# 'Identity' is not only about human relations: the relevance of human-to-non-human interaction in 'identity' articulation

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# 'Identity' is not only about human relations: the relevance of human-to-non-human interaction in 'identity' articulation

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper concerns the construction of 'cultural identity' in the personal everyday lives of a group of high-status professionals living in the UK, who happen to be academics. The paper focuses on the relevance of non-human categories in 'identity' construction and advocates for broadening our understanding of this debatable term by acknowledging the relevance of human-to-non-human relations in intercultural communication. The findings demonstrate that non-human categories such as naming, death, and food are central in 'identity' construction. This conceptualisation of 'identity' broadens our understanding of this highly contested concept and acknowledges the centrality of non-human entities in its manifestation.

ملخص الدراسة

يبحث هذا المقال في بناء "الهوية الثقافية" لمجموعة من الأشخاص ذو المستوى التعليمي العالي والذين يعيشون في المملكة المتحدة. تضم المجموعة المشاركة في هذا البحث محاضرين جامعيين ويبحث هذا المقال في دور الفئات الغير البشرية: الأسماء، الموت والأكل في بناء "الهوية"، حيث يهدف هذا المقال الى الالتفات الى مركزية العلاقة بين الإنسان والفئات الغير بشرية في مجال التواصل بين الثقافات والابتعاد عن فكرة تقييد مفهوم "الهوية" من حيث العلاقات بين الأشخاص فيما بينهم. قد أظهرت نتائج المقال أن الفئات الغير بشرية المذكورة أعلاه لها دور محوري في بناء مفهوم "الهوية" لدى الأشخاص والتعبير عنها. هذا التصور يجعل مفهومنا "للهوية"، والتي هو مفهوم متنازع عليه بشدة، أكثر تحررا ويقر بمحورية الفئات الغير بشرية في تجلياته .

## Introduction

In this empirically based paper, I examine the significance of some of the non-human categories that a group of high-status professionals, who happen to be academics draw upon to construct what I interpret as their 'identities'. These categories are naming, death, and food. They are constructed as significant practices in the ways in which the participants articulate their 'identity'. This manifestation of such non-human categories decentres the understanding of 'identity' as a process which is exclusively linked to 'self' and human 'other' encounters, and rather brings to the centre the relevance of human-to-non-human interactions into our make-up. Through this manifestation of 'identity', I argue for the need to conceptualise intercultural experiences beyond humans' interaction with each other, and instead accommodate the significance of artefacts and practices such as naming and the meanings people attribute to death in our projection of who we are.

This paper engages with current debates on the need to accommodate posthumanism in our understanding of intercultural communication. In this regard, Auger and Dervin (2021) argue

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for the need to think about our intercultural encounters beyond human subjects, and to accommodate interactions between living objects and non-living objects (p. vii). The paper also draws on other contributions by non-essentialist researchers, such as Ros i Solé et al. (2020), Fenoulhet (2020), Ferri (2020), among others, who engage with this critical subject. While the works of these and other researchers, which will be discussed below, focus on material entities such as objects, I mostly use their contributions to discuss both material and non-material elements. These elements are food, naming, and death. This is because their argument of the relevance of material entities in our make-up can be extended to abstract categories, such as naming and death. This allows for more engaging research by including another dimension to the discussion of the relevance of posthumanism to our understanding of how we communicate and make sense of who we are in relation to living and non-living entities. Therefore, this paper provides much needed insights into the relevance of posthumanism in the field intercultural communication by extending our understanding of the ways in which individuals interact with the world and acknowledging the centrality of objects and abstract entities in our make-up.

In what follows, I discuss the philosophical underpinning of the study. After this, I provide the theoretical framework and explain its relevance to the study. Then, I present the background of the study. Following this, I situate my study in relation to relevant literature on the pertinence of posthumanism in our understanding of intercultural communication. Next, I present the methodological aspect of the study and the data discussion, respectively. Subsequently, I conclude the paper by emphasising the need to broaden our understanding of intercultural encounters and the relevance of posthumanism in this endeavour.

Throughout, I use the term identity in inverted commas to communicate that the use of this contested concept is highly subjective. This practice of using inverted commas signals a view of 'identity' as 'who people take for themselves to be and who others take them to be' (Storry & Childs, 2013, pp. 4–5). While through this practice I acknowledge that, what I have conceptualised as, 'identity' can be interpreted differently by other researchers, I maintain my understanding of it in terms of how people perceive themselves, how they are perceived by their social environment, and the way this relationship is manifested in how individuals interact with the wider world.

Also, throughout, I refer to the academics in the study as co-participants due to the give-and-take relationship between myself as a researcher and them as research participants in constructing the knowledge of the study (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 5; Creswell, 2014, pp. 187–188). While I present the philosophical underpinning and the theoretical framework below in a linear fashion, this does not mean that I treat these philosophical perspectives as separate. They are rather mutually determining in the sense that they both inform each other regarding the understanding advocated for in relation to the subject under investigation.

## Philosophical underpinning

The paper uses a social constructivist approach and a qualitative research design. The former is used because it acknowledges multiplicity of realities and the socially constructed nature of contested notions such as 'identity'. In other words, the constructivist approach I use acknowledges that research which examines individuals' self-positioning in relation to others and the wider world is not an innocent practice. It is rather shaped by both the researcher's and the participants' own beliefs, views, and experiences which are constantly shaped and reshaped (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 33, 195; Burr, 2015, p. 4; Creswell, 2014, p. 8; Denzin, 2000, p. 256; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111; Rosenthal, 1967, pp. 258, 417). In a similar vein, the latter, being qualitative design, is used because it acknowledges subjectivity in research and promotes the pursuit of a nuanced understanding of social issues and digging deeper into them rather than opting for clear-cut definitions, which is a characteristic of essentialist research (Boyatzis, 1998; Holliday, 2016a). In this regard, Holliday (2009) argues: 'decentred research methodologies need to allow critical spaces in which the unexpected can emerge, and the narratives of subjects can take on a life of their own' (p. 147).

## Theoretical framework

I use a critical posthuman perspective (Braidotti, 2013, 2019) to make sense of the relationship between the co-participants' 'identities' and the non-human categories of naming, death, and food that they draw upon. Critical posthumanism is explained as a critique of a 'Eurocentric' perception of the world originated from the enlightenment century (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 67–68; 2019, pp. 31–32). This is in the sense that 'the West' structures and defines the rest of the world (Delanty, 2006, p. 27). Critical posthumanism is also defined as post-anthropocentrism; this term refers to the viewpoint of rejecting species hierarchy (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). This worldview which rejects a 'Western' organisation of the world where 'white rational Man' (Ros i Solé et al., 2020, p. 401) is the norm, and which interrogates the separation between 'humans, and other animals, humans and artefacts, humans and nature' (Pennycook, 2018, p. 445) is manifested in the discussion below about the significance of a range of non-human categories in our understanding of 'identity'.

## Background of the study

The paper is part of a larger qualitative research project which concerns the ways in which a group of well-established academics living the UK construct their sense of 'cultural identity' and 'belonging' in their personal everyday lives, not about their experiences in the university context. When the co-participants discuss their understanding of who they are, they also draw on the ways in which they believe they are perceived by some 'white British' people (Kebabi, 2022). In this 'self' and 'other' relation, 'the other' is omnipresent in the ways in which the co-participants talk about themselves wherein, the imposed and essentialist categories of 'race' and 'accent' are central to them (Kebabi, 2022). This is in the sense that these categories, which reflect positivist and postpositivist influences in intercultural research (Holliday & MacDonald, 2020, pp. 621–622), are the lens through which the co-participants believe they are perceived by others. They resist this perception of them by refusing to be framed within these reductionist categories, as well as by decentring 'the other's' perception of them. In doing so, they instead express their sense of 'identity' in relation to 'new' categories (Kebabi, 2022). These categories are naming, death, and food, and are the focus of this paper. Therefore, this paper is an investigation from the 'insider perspective', that is, the co-participants' views, rather than being 'an investigation from outside' (Wodak, 2008, p. 55), i.e. others' perception of the co-participants.

It is important to clarify that my use of the term 'categories' in relation to naming, death, and food reflects the view of such entities as part of individuals' make-up. There is interaction and intra-action with these categories among others in the sense that they constitute us as much as we, as human beings, attach meaning and emotions to them. They become central in how we view ourselves and situate ourselves in the world in which we exist. This manifestation of such non-human categories is aligned with a posthuman perspective in terms of moving away from humans' superiority over other entities and, rather acknowledging that our 'identities' are situated in the entanglement of multiple configurations of life. This view of the relationship between human and non-human subjects is key in the contributions discussed in the following section.

## The relevance of posthumanism to intercultural communication

The posthuman worldview which questions the separation between 'humans, and other animals, humans and artefacts, humans and nature' (Pennycook, 2018, p. 445) is salient in the works of non-essentialist researchers such as Kell (2015); Pennycook (2018); Badwan and Hall (2020); Ferri (2020); Fenoulhet (2020); and Ros i Solé et al. (2020).

Ferri (2020) attempts to shake the tendency of conceptualising intercultural encounters within the binary relationship between 'self' and human 'other' where difference is a site for enacting power relations. This is by arguing that this understanding of intercultural encounters, which can be

described in terms of 'cultural blocks' (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017; Holliday, 2016b), is a 'Western' construe and perpetuates 'cultural difference of the other [on the basis of] nationality and language' (p. 409). Ferri (2020) argues instead for an understanding of 'the other' whereby, difference is understood as a source of 'becoming' (p. 408) rather than a source of conflict using a critical posthuman theory and post-structural feminism. These perspectives emphasise subjectivity and promote an equal relation between human and non-human others. This is by destabilising hierarchies, binary relationships, and acknowledging 'minoritarian' or 'outsider' views, which are also referred to as 'rhizomatic subjectivities' (ibid., pp. 412–413).

Based on this rhizomatic understanding of 'the other', Ferri (2020) argues for expanding our resources of how we relate to the world to include artefacts, video, artwork and auto-ethnographic narratives (p. 415). Therefore, this conception of 'the other' is not limited to humans nor is framed within power dynamics; it is rather understood in terms of the interaction between human and non-human subjects where both entities enjoy equal consideration.

This conceptualisation of the interplay between subjectivity and 'identity' is aligned with (Fenoulhet, 2020) who illustrates interconnectedness between human and non-human subjects by arguing: ' … agency can be distributed across things as well as people' (pp. 500–151). She illustrates this viewpoint by drawing on her own personal experience of translating the novel Eva by the Dutch writer Carry van Bruggen wherein, herself and the various other entities used in the process of translating the novel such as a Dutch dictionary, paper and pencil, and the data base are constituent parts of generating excitement and making the translator (Fenoulhet) rediscover her sense of 'identity' in relation to the events and characters in the novel.

Relatively in the same vein, Ros i Solé et al. (2020) argue for an understanding of 'identity' which moves away from an anthropocentric view of the world whereby, the human subject is the centre of existence who gives meaning to life (p. 397). This understanding of 'identity' interrogates the exclusivity of its human-made nature, and resists conceptualising it within binary relations where power relations between human beings, and human and non-human subjects define the way these relations operate.

Ros i Solé et al. (2020) rather view 'identity' as 'vibrant', unpredictable, and interconnected with 'organic and non-organic life' (ibid., p. 397). They advocate for this understanding of 'identity' by organising its discussion around five axes: becomings, relationality, language, agencements, and affect (Ros i Solé et al., 2020, p. 398). These axes emphasise 'interconnectedness between organisms' (Ros i Solé et al., 2020, pp. 399–400) and non-organic material, as well as agency of human and non-human subjects in producing meaning. In other words, this understanding of 'identity' decentres its human-made nature and acknowledges its unpredictable nature and the centrality of living and non-living entities in our make-up.

My argument of rethinking our understanding of 'identity' as not exclusively relational in terms of 'self' and human 'other', which is corroborated by the contributions discussed so far, brings to the centre Kell's (2015) argument that 'things make people happen' (p. 442). I discuss this argument in relation to the idea of emotions in 'sticky' places (Ahmed, 2014) which is also aligned with the works I have discussed above.

The idea of 'things make people happen' (Kell, 2015, p. 442) illuminates the centrality of categories such as place and objects, and their role in people's sense of becoming. This view which emphasises interconnectedness between people and objects offers new insights into emergent relations between human and non-human subjects. It destabilises the belief that communication is exclusive to human beings and is mediated by language only. A manifestation of this worldview is turning objects into something else, developing other objects, and using objects in creative ways. This interaction and intra-action make human beings happen by, for example, having a sense of accomplishment and status among our peers. This relationship might also make other people happen such as researchers by enabling them to research and illuminate these interactions (Kell, 2015).

This conceptualisation of the relationship between individuals and things is also advocated for in Badwan and Hall's (2020) contribution on the role of emotions and materiality in how 'things make

people happen' (Kell, 2015). Badwan and Hall (2020) argue that the physical presence of one of them during the interview with a participant in the Curry Mile in Manchester, a place which the participant constructed as 'home', enabled the researcher to understand what the participant could not express in words, as well as to 'happen'. This is in the sense that being in this place made the researcher reflects on her own childhood memories and her social class positioning in the world which became central in the research.

This understanding of the relevance of non-human categories in the ways in which we engage with the world, in my view, connects with the work of Ahmed (2014). She focuses on the way in which interaction between individuals, objects, and spaces evokes emotions which we attach to objects and spaces to make them 'sticky and saturated with affect' (p. 11). In this regard, Ahmed (2014, p. 6) argues that emotions are fluid, and they emerge due to our interaction with objects and the meanings we attach to them. This 'aboutness' of emotions indicates our stance towards the world in which we exist and the way we make sense of it. In other words, the emotions we give to the various entities we interact with makes them 'sticky' in that, they become a space for enacting our 'identities' and worldviews.

## Materials and methods

Throughout the paper, I do not specify information about the co-participants. This involves their national background, their names, their physical appearance, their gender, their areas of expertise and so forth. This is to protect the co-participants' anonymity and because, I suggest, this type of information is not necessary for the data analysis. This is in the sense that the analysis is not affected when this information is rendered unspecific. In my understanding, this approach, which can be described as interrogating the data, allows us to focus on the co-participants as individuals rather than viewing them through the lens of the countries they come from and what they look like and so forth. In this vein, Woodin (2007) argues 'the very naming of cultural groups we are to some extent ascribing essential qualities to them' (p. 213). Therefore, I have chosen random gender for the co-participants using the website 'random generators', and I have assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms to them, such as Kyle, Ryan, Eli, Charlie, and Alex.

While I appreciate that these gender-neutral pseudonyms are traditionally 'White/Western' names and reflect the cultural background of most of the co-participants, I maintain that by using this type of names for all the co-participants I attempt to interrogate both our understanding of 'whiteness' in relation to naming, and the data itself. First, I interrogate the concept of 'whiteness' in relation to naming by decentring essentialist understanding of the question of 'to belong or not to belong?' (Beck, 2003, p. 45) based on perceptions of 'race' (Kebabi, 2022) and bringing the co-participants' views of who they are into the centre. This is in the sense that even though most of the co-participants come from the so called 'White/Western' background, their 'whiteness' is not recognised by some 'white British' people. This is in such a way that the co-participants are labelled 'foreigners' and alienated because they are not as 'white' as 'white British' people, whatever this term means (Kebabi, 2022, pp. 82–91). Second, I interrogate the data by using 'White/Western' names for few co-participants who might not be in a way or another considered 'White/Western' to divert attention from stereotypical beliefs and minimise our unconscious bias which may arise from using names which reflect their cultural and national background.

Nevertheless, the way I discuss some of the anonymised categories, mainly skin colour and some of the co-participants' country of 'origin', might question how far I have anonymised this information and the extent to which the co-participants' identities are not compromised. The way I discuss this sensitive information is closely linked to how the co-participants talk about it in that, they make explicit association between what they look like and how they believe they are perceived by others. Specificity of skin colour is inevitable in this study in the sense that, regardless of my attempts to make explicit reference to skin colour less visible, I am aware that in some parts of the study it can be deduced from the context.

The data presented below is generated mostly from semi-structured interviews, and one piece of data is generated from an email. Interviews, more specifically semi-structured interviews, allow for a give-and-take interaction between the researcher and the participants. The interview was a site to explore the co-participants' 'realities', as well as my own 'realities' by interrogating my assumptions and digging deeper into how the co-participants construe their understanding of who they are. Therefore, even though this study is not about me, my own worldviews and the co-participants' realities were put into interaction. This interaction has resulted in the knowledge of this paper. This is to say that knowledge created via interviews is co-constructed in nature in that, both the researcher and the participants construe meaning by drawing on their experiences and worldviews (Amadasi & Holliday, 2018; Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kvale, 2007, among others).

The following table includes details about the co-participants and the dataset used in the paper (their pseudonyms, interview dates, the duration and location of the interviews). Due to the limited space, I discuss data generated from interviews with five co-participants: Kyle, Ryan, Eli, Charlie, and Alex.

| Co-participants | Interview dates | Duration of the interviews | Location of the interviews |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Alex | 16/05/2018 | 56 min and 11 s | An office in a university setting |
| Kyle | 29/05/2018 | 1 hrs, 8 min, and 31 s | An office in a university setting |
| Eli | 06/06/2018 | 1 hrs, 18 min, and 15 s | Eli's office in a university setting |
| Charlie | 25/06/2018 | 1 hrs, 28 min, and 30 s | A café in a town centre |
| Ryan | 03/08/2018 | 1 hrs, and 23 s | Ryan's office in a university setting |

During the interviews, I have asked the co-participants' about the following topics to which they have responded in ways which led to the emergence of other topics such as, death and food.

1. Can you tell me about yourself? how do you think of yourself?
2. What could you say about your 'immersion' in Britain?
3. How do you perceive yourself in relation to being bilingual?
4. How do you position yourself in Britain and in the country you come from?
5. Do you think the practice of naming is important in our self-perception?

As shown in these initial interview questions, the theme of naming and its relation to people's self-perception was introduced by the researcher to which the co-participants responded in their own ways, as will be shown below. However, the themes of death and food emerged more or less from the co-participants. The topic of death emerged from the co-participants in such a way that they expressed a desire to go back 'home'. I tentatively associated this feeling of longing for returning 'home' with the idea that they might want to be at 'home' forever, which I have associated with death. I have interrogated my assumption by asking the co-participants about this link in a way which yielded insightful perspectives. This is further discussed below. As far as the topic of food is concerned, it was drawn upon by two co-participants to project its significance in how they perceive themselves, and how they want to be perceived by others. Among these co-participants is Alex, whom I discuss below. Alex drew on the topic of food to manifest the way in which his children perceive him as someone who is trying to become 'white' (Kebabi, 2022, p. 78). I also use an email exchange which Alex sent me after reflecting on his statements during the interview in relation to the link between food and his sense of 'identity'; this is to illustrate how the co-participants make sense of the way they interact with food.

The data is analysed using thematic analysis and is influenced by the framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). While Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest six steps which are: familiarisation with the data through immersion, generating initial codes, organising these codes into themes with relevant extracts, checking and refining the themes developed, having a 'satisfactory thematic

map', and having a 'fully-worked-out' themes. (pp. 16–22), I have analysed the data in a somewhat different way. My analysis revolves around two main phases, and each phase involves steps which I have taken to ensure that the data is analysed rigorously. The first step concerns analysing the co-participants' discussion based on data generated in the first meeting I had with them, as well as in the interview meetings. This involved writing notes of interesting points, pursuing these notes, and generating further questions in the interview meetings. The second phase of data analysis is about further analysing the data after conducting the interviews. This was accomplished by transcribing, indexing, drawing connections between the data, revisiting the whole data, organising the selected data into a table, and further arranging this data in A3 paper. Before I discuss the data about 'identity' construction in relation to naming, death, and food, I present how I approached the co-participants and managed my relationship with them.

### Recruitment of the co-participants

My selection of the co-participants was based on the criteria of being professionals living in the UK with another cultural background. I identified some of the co-participants in some research events which I attended. Other co-participants were suggested by my supervisory panel. I sent an email invitation to fourteen potential co-participants. The email explained the focus of the study being, the ways in which they construct their sense of 'identity' and 'belonging' in their personal everyday lives when their professional status as academics is not highlighted. In other words, the core focus revolved around their personal lived experiences in the UK outside the university context. I received responses from nine co-participants about their willingness to take part in the study. After that, I arranged a meeting with each co-participant to establish rapport with them, as well as to obtain formal consent from them to take part in the research.[1] Following this, I conducted interviews with the nine co-participants individually.

The following is an interpretation of the data.

### The significance of names

The relevance of naming to the posthuman view of the relationship between humans, animals and living and non-living objects lies in illuminating the significance of these entities in individuals' make-up and advocating for an approach which attempts to bridge the gap between human and non-human entities in our understanding of 'identity'. Therefore, the manifestation of naming in my study is aligned with the posthuman view of human-to-non-human relations in that, this abstract entity alongside the categories of death and food are central in the ways in which the co-participants make sense of and project their 'identity'. This relationship interrogates separation and hierarchy between human and non-human entities, which is a tenet of critical posthumanism.

I asked Kyle to further clarify her statement that people's names are closely associated with the beliefs that parents hold about the choice of names for their children. The following is her response:

> Because they are not English. Well, ok, not them. They are English because they were born here. I'm not English. What reinforced for me was right from [the country Kyle comes from] when I met my husband, I said to him when we have kids we are not going to have any doubts back in [the country Kyle comes from]. So, I really had this thinking, but living here also reinforces it. For me, actually, they were born in this society, in England. One thing I wanted them to, if nothing else is, always remember where those names come from. For me, that's really important. That's why I always say to them: well, I was the one who do so, and I make sure they do it as well. (Kyle, interview)

Kyle shifts between what appears to be contradictory perceptions of her children's 'identity' based on their names and where they were born. She seems to rectify her statement that her children are not, using her term, 'English' by rearticulating her belief that their 'identity' is 'English'. Her self-perception which she refers to as 'not English' is salient in the ways she constructs her children's 'identity'. This is in the sense that she self-identifies with the country that she comes from by

expressing allegiance to the names which appear to 'belong' to the country in question. Kyle's connection with the country that she comes from appears to be manifested in her attitude towards her deliberate choice of names for her children. This can be shown in her statement: 'For me, that's really important. That's why I always say to them: well, I was the one who do so, and I make sure they do it as well'. This statement also implies an endeavour to pass these names on to future generations. Therefore, Kyle's self-perception is projected in the names she gave her children. These names appear to be central in maintaining ties with the country that she comes from as she wants her children to pursue the 'tradition' of passing on these names so that they remain saliant in future generations.

In the next extract, she appears to disprove the choice of other people who change their own names, as well as their children's names to 'English' sounding names:

> I know people who have come here and, actually, they've changed their names to English names. Some people are here and mentally they are here. Their kids, oh! we don't want people having difficulty calling their names, and they give them English names. They even change their own names. I know people who have done that. (Kyle, interview)

I am assuming that Kyle disapproves the practice of changing names to English sounding names which some parents do for themselves and for their children because of the difficulty in pronouncing their original names properly. This assumption is based on the interview extracts below where she seems to associate substituting original names for English ones with, what she refers to as, 'whitening' her 'identity', as well as with the perception of not being important in people's eyes.

The next extract is a response to my question by Kyle about whether she is mentally in the country she comes from, but physically in Britain, which I generated from the extract above. She responds to my question by positioning herself in relation to both, Britain and the country that she comes from through bringing her identification with these places into interaction. She appears to resist being perceived as though she is mentally 'stuck' in the country that she comes from or as someone who wants to become, using her word, 'white'. This is evident in her statements: ' … my identity is not stuck in [the country she comes from]' and ' … I'm not going to whiten my identity to become British'. She rather creates her own ways of situating herself in both contexts by bringing her cultural background into interaction with the 'British' context.

In the next extract, she seems to impose her name by expressing dissatisfaction when people do not pronounce it properly:

> You know, I watch TV a lot and there are some really difficult names, aren't there? And they call them right all the time. I think, why, is because they think they are important people. So, the fact that you don't get my name right and you call me something else tell me that you don't think I'm important. (Kyle, interview)

I interpret the way Kyle appears to perceive the way people pronounce each other's names in a way that they are 'able' to pronounce each other's names in the right way, regardless of its 'difficult' nature, but they choose to do so depending on their perception of each other. For Kyle, uttering her name in the wrong way shows that she is not important to people. This is because, according to her, if they perceived her otherwise, they would pronounce her name properly. Therefore, far from being associated with difficulty, Kyle perceives pronouncing her name correctly or in the wrong way as a choice that people make which indicates how far she is valued by them.

In the next interview extract, I asked Ryan about the relevance of her name in the way in which she perceives herself. She responded by explaining the Latin origins of her name and that she does not feel comfortable with the idea of changing her name after marriage. Then, she moved to talking about the choice of names she gave her children, which I find interesting to discuss:

> I gave [reference to the country Ryan comes from] first names to my children on purpose. So, they are proper [reference to the country Ryan comes from] names. We didn't want ones which then they will be Anglicised or, you know. I didn't want Robert, for instance, as a [reference to the country Ryan comes from] version and

English version, because he will be just Robert or something. So, they have got very typical [referring to the country Ryan comes from] names. They can't deny, they can't hide (laughing). (Ryan, interview)

Like Kyle, Ryan deliberately chose names for her children, which appear to 'belong' to the country that she comes from. Her intention of choosing, what she refers to as, 'proper' names for her children which cannot be converted into English names appears to indicate that she wants to preserve, what I interpret as, the 'uniqueness' and the 'originality' of these names. This choice of names appears to be a means via which Ryan is making statements about her relationship with the country she comes from, as well as her perception of her children's 'identity'. This is in the sense that, like Kyle, she appears to endeavour to pass on her sense of self-identification and connection with the country she comes to her children through the names she gave them.

Therefore, Ryan also appears to maintain ties with the country she comes from; this is by carrying the names which are associated with that country with her to Britain and ensuring they remain 'original' through passing them on to her children.

In the following extract, Eli describes her experience of omitting part of her surname in order to 'fit in':

There was a time when I started using my first surname just to make my life easier because you only have one surname. It's easier than having to say: okay, so, my surname has two words [saying each part] (in a funny way). Then, at one point I thought why would I do that? My name is my full name. Why should I have to (silence) kind of I don't know. Why should I do something to my name just to make it fit? If you don't like it, just deal with it. Why should I take my grandfathers' surname out of, you know, it's part of who I am. Why should I have to delete it for your sake? No. I said: okay, it's a little bit more uncomfortable in practical terms, but it doesn't matter. It has to be full. (Eli, interview)

What seems to be a difficulty in dealing with Eli's surname by people around her because of its 'different' nature appears to push her to omit part of it; this is to make it 'fit in' with the way people seem to use their surnames in Britain. She appears to make fun of the way these people seem to respond to her full surname. This is by adopting their reaction when explaining the reason she decided to use one surname only: 'you know, it's easier than having to say: okay, so, my surname has two words [saying each part] (in a funny way)'.

This reaction indicates that Eli is aware of these people's perception of the nature of her surname which she resists by imposing her full surname. This is by rearticulating her connection with the part of her surname which she omitted by constructing it as 'part of who I am'.

In the following extract, she makes further statements about the significance of her surname and the names she would choose for her children in projecting her sense of 'identity'.

The only one that I actually feel proud of is my last surname because it's the one from my mum's part of the family (showing emotions). It's the one that I actually feel a proper connection to. So, really, I messed up my relationship with my name (laughing). It's linked to their identity. I actually think about that even though I don't have any children. If or when I have them, they will have [names which relate to the country Eli comes from]. (Eli, interview)

She expresses a bond with her mother's side of the family which she identifies with by maintaining her mother's surname. She projects this connection by expressing emotions which show the significance of this part of her surname to her sense of 'identity' and the extent to which she is connected to her mother's side of the family. This is in the sense that she appears to maintain, what she refers to as, the 'identity' of her mother's part of the family by preserving their surname regardless of others' perceptions of the nature of her surname.

In the same vein, she projects her identification with the country she comes from by showing her intention to give her future children names which 'belong' to that country. Like Kyle and Ryan, who I have discussed above, Eli's surname, and the names she intends to give her children in the future are interpreted as ties through which she projects her sense of 'identity' and keeps connection with the country she comes from.

### Does dying or resting somewhere specific matter?

The notion of death emerged from my own interpretation of the way in which the co-participants expressed their relationship with the countries they come from, to which they have referred as 'home'. This is in the sense that they expressed a longing to go back 'home' and retire there. Based on this, I had the impression that there might possibly be a link between their longing for returning 'home' and my assumption that it is in these places that they want to be forever, which I have associated with death. I interrogated this assumption by asking the co-participants individually if there is a specific place where they desire to die.

Confronting my assumption that there might be a link between the co-participants' longing to go back 'home' and settle there with the idea that they might want to die there, by explicitly asking the co-participants about this link might communicate a sense of imposing my own assumptions in collecting and interpreting the data. I argue that this is not the case because of the following reasons. Frist, I have acknowledged that my interpretation of the relationship between the co-participants' desire to retire at 'home' and dying there is an assumption which I have challenged. This is by asking the co-participants an open-ended question, instead of asking them a leading question which might feed into my assumption in a way or another. Second, by looking at the co-participants' responses carefully, they chose to pursue my question by reflecting on it and complementing me for asking it (Ryan and Charlie), as well as by responding without any surprise, as will be shown in the discussion of Eli's response.

Below is a more detailed discussion of the co-participants' responses to my question.

In the following response by Ryan, she seems to associate the place of retirement with the place she might rest in:

> Oh God, I haven't thought about that (laughing). I suppose, because I'm planning to retire probably in [the country Ryan comes from], I would imagine. It's interesting. My mum died when I was pregnant with my second child and that, it, was quite hard. In [the country Ryan comes from] there is more culturally and expectations, but also other people go and visit relatives in a cemetery regularly. I don't find it here. So, I think if I die here, no one will visit me anyways (laughing). (Ryan, interview)

Ryan is obviously surprised by my question; however, she tends to pursue the question by responding discursively. First, she talks about not thinking about where she might want to die, which she seems to relate to her intention to retire in the country she comes from. This can be shown in her reply: 'I haven't thought about that (laughing). I suppose, because I'm planning to retire probably in (where Ryan comes from), I would imagine.'

From this response, there seems to be a sub-conscious link between the place of retirement and the place where she might want to die. This is in the sense that retiring in the country she comes from might, possibly, mean that it is the place where she chooses to be forever. Second, she highlights the difference between the way people in Britain and the country that she comes from relate to dead people where she seems to lean towards the rituals performed in the country she comes from. This is in the sense that she appears to feel 'abandoned' when she imagines the case in which she is buried in the UK, unlike in the place she comes from where she might be visited on a regular basis.

Below, she pursues the question I previously asked by rethinking it:

> Where do I die? Yeah, I don't know, I suppose it depends where I am at the time (laughing). Yeah, God, yeah! I didn't talk to my husband about it, actually, because we keep saying, yeah. I don't know, we haven't decided yet. Hopefully, I've got a while to go (laughing). That's a very good question though. (Ryan, interview)

In this response, she appears to try hard to situate herself in relation to the question I asked by pausing and asking herself the question again: 'where do I die?'. It appears that, even though this question was unexpected, it triggered her curiosity to figure out where she might want to rest, and she pursues this by trying to rethink her previous response.

In the next extract, Charlie projects his bond with various places which reflects his self-understanding:

That's great (silence)! I wouldn't necessarily like to be buried there like a specific location. If, maybe, some ashes could be scattered there like, some quite pretty, ah shit like may be like, a bit in [a place in Britain]. I do bits the same as (not finishing the sentence). I'm describing myself now as somebody who, you know, negotiates different locations. I probably have to pay someone, you know, to just go and deal with, you know, spreading a bit here, spreading a bit there. Where I'd like to die like? (hesitation) I don't know whether it's a new place or a place I know very well, you know, as long as it's got a pretty view. (Charlie, interview)

Charlie appears to display his sense of 'identity' by moving between the country he comes from and a place in Britain. I interpret the way in which he attempts to negotiate the significance of these places in relation to where he might want his ashes to be scattered as 'messy'. This can be shown in his response above where he pauses and reflects on the question whereby, he seems to rearticulate himself differently by leaving the answer open, as well as by showing the prospect of relating to new places. Therefore, I interpret the way in which he appears to make sense of death as a continuous articulation of his sense of place in the world, which is manifested in his choice of scattering his ashes in various places he has connected or might connect with in the future.

Unlike Ryan and Charlie, in the following extract, Eli appears less surprised by the question of where she wants to rest to which she responds by emphasising attachment to her mother's village:

I will probably live somewhere else, but I think as I get older, I think, I wanna be buried in my mum's village. I wanna be in that cemetery. In that cemetery I wanna be there. It's not where I was born, but it's where my mum's family comes from and, again, it's where I see the connection, where I feel. So, that's where I want to be eventually. You know, the roots actually call you. They call you back. (Eli, interview)

The way in which Eli responds appears to me as if she has thought about the question before. She seems far less surprised by the question compared to Ryan and Charlie. She also seems to have already decided on the place she wants to rest in, by showing her intention to be buried in her mother's village. The way in which she talks about death and her bond with this place connects with her desire to go back 'home' after retirement and settling in her mother's village (Kebabi, 2022, pp. 102–103), which she constructs in this extract as 'the roots'.

Her intention to rest in her mother's village which is evident in her longing for going back to 'the roots' is another way through which she shows her bond with this place, which she carries with her. This in the sense that she tends to maintain her connection with this place through naming, which I have discussed earlier, and she also appears to continue to articulate this bond by choosing to be buried in this specific place.

### *Food*

In the following extract, I discuss the significance of food, such as sourdough bread, in the way in which Alex projects himself:

My kids are the latest thing … . These days, they've started making fun of me because I have started baking sourdough bread. There is this bread called sourdough which is a very sort of middle-class, white, British thing to do, and I make it very regularly, and … you have to keep feeding it (laughing). I think this is a very post-colonial thing. We want to be accepted as OK … So, the sourdough bread because it's such a symbol of middle-class white culture, my kids told me that it's a new thing that I am doing to feel accepted (laughing). (Alex, interview)

Baking sourdough bread appears to be a significant cultural practice in the everyday life of Alex. Through this practice, he projects his longing for acceptance among, what he refers to as, 'middle-class, white, British culture'. He attributes this feeling of seeking acceptance among 'white British middle-class culture' to colonial and postcolonial influences, which appear to play a major role in the way Alex self-identifies. Throughout the extract, Alex appears to be making fun of himself. This practice reveals that he is aware of the impact of baking sourdough bread and making it an essential daily practice on how he is perceived by his children.

The centrality of such a cultural practice in the ways in which Alex projects his sense of 'identity' is also manifested in the practices of grinding coffee beans and making artisan gin as shown in the following email:

> I was thinking of our discussions the other day and laughing because my latest attempt to become a white middle-class person is that my wife has bought a coffee grinder. So, we have started buying coffee beans and grinding them fresh each time for a cup of aromatic coffee! First, the sourdough and now coffee beans … I wonder what will be next. Artisan gin, I guess. Then, one day, I will look at the mirror and realise that despite all my attempts at being white on the inside, I am at best a coconut and still brown on the outside and the disillusionment will send me to despair! (Alex, email)

The significance of baking sourdough bread, grinding coffee beans, and making artisan gin appears to be crucial practices in Alex's self-image of wanting to 'become white', which he talks about by making fun of himself. This attitude of making fun of himself, as stated above, seems to communicate a sense of awareness of how nuanced this relationship between these cultural practices and his sense of 'identity is. This is in the sense that, based on this extract, what he looks like from, what he refers to as, 'the outside' does not appear to 'conform' with these practices. In other words, according to Alex, these practices tend to be associated with 'white middle-class' individuals from whom he is dissociated. This is evident in how he positions himself in relation to this: 'one day, I will look at the mirror and realise that despite all my attempts at being white on the inside, I am at best a coconut and still brown on the outside and the disillusionment will send me to despair!'

## Conclusion

This paper focused on the relationship between human and non-human entities in 'identity' construction. I used a critical posthuman perspective (Braidotti, 2013, 2019) to make sense of the significance of the categories of naming, death, and food in 'identity' construction. As evidenced in the examples above, these non-human categories are significant in the ways in which the co-participants articulate their sense of 'identity'. This conceptualisation of 'identity' moves away from restricting our understanding of this contested term to 'self' and human 'other' relations and moves towards acknowledging the role of non-human categories in the way we, as individuals, constantly make sense of ourselves in relations to different others. I argue for the need to broaden our understanding of the notion of 'identity' by looking at the omnipresence of entities which are not human in nature in our make-up and sense of becoming. As such researching intercultural journeys could benefit from this broad conceptualisation which interrogates the extent to which we, as researcher, are perpetuating rigid understanding of contested terms such as 'identity' by framing our intercultural encounters within 'self' and human 'other' power relations.

## Note

1. Throughout this research, I have complied with Canterbury Christ Church University formal procedures, such as Research & Enterprise Integrity & Development Office committee's approval to pursue this research. The Study's reference number is: 17/A&H/17C.

## Notes on the contributor

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