all three of these realms. African psychology's greatest challenge thus lies in bringing its epistemological, methodological, and theoretical perspectives to the fore, rooted in African culture and healing practices, and then applying them in ways that can address African therapeutics and healing rituals for the traumatised in the modern, postcolonial context (Geils, 2011; Nwoye, 2013, 2015, 2022a; Piper-Mandy & Rowe, 2010).

Turning our attention to the East, Asian psychology of the self clearly concurs a perceptible distinctiveness from the individual-centric, independent understanding of Western self-construal and identity. This is contrasted with a relational, interconnected understanding of the self, as well as the "no-self" (Yan-Qin et al., 2011), the "not-self" (Collins, 1982), and the nonself (Wang & Wang, 2021) emanating from Buddhist psychology. Suzuki (2005) goes into historical detail regarding the Japanese *jiga* (ego) and *jiko* (self), that remain distinct from Western research, expressed through a consciousness of "home, the country and mankind in general" (Suzuki, 2005, p. 118). Togashi (2009) describes a similar phenomenon through a Japanese "loosely but optimally" aesthetic, dynamic systems view that emphasises empathy and the interconnectedness of individuals with nature and time, explaining and enticing transformations: *mono no aware*. The nuance carries over to a unique understanding

[4] These constitute: the embodied self; the generative self; the communal self; the narratological self; the melioristic self; the structural self; the liminal self; and, the transcendental/spiritual self (Nwoye, 2006).

[5] *Ubuntu* is a Zulu word that represents a value system. It has slight variations in pronunciation, spelling and conceptualisation across African contexts, however, it "refers to African values of collective relatedness, interdependence, communality, group solidarity and conformity", intergenerationally transmitted, that points to personhood only ever existing through others—the condition of being human does not necessarily satisfy the requirements of personhood; one is seen as embedded within a social context and a community (Kpanake, 2018, p. 201). The relational orientation connotes past, present and future family, clan, and community, that extends to humanity as a whole.

of development, as "not a simple process of the realization of quantitative growth or magnification [rather, it] is a process that involves both acquisition (growth) and loss (decline) in association, throughout the life span" (Suzuki, 2005, p. 123). In the Buddhist paradigm, there exists a component to the self in addition to the conscious and subconscious that negates duality, resulting in uncovering the illusionary quality of the self. The unity between one's subjective and objective self subsequently occurs once one "forgets the self" by also negating language and other concepts of logicality. Thus, one can connect to the self through Zen-meditation, since "when we use Dualism to research 'self', we're just using 'self' to research 'self', and this can't succeed certainly" (Yan-Qin et al., 2011, p. 213). Correspondingly, Asian psychology's, including Confucian and Taoist notions of self-actualisation, can be viewed as more analogous to "self-annihilation", while interdependence (over independence) and holism (over dualism) are pursued (Sun, 2024) in a pluralistic understanding of the self. Wang and Wang (2021) elaborate on this through a ternary, yin-yang, "Taji" model of the self, characterising it as a "height psychology" that seeks to cultivate, enhance and amplify human nature, rather than a "depth psychology" they portray for Freudian and Jungian analytical concerns of the unconscious.

When considering an Arabic perspective, one must necessarily consider an Islamic understanding of the self and identity, as most of the populations within those regions adhere to Islam. Moreover, Muslims currently account for 2 billion of the world's total population (around 25%; Statista, 2023), exceeded only by Christians (World Population Review, 2024), so a more globally informed psychological understanding of the self, recognising its principles is required. Accordingly, a number of scholars have elaborated on the multi-levelled psychospiritual Islamic identity, and how it is guided by and aligns with Qur'anic teachings, much of it rooted in Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali's (1058–1111) theoretical work (Abu-Raiya, 2012; Kaplick & Skinner, 2017; Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Skinner, 2010). This includes four functions of the soul, known as the psyche, or inner self, being the *nafs*[6] (lower self, ego, desires and instinctual self), *a'ql* (reasoning centre, intellect, mind, consciousness), the *qalb* (morality, physical and ethereal heart), and the *ruh* (spirit, life-force, pure, higher self, where God's imprint resides). If dissonance arises between any of these elements, it is the *qalb* that is most at risk, requiring a realignment of the soul with its innate, sound nature, or *fitrah*. The sought-after ideal is an expression of health and balance, where the *qalb* is open to *ruh*, directs *a'ql* and together, they lead the lower *nafs*. This places the heart at the centre of all conscious effort, as "Only those who come before Allah with a pure heart will be saved" (The Qur'an 2024, 26:89), and thus, are at peace. Islamic mindfulness of thoughts is therefore vital for one's overall health as well as for the purification and peace of one's *qalb*. Consequently, there is no clear division between the mind, body and soul. Instead, Islamic psychology views the self as an integrated whole, where spiritual practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God, God-consciousness) is essential to one maintaining balance and control over the *nafs*. One's main objective is to achieve a state of *nafs al mutmainah* (serene *nafs*, tranquil psyche), realised when one is in complete surrender to the *qalb* and entirely incorporated into the worship of God, thus, in a state of harmony. Rothman and Coyle (2018) have unified the nature, structure, stages and dynamic development of the soul in an empirically-grounded theoretical model that also takes into account the innate goodness of all human beings (*tawhid*, divine imprint on the soul) that strives in the *dunya* (temporal world) towards *nafs*

[6] Since the original language is Arabic, the English spelling of each of the words in italics in this paragraph will slightly differ across publications.

al mutmainah. Abu-Raiya (2012) acknowledges the similarities between Western psychological principles, but highlights challenges based on Judeo-Christian assumptions, as do Haque and colleagues (2016) and Skinner (2019), among others, particularly the lack of attention paid to the spiritual component of the self (Skinner, 2010). For example, instinctual drives arising from the *nafs* are regarded as an intrinsic component of the Islamic self, rather than as something that must be eradicated. Instead of advocating for their suppression, which is viewed negatively, the focus is on managing these drives in a constructive manner (Skinner, 2019). Further characterising the Islamic self, Abu-Raiya (2012) distinguishes it as one that: is based on creationism; is structural, with varying parts that have specific functions; is dynamic and in constant interplay, with opposite forces vying for control, that may result in psychological conflict; is topographic as its constituent elements exist in varying levels of awareness; is holistic as individuals struggle to unify the whole in balance; and has the potential of a higher level of existence. Finally, in Islam, all believers are considered members of a distinct community known as the *Ummah*, which transcends social, cultural, economic, and demographic boundaries, within which all collectively uphold shared beliefs, values, abilities, goals, and responsibilities (Briki & Amara, 2017).

In South America, the psychology of the self and Latin American identity is also multifaceted, requiring ongoing reflexive considerations towards colonial legacies, and hegemonic, Western scientific paradigms. Some add that there is a need to advocate for an epistemic shift that can justly incorporate local historical, political, and ethical dimensions and their ontological alternatives (Morales, 2021). Solis (2000) adds to this by proposing a psychohistoric approach which requires spatiotemporal recontextualisation in geohistorical and cultural matrices, while emphasising the importance of human rights and democratic values in identity (re)formation. For example, the self-perception of ethnicity in Latin America is deeply entwined with persisting oppressive notions from colonial and early-post-colonial elite miscegenation,[7] further shaped by a complex interplay of genomic ancestry, socio-economic status, and phenotypic traits, which influence aspects of ethnic identity and how groups navigate social policies (Paschetta et al., 2021).

From an anthropological perspective, Wright (2023) highlights an intensifying paradox between the global rise of secularism and disenchantment that evolved alongside an unexpected relevance of religion and spirituality. In contemporary South American shamanisms, he explored the ontology of *metanoia*[8] by employing Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self,[9] in addressing what may be regarded as "spiritual states and skills […] connecting to otherwise inaccessible cosmological regions and beings, crucial to the community's balance and wellbeing […] which might allow the individual—and/or the collective—to know, manage and control culturally defined existential thresholds, through the intersubjective participation of humans and non-humans" (Wright, 2023, p. 28). Practices call into question dominant Christian and Western scientific worldviews as locals foster direct connections with the numinous—the supernatural, divine, aesthetic sense of spirituality—through ritual practices, such as through the Qom/Toba indigenous shamanism from

[7] The authors specify that in this period, the miscegenation referred to "whitening" the population, rather than segregation (Paschetta et al., 2021, p. 4).

[8] A profound, usually spiritual transformation (www.dictionary.com); a transformative change of heart, especially in relation to a spiritual conversion (www.merriam-webster.com).

[9] Technologies of the self, "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations acted on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18).

Argentina's Chaco region and Brazil's Creole, Caboclo, indigenous, ayahuasca[10] shamanism of the Santo Daime religion (Wright, 2023). In his empirically informed understanding, these cultures encompass a wider notion of the self that embraces the numinous, in need of greater, locally-relevant understanding.

Furthermore, there is a deeply rooted Latino cultural value of *simpatía*[11] (Acevedo et al., 2020; Salvador et al., 2025) that permeates Latin American societies, wherein individuals exhibit a paradoxical blend of self-enhancement and interdependence, where interdependence becomes self-enhancing. Similar to Krys and colleagues (2022), Salvador and colleagues (2025) mark this in stark distinction from the more individualistic self-enhancement observed in Westerners, that is also expressed much more emotionally in comparison to other collectivistic societies, e.g. Confucian East Asian. Subtle links to Arab societies were noted in this regard, which could potentially be linked to the high heterogeneity of the population, as well as socio-economic disparity (Salvador et al., 2025), or other factors such as colonial histories, religious heritages and the organisation of society (Krys et al., 2022). Thus, the Latin American *simpatía*, a well desired part of the Latin American identity, embodies various expressions of the personal self that are used to build, as well as strengthen, social ties (Salvador et al., 2025). This counters a binary view of collectivism versus individualism, as Latin American societies foster independent self-construals alongside collectivist values, and thus, a wider lens of appreciation of psychology and culture are called for (Krys et al., 2022). The complexity is further explored in Latin American social psychology, and a more generalised pattern of engagement with the global (traditionally, Western-inspired), highlighting the need for a distinct Latin American psychological framework that addresses historical, political, and ethical dimensions (Montero, 2010; Morales, 2021).

Through a final lens of non-Western perspectives of the self and identity, we turn our attention to deeply rooted, often silenced, predominantly colonised, indigenous populations who have had to overcome immense adversity in preserving and revitalising their authentic identities. Indeed, the persistent significance of historical trauma and colonisation regarding the self in these societies cannot be underestimated. Dreadfully, there exists a dearth of academic knowledge, also, marginally authored by natives; signalling an imbalance that is in critical need of reshifting (Grincheva, 2013; Hayward et al., 2021; Knopf, 2015). The cumulative wounding that has been experienced by native populations, with ongoing effects across generations, continues to create obstacles within communities, as well as inter-contextually (Gall et al., 2021; Robertson, 2014), referred to as "soul wounds" (Thornton, 2020). There remains a genuine challenge in understanding, appreciating and adopting approaches to knowledge whose self-determined, legitimate transmissions have unfolded through embodied, traditionally oral (Moran, 2019; Piercey-Lewis, 2014) and experiential flumes—in depth, and in authority. The evolution of indigenous storytelling from oral traditions to written and digital forms, draws from many personal and communal histories, reflecting dynamic narrative traditions that critique and counter colonial histories so as to offer new possibilities for cultural continuance (Sweet Wong, 2023; Wood, 2017).

[10] Ayahuasca is a beverage that is indigenous to South America, traditionally used by indigenous cultures and healers, called *ayahuasqueros*, in spiritual ceremonies, containing sections of the *banisteriopsis caapi* vine and leaves of the *psychotria viridis* among other plant-based ingredients that can vary, according to local traditions (www.ayahuascafoundation.org).

[11] To create warm, social interactions that exude emotional positivity while avoiding conflict as well as overt negativity (Acevedo et al., 2020).

To more capably expand on this, Tina Ngata[12] unfolds the concept of *Mātauranga Māori*[13] and its symbiotic relationship with the Māori self,[14] as it infers notions of knowledge, including self-knowledge. Its richness is evident through its incommunicable, transcendental and empyrieal character, as much as it is holistic and omnipresent, connecting the spiritual with the psychological, intellectual, and physical—like,

> *…indigeneity […] is the living, breathing, thinking, doing, manifestation of knowledge that comes out of the soils and out of the waters that surround you, wherever you are. […] And so this way of knowing, being, doing and relating that has grown out of the soils, that manifests in the way that you speak, that manifests in the way that you name your children, that manifests in the way that you build your 'whare', that manifests in the way that you pass on your education or transmit your knowledge… All of those things are shaped through 'Mātauranga-a-hapū' that are contextual to the 'taiao'*[15] (Tūturu NZ, 2023).

Through such exegeses, a sense of fusion between the Māori and the land emerges, also between the historical and contemporary, highlighting a continuity and interconnection of self (Rameka, 2018), consciousness and unconsciousness, culture and the natural environment, and all they encompass. Exactly through such framings can one begin to appreciate how and why 'independence' may be perceived as maladaptive in Māori and other native cultures, and how the nuance of meaning in relation to every concept is important—too much independence fractures critical knowledge connections that are considered vital to life in the Māori context (Gall et al., 2021). This is also fostered through cultural practices and values, such as through *whanaungatanga* (family relationships) and collective responsibilities, a sense of belonging within *whānau* (family), *hapū* (subtribe), and *iwi* (tribe, related to the sacred "bones" of ancestors), contributing to wellness and building strength through connectedness (Rameka, 2018), also evidenced in Māori men's experiences through positive self-construals and enhanced *mana* (power/authority) (Rua et al., 2017).

From a Native American perspective, many, like Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998), have demonstrated how colonisation trauma has been compounded, having a collective, pervasive impact that still manifests through younger generations who have not directly experienced the trauma they have embodied, yet exhibit. Dee Brown's (1987)

[12] Tina Ngata is a Māori advocate, author and researcher, based in Aotearoa New Zealand (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tina_Ngata).

[13] From the Māori Dictionary (Moorfield, 2024), *mātauranga* is a noun, denoting: 1) knowledge, wisdom, understanding, skill; 2) education; and/or 3) a knowledgeable person, a sage, scholar, intellectual or academic. Related, is the term *mātauranga Māori*, a noun, meaning "Māori knowledge—the body of knowledge originating from Māori ancestors, including the Māori world view and perspectives, Māori creativity and cultural practices". From Tūturu NZ (2023), Prof. Dr. Rangiānehu (Rangi) Mātāmua ONZM highlights the fact that both words—*mātauranga* and *Māori*—are not traditional words, but rather, developed "as responses to colonisation, actually. So, Māori is not a term that we called ourselves. […] *Mātauranga* is not a traditional Māori word for knowledge. We generally use *kōrero* or *wānanga*. […] I'm not saying it's a bad term. […] They are two modern words, and a modern phrase, but it's reflective of a much older and deeper understanding of how we understand our world, ourselves, and everything in our world".

[14] For a multidimensional model of Māori identity, investigated through a quantitative study that was created for Māori, by Māori, see Greaves et al. (2017).

[15] *Taiao* is interlinked with a Māori worldview, encompassing the natural world that contains and surrounds us—the *whenua* (land), *wai* (water), *āhuarangi* (climate) and *koiora* (living beings)—referring to the interconnection of people and nature in an eternal relationship of respect, reciprocity and interdependence (Taiao Ora, 2024).

"*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*" is a powerful testament to the devastating effects of the late-nineteenth century's American expansionist project in the American West. In Canada, First Nation, Inuit and Métis children also attended colonising residential (Christian) schools from the late nineteenth century up until 1996 (Miller, 2024), for which there is a 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (de Bruin, 2020). Greenlanders must also contend with negotiating and contestations of identity in our present day, having survived Danish colonialism, however, not yet having officially reclaimed their nation.

For Native Americans, identity is often constructed in tensions between traditional tribal values and the dominant white culture, as explored through self-narratives that reveal the struggles of living between these worlds (Wood, 2017). For example, the oral histories compiled in "*Always a People*" emphasise the resilience of Woodland Indians, who maintain a strong sense of community and cultural identity despite historical displacements and cultural suppression (Kohn & Montell, 1997). The diversity of Native American self-narratives is further illustrated in Arlene B. Hirschfelder's (1995) collection, which spans 200 years and includes voices from various tribes, revealing the richness and diversity of Native American societies. Equally, the Inuit self-concept is influenced by traditional values and societal norms, which prioritise collective well-being and harmony with nature, across time, where the present is the most experienced, while ancestors' influence on the self suffuses time (Wihak & Merali, 2005).

Despite heterogeneities, Native peoples maintain a collective sense of origins and a primordial essence that is central to their identity, collectively resisting postmodern critiques of essentialism. The essence they so naturally refer to is ethereal, communal and realised through a symbiotic relationship with the land and a sense of belonging, challenging constructionist models of identity that deny a pure originary of self (Tripathy, 2006). Native peoples' identities are, therefore, not static and are also deeply intertwined with the legacy of colonialism, which has necessitated a renegotiation of self-identification and cultural expression to resist imposed identities and reclaim authentic self-identities and worldviews (Moran, 2019). Conceptions of the self are relational, viewing mind and identity as products of communal storytelling and relationships rather than individual constructs. Mehl-Madrona and Pennycook (2009) argue that this perspective aligns more closely with Eastern philosophies than with Western psychological models, with the exception of dialogical self theories and systems theory. This alignment explains why practices such as ceremony, ritual, community interventions and talking circles are more compatible with Aboriginal self-work than conventional Western approaches. Moreover, there is an emancipatory struggle to reclaim the self that altogether defines identity work within these contexts.

Non-Western perspectives[16] on identity and the self converge around a shared emphasis on the interconnectedness between the individual and the collective, framing the self as relational, communal, and often spiritual. These approaches reject the fragmented, individualistic self that dominates Western theories, offering instead a holistic vision that integrates the individual with community, land, ancestors, and the cosmos. Whether in African, Indigenous, Islamic, Latin American, or Eastern traditions, the self is not understood in isolation but in constant dialogue with the world—its values, histories, and relationships. These perspectives insist on an identity that is fluid and evolving, challenging the Western

[16] Excluded from these are non-Western researchers who have received their education in Western institutions and/or have adopted Western theories without having contested them from their native and fellow-native perspective.

notion of a fixed, isolated individual that is ever bound by the present and an orientation towards the future.

Moreover, although marginalisation also characterises these diverse traditions, their resistance to colonial narratives, their fundamental rejection of Cartesian dualism and the Western ideals of individualism embedded in Judeo-Christian frameworks also unites them. They unanimously call for more comprehensive appreciations of identity that can authentically capture nuanced experiences and the cultural contexts of the populations they seek to understand. Non-Western perspectives propose a unified self, interconnected with others, nature, and the spiritual realm. These visions resist the moral absolutism and separation that have historically defined Western understandings of identity, encouraging, instead, a conception of the self that is dynamic, and relationally embedded in broader social, cultural, and spiritual contexts. Far from being mere alternatives, non-Western frames act as potent forms of resistance. They are shaped by historical struggles, colonial and neo-colonial experiences, and the ongoing reclamation of culture and collective identities. What emerges is a more expansive, more inclusive conception of the self—one that recognises the complexity of human experience and the profound interconnections that forge it. These distinctions thus extend beyond the theoretical; they call to reimagine identity in ways that transcend limitations imposed by Western epistemologies to offer a more flexible, collective, and spiritually attuned understanding of who we are by redefining how the self is understood (ontologically) as well as how knowledge about the self is constructed and validated epistemologically.

It is therefore our position that critically engaging with perspectives, directly, from the seat of the *knowers* (Boochani et al., 2020) is the only way forward in bridging that enduring gap and of enriching understandings. Through such streams of cultivating theoretical (re)considerations within psychology and promoting pluralistic approaches that are unbounded—disenthralled—may we liberate our perspectives from psychological colonialist auras that control, if not delimit identity work, particularly in multicultural and non-Western contexts. Furthermore, such endeavours can illuminate the unique methods of self-conception and community dynamics present in various non-Western and native settings, thereby challenging hegemonic narratives and fostering more inclusive future discourses. Ultimately, a shift towards non-Western methodologies is crucial for addressing the epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007, 2016) inherent in the prevailing spaces of psychological research and for validating the lived experiences of underrepresented communities.

Selfing Our Way Forward

From a freshly, non-Western-informed, augmented, perspective on identity research and psychology of the self, several implications have ensued regarding the research I have undertaken and how participants would ultimately become engaged. Firstly, embracing a fluid, processual view of identity work and abandoning reification became a necessity. Hence, in exploring how asylum-seekers and refugees make sense of their identity and 'who they are' in their new, post-refuge country of residence, methods that would encourage *selfing* processes in a cross-cultural, multilingual research context were selected.

The intended meaning of *selfing,* as employed in this research, leads from Valsiner's early use of the term (1997 and 2007[17]). In its original application, *selfing* describes autogamy (self-fertilisation, especially in the form of self-pollination). However, it cross-pollinated into the field of psychology, taking on various nuanced expressions, briefly reviewed in this section so to more precisely discern the meaning intended within my project.

Selfing made its appearance in Baerveldt and Voestermans' (1996) work regarding anorexia nervosa and their use of the terms "selfing device" to denote the body as a producer of meaning, and the "selfing process" as the bodily skills employed in one's participation in the "life-world". Kempen (1996) then employed a *selfing* perspective that considered non-Western critiques of psychological perspectives. His objective was to use the processual to enhance Cartesian dualisms of the self (mind and body) with a social constructivist approach, in search of universal self-features. In turn, he proposed a revisiting of the self through a "wholly corporeal imagination", where meaning originates in the body and thereafter emerges into consciousness.

A little later, the term was employed in a study on contested identities of homicidal victims' family survivors, whereby *selfing* referred to the ongoing semiotic construction of the self in examinations of post-mortem processes and identity reclamation, through which people undergo *selfing* and *reselfing* (Martin, 2011). Also, although undefined in her study of immigrant children's experiences in Cyprus, Theodorou (2011) referred to *selfing* as a parallel process to discriminatory *othering*. Similarly, Wang and Dai (2011) employed *selfing* and *othering* as dyadic, juxtaposed, interdependent processes, specific to *ingrouping* and *outgrouping* in their study concerning stereotyping.

Almost a decade later, the term resurfaced in Meini's (2020) work on causal pathways to psychological suffering. She employed the notion of *selfing,* "really more like a verb; it might be called 'selfing' or 'I-ing', the fundamental process of making a self out of experience" (McAdams, 1996, p. 302 cited in Meini, 2020, p. 114). Then, in more recent work by Summers-Effler (2021), *selfing* was used as an integrating notion of pragmatism, phenomenology and brain science that is conceptualised in a multiprocessing theory of the self. There, she used *selfing* to consider "somatic, temporal, emotional, and symbolic information gathered from experience to anticipate unrolling contexts […highlighting] body, time and emotions", beyond cognitive processes (2021, p. 91). Parallels between these two researchers' and non-Westerner fluid perspectives of self, are noticeable.

Somewhat more specifically, Oyler and colleagues' (2022) then utilised *selfing* as a construct to signal one's over-identification with a social role (e.g. friend, parent, student), for which they developed and validated the psychometric "Selfing Scale" that enables the measurement of degree of identification in the contexts of the Buddhist 'not-self' and the self of Western psychology, to be extended to other contexts. Moreover, Stapleton and colleagues undertook a synthesis of "self-as-context" (McHugh & Stapleton, 2021) followed by examinations of *selfing* that occurs after traumatic brain injury (Stapleton et al., 2024), analysed within relational frame theory and acceptance and commitment therapy research.

One non-Western use of *selfing* that emerged from this section's concise scoping review has been offered by Gülerce (2014). She critically examined hegemonic approaches to the reification of the self, thus, introduced *selfing* to "accentuate the moral, historical and sociopolitical aspects of dialogical self-reflexivity and psychic, microgenetic, ontogenetic and sociogenetic processes" (p. 244). She then made a further distinction between the self (a noun, an entity) and *selfing* (phenomena) as "an abstraction of an indivisible flow process that is experientially developmental", both a conscious and unconscious endeavour

[17] As cited in Murdock (2016).

to maintaining the singular history of the potentially reflective analytical unit, that simultaneously fosters a sense of goodness, uniqueness, and continuity; "an introvert and *private narration* towards an illusory cohesion, psychic autonomy and singularity, and hence, inevitably draws boundaries to differentiate its 'owned' experience and history from the non-self" (italics from original text, Gülerce, 2014, p. 245).

Arguably, any of the applications of *selfing* from the studies cited above could fit the purposes of my study, particularly those embracing a wider and multifaceted implication. However, I have chosen to respect the non-Western request to primarily consider participants' own perspectives, free from a priori Western theoretical impressions. Thus, I mean to use the term *selfing* in its most simplified meaning, as a verb that coexists in relation to a deeply personal, reflexive experience of one's self (personally identified and idiosyncratically experienced), in a dynamic flow of moments. Further precision or characterising of meaning or sensing of *selfing*—e.g. doing, making, understanding, creating, (re)forming, etc.—would be derived directly from the participants of this study, acknowledging it as "a highly private flow of cultural, moral or spiritual sophistication" (Gülerce, 2014, p. 253). I fear that any more precision in this regard could risk eroding the differences we can uncover of the self, in all its uniqueness. Here, the aim is to privilege the lived, authentic and individual realms of the study's participants.

Research Approaches and Methods

For my research, I adopted a phronetic (Tracy, 2020), phenomenological (Van Maanen, 1988), and case study (Stake, 1995) approach, using three main data sources: life histories (Mandelbaum, 1982), thematic open interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), and artefact-mediated interviews, along with identity collages created by participants. The phronetic approach focuses on practical wisdom, theory-building, and guiding social practices, emphasising iterative reflexivity (Tracy, 2020, p. 210), which allowed me to adapt my focus and methodology throughout the research process. Initially, my study focused on trust-building, integration, and identity formation; however, as I moved forward, I recognised the need to centre the exploration on identity, alone. This led to the incorporation of an artefact-mediated component in interviews, where participants were asked to bring meaningful artefacts for discussion. However, participants disclosed that they struggled to find items that represented their sense of self. Upon reflection, this might have been due to the significant material losses they had endured,[18] which in turn, prompted another iteration in my research: incorporating the use of collage-making.

[18] Participants had indeed fled from their countries of origin, with minimal personal belongings, embarking on asylum-seeking processes as independent adults. In doing so, they left behind homes, businesses, meaningful objects and irreplaceable valuables. This resulted in significant material losses, with treasured possessions either abandoned or lost permanently. For instance, Zahra has but one remaining, wallet-sized picture of her mother from her pre-flight life in Iraq. All physical and digital copies of personal and family pictures were destroyed when her house was seized by the military. Similarly, following an assassination attempt where he was shot in the head twice, Osaze was left for dead in the streets of Nigeria, regaining consciousness in a hospital, from where he fled. Furthermore, participants spent extended periods in temporary housing in their new country of residence, in Luxembourg, often in shared spaces within 'camps', awaiting a decision on their refugee status, also barring them from employment. The temporariness of their situation further compounded their sense of loss, while challenging their experience of personal space and their attachment to 'things' and belongings, as well as their capacity to acquire.

The collage method aligns with decolonial, feminist refugee epistemology by prioritising participants' voices and perspectives, shifting the research focus from refugees as mere objects of study to the intimate, lived experiences of these individuals. By offering a non-verbal, creative space for the exploration and expressions of identities, as experienced by participants—often shaped by trauma, displacement, and complex cultural intersections—the method directly responds to the limitations of traditional verbal interviews, especially when working with participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The challenges of conducting interviews in non-native languages, such as English and French in this study, heightened the potential for misunderstandings, unintentional marginalisation, and the reduction of participants' experiences to literal and incomplete interpretations. Instead, collages enabled for more meaningful engagement with participants' experiences, drawing upon multimodal resources to express what might otherwise remain unspoken or inaccessible through traditional language-based methods. With its non-linear and visual nature, the method reflects the fluidity of participants' relationship to time and experience, allowing for a more dynamic and holistic articulation of identity that moves beyond the constraints of linear storytelling. This feature is especially crucial in phenomenological studies, where we seek out the richness of lived experience, captured in a way that honours its complexity and temporal nuances.

Moreover, collage-making as a research practice acknowledges and legitimises participants as co-stewards in research processes and as co-creators of knowledge, validating their insights and experiences while counteracting the marginalising tendencies of conventional research. The arts-based method provides a platform for participants to engage in *selfing* in ways that reflect their personal, cultural, and social realities, liberating them from the constraints of Western-centric modes of expression and conceptualisation. In doing so, it fosters a participatory, empowering pathway that facilitates the articulation of complex, often unspoken experiences, and the exploration of memories that may have been repressed or overlooked, while simultaneously offering a space for ongoing, deep, self-reflection and connection with parts of the self that are often neglected, inaccessible or forgotten (De Rijke, 2024; Polanyi, 2009).

In post-collage interviews, the sensemaking process, as described by Weick (1979), proved integral to understanding how participants interpreted their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them. The iterative nature of the interview-collage-interview process invited participants to engage in extensive reflection, prompting them to ask, 'How can I know what I think until I see what I mean, and then see what I say about what I mean?' This "outside-in" approach prioritised participants' outward expressions of thought and action, thus allowing for a more authentic understanding and personal examination of their individual identity formation realities (Tracy, 2020, p. 38).

The collage method's ontological characteristics—its participatory, non-linear and non-hierarchical nature—made it a powerful tool for epistemological inquiry, creating a space where participants could simultaneously author and guide the knowledge being produced, anchoring their voices as central. By securing a focus on them in all research considerations, the method equally provided an opportunity for the reclamation of agency, a key theme in decolonial feminist thought. Indeed, the approach aligns with the epistemological values of respect, reciprocity, and shared power, which are essential for fostering an ethical and inclusive research process. These principles ensured that participants' perspectives were not only listened to, but would become literally visible in shaping the knowledge created. In this way, collage-making challenges traditional research paradigms, privileging the embodied, emotional, and subjective elements of identity, reflecting non-Western precepts,

to offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of the lived experience that can be shared with a wider audience.

Overall, the dynamic, iterative process of engagement through collage-making integrated cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and embodied dimensions in sensemaking, facilitating a more encompassing relationship with ineffable narratives that call upon a higher order of understanding and self-reflection. Through this process, participants were able to construct and express composite identity features that transcended the limitations of language, and more linear approaches to knowledge creation, offering new insights into the complexities of their lived experiences. The method enabled a deep, multifaceted exploration of identity that extended beyond the Western*ly* familiar, traditional, transactional exchange between the research and the researched, reflecting the complex, interconnected nature of *selfing*.

Show Me Who You Are and Tell Me Who You Are: Interpreting Their Own Collages[19]

Farid[20]

Farid's collage (Fig. 1) is the only one that features a single image, which is nevertheless a complex composition, depicting a Mediterranean landscape with a prominent, old, gnarly, leafy olive tree in the foreground that is explosively growing out of a rocky hillside overlooking the vastness of the Mediterranean Sea. For him, the olive tree, a deeply rooted symbol of Mediterranean culture, represents resilience and growth, particularly as it is seen, growing from rocky, infertile ground—reflecting Farid's personal growth in the face of adversity. The sea is his place of refuge, connecting his past to his future, representing his nostalgia for Syria and Turkey: "I miss the sea […] When I had the problems, I always go to the seaside […] I speak with the sea for hours […] With the sea, you can explain whatever you want" he reflected, highlighting the solace it provided him during challenging times and his profound emotional connection to it, transcending words.

Farid's vision for the future is rooted in simplicity and self-sufficiency, a life where he can cultivate his own food and live in harmony with nature. He expressed a longing to escape the complexities of capitalism, preferring a life closer to that of his grandfather, who lived off the land, free from modern distractions like Netflix or social media. "…this complicated capitalism system I hate. Here you lose all your values with this capitalism system. […] This capitalism, like you should have competence with everybody. I don't want to be in this system," he declared. His collage serves as a metaphor for this transformation, symbolising his desire for a more authentic and fulfilling existence.

The rocky hillside in the image also represents stability and strength, reflecting Farid's resilience as he builds his life and business in his new country of residence. He acknowledged the changes he has made, from getting married to opening a restaurant in a business partnership, and his commitment to continuous growth. Farid's collage thus, encapsulates

[19] Please see Appendix 1 for the participants' brief "Profiles in Resilience," for additional contextualisation.

[20] Arabic pseudonym, carrying the connotation of "unique", "rare", "singular", "precious", and "renewed".

his past, present, and future, intertwining his heritage with his aspirations for a life that is simple, grounded, and connected to nature. It reflects his evolving resilience, balancing challenges and growth while striving for authenticity and freedom.

Anastasia[21]

Anastasia's collage (Fig. 2) reveals a deeply personal reflection on her values, experiences and future, crafted with care to convey "who I am". At the collage's top is an image symbolising her beloved cat, with whom she shared a five-day journey across the continent:

> *And after war, I take my cat, because my [Kateryna[22]], my cat, this is for me like children. I love too much. If die my children, I die also. I take this girl, […] I cry. Yes, I no stop cry. Every day I cry because [Kateryna] also cry.*

Her cat is not just a pet but a cherished family member who gave her strength to carry forward with finding adequate accommodation for her and employment to feed her.

The ocean, represented by large waves near her eyes, embodies her outlook on the future, capturing both the strength and tranquillity she strives for in life. "I, like ocean or sea, have character," she explained, connecting the ocean's dynamic nature with her own spirit. Positioned at her lips, the cacti reflect her admiration for resilience and individuality. Preferring cacti to traditional flowers, she sees in them a strength to thrive in challenging environments—a metaphor for her own endurance.

Stars and the night sky are another crucial component, symbolising her curiosity and wonder. She is captivated by the possibility of other life in the universe and reflects on humanity's small yet significant position within it. Lastly, dandelions breaking through asphalt resonate as a symbol of life's persistence, representing how, "If flowers from down come, want live, and the people also like this," pushing through adversity.

Zahra[23]

Zahra's collage (Fig. 3) is a rich reflection of her life's journey, personal values and achievements. She shares a deep bond with cats, describing them as "so friendly" and noting how they seem to recognise her as a kindred spirit, overall representing independence, resilience, and intelligence. The lion symbolises her son's courage and strong sense of justice. She recalled how, even at three years old, her son displayed remarkable bravery when he stood up to children being cruel to animals, showing a profound sense of compassion and righteousness. The palm tree, abundant in her hometown of Basra, is a symbol of resilience, standing strong "whatever happens" despite harsh conditions. Zahra likened it to her own experiences of surviving adversity, quoting the poet Nizar Quabbani's[24] words, "Even if they are dying, they are still standing". The wave, with its unpredictable nature,

[21] Ukrainian pseudonym, meaning "she who shall rise up again", evoking notions of "resurrection".

[22] A pseudonym for her cat. Kateryna is a popular, female, Ukrainian name that is also very much used for cats. It means "pure".

[23] Arabic pseudonym with Islamic significance, meaning "beautiful", "radiant", and "brilliant", often associated with the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

[24] Nizar Tawfiq Qabbani (1923–1998) was a Syrian diplomat, writer and highly prolific political poet (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nizar_Qabbani).

represents life's ebbs and flows, bringing both challenges and rewards. She views it as a force that "brings everything," much like the lessons and experiences life presents. The open door is a symbol of Zahra's openness to new possibilities, reflecting her belief in freedom and growth, a gateway to "new worlds".

The Luxembourgish passport signifies freedom and control over her own life: "With my passport, I can travel everywhere, and I feel free", reflecting on the empowerment it provides compared to her past experiences with oppressive bureaucracy—"I had before one of the worst passports ever in the world". Her car represents autonomy, ownership and personal achievement, with Zahra proudly stating, "I love my car because it is my car". Moreover, black tea plays a grounding role in her life, symbolising moments of clarity and reflection and overall well-being, "I need to drink tea to understand the world". The golden eagle further represents majestic strength, and "high dignity," in how it soars alone, reflecting her own desires and aspirations.

Lastly, the colour pink in Zahra's collage represents optimism, peace, and nurturing love. "It is optimistic. It is full of life," adding a layer of gentleness and hope to the more potent symbols in her collage.

Osaze[25]

The most striking aspect of Osaze's collage (Fig. 4) is the vibrant colour. For him, yellow is tied to the core of his motivation, reflecting the simplicity and pure creativity of his early years as well as the morning sun of each day: "It represents why I get up in the morning… yellow for me reflects the idea of childhood".

The anchor represents his sense of stability and groundedness, both in providing support for others and in staying centred amidst life's challenges throughout deeply turbulent years:

> *So at some point, I realised that I really had no […] constants in my life. […] I was moving around the world, you know, because of the situation. But at the same time, I had me, you know. I have my body. I have my mind. I had myself to carry around. So at some point, I realised that that was the most important thing. […] and ask myself, within, "What can I do to make sure that I'm of sane mind, and I can achieve whatever things the day brings to me?"*

The owl, aligned with Osaze's eye in the collage, represents his value of freedom and independence, reinforcing his belief in self-determination despite external pressures. The leopard and mudfish reflect Osaze's adaptability and survival instincts, embodying strength, along with an ability to navigate between different realms: "Whether it's the realm of the dark or the realm of death, or the realm of life or the realm of professional career, you know, in my corporate job, and also the realm of art". He noted that these animals, with their remarkable resilience, reflect who he is: "They exist in almost every part of the planet […] incredible survival ability".

[25] Edo pseudonym, meaning "God's power" or "God's authority", signally strength and authority that is derived from the divine.

The Benin bronzes symbolise Osaze's connection to his heritage and early artistic influences. These artworks shaped his journey and remain integral to his creative expression: "Art, even to this day, plays an important role in my life". Finally, books in the collage signify Osaze's commitment to learning and expanding his perspective. They are a means of connecting with others; thoughts and histories, enriching his understanding of the world: "Books allow me to enter into the minds of other people". Together, these symbols paint a portrait of Osaze, grounded in his past, evolving in his present, and continually striving for personal growth.

Asmahan[26]

Asmahan's collage (Fig. 5) is composed of various symbols, each reflecting significant aspects of her life. The metaphor of an arch made of stones represents the foundational elements that support her identity, with faith as the keystone. She believes that "everything in your life is done for your good", and her faith has given her the strength to face challenges directly, embodying resilience. The other stones she included are her "husband" (life partner), "of course my family," "work" and "real friends"—"So, you see, these are all connected together, but this really shapes my life".

Her husband, further symbolised by the elephant, represents her security and stability: "… really a mix of everything. […] you feel him like he's stable, he has his presence […] still firm, […] and like you know that you can lean on him", likening him to a creature that provides both protection and comfort. This metaphor highlights their deep connection, emphasising his quiet strength. For friendship, she chose the tree of life, also representing family, symbolising the support of those around her, with deep roots that nourish and connect, intertwined with the sustenance from the colour and diversity of the tall, leafy branches.

The image of rain in sunlight symbolises balance for her, reflecting her belief that replenishing oneself leads to growth, which then impacts those around her: "Nourish your life because it will reflect on your personality, and then it will affect your family". The light green colour also symbolises vitality and life.

Finally, the image of a beach at dusk, with bioluminescent waves and stars, represents the foundation of her family. The beach symbolises peace and stability, with the stars reflecting the enduring support her family provides, even in their absence: "Because they really shine. So they are there, you know? Even if you do not see them". The collage thus beautifully intertwines her faith, family, love, and relationships, each symbol reinforcing her resilience and the interconnectedness of these elements in her life.

Fahad[27]

Fahad's identity collage (Fig. 6) symbolises his journey, emotions and outlook, encapsulating the complexities of his life as an undocumented resident in Luxembourg.[28] The bottom section features an old olive tree, representing his roots and connection to his homeland of

[26] Arabic pseudonym, connoting "divine beauty", "exalted", "powerful" and "smart".

[27] Arabic pseudonym, meaning "panther", "leopard", "cheetah", and "lynx" evoking stealth, courage, and grace.

[28] Despite being in Luxembourg for more than eight years, having married a long-term resident since immigrating, and having fathered two children with his wife, Fahad has been denied asylum and has been asked (not yet forced) to leave the country in order to apply for family reunification from his country of origin—which he fled from in 2016.

Fig. 1 Farid

Fig. 2 Anastasia

Fig. 3 Zahra

Fig. 4 Osaze

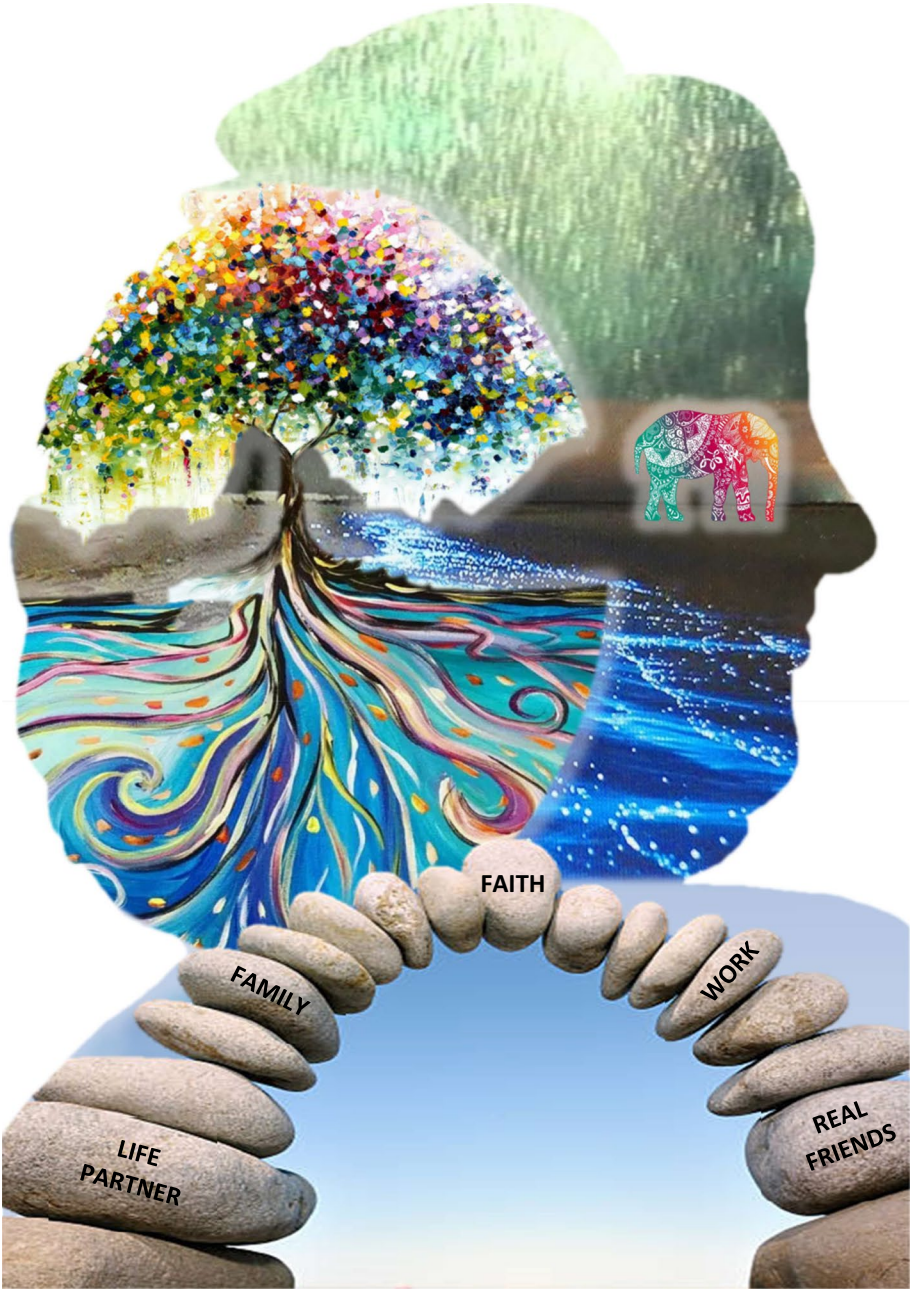

Fig. 5 Asmahan

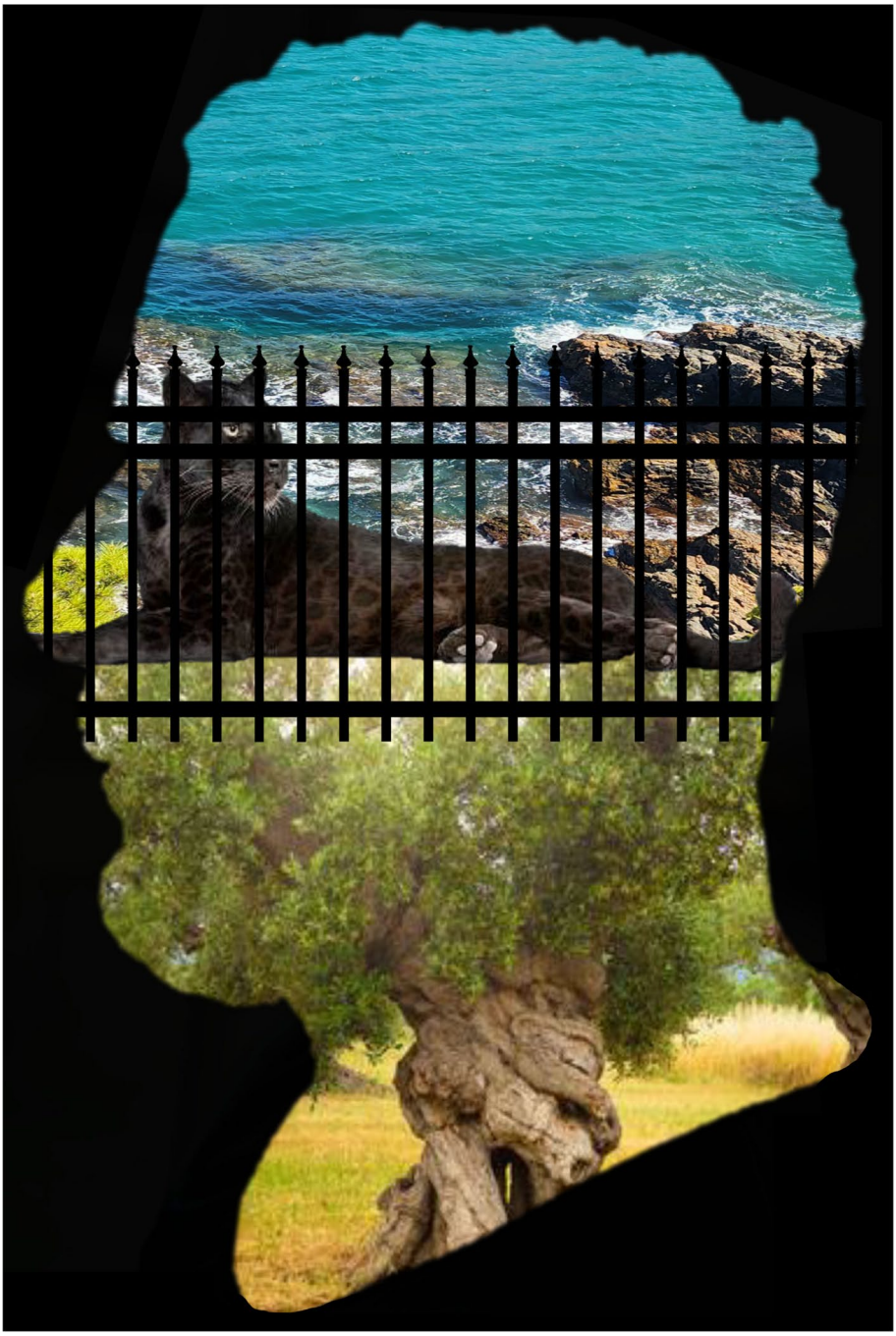

Fig. 6 Fahad

Tunisia. It symbolises stability, resilience, and heritage, reflecting his longing for continuity amidst displacement, anchoring him to his past and ancestry.

The middle section features a panther behind steel bars, capturing Fahad's enduring transitional state. The panther, poised yet confined, represents his patient strength and unwavering desire for freedom, while the bars signal the significant barriers imposed by his illegal status: "Je travaille comme les voleurs[29]" he confessed. Fahad further elaborated that a panther, needing space to roam, mirrors his own state of tension between his readiness to act and the limitations imposed on him, holding him back: "Moi, je bouge, j'ai de la valeur[30]".

At the top, a vibrant sea depicts Fahad's aspirational self, symbolising his desire for opportunity and the vast potential that lies just ahead. The waves and clarity of the water reflect his hope for a future unimpeded by restrictions, one where he can fully realise his goals.

Together, these elements—the open sea, the imprisoned panther, and the old, rooted, olive tree—illustrate Fahad's journey from the past to a hopeful future, while enduring the purgatory of his present situation. His collage transcends aesthetics, capturing the weight of his past alongside the lightness of his aspirations. It offers insight into the complexities he faces of living as an undocumented migrant, driven by the desire to live according to honest and wholesome values. It also reflects his deep commitment to securing a better future not only for himself but for his family, as he embraces the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Discussion and Insights

Having listened attentively to the resounding voices of the non-Western majority explored in the first part of this manuscript—of which the participants in my study are a part—the discussion will take an unconventional approach to synthesising insights while resisting any imposition of Western theoretical frameworks on the interpretations of self, as they were expressed through the collages and phenomenological interviews conducted. Instead, I will adopt an "outside-in" (Tracy, 2020, p. 38) perspective; one that seeks to uncover what we can 'see about what participants mean, and what they say about what they mean'.[31]

The collages and accompanying summative texts, including direct quotations from the interviews, are meaningful artefacts in their own right, offering profound insights into identity. In an attempt to uncover this richness, I will start by recognising what is *not* represented within the collages and participants' emitted meaning. Personal identifiers such as gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, nationality, languages spoken, religious and spiritual beliefs, level of education, civil status, country of origin, legal status (e.g. citizen, temporary resident, refugee, asylum-seeker), profession, employment status, socioeconomic status, level of ability, household status, marital and parental status, health status, body image or political beliefs, do not

[29] "I work like thieves" (personal translation). Fahad has been providing mechanic services for personal vehicles in the grey market throughout his asylum-seeking time in Luxembourg.

[30] "Me, I move, I have value" (personal translation).

[31] In relation to the post-collage interview and the subsequent sensemaking process undertaken by participants, I draw upon Karl Weick's (1979) concept of sensemaking, which highlights the dynamic process of meaning-making and the role of ambiguity in identity formation. Accordingly, individuals make sense of their surroundings by reflecting on their experiences and actions, often asking themselves, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick, 2001, p. 189 cited in Tracy, 2020, p. 38), which in the case of the iterative process of collage-making can become, 'How can I know what I think until I see what I mean, and then see what I say about what I mean?' (reflecting the interview-collage-iterative-interview research process).

feature. Moreover, any explicit material symbols of achievement represented in the collages (e.g. car, passports, a personal library) were not used to depict accomplishment in the conventional notions associated with success. Rather, they were used as metaphors that associate attainment and a continual pursuit of more enduring, triumphant values, such as peace, tranquillity, resilience, creativity, freedom and autonomy. The sense of having cultivated a strong character, being a good friend, leading a healthy and happy family, or contributing to the broader community by rooting one's self to become an "anchor" for others is metaphorically expressed through images that evoke the qualities and aspirations that scaffold achievement. This nuanced approach to 'success' highlights a central theme in the empirical work as a whole: that for the participants, the alignment of their actions and lives with personal values is measured outside of traditional milestones. The collages thus become a visual representation of how these entrepreneurial refugees navigate the complexities of identity and selfhood, where the metaphorical and the literal converge to form a holistic narrative of resilience, purpose, and transformation.

Also, it emerges that the values participants metaphorically expressed serve as orienting anchors—more permanent, foundational systems that guide their sense of direction and selfhood in life, through an appreciation of stability and purpose. These essences also entwine their past, present and future in a fluid interconnectedness; suggesting that processes of healing and self-formation are continuous, and that they draw upon lessons of the past, while remaining firmly focused on future aspirations. Therefore, the trauma that may have shaped their journeys to safety is not explicitly depicted, yet remains present, as an influencing force to their current need for peace, balance, calm and clarity. The metaphorical values thus serve as enduring reference points, creating continuity and coherence in participants' identities as they move forward.

Having focussed on values further highlights the existential nature through which the participants consider identity formation, which is also inextricably linked to their experience of displacement. For refugees, particularly those who have endured trauma, their lived experience is marked by profound changes from all that is familiar in the day-to-day that contributes to their sense of self. In this context, values such as resilience, hope, strength, and community become essential in constructing a new, post-trauma identity. Moreover, it seems that refugees, often facing systemic exclusion or marginalisation, may shift away from identities based on external circumstances and instead root their sense of self in internal, enduring qualities that transcend legal status, or national identity. This realignment towards values is consistent with a focus on the subjective, self-determined processes through which participants are redefining themselves. Thus, the identity of the refugee entrepreneur participants may focus less upon who they *were* in their former lives and more upon who they are *becoming,* indicative of a future-oriented, evolving sense of self that is grounded in reflexivity, personal integrity and resilience. Furthermore, values offer a common thread through which refugees can reassert their humanity, independent of imposed measures of qualifications. Accordingly, the metaphorical shift towards values enabled participants to express an authentic, holistic understanding of their identity that is released from social constraints, more reflective of their lived experiences.

There is also a clear omission, if not refusal, to focus on traditional identity markers, which can be understood as a form of resistance to external categorisations. Refugees, in particular, are often labelled and reduced to their status as displaced individuals, ascribed the negative connotations that come with being *othered* by the societies they resettle in. By omitting these markers, participants appear to be reasserting their agency. Parts of the narrations in the phenomenological interviews focused on what they had lost or lacked (e.g., legal status, employment, agency, stability, or belongings). However, participants then defined themselves in their collages by what they *have*—their internal values, personal strengths, and aspirations, effectively reframing their own identity narratives in empowering and humanistic ways. They are choosing to centre their identity around values that reflect autonomy, creativity, and resilience, allowing for meaningful

reflections on how they perceive themselves, while reshaping how they are perceived. We therefore consider the collages as a conscious act of reclaiming identity from any social construction imposed upon the participants. In this sense, the collages, as artefacts in and of themselves, as well as the iterative act of creating the collages, embody fluid processes and objects of protest—also as forms of self-definition in a context where participants are being objectified.

Drawing upon values as metaphors can also be understood through a trauma-informed lens. Refugees, having lived through displacement, loss, and often violent conflict, may find traditional markers of identity—such as nationality, ethnicity, or even legal status—reminiscent of past suffering and hardship. The history of trauma that many refugees carry can distort their relationship with certain static and imposed aspects of identity, making them less relevant or even counterproductive in processes of *selfing*. Instead, values such as persistence, flexibility, and freedom become key components of their reconstructed identity. Rather than identifying with externalities that marginalise them further or retraumatise them, they choose to focus on the internal qualities that signal their capacity for growth. Therefore, it seems that values are not mere abstractions in the collages; they metaphorically represent participants' lived and embodied experiences of the self, within their new contexts. They do not just talk about resilience; they *live* it through their entrepreneurial actions, social engagement and the choices they make in their daily lives. An emphasis is clearly placed on experiences of transformation, through which participants can transcend their victimhood and reframe their identity as one of agency. Thus, resilience, in particular, takes on a new meaning: no longer about enduring hardship or trauma, but about actively shaping one's future despite adversities, and the visuals signal this crafting of new narratives, compassed on values, beliefs and worldviews.

An equally significant integral feature is the role that values play in fostering a sense of belonging and community in a new, unfamiliar context. The participants in the study, now living in Luxembourg, find themselves outside of their traditional social structures, detached from the communities they once belonged to, having immigrated with very few or without prior relationships to welcome them after their journeys of flight. In the face of this dislocation, values like solidarity, cooperation, and mutual support can become powerful connectors, enabling refugees to forge new bonds with others who share similar experiences, values and aspirations. In the entrepreneurial contexts in which the participants find themselves, values such as creativity, collaboration and community-building are often central to their success. Thus, their entrepreneur*ing* also inclines towards creating new networks, new relationships, and new forms of belonging, transcending national, religious or ethnic boundaries, providing a unifying force of shared principles and ideals, through which to *become*.

Finally, the process of creating collages has played a crucial role in facilitating elucidations of identity, beyond the literal. Art, particularly in its abstract form, allows for the representation of self and values in ways that are often more nuanced and complex than verbal or written descriptions. The act of collage-making enabled participants to overcome conventional language relating to identity through powerful metaphors, while also overcoming the multilingual and multicultural limitations that characterised the research setting. Instead, the method facilitated the expositions of participants' lived experiences through symbolism and imagery for the representation of what is deeply felt, yet often difficult to articulate. Moreover, participants expressed their sense of dignity regarding the final artefacts they created which they can feel proud to share beyond the scope of the research. Collages thus served as a transformative space for identity construction, offering participants a processual means through which to reconnect with their innermost, ineffable narratives and express them through a medium that is both personal and universal.

The metaphors brought to light and voiced through the collages can therefore be considered as choices that have not been arbitrary; they reflect participants' deeply internalised

experiences of refuge as they continue to navigate the complexities of identity after displacement, with values as orienting anchors. Moreover, the process of artmaking itself could be considered as therapeutic and as a process of expressing dignity. It levelled asymmetries inherent in traditional methods employed in qualitative research and privileged participants to claim agency over how they are seen and understood, centring their identity around the values that give their lives meaning and purpose.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

The exploration of identity through collage-making has led to important insights into how refugees, in particular, conceptualise and express their sense of self within their new contexts, after having survived trauma. The focus on values through metaphors suggests a shift towards a more dynamic, fluid understanding of identity and *selfing*. This points to an untapped potential of collage-making as a powerful tool for research, therapy and education,[32] as well as unique potential for identity theory re-examinations through metaphors, conducted alongside the authors and knowers of identity processes (the collage-makers, themselves). The empirical treasures of the study also highlight how all voices can be amplified across contexts, through metaphors.

The potential applications of collage-making, therefore, extend far beyond the scope of this research, offering many possibilities for interdisciplinary inquiry. By integrating collage-making into diverse frameworks, researchers can enrich understandings of the intersections between identity, trauma and resilience, for example, further expanding the possibilities of exploring lived experiences in participant-centred ways. The arts-based method, with its compelling symbolic and visual elements, opens new avenues for expressing and understanding the self that cannot always be captured through traditional research methods or verbal articulations, lending itself to research that is inclusive across boundaries, at any stage or age of development. Moreover, the method in this research was conducted using digital images, however, collage-making has immense potential in multimodal and multimedia productions, also in collaborative research contexts.

Finally, the therapeutic potential of collages must not be overlooked. The process of creating these visual artefacts enabled participants to reflexively express feelings and experiences that are largely elusive. The method thus served as a therapeutic tool, helping individuals uncover the ineffable aspects of their identity—elements of the self that may be both consciously and unconsciously perceived. In this way, collage-making bridges the gap between what is known and what remains unspoken, offering a deeper understanding of personal experiences, thoughts and emotions. In addition, the possibility of interpreting such artefacts in a longitudinal study opens new doors for tracing the evolution of identity over time. As participants continue to create new collages or revisit their previous work, researchers could gain deeper insights into how identities transform, particularly in relation to long-term adaptation and other life events. The dynamic nature of identity means that collages could reveal much more over time, as new layers of meaning emerge in response to changing circumstances, challenges, and successes. Collectively, the participants in this study have highlighted the complexities of the human experience in ways that are both nuanced and deeply personal, voicing them through powerful metaphors. Significantly, they have called our attention to widen the scope and depth of identity research to include embodied and holistic, value-based understandings of *selfing*.

[32] Please see Appendix 2 for an example of how identity collages were used by the authors of this manuscript, in a PhD course setting.

Appendix 1: Profiles in Resilience[33]

Farid

Fig. 7 Farid's appreciation voucher

CoO: Syria • New (Paludan, 1974, 1981), anticipatory, self-alienated migration[34] (Kunz, 1973, 1981) • Interview language: English • Farid's languages: Arabic & Turkish (master proficiency), English (effective, fluent proficiency) & French (interactive, beginner proficiency).

Highlights: Age: 35–39 • Gender: Male • Entry to Luxembourg (CoR): 2015 • Legal status in the CoR: Refugee • Civil status: Married to a non-EU citizen who holds a long-term resident permit for Luxembourg • Dependants: None • Prior relations in the CoR: None[35] • Education: • Some university in a non-EU country (not the CoO) • Employment history: Entrepreneurial experience in a non-EU country (not the CoO), in the healthcare services industry • Current employment status: Business co-owner • Industry: Restaurant.

Two in-person meetings (Fig. 7), with two audio recordings that have been transcribed:

1st recording: 116 min of recorded time

2nd recording: 47 min of recorded time

Anastasia

Fig. 8 Anastasia's appreciation voucher

[33] CoO is the abbreviation used to denote 'country of origin' and CoR is the abbreviation used to denote 'country of residence'.

[34] This is an exception to the classification I have ascribed to other Syrian nationals that fled from their CoO during the mass exodus that began around 2014. Already, prior to the more generalised war in the CoO, citizens and residents could gather that their country was on the brink. With this in mind, and as narrated by Farid himself, he took the decision to self-alienate by attending university abroad; in his case, Turkey.

[35] Importantly, Farid undertook his journey of flight with a male companion, a friend from the same CoO with whom he had studied and lived with, outside of their CoO, and had already several years of friendship with. Neither of them knew anyone who was residing in their destined CoR (Luxembourg), but they had each other to navigate their new surroundings with.

CoO: Ukraine • New (Paludan, 1974, 1981), acute, event-related migration (Kunz, 1973, 1981) • Interview language: English • Anastasia's languages: Ukrainian & Russian (master proficiency), English (interactive, beginner proficiency), French & Arabic (basic / breakthrough proficiency).

Highlights: Age: 25–29 • Gender: Female • Entry to Luxembourg (CoR): 2022 • Legal status in the CoR: Long-term resident • Civil status: Married to a permanent resident of, and in the CoR (he has a refugee status) • Dependants: None • Prior relations in the CoR: One acquaintance from her CoO who immigrated in the CoR a few weeks prior to her own entry • Education: Formal, vocational education from her CoO • Employment history: Entrepreneurial, business ownership experience in her CoO in the restaurant industry Current employment status: Business co-owner • Industry: Restaurant.

Three in-person meetings (Fig. 8), with four audio recordings that have been transcribed:
1st recording: 30 min of recorded time
2nd recording: 19 min of recorded time
3rd recording: 25 min of recorded time
4th recording: 16 min of recorded time

Zahra

Fig. 9 Zahra's appreciation voucher

CoO: Iraq • New (Paludan, 1974, 1981), acute, event-related migration (Kunz, 1973, 1981) • Interview language: English • Zahra's languages: Arabic (master proficiency), English (effective, fluent proficiency), French (interactive, beginner proficiency) & Luxembourgish (basic / breakthrough proficiency).

Highlights: Age: 35–39 • Gender: Female • Entry to Luxembourg (CoR): 2016 • Legal status in the CoR: Citizen • Civil status: Single • Dependants: 1 child • Prior relations in the CoR: None • Education: One master's degree from the CoO, one master's degree from the CoR • Employment history: Employment in the engineering industry, up to management level (no entrepreneurial experience) in the CoO and in non-EU countries (outside of the CoO) • Current employment status: Long-term unemployed • Industry: Engineering & information technology.

Three in-person meetings (Fig. 9), with three audio recordings that have been transcribed:
1st recording: 74 min of recorded time
2nd recording: 133 min of recorded time
3rd recording: 72 min of recorded time

Osaze

Fig. 10 Osaze's appreciation voucher

CoO: Nigeria • New (Paludan, 1974, 1981), acute, majority-identified migration (Kunz, 1973, 1981) • Interview language: English • Osaze's languages: English[36] (master proficiency), French & Luxembourgish (interactive, beginner proficiency) & German (basic / breakthrough proficiency).

Highlights: Age: 35–39 • Gender: Male • Entry to Luxembourg (CoR): 2017 • Legal status in the CoR: Asylum-seeker[37] • Civil status: Civil partnership status with a Luxembourger • Dependants: None • Prior relations in the CoR: None • Education: Bachelor's degree from the CoO, with some university form a non-EU country (not the CoO) • Employment history: Entrepreneurial experience in the CoO in art & design, as well as in the IT & finance industries • Current employment status: NGO co-founder, independent artist & full-time employee at an NGO • Industries: NGO, art & design, information technology.

Six in-person meetings (Fig. 10), with six audio recordings that have been transcribed:
1st recording: 104 min of recorded time
2nd recording: 50 min of recorded time
3rd recording: 19 min of recorded time
4th recording: 30 min of recorded time
5th recording: 76 min of recorded time
6th recording: 52 min of recorded time

[36] To add a layer of anonymity, I have chosen not to list the Nigerian languages Osaze speaks. There are more than 520 native languages that are spoken in Nigeria (Ethnologue, 2024; Translators Without Borders, 2024), thus, listing the ones that he is proficient in has the potential of serving as a highly unique identifying marker, as there is still a relatively small population of Nigerians residing in Luxembourg.

[37] From the time I had met him in 2017, through to our final interview in 2022, Osaze's status had not changed from that of asylum-seeker. This barred him, throughout those years, from formal employment, formal education opportunities (asylum-seekers can participate in courses at the University of Luxembourg for free, but cannot receive accreditation) and other services, including independent banking and housing (there may be exceptions to this, however, it is absolutely rare that an asylum-seeker be able to buy a residence or secure a rental contract without an employment contract). Eventually, after more than four years of waiting and then appealing a first decision from the government denying him refuge, he was definitively refused a refugee status in 2022. However, due to his incredibly diverse and energetic social and volunteering activities and involvement in community initiatives throughout his years of asylum-seeking, he managed to forge key relationships that led to securing him an indeterminate, full-time employment contract, which eventually enabled him to obtain a working visa, and remain in the country. Shortly thereafter (about one year later), he obtained the Luxembourgish nationality. Importantly, the government recognised his years of residency as an asylum-seeker—one of the criteria to obtaining citizenship is five years of uninterrupted residency.

Asmahan

Fig. 11 Asmahan's appreciation voucher

CoO: Syria • New (Paludan, 1974, 1981), anticipatory, event-related migration[38] (Kunz, 1973, 1981) • Interview language: English • Asmahan's languages: Arabic & English (master proficiency), French (effective, fluent proficiency) & Luxembourgish (interactive, beginner proficiency).

Highlights: Age: 45–49 • Gender: Female • Entry to Luxembourg (CoR): 2009[39] for one year, then, 2016 for her definitive migration • Legal status in the CoR: Citizen • Civil status: Married (her husband followed her to the new CoR and has since obtained citizenship) • Dependants: 6 (1 toddler, 1 child, 1 teenager & 3 retired parents) • Prior relations in the CoR: One; her internship contact from 2009, as it was through a higher education internship that she first entered the CoR for one year • Education: One master's degree from the CoO, several professional certificates obtained since immigrating in the CoR • Employment history: Employment in the IT & finance industries • Current employment status: Employed full-time, with an indeterminate contract • Industry: Finance • Entrepreneurial industry in the CoR: Real estate.

Two in-person meetings (Fig. 11), with three audio recordings that have been transcribed:

1st recording: 43 min of recorded time
2nd recording: 78 min of recorded time
3rd recording: 65 min of recorded time

[38] Although there was a great, lengthy planning in Asmahan's departure from her CoO, I have still categorised her migration as event-related rather than self-alienated. Her emigration from Syria and entry into Luxembourg included applying for an internship at a European banking institution, where she did not know anyone, in a country she was also unfamiliar with—she had no personal network connections encouraging her, nor did she have help in applying for, or insiders encouraging the review of her application. She also had to endure a daunting process of obtaining approvals from her CoO's government and institutional authorities, for herself and her two children, whom she decided to bring with her, and in turn, this also extended her process of departure. Nevertheless, her reason for applying had been motivated by the impending war in Syria, and thus, her self-alienation goals were motivated by looming event-related factors that were outside of her control. Had there been peace in her CoO, she has admitted that she would not have sought to emigrate.

[39] Asmahan's experience in Luxembourg stands out as a singular one from all the interviewees and waves of asylum-seekers I have met from the time of my own immigration in Luxembourg in 2017, as she had a 2009 one-year internship experience in the country, which she obtained through a specialised industrial master's programme from her home university. Through it, she also had early training in French in her CoO, thus, already possessed quite a strong level of language proficiency in one of Luxembourg's official languages, prior to her experiences abroad. In the last quarter of her internship period, she managed to obtain a visitor's visa for her, then, soon-to-be husband, and was remarkably married in Luxembourg prior to her re-entry in 2016.

Fahad

Fig. 12 Fahad's appreciation voucher

CoO: Tunisia • New (Paludan, 1974, 1981), anticipatory, self-alienated migration (Kunz, 1973, 1981) • Interview language: French • Farid's languages: Arabic (master proficiency), French (effective, fluent proficiency) & Luxembourgish (interactive, beginner proficiency).

Highlights: Age: 35–39 • Gender: Male • Entry to Luxembourg (CoR): 2016 • Legal status in the CoR: Illegal, undocumented (applied for asylum and has been officially denied a refugee status—no asylum granted) • Civil status: Married to a non-EU citizen who holds a long-term resident permit for Luxembourg • Dependants: 2 infants • Prior relations in the CoR: None[40] • Education: Vocational education and apprenticeship in the CoO • Employment history: Entrepreneurial experience in the family business, in the automotive services industry in the CoO • Current employment status: Self-employed in the grey market • Industry: Automotive services.

Two in-person meetings (Fig. 12), with two audio recordings that have been transcribed:
1st recording: 33 min of recorded time
2nd recording: 21 min of recorded time

Appendix 2: Assignment Instructions for a PhD Workshop at the University of Luxembourg with Doctoral Researchers, Co-led by the Authors of this Paper

Current Approaches in Migration Studies: Inclusive and Participatory Methods

Collage-Making in Migration Research
Elke Murdock & Rosa Lisa Iannone
University of Luxembourg, 10 November 2023

In this session, we will engage in a research simulation that draws upon collage-making and open interviews in an attempt to develop/advance theory. The simulation will make use of real data that will be generated by the learners, who will also switch between the roles of research participant and researcher throughout the session.

The following assignment is for all:

[40] He revealed that his sister and his parents have all been able to successfully immigrate into Luxembourg (though he did not specify their status): "…ils sont là. Ça fait même pas trois ans" ("They are here. It hasn't even been three years," personal translation). This indicates that they have been in Luxembourg from about the year 2020, while he has been in the country since 2016.

Fig. 13 Inspirational identity collages

Within the contours of your profile, create a collage that tells the story of how you are experiencing "being a PhD candidate at Uni.lu". Upon completion, you should be able to see yourself in all aspects of the collage—the imagery, the colours, the incorporated text/words (if there are any) etc. It should depict what is important to you and what aspects represent all the uniqueness in you and your journey. There is no defined time period for the collage; it can include elements from your past, present, and can also be future-oriented. Please produce this in an A4 format, or larger. You can feel free to create it digitally, or in hard copy, with mixed media. It can be simple or complex, monochromatic, or psychedelic—every creative aspect is entirely your choice. These will be displayed in the room on the day of our session, and will be used as the key data for our research simulation (Fig. 13).

Using our collages and brief interviews as data, we will straight away collectively apply them within a theory building framework. An additional objective will be to critically examine these qualitative methods in terms of strengths and weaknesses and discuss how they may be applied to your current research.

Looking forward to our session together!

*Readings will be assigned ahead of the session and posted in Moodle so be sure to check![41]

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Author Contributions R.L.I. holds sole responsibility for the study conception and design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as the preparation of this manuscript. E.M. critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content and approved the version to be published.

[41] The four images in the middle are collages that have been generated by four participants of the research being referred to in this manuscript. The other two images have ben used as inspiration: the image on the left is credited to Mrs. Kennison's Art Class Blog (https://mrskennisonartclass.blogspot.com/p/art-gallery-of-examples.html); and the image on the right depicts a mixed media mosaic art piece by Shawn DuBois entitled "Know Thyself", that sold "through Etsy (https://www.etsy.com/listing/287758077/know-thyself-head-profile-mixed-media?ref=shop_home_feat_1).

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethical Standards The research project (ERP 21–004 RELUX) that informs this manuscript has obtained approval from the Ethics Review Panel of the University of Luxembourg on 28 April 2021 for the fieldwork undertaken.

Conflicting Interests The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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