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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Gjaltema, E. (2022) *Hiding/ Hidden collection*. Available at: https://artdoc.gallery/products/hiding-hidden-iv-eva-gjaltema?pr_prod_strat=e5_desc&pr_rec_id=66c6e7529&pr_rec_pid=8394495230220&pr_ref_pid=8394495525132&pr_seq=uniform (Accessed: 10 February 2025).

Figure 2: Goldberg, J. (1977-1985) *Rich and Poor*. Available at: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/society/jim-goldberg-rich-and-poor/> (Accessed: 13 February 2025).

Figure 3: Nesh, S. (1994) *Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah* collection. Available at: <https://smarthistory.org/shirin-neshat-rebellious-silence-women-of-allah-series/> (Accessed: 9 February 2025).

This essay will provide an overview of, how an individual's identity is constantly changing. It will begin with a discussion of three keywords which relate to the formation of identity under the concepts of heritage, memory and language learning, highlighting how these interlink with the changing of self-identity and how this is reflected through visual art practice.

Memory refers to the storage of information that has happened through a person's life, compiled through experiences both physical and sensorial, past events and childhood. 'Memory consists in the preservation of images imprinted in the mind from previous experience' (Reid,2009). These images however can be fleeting, and not all information is retained as it becomes dependent on the information being contextualised within a social grouping whether 'family, a social class, or a religious community (Halbwachs,1950). Memory thereby is not always an accurate reflection upon what happened but rather a collective grouping of information influenced by the values of others and community involvement making it a collective memory' (Hutton, 1988). They both reflect on how memory is not only personal, but an obscure list of facts, suggesting that how we remember things, is deeply affected by the people around us, family, friends, culture, and even community. Through engaging within these groups, memories over time will become refined, reshaped and partly rewritten by the values, and beliefs of the group that individuals belong to and other's personal recollections. Hutton called this 'collective memory' where it becomes a social construction not only a personal record.

The concept of memory has been studied within multiple fields from scientists to philosophers, to gain a better understanding of how it functions and relates to the

formation of our identity. Through the understanding of the writer, memory is a flashback of images forged through past experiences. This recollection however can be modified over time through having an overwhelming amount of memory; increased information can result in memories becoming distorted or forgotten. 'Locke is committed to the thesis that ideas are momentary and non-continuous and to the thesis that the identity of ideas over time requires continuous existence' (Copenhaver, 2006). Locke argues in this thesis that an idea (memory) only exists when it is being thought about and can disappear when this thought process stops. He suggests that ideas don't stay around in the mind continuously, but only when they are remembered. Locke furthermore states that for it to be the same idea it must have been constantly situated in the mind however this is not possible, since ideas come and go constantly. Locke has also reflected on the way ideas are stored, through the ability to bring them back into the mind after they have faded or been put aside. He called this 'memory' which, acts as a storehouse for ideas. When remembering something, it's not that the idea is sitting around waiting, it's that the mind can recreate it, sometimes clearly and in other cases blurry, dependent on the situation (Reid, 2009). Memory enables past experiences to be brought back, and this helps a person to build connections between the idea and knowledge formed over time; Locke highlights however that it is important to recognize that memories can fade away or change.

Thomas Reid however suggests that ideas with the highest degree of force and vivacity are called perceptions: those with a lesser degree are memories: one's with the least are imaginings. Reid challenges this idea of grouping through experience basis. He notes that some perceptions can be less vivid than other memories, just

like when one is deeply engaged in recollections, some memories may be less vivid than certain imaginings, as in moments of intense daydreaming or vision (Copenhaver, 2006). Reid reinforces the idea that perception is not always as strong as memory because it constantly changes, due to the person growing, developing and becoming an adult, therefore our feelings and perceptions towards some memories change as our feelings change.



Figure 1: *Hiding/ Hidden collection* (Eva Gjaltema, 2022)

The concept of memory as a fluctuating concept developing and changing as the person themselves changes, is explored visually by Eva Gjaltema in her works *Hiding/ Hidden I & II*. Figure 1 shows a self-portrait of Gjaltema with another image layered on top of her forehead, and eyes, suggesting that identity is blended with

inner and outer worlds for example, personal experiences and imagination as suggested by Reid. The photograph of the landscape is a representation of a memory she looked back on, or it may symbolize a nostalgic event or space. The way in which Gjaltema shown the work in a collage format and in fragments, can suggest a disconnection between the mind and the body, and the way which memories are preserved and remembered. This work supports the idea of how identity is shifting and shaped through recollection of memories; that memory is not a constant but adapts, developing through connections between memories, knowledge gained and experience (Reid, 2009).

Language is a way of communicating with people either through writing, talking or through gestures, and or it's native to a particular country or community. First languages come naturally to a person living in their home country, for example Hungary where the native language is Hungarian. Moving to another country however means learning a new language, which is easier to learn when the individual is still young, as the mind is more adaptable to learning (UNRIC, 2022) and increased social interaction through schooling can be heavily influential. Learning a second language thereby would be more challenging as a first language is ingrained from birth. A person's brain must work to learn and memorize elements of a new language which can get confused and mixed up with the original language through reading, writing and thinking. Learning a second language requires a focus on grammar and vocabulary to understand the elements and rules, to enable effective communication, however language is not only about memorizing words and rules but also being able to understand meaning, context, communication and cultural aspects (Littlewood, 2025). Littlewood discusses true language learning as not just learning

the technical rules used, but rather learning a language is about being able to use it meaningfully and appropriately. Languages create different frameworks for understanding existence, shaped by the cultural ideas and practices they evolve from. As a result, people from diverse linguistic backgrounds develop distinct ways of connecting to life from early childhood (McCauley, 2016); the language individuals grow up with shape the way they think, feel and understand life itself.

Different languages have contrasting ideas on ways of seeing the world and cultural traditions. Due to the large expanse of languages and each having their own unique form of communication, individuals from different cultures may experience and connect to the idea of self-identity in a different way from early childhood. To give an example, in Hungarian, when asking to 'have something', it's not framed around 'I have' as in the English language, but instead it's structured 'something is to me'. In English, 'I have a book', translates in Hungarian as 'van egy könyvem', which means 'There is a book of mine'. In Hungarian it feels less about actively controlling something but instead the item existing in relation to the individual. Therefore, from childhood, a Hungarian may grow up with a more personal way of thinking about where they belong, the people and even emotions, seeing them as things that are present within the individual, and not things that they control or claim. Changing to a different language can lead to an uncomfortable control between people with different linguistic backgrounds, creating a sense of otherness as the intimate relationship with language and culture, can shift and may eventually lead to a change of identity and loss of security (McCauley, 2016). McCauley argues that people who speak their dominant language fluently, have an advantage, whereas those who speak less dominantly, will often feel othered like they are an outsider. As language

is interconnected with the way a person thinks, expresses themselves and connects to others this imbalance in communication can cause the individual to feel disconnected from their culture, their confidence, and even from themselves. Therefore, if an individual must shift to the dominant language and leave their native language of speaking and thinking behind, this can lead to a collapse of identity like losing a piece of who they are.

WE LOOK LIKE ORDINARY PEOPLE!



WE HAVE A TERRIBLE LIFE

Emily S.

Figure 2: *Rich and Poor* (Jim Goldberg, 1977-1985)

Figure 2 by Jim Goldberg is a documentary photograph showing a woman and her child in a bedroom or possibly in the living room. Goldberg uses handwritten text to supplement an everyday family scene stating above “We look like ordinary people” and below “we have a terrible life”. Goldberg draws attention to the nature of perception and understanding through combining an ‘ordinary’ domestic scene with

words indicative of a personal or social struggle perhaps with emotions and finances. Through incorporating this text alongside the image transforms a simple family portrait into a statement on lived experience, with the text revealing a hidden truth about the family. The work reflects on language, as it is used as an anchor to express what individuals struggle with; when the person has no control over oneself, it can lead to a change in identity and loss of security.

Culture, as Raymond Williams famously said, 'is ordinary', part of the process through which any social organisation develops and reproduces itself (Phillips, 2006, p1). Raymond saw culture as shared meanings and values which have been passed down through generations, but this does not mean culture is something inherited but instead that it is continuously being questioned, transformed and reconceptualised through human creativity and this in turn forms a person's cultural identity.

Cultural identity, often conceptualized as coterminous with national identity, (i.e., thinking of oneself as American or Japanese or Italian), more accurately can be considered the psychological counterpoint to national identity-the identity that describes the cultural self in content, evaluation, and structure (Sussman, 2000, p.357-359).

Cultural identity is not cohesive with national identity but rather formed through a person's life experiences (content) and the way these are understood (evaluation). The way a person lives, their notion of self, alongside their geographical location and share language all contribute to forming a person's cultural identity (Triandis, 1989 in Sussman, 2000, p.357-359). James Clifford suggests that 'Culture and (national identity which expresses it) to be singular and fixed instead of multiple', his declaring that culture is not 'a rooted body that grows, lives, dies', but is rather a site of 'displacement, interference and interaction (Edensor, 2002, p.1-2). Within this

statement Clifford argues that culture is not fixed or clear but constantly changing through movement and contact with others.

A person's sense of belonging to a country strongly influences the development, reinforcement, or weakening of other identities, such as social identity. In the same way, national, religious, ethnic, and class-based identities significantly shape and impact each other (İnaç & Unal, 2013, p.225). Both authors argue that identity is linked and shaped by multiple factors and that national identity, the sense of belonging to a country has a strong impact on other identities, such as social, religious, ethnic, or class identity. The way a person belongs to a country can either enhance or decrease the way individuals see themselves socially which reflect on the roles played within societies and the way they relate to others. However, religion, ethnicity, and social class also influence in shaping individuals' national identity. Therefore, identity cannot be fixed as it's shaped by the interplay between different aspects of who individuals think they are. Identity thus is complex and fluid, which is influenced by the environment and the way different aspects of people's identity such as nationality, religion, and class affect each other. Although these cultural elements have importance, there arguably is too much focus on myth of common origins, history, religion, and language which limits how culture is understood. This strong significance on tradition, symbols and sacred places as a sign of connection may help to explain some historical developments, however it fails to explain the complex and constantly changing way's national identity is formed today (Edensor, 2002, p.1-2). The writer has critiqued the traditional, fixed ideas of national identity and argues that modern identities are more fluid, mixed and shaped by current events, not just history. Individuals who have a good definition of their culture gradually build a sense of knowledge about the world around them where individuals can decide how their

thinking, motivates and selects their behaviours. Berry (1980) suggested that culture provides both frame of reference for self-definition and a frame of reference for ordering social relationships (Sussman, N, M 2000, p.357-359). Therefore, culture is not only defined by where we come from but within the formation of cultural identity helps a person to understand 'who they are' and how to interact with others.



Figure 3: *Rebellious Silence*, *Women of Allah* collection (Shirin Nesh 1994)

In figure 3 culture and cultural identity are represented through a portrait made by Shirin Nesh, showcasing a woman's face which has been split in two, by a barrel of a gun which symbolises the idea of half identity or conflicted identity. The hijab which

she's wearing is a cultural and religious expression, which in this work highlights the cultural belonging and restrictions forced upon women in certain parts of the world. The gun in the middle represents signs of abuse or violence faced by the women as a vehicle for rewriting the narrative of identity; it creates a clear relationship between the fragility of poetry supporting the pressure of violence against beauty and power. The veil which the woman wears symbolizes cultural and religious identity which reflects both on cultural belonging and the restrictions imposed on women. The subject's face becomes a site where tradition, conflict, and personal identity connect and evolve. In this portrait, cultural identity is created and represented not just by the culture she has been raised in, but religious influences and restrictions imposed due to the geographical regions and the specific rules in place in this region as a result. Cultural identity formation becomes not just about life experiences therefore but also external forces often uncontrollable by the individual.

Each of the key words explored within this document, memory, language and culture contribute to the formation of a person's identity and a greater understanding of the formation of self. A person's memory is not a singular representation of events but rather a collective consciousness formed through the recollections of others, experiences and knowledge gained. As a person develops and grows so does their memory; not static but continually evolving. A person's memory is integral to the formation of their identity. Memory can be added to through new languages learnt as a result of a location change or new languages may be learnt through schooling and this influences the way the world can be viewed. My move from Hungary to Wales changed my perspective; a new culture created new memories and new experiences which altered the way I viewed the world and ultimately myself. Memory, language

and culture are all integral to the formation of a person's identity and through this their cultural identity. My dissertation will focus on the formation of a person's identity and what this means to them considering the question, how does a person's understanding and experience of culture affect their identity formation and through this their cultural identity?

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