

**AM I MY CULTURE'S KEEPER?**

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**Watch me choose (?) my culture**

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## Introduction

### Background and Motivation

#### *Introduction to the Concept of Cultural Identity*

Cultural identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective experiences. It encompasses the shared values, traditions, languages, and customs that define a group of people and distinguishes them from others. For individuals, cultural identity provides a sense of belonging and self-understanding, influencing how they perceive themselves and their place in the world.

#### *Personal Motivation for Exploring This Project*

When I arrived at Columbia University in New York, my initial goal was to complete a project within one year to earn my degree. However, being in this diverse city, surrounded by esteemed professors and having access to numerous resources, I had to reshape my project with the guidance of my academic advisor. My original project focused on griots, the cultural custodians in West Africa. Their use of oral history has shaped West Africa for centuries. However, colonization caused a break in the transmission of culture and history to new generations. My work initially aimed to reconnect previous generations with the new ones, especially the diasporas living outside their home countries, through the work of griots.

Living in New York this school year has changed my vision of my initial work. New York is known for its diversity of cultures, languages, and origins. Being exposed to so many perspectives and people, as well as facing various challenges, motivated me to include a new objective in my research. As a member of the Congolese diaspora born and raised in France without having yet visited the Congo, I have always felt a disconnection between myself and my country of origin. My parents had to leave the Congo in their twenties due to the situation in the country and only had the opportunity to return 30 years later, without

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the possibility of seeing their relatives. They rebuilt a new life in France, where I had the opportunity to become who I am now.

As a young Frenchwoman of Congolese diaspora, I navigate between different worlds without feeling a sense of belonging or "home." My work now aims to engage with young Africans in the diaspora and African youth to build a bridge between a culture we do not know and want to reconnect with, and a culture we have known and incorporated in the countries where we were born.

### *Brief Overview of Personal Cultural Background and Experiences*

New York has allowed me to define myself and find a way to navigate this feeling of "not belonging." This feeling is shared by many people in similar situations, but no platform or study has yet explored it in depth. New York is an ideal place for me to settle and be in contact with so many people of different origins, cultures, studies, experiences, and ways of life. It is through this contact that my perspective and viewpoint change not only on my work, thesis, and studies but also on who I originally thought I was.

The initial idea of my work was about how the African diaspora could reconnect with their original cultures. However, now my work focuses on how our cultures, whether we are immersed in them or not, can be our strength to create a third place where we belong and find ourselves—our own culture. My stay in New York and at Columbia has profoundly changed my way of thinking. I have moved from a static notion of culture, where the "real" version of a culture lives in the homeland and diasporic cultures are impoverished and inauthentic, to a much more lively and dynamic way of thinking about cultures as living entities that can move, change, and grow through migration processes and diasporic networks. As a Frenchwoman of Congolese origin who has never had the opportunity to visit the Congo, this has changed both my sense of self and my approach to my research.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

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## *Define the Main Aims of the Thesis*

The main aim of this thesis is to explore the notion of cultural identity and the notion of third culture within the African diaspora, focusing on the experiences and challenges faced by individuals in navigating their identities. This study seeks to understand how diasporic individuals reconcile their heritage with their present circumstances and how they create a sense of belonging in a multicultural environment.

## *Outline the Specific Objectives of the Reflection*

1. To analyze how personal experiences and cultural backgrounds influence identity formation.
2. To explore the challenges and triumphs of navigating belonging and identity within the African diaspora.
3. To examine the impact of cultural disconnection and the quest for reconnection on individuals' sense of self.
4. To investigate the role of cultural heritage and storytelling in healing and building a cohesive diasporic identity.
5. To reflect on the dynamic process of cultural identity construction and its implications for personal and collective well-being.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

### *Provide a Roadmap of the Thesis Chapters*

1. **Introduction:** Background and Motivation, Purpose and Objectives, Structure of the Thesis.
2. **Stop Running Away from Myself and the Truth:** Reflecting on the journey of self-discovery and confronting the truths about my identity and heritage.

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3. **Dealing with the Pain We Never Asked For:** Examining the emotional and psychological challenges of cultural disconnection and the inherited pain of diaspora.
4. **Healing Together:** Investigating the role of community, storytelling, and cultural practices in collective healing and identity construction.
5. **Finding an Identity:** Reflecting on the process of constructing a cohesive and dynamic cultural identity that integrates multiple influences and experiences.
6. **Conclusion:** Summary of key reflections, theoretical and empirical contributions, and future directions for research and personal growth.

### The Influence of Cultural Background

*Discuss How Cultural Upbringing Shapes Thinking and Behavior*

Cultural upbringing is a fundamental force that shapes our thinking, behavior, and worldview. For many individuals, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, the interplay between the culture of their heritage and the culture of their new environment creates a unique and often complex identity.

Growing up in a Congolese household in France, I was exposed to a rich tapestry of cultural values and traditions. My parents instilled in me the importance of family, respect, and hard work, while the broader French society emphasized individualism, secularism, and *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. These differing values often led to internal conflicts as I navigated between two worlds, trying to honor my heritage while integrating into French society.

*Explore the Impact of Cultural Values on Daily Life and Beliefs*

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The cultural values imparted by my upbringing significantly influenced my daily life and beliefs. For instance, the Congolese emphasis on community and collective well-being often clashed with the French focus on personal freedom and individual rights. This duality manifested in various aspects of my life, from my educational pursuits to my social interactions.

### *Re-evaluating Beliefs and Assumptions*

As I grew older, I began to question long-held beliefs and assumptions about my identity. Personal experiences triggered moments of cognitive dissonance and growth. I started to realize that my sense of self could not be neatly categorized into predefined labels.

Navigating different cultural spaces often required me to adapt and compromise parts of my identity. As a member of the diaspora, I learned to behave differently in different spaces to be understood and accepted. However, this constant adaptation left me feeling fragmented and unsure of my true self.

### *Share Personal Experiences of Questioning Long-held Beliefs*

Growing up, I was frequently bombarded with questions about my identity. "Do you feel French?" they would ask. The truth is, I've never felt like I fit neatly into any single category. Raised in a city with limited opportunities, my parents made immense sacrifices to ensure my siblings and I had a chance at a better future. Despite their efforts, I often felt like an outsider in the halls of privilege, the only one who looked like me among peers who couldn't understand my struggles.

### *Adapting to New Perspectives and Lifestyles*

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Adapting to new cultural perspectives and lifestyles was a significant challenge. The process of integrating new perspectives involved reconciling the values and beliefs of my Congolese heritage with those of my French environment. This often meant adopting different lifestyles to fit in and be accepted in various social contexts. This constant questioning led me to dive into the concept of Third culture.

### *Describe the Process of Integrating New Cultural Perspectives*

The process of integrating new cultural perspectives was both challenging and enlightening. It required me to confront and re-evaluate deeply ingrained beliefs, opening myself up to new ways of thinking and living. This journey was marked by both resistance and acceptance, as I navigated the intersection of tradition and modernity.

### *Explore the Challenges and Benefits of Adopting Different Lifestyles*

Adopting different lifestyles came with its own set of challenges and benefits. On one hand, it allowed me to gain a broader understanding of the world and build bridges between different cultural communities. On the other hand, it often led to feelings of alienation and a sense of loss as I struggled to maintain a coherent sense of identity.

### *Personal Growth and Transformation*

Reflecting on this transformative journey, I recognize key moments of personal growth and change. These experiences have shaped me into a more resilient and adaptable individual, capable of navigating complex cultural landscapes.

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Navigating language and cultural assimilation was a daily challenge. While fluent in multiple languages, I never felt fully at home in either. Several key moments stand out in my journey of personal growth and change. Navigating different cultural spaces, and questioning long-held beliefs were pivotal experiences that contributed to my evolving identity. These moments of introspection and adaptation have ultimately strengthened my sense of self and deepened my understanding of what it means to belong.

### **New York, A Place of Melting Pot**

New York City stands as a living testament to the notion of the "melting pot"—a place where countless cultures, histories, and identities have fused over time to create a dynamic and diverse urban landscape. For centuries, the city has been a magnet for immigrants seeking new opportunities, refuge, and a fresh start. From the early days of European settlers to the waves of African, Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian immigration, New York has grown into one of the most culturally rich and complex cities in the world. This chapter explores how New York's identity as a melting pot plays a pivotal role in the African diaspora experience, shaping both individual and collective identities.

#### *A History of Migration*

The roots of New York's melting pot status can be traced back to its founding as a Dutch colony in the early 17th century, where it quickly became a hub of trade, bringing together people from different European, African, and Indigenous backgrounds. By the 19th century, Ellis Island became the symbolic entry point for millions of immigrants who arrived from countries like Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe, and later, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

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Each wave of migration brought its own set of cultural traditions, languages, and beliefs, which in turn contributed to the ever-evolving fabric of the city. The sheer diversity that defines New York has allowed it to become a symbol of multiculturalism—an urban space where various ethnic groups can coexist while maintaining aspects of their cultural identities. For many immigrants, the city became both a sanctuary and a stage for reinvention.<sup>1</sup>

### *The African Diaspora's Journey to New York*

The African diaspora's story in New York is multifaceted, beginning with the forced migration of enslaved Africans in the 17th century, followed by voluntary immigration in the 20th and 21st centuries. Harlem, for instance, became a cultural epicenter for African Americans and African immigrants alike, especially during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of immense artistic and intellectual output.

As African immigrants arrived from countries like Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, they formed communities in neighborhoods like Little Senegal in Harlem and parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx. These areas became cultural enclaves where immigrants could practice their traditions, speak their languages, and create spaces that felt like home. The markets, churches, restaurants, and cultural centers established by the African diaspora played crucial roles in preserving their identities while also introducing their cultures to the wider city.<sup>2</sup>

### *Navigating the "Melting Pot"*

The concept of the melting pot often suggests that immigrants must assimilate into a dominant culture, but the reality in New York is far more nuanced. The African diaspora, like many other communities, has had

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<sup>1</sup> Foner, Nancy. "Immigration Past & Present." *Daedalus* 142, no. 3 (2013): 16–25..

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, April. "The New Diaspora-African Immigration to the United States." *Journal of Third World Studies* 15, no. 1 (1998): 79–103.

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to balance the need to maintain their cultural heritage with the pressures to adapt and succeed in a new environment. This duality—maintaining a sense of home while forging a new identity in a different land—is a recurring theme for immigrants in New York.

While the city offers opportunities for growth, education, and success, it also presents challenges. For members of the African diaspora, issues of race, class, and immigration status often add layers of complexity to their experience. Racism and xenophobia, while not as overt as in other parts of the world, still shape the ways in which African immigrants are perceived and treated. This reinforces the need for strong community networks, where cultural preservation and collective support provide a buffer against the pressures of assimilation.

### *The Resilience of Cultural Identity*

In the face of these challenges, the African diaspora in New York has shown remarkable resilience. Through religious practices, music, food, and storytelling, they have continued to uphold their cultural traditions while adapting to the rhythms of New York life. For instance, the griot tradition of West Africa—where storytellers and musicians preserve oral history—has found new expression in the city. African drumming circles, spoken word performances, and cultural festivals like the African American Day Parade and the West Indian Day Parade are vibrant reminders of how diaspora communities keep their heritage alive.

The "melting pot" metaphor is further complicated by the fact that New York doesn't always ask immigrants to assimilate in the traditional sense. Instead, the city's diversity allows for the coexistence of multiple cultures, often in parallel. It is a place where African immigrants can form distinct cultural enclaves while also contributing to the broader mosaic of the city. For many, the key to navigating New York's melting pot is the ability to adapt while holding onto one's roots.

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### *The African Diaspora and the Future of New York's Identity*

As the African diaspora continues to grow in New York, its influence on the city's cultural, political, and social life deepens. The success of African-owned businesses, the prominence of African art and music, and the political activism of African immigrants are all testaments to the ways in which the diaspora is shaping New York's future.

However, the melting pot is not without its challenges. African immigrants, like other minority groups, face systemic barriers, including unequal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Despite these hurdles, the diaspora remains a powerful force for change, advocating for immigrant rights, racial equality, and social justice.

In conclusion, New York's identity as a melting pot is both a blessing and a challenge for its African diaspora. The city offers a space where multiple identities can coexist, but it also requires constant negotiation between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new realities. For many African immigrants, New York becomes a place where they can redefine what it means to belong—both to their homeland and to their new home. Through resilience, creativity, and community, they continue to shape the ever-evolving story of New York City, ensuring that their cultures are not only preserved but celebrated.

The melting pot may blend cultures together, but it does not erase their individual identities. Instead, it allows them to transform, evolve, and thrive in a city that celebrates diversity at its core.

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## Chapter 2: Stop Running Away from Myself and the Truth

### *Confronting Cultural and Personal Truths*

Confronting cultural and personal truths can be an incredibly difficult and painful process, especially for those of us who identify as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Raised in a blend of multiple cultures, we often feel a sense of belonging in many places yet do not fully belong in any single culture. This unique position places us in the intersection of various cultural norms, values, and expectations, making the journey to self-awareness and authenticity complex.

I am close to my Congolese culture, embracing the food, the music, and the theaters that resonate with my heritage. Yet, growing up with French culture, I find myself constantly navigating between these two worlds. This blend, though enriching, often feels like a double-edged sword—an opportunity and a challenge.

For a long time, I avoided facing the uncomfortable truths about my cultural identity. I grew up constantly moving between different cultures, trying to fit in and adapt to my ever-changing environment. The notion of "home" became a fluid concept, not tied to a specific location or culture but to the transient experiences and relationships formed along the way.

Personal anecdotes often illuminate these truths. I remember vividly a moment during my teenage years when I was asked where I was from. I hesitated, not because I didn't know the answer, but because I had too many answers. France, where I was born and raised? The Democratic Republic of Congo, where my parents are from? Now The United States, where I'm currently studying? Each answer felt incomplete on its own, reflecting only a fragment of my identity.

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### *The Fear of Self-Awareness*

The fear of self-awareness is a significant barrier for many TCKs. It's the fear of confronting the rootlessness that accompanies a third culture identity, the fear of acknowledging that we may never fully belong anywhere. This fear often leads to resistance, an emotional and psychological barrier that keeps us from diving deep into our true selves.

For years, I resisted self-awareness, preferring the comfort of superficial adaptation to different cultural settings rather than facing the underlying confusion about my identity. This resistance was a defense mechanism, protecting me from the pain of feeling like an outsider in every culture I was a part of. The emotional strain of frequent relocations and the perpetual cycle of forming and severing relationships added to this resistance, creating a shield against the vulnerability required for self-awareness.

### *The Journey of Acceptance*

The journey to accepting personal and cultural truths is often long and winding, marked by key moments of realization and acceptance. For me, one such moment came during a conversation with a fellow TCK. We shared stories of our upbringing, the constant moves, and the sense of never truly fitting in. It was in this exchange that I realized I wasn't alone in my experiences. This realization was the first step towards acceptance.

Acceptance began with acknowledging that my identity is not tied to a single culture or place. It is a mosaic of all the cultures I've lived in and the experiences I've had. This process involved embracing the discomfort and uncertainty that comes with a third culture identity. It required me to let go of the need to fit neatly into predefined cultural categories and instead, accept the fluidity of my identity.

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### *Embracing Authenticity*

Living authentically is a significant aspect of embracing one's true self. It means no longer running away from the truth but instead, standing firm in who you are, despite the complexities and contradictions. For TCKs, authenticity involves integrating the diverse cultural influences that have shaped us and recognizing the unique identity that emerges from this blend.

Embracing my true self meant accepting the parts of my identity that felt contradictory. It meant acknowledging that I could feel a strong connection to my Congolese heritage while also identifying with the French culture I grew up in and the American culture I'm immersed in now. This acceptance was liberating, allowing me to live authentically and confidently, without the constant need to conform to any single cultural expectation.

### *The Pain of Not Knowing Where You Are From*

The pain of not fully knowing where you are from is a common experience among TCKs. It is the pain of feeling like an outsider everywhere, of being in a constant state of transition and never fully settling. This pain can be profound, often avoided at all costs. However, confronting this pain is essential for true self-awareness and acceptance.

For a long time, I avoided this pain, distracting myself with the busyness of life and the superficial connections formed in new environments. But running away from this truth only delayed the inevitable. It was only when I confronted the pain of my rootlessness that I began to find peace. Accepting that I may never have a single place to call home was a difficult but necessary step towards embracing my third culture identity.

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### *Conclusion*

The journey of a TCK is one of constant movement, adaptation, and self-discovery. It is marked by the pain of not fully belonging, the fear of self-awareness, and the eventual acceptance of a complex and fluid identity. By confronting these truths and embracing our unique cultural blend, we can live authentically and confidently. The journey is challenging, but it is also profoundly enriching, offering a broader perspective and a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and human resilience. This project became a platform for exploring and celebrating our complex identities.

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## Chapter 3: Dealing with the Pain We Never Asked For

### *Understanding Inherited Trauma*

Inherited trauma, also known as intergenerational trauma, is the transmission of historical oppression and its negative consequences across generations. For many within the African diaspora, the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and systemic racism has left deep emotional scars that continue to affect descendants. This trauma can manifest in various ways, including feelings of inadequacy, persistent anxiety, and a deep-seated fear of failure.

One poignant memory that encapsulates this struggle occurred during a visit to a museum in New York City with a black friend. After a day on campus, we decided to explore the city. We boarded the subway at the “Columbia University” station, surrounded by university students like ourselves. As the train moved from station to station, the student crowd gave way to tired employees returning home from work. Our animated conversation and laughter began to draw stares from both black and non-black passengers.

The non-black passengers’ gazes felt like judgment, while the black passengers’ looks seemed to silently urge us not to embarrass them. A group of non-black students were speaking just as loudly, if not louder, yet they received no such scrutiny. Realizing this disparity, my friend and I fell silent, adjusting our behavior to meet the unspoken expectations placed upon us as “good black people.”

This incident underscored a painful truth: no matter where I am, I must modify my behavior based on those around me. The pressure to conform to societal expectations of how a black person should behave is a burden that weighs heavily, often forcing me to suppress my true self.

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### *Coping Mechanisms and Healing Processes*

Coping with such experiences requires resilience and a variety of strategies. For me, understanding and acknowledging inherited trauma has been crucial. By identifying the root causes of my pain, I have been able to develop healthier ways to manage it. Praying and journaling have been particularly therapeutic, allowing me to process my emotions and gain clarity.

Additionally, engaging with my cultural heritage through music, dance, and storytelling has provided a sense of grounding. These activities not only connect me to my roots but also serve as powerful reminders of the strength and resilience of my ancestors.

Healing, however, is not a solitary journey. It requires the support and solidarity of a community that understands and shares similar experiences.

### *The Role of Community Support*

Community support plays a vital role in the healing process. It offers a space where individuals can share their stories, validate each other's experiences, and collectively work towards healing. For instance, during my time at Columbia University, I encountered students and friends who shared similar backgrounds and struggles. Our meetings provided a safe space to discuss the challenges of navigating multiple cultural identities and the impact of inherited trauma.

One of the most impactful experiences was participating in casual discussions which turn into storytelling sessions. These moments allowed us to share personal anecdotes and explore the broader historical and cultural contexts that shaped our lives. Through these shared narratives, we found strength and solidarity, realizing that we were not alone in our struggles.

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Moreover, community events and gatherings, such as cultural festivals and workshops, have been instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural pride. These events celebrate our heritage and provide opportunities for intergenerational dialogue, allowing us to learn from the experiences of our elders while passing down our stories to younger generations.

### *Conclusion*

Dealing with the pain we never asked for is a complex and ongoing process. Understanding inherited trauma, sharing personal stories of pain and resilience, developing coping mechanisms, and seeking community support are essential steps towards healing. By embracing our cultural identities and fostering solidarity within our communities, we can navigate the challenges of living between multiple worlds and work towards a more inclusive and understanding society.

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## Chapter 4: Healing Together

### *Collective Healing Practices*

Healing from trauma, especially inherited trauma, often requires a communal approach. Various cultures around the world have developed collective healing practices that emphasize community support and shared experiences. In many African societies, healing practices are deeply rooted in communal activities. Sharing a meal, dances, and ceremonies play a crucial role in bringing people together to heal collectively.

For example, in Senegal, the concept of "teranga" embodies hospitality and community spirit, fostering an environment where collective healing can occur. Similarly, Native American healing circles involve community members gathering to share their experiences and support one another through prayer, drumming, and storytelling.

My personal experience with collective healing began when I met my friend groups, where we all had different backgrounds and origins. We shared traditional dances and songs, which allowed us to connect with our heritage and each other. The sense of unity and shared purpose in these sessions was incredibly therapeutic, helping us process our emotions and support one another in our healing journeys.

### *The Power of Shared Stories*

One of the most powerful tools for healing is storytelling. Sharing personal stories can help individuals process their experiences and foster a sense of connection and empathy among listeners. Stories have the ability to bridge gaps between people, creating a shared understanding of pain and resilience.

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During one of these moments, I shared my subway experience in New York City, where my friend and I were scrutinized for our behavior. As I recounted the incident, I felt a wave of emotions, but also a sense of relief. My friend's empathetic responses and shared stories of similar experiences reinforced the idea that we were not alone in our struggles.

Storytelling not only helps individuals heal but also strengthens community bonds. By sharing our narratives, we acknowledge our collective history and experiences, which fosters a deeper sense of solidarity and mutual support.

### *Building Bridges Across Cultures*

Building understanding and solidarity across cultures is essential for collective healing. In a diverse and multicultural society like the United States, efforts to bridge cultural gaps can lead to greater empathy and cooperation. This process involves recognizing and respecting cultural differences while finding common ground.<sup>3</sup>

For instance, during a cultural festival, I had the opportunity to see Congolese dance and music present to an audience of diverse backgrounds. The positive reception and interest in learning about my culture were heartwarming. Conversely, I learned about the traditions and histories of other cultures, which enriched my understanding and appreciation of diversity.

### *The Path to Reconciliation*

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<sup>3</sup> Tatum, B. D. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. Basic Books. (2017).

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Reconciliation is a critical component of healing, both within oneself and with others. It involves acknowledging past wrongs, forgiving, and striving for peace. Reconciliation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that requires introspection, dialogue, and a commitment to change.<sup>4</sup>

On a personal level, reconciliation began with accepting my dual identity as a Congolese-French individual. Embracing both aspects of my heritage allowed me to reconcile the internal conflict I had felt for years. Moving to the United States added another layer of complexity, but it also provided an opportunity to reconcile my identity within a broader cultural context.

Reconciliation with others involves open communication and a willingness to understand different perspectives. These skills were instrumental in resolving misunderstandings and fostering a sense of community.

### *Conclusion*

Healing together is a multifaceted process that encompasses collective healing practices, the power of shared stories, building bridges across cultures, and the path to reconciliation. By engaging in these practices, individuals and communities can support each other in their healing journeys, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding.

Through my experiences and beyond, I have witnessed the profound impact of collective healing and cultural bridge-building. These experiences have not only helped me heal from inherited trauma but also strengthened my resolve to contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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<sup>4</sup> Kymlicka, Will, and Bashir Bashir, eds. *The Politics of Reconciliation in Multicultural Societies*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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As we continue on this path, let us remember that healing is a collective effort. By sharing our stories, embracing our diverse identities, and working towards reconciliation, we can create a more compassionate and united world.

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## Chapter 5: Finding an Identity

### *The Quest for Self-Identity*

The journey of finding and defining one's identity is ongoing and deeply personal. For many of us, this quest involves navigating complex intersections of culture, history, and personal experiences. Growing up in France with Congolese parents, I was immersed in a blend of cultures that sometimes felt at odds with each other. This duality shaped my early understanding of identity and set me on a path to explore what it truly means to belong.

When I moved to the United States, the quest for self-identity intensified. I was no longer balancing just two cultures but now faced the challenge of integrating a third. Each culture brought its own set of values, traditions, and expectations, which influenced my sense of self. This journey has been filled with moments of confusion, self-discovery, and profound insight.

### *Balancing Multiple Cultural Influences*

Balancing multiple cultural identities is both challenging and rewarding. It requires navigating the expectations and norms of each culture while staying true to oneself. In France, I often felt pressure to assimilate and downplay my Congolese heritage to fit in. At home, my parents emphasized the importance of maintaining our cultural traditions, which sometimes felt disconnected from my experiences outside.

In the United States, I encountered new cultural dynamics and stereotypes. I had to learn how to present myself in ways that would be accepted in different social settings. This balancing act required developing

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strategies to manage the conflicting influences. One strategy was creating spaces where I could express my full self without fear of judgment. Joining cultural groups and engaging in community activities allowed me to celebrate my heritage and connect with others who shared similar experiences.

### *Identity in a Globalized World*

Globalization has a profound impact on cultural identity. The interconnectedness of our world means that we are constantly exposed to diverse cultures and perspectives. While this can enrich our understanding of the world, it can also complicate our sense of identity. In a globalized context, personal identity becomes fluid and dynamic, shaped by multiple influences and interactions.

For me, globalization has meant embracing a broader perspective on identity. It has allowed me to see how my experiences are part of a larger narrative shared by many people around the world. This realization has helped me understand that identity is not a fixed construct but a continuous process of evolution and adaptation.

### *The Evolution of Personal Identity*

Personal identity is not static; it evolves over time as we grow and experience new things. Reflecting on my journey, I see how my identity has changed and expanded. In my early years, I struggled with the duality of being Congolese and French. Over time, I learned to embrace both aspects of my heritage, recognizing that they are integral parts of who I am.

Moving to the United States added another layer to my identity. It challenged me to reconsider my sense of self and how I relate to the world. Through this process, I have come to see identity as a tapestry woven from diverse threads of experience, culture, and personal growth.

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One significant insight is the understanding that identity is not about fitting into predefined categories but about creating a unique space where all aspects of oneself can coexist. This realization has empowered me to embrace my multifaceted identity and find strength in my diversity.

### *Conclusion*

The quest for self-identity is a lifelong journey that involves balancing multiple cultural influences, navigating the impact of globalization, and embracing the evolution of personal identity. Through this journey, I have learned that identity is not a fixed destination but a dynamic process of self-discovery and growth.

In a globalized world, our identities are shaped by a multitude of factors, and the ability to adapt and integrate these influences is crucial. By reflecting on our experiences and embracing our diverse heritages, we can find a sense of belonging and purpose.

As I continue on this journey, I am reminded that finding an identity is about more than just fitting in; it is about celebrating our unique stories and creating a space where we can fully express who we are. This chapter of my life has taught me that the quest for identity is an ongoing adventure, one that requires courage, resilience, and an open heart.

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## Conclusion

### *Summary of Key Insights*

This thesis has explored the intricate journey of cultural identity, belonging, and self-discovery. Through personal reflections and thematic analysis, several key insights have emerged:

1. *Changing My Way of Thinking, Living, and Believing*: The necessity to adapt and evolve one's mindset when navigating multiple cultural identities. This adaptation fosters resilience and openness to diverse experiences.
2. *Stopping Running Away from Myself and the Truth*: Embracing one's true self and heritage, and acknowledging the pain and struggles faced along the way. This acceptance is crucial for personal growth and authenticity.
3. *Navigating Belonging*: The continuous process of finding and creating spaces where one can belong. It involves balancing different cultural influences and finding harmony within oneself.
4. *Dealing with the Pain We Never Asked For*: Understanding inherited trauma and the importance of collective healing. It emphasizes the role of community support and shared stories in coping with and overcoming pain.
5. *Healing Together*: The power of collective healing practices and the significance of building bridges across cultures. It highlights the transformative impact of shared stories and communal efforts in fostering reconciliation and solidarity.
6. *Finding an Identity*: The dynamic nature of personal identity and the ongoing quest to define oneself in a globalized world. It underscores the evolution of identity through experiences and cultural interactions.

### *Reflections on the Journey*

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This project has been a profound personal journey of self-exploration and cultural discovery. Reflecting on my experiences, I have gained a deeper understanding of my cultural heritage and the complexities of navigating multiple identities. The process has been both challenging and rewarding, providing valuable insights into the nuances of cultural belonging and identity formation.

Through this journey, I have grown in my appreciation of the richness and diversity of cultural experiences. I have learned the importance of embracing my heritage while being open to new influences and perspectives. This project has reinforced the significance of resilience, adaptability, and authenticity in the quest for self-identity.

### *Implications for Future Research*

The findings from this study suggest several potential areas for further research:

1. Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Identity: Exploring how cultural identity is passed down through generations and the role of family and community in this process.
2. Impact of Globalization on Cultural Belonging: Investigating how globalization influences cultural identity and belonging, particularly among diasporic communities.
3. Collective Healing Practices in Diverse Cultures: Examining various collective healing practices across different cultures and their effectiveness in addressing inherited trauma.
4. Identity Formation in Multicultural Societies: Analyzing the challenges and strategies of identity formation in multicultural and multiethnic societies.

These areas of research can provide deeper insights into the complexities of cultural identity and contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamics of belonging in a globalized world.

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### *Final Thoughts*

The journey of exploring cultural identity and belonging is deeply personal and profoundly significant. It is a journey that requires courage, self-reflection, and an openness to diverse experiences and perspectives. Embracing our cultural heritage while being receptive to new influences enriches our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

I hope that this thesis has highlighted the importance of cultural identity and the value of finding a sense of belonging. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, fostering understanding and solidarity across cultures is more important than ever. By sharing our stories and embracing our diverse identities, we can build bridges of empathy and support, creating a more inclusive and harmonious world.

As I conclude this project, my hope is that future generations will continue to explore and celebrate their cultural identities. Let us strive to create spaces where everyone can belong, where our differences are honored, and where we can come together in mutual respect and solidarity.

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### **To my parents and people that are looking for themselves**

As I conclude this thesis, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my parents, whose unwavering support and love have been the bedrock of my journey. To my parents, thank you for the countless sacrifices you have made and for instilling in me the values of resilience, perseverance, and pride in our cultural heritage. Your stories, experiences, and guidance have profoundly shaped my understanding of identity and belonging. I am forever grateful for your wisdom and the strong sense of community you have cultivated within our family.

To those who feel like they are living everywhere and nowhere, navigating the spaces between cultures and identities, this work is dedicated to you. The journey of finding oneself in a world that often seeks to categorize and define us can be daunting. Yet, it is also a journey of immense strength, discovery, and beauty. Know that your experiences are valid, and your unique perspective enriches the tapestry of our global community.

Embrace your heritage, honor your journey, and continue to seek out spaces where you can belong. Remember that it is okay to feel like you are part of many worlds and yet none entirely. This fluidity is a testament to your adaptability and resilience. You are not alone in this experience. There are many who share similar paths, and together, we can build bridges of understanding and solidarity.

To everyone who feels the weight of living between worlds, I encourage you to find strength in your multifaceted identity. Celebrate the richness of your experiences and the unique insights you bring to every community you touch. Let this thesis serve as a reminder that you are seen, valued, and that your journey is an integral part of our collective story. Through this project, I aim to highlight these shared

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experiences, opening a dialogue about what it means to belong and celebrating the resilience of those navigating the complexities of a third culture.

In closing, let us continue to embrace our diverse identities, support one another in our journeys, and work towards a world where everyone feels they belong, everywhere and anywhere.

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