On Hold: Exploring the Intersections of Indefinite Waiting and Island

Phenomenology on Identity Formation Among Asylum Seekers in Lesvos

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Abstract

This thesis examines the identity negotiation processes of young adult asylum seekers during prolonged waiting periods on the island of Lesvos, Greece. Integrating phenomenological perspectives and Dialogical Self Theory (DST), the study explores the interaction between the spatial-temporal dimensions of waiting and identity formation among asylum seekers. Through a qualitative analysis of life stories, the research highlights how the liminality of waiting, compounded by the island's unique geographic and social dynamics, profoundly impacts the participants' sense of self. Key findings reveal the psychosocial effects of indefinite waiting on personal agency and future aspirations, uncovering various identity positions (*I*-positions) that emerge in response to the challenges posed by the spatial and temporal aspects of asylum processes. These positions reflect the continuous negotiation of identity amidst the uncertainty of asylum procedures. This study contributes to island and migration studies by emphasizing the significant role of place in the psychosocial processes of identity formation under conditions of forced waiting and liminality. It calls for policy interventions aimed at mitigating the hardships of prolonged asylum procedures and enhancing support structures on the island, fostering a more humane and responsive asylum system.

Keywords: identity, waiting, asylum seekers, Dialogical Self Theory, Lesvos

Foreword

When I finally decided on the main theme of my thesis I was in the plane flying from Europe to Brazil to meet my family. It was the first time in 8 years that all of us were going to gather. The distance in time and space, nonetheless, never meant a distance in subjective closure and intimacy. Maybe of greater importance, it was never an externally imposed distancing due to any sorts of legal affairs. Since my brothers and I were young, We enjoyed moving through borders that were more or less fluid to our Brazilian passport—for leisure, study or work, but never due to necessity.

I learned to move, settle, move again. Thus, my own identity is both built and challenged through movement and through the multiple human and spatial interactions that have unfolded through my journeys. Amidst the abundance of my bounces, the inhumane circumstances imposed on those who have their displacements inherently justified brings me great sorrow. The policies against the right of asylum and the painful coloniality of global relations ripple through the skin of those who survive and through the fading body of those who sink in the seas of indifference.

My positionality in this research project is multifold. Whereas I used to identify myself (and be identified by others) as an upper middle-class white young man while living in Brazil, having considerable recognition in my hometown through both personal and family ties, this changed as soon as I moved out of Brazil. In Europe, I am less white and somehow more Othered. Throughout the semesters I spent in Lesvos I was in fact often mistaken to be Arabic, mostly by asylum seekers that occasionally addressed me or that I interacted with in the NGOs. Having Lebanese roots from my father's side and a latent appreciation and curiosity for these, I unfold an inner smile in those situations.

As a heterosexual man who currently holds a Dutch residence permit, I enjoy some privileges surely acquired without much (if any) merit of my own. In the context of this research, these social identities have helped me gain access to most participants, but diminished the possibility of full openness with some girls/women who were possibly unused to disclose about their lives and trajectories to an unknown man. These obstacles were overcome, as much as possible, by establishing continuous rapport through participant observation, becoming a trusted member of the NGO in which I volunteered, and by counting on gatekeepers I met during my time in Lesvos to introduce me to female participants who were willing to speak.

Having lived and studied most of my life in Brazil and having graduated from a Bachelor's in Geography, I was gifted with insights into critical, postcolonial and decolonial theories and perspectives. Thus, I share with refugees and asylum seekers, if solely in one of my many *I*-positions, an imaginarium that inhabits and is inhabited by the Global South. Not only, I share, although on an alternate side of the spectrum, the hardships of structuring and centering my own identity as a young adult after so many past and present mobilities, departures, arrivals, uncertainties.

In the dialectics of my personal freedom to move and the impossibilities faced by my other similars, this research process unfolds. In the gathering of my inner motivations with the qualitative research techniques I have acquired, and building on the relevant literature I have been dwelling into, I found the tools needed to navigate my investigation.

Coming from a hopeful effort, I feel assured that listening heartily to the life stories of my research participants was, at least, worthy in itself, as I hope they made profitable use of this narrative approach in reorganizing and negotiating their own identities through the very formulation of their life stories. At most, this work will prove itself useful to guide faster and

more humane asylum processing and more pleasant waiting periods, while, simultaneously, adding to a much needed body of knowledge that is born in the intersection of identity, migration, global studies and island studies.

The self of mine who elaborated the research proposal which unfolded in this study is surely not the same as the one who writes this new reflection. Although maybe I can still be defined as a cluster of positions, "wandering in and of", as Edwards Said would put it, the extent to which this research has changed me is incommensurable. To look compassionately and attentively in the eyes of my participants while they pour their humanness in the air between us has made me more aware, more loving, more caring, more humble.

In fact, amidst the upsurge, through my research, of a personal awareness of differential temporalities, I must take note of the intensity of contact with my participants in the "bubble island" of Lesvos.Although my fieldwork and time on the island lasted for about 4 months, several happenings and changes of configurations emerged amongst participants in my research. With some, I had the opportunity to work and volunteer side-by-side. I witnessed some joyfully leave the island, after receiving a positive decision. I saw others, also leaving the island, dwelling with blurry horizons, after receiving a negative decision. I heard from a former asylum seeker, with excitement, about the scholarship she recently received to pursue her masters, and from another, how education changed her life.

I was gifted with a series of meetings with a young-woman who introduced to my mind a great deal of revelations, most of which I did not have the experiential tools to properly grasp. Through her reports, I witnessed her lack of trust in life. Still, I had the joy of being around when she and her family finally received their passports. On a different side of the spectrum, I witnessed the innocence and hope amongst younger migrants or asylum seekers—hopes, that I

am afraid, might be crushed, or slowly undermined, by the unfairness and untimeliness of legal asylum procedures.

     I wrote most of these words half-way through my data analysis. Taking a short time out of Lesvos, I found the spatial and conceptual distancing to finally reflect and look into what this fieldwork experience meant to me. Each interview has changed and touched some corner inside of myself. I have promised my participants my compromise in trying as best as I can to turn this research into a reachable outcome—one that contextualizes their narratives and my narrative on their narratives with integrity and wholeheartedness. I truly hope to have done so. Nonetheless, knowing of the potentially limited reach of my work, I promised them, this time with guaranteed delivery, my fullest attention and love in hearing their words—which was kept throughout.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the intricate process of identity formation among asylum seekers, particularly focusing on their experiences during waiting periods for international protection in Lesvos, Greece. As such, this study delves into the nuanced interplay between identity, temporality and spatiality, framed through the multifaceted lenses of young adulthood—a critical period for identity exploration and formation. Within this context, this research addresses how asylum seekers from diverse backgrounds, grappling with the constraints of migration and asylum policies, navigate their waiting periods and forge their identities under conditions of prolonged uncertainty in a liminal living space.

Four interrelated dimensions are central to this study: (a) the experiential reality of waiting during the asylum process; (b) the coping mechanisms and activities undertaken by asylum seekers within the island's confines; (c) their perceptions and interactions with the island's spatiality—both its physicality and its symbolic meanings; and (d) the dynamics of their relationships with each other, various actors, and local institutions.

Departing from a phenomenological foundation in which subjective relation to place is highly emphasized, this research seeks to fill a significant gap in migration studies. While considerable research has focused on identity formation in post-migration contexts, less attention has been given to how the migration journey in general, and more specifically waiting periods along journeys (and the environments in which waiting unfolds), intersect with identity construction and negotiation. Thus, this research aims to exploratorily address this gap by providing a nuanced interpretation of how temporalities of waiting and the spatial dynamics of insularity intersect with asylum seeker's identity negotiation processes. In doing so, the study

concomitantly follows Hay's (2006) suggestion to substantiate nissology by interpreting the main conceptual and theoretical challenges of the field through the lens of phenomenology of place.

In delving into the complexities of identity negotiations faced by asylum seekers, this study makes use of a life stories approach, through a Dialogical Self Theory (DST) framework. By examining how asylum seekers narrate their experiences, this research sheds light on how they perceive, cope with, and find meaning in their waiting periods, thereby forging their identities through the very process of narrative creation and formulation that is built upon life experiences.

Towards the same direction, DST offers a robust conceptual and analytical framework for analyzing the multiple (and often conflicting) identities that emerge in individuals' life stories. These identities, or *I*-positions (in DST terms), are characterized by internal and external dialogues, which arise from and are reflective of complex sociocultural contexts asylum seekers come from and go through, including their asylum processing experience and the location where it unfolds.

Through this comprehensive theoretical and methodological approach, this thesis aims to answer the following research question '***How do the periods of wait undertaken by young adult asylum seekers in the island of Lesvos affect the negotiation and construction of their identities?****',* which is be broken down as the following subquestions:

1. *How do prolonged waiting periods influence asylum seekers' identity negotiation processes?*

2. *How do asylum seekers' future aspirations are affected by prolonged waiting periods?*

3. *What coping strategies do asylum seekers employ to manage the stresses associated with indefinite waiting periods?*

4. *How do institutional support systems in Lesvos interact with asylum seekers' perceptions and expectations of the Western world?*

5. *In what ways does the dual nature of Lesvos as a physical and symbolic space affect the identity and emotional experiences of asylum seekers?*

I suggest, on phenomenological grounds, that the spatial dimension of waiting periods plays a crucial role in identity formation, for crystallizations of personal, social and cultural identity dynamics (which are intersected by multi-varied power relationships), are materialized in space. In this sense, space and place are also active in their intersections with the construction and negotiation of migrant identities.

Lastly, This work underscores the importance of considering how migration policies and frameworks ultimately affect processes of identity formation and negotiation by offering insights into the profound effects of waiting and liminality on personal and collective identity formation processes.

An Introduction to Lesvos

Lesvos is the largest Greek island in the North Aegean Sea, situated merely 13 kilometers from the Turkish coast (Figure 1). With a population of approximately 115,000, it has become the main point of entry into Greece for migrants (Tassin, 2016; Afouxenidis et al., 2017). The island is highly emblematic of the migration issue, having been considered a testing ground for the practices of confinement and waiting that can be found today in all European hotspots (Babels, 2017). As asylum seekers influx escalated significantly in 2015, the island witnessed the transit of over half a million asylum seekers, primarily due to the political instability and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria (UNHCR, 2015).

In response, the EU-Turkey Agreement was established in March 2016 to manage and reduce the influx of asylum seekers arriving in Europe. This agreement stipulates that new arrivals on Greek islands from Turkey should be returned if their asylum applications are declared inadmissible. Under the implementation of the EU—Turkey Statement, and through the Official Government Gazette 1366/2018 and the Official Government Gazette 4427/2018 a restriction of movement (geographical restriction) was thus adopted in the border islands of Greece (with a prohibition to leave the islands throughout the duration of the examination of their asylum claim).

Figure 1. Location of Lesvos, Greece

The flux of asylum seekers through Greece has seen a significant shift since its peak in 2015, when Greece received 856,723 sea arrivals, declining to as low as 4,331 in 2021. Nonetheless, there was a substantial rise once again in 2023, when the number of asylum seekers arriving by sea rose to 41,561 (UNHCR, 2023). According to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, Greece (MMA, 2024), individuals in the 18-34 age group, expressive of young adulthood, submitted 37,581 out of a total of 64,212 applications. As of February 2024, Lesvos was home to 4,532 asylum seekers, reflecting the island's ongoing role as a critical entry point for those seeking international protection in Europe. During the same month, the island processed 1,853 applications for international protection (MMA, 2024), indicating a sustained demand for asylum amidst complex geopolitical tensions.

The island's strategic significance in the broader context of international migration is not only sustained by the figures above—it is also expressed through the island 's spatiality. Moria refugee camp, no longer existing due to a destructive fire in September 2020 (MSF, 2020), was the largest camp on Lesbos, being the host of as many as 19.000 asylum seekers by January of the same year, far exceeding the facility's original capacity of 2.840 people (Bell, 2020). Camp Kara Tepe, also known as Mavrovouni, replaced Moria, and offers slightly better conditions than its predecessor, but is still marked by challenges such as harsh living conditions and limited access to services.

The streets of the island capital, Mytilene, are the meeting ground for the convergence of locals, tourists, asylum seekers and volunteers engaged in migration causes, who inhabit the island especially during the summer months. The main square, Sappho, is where most organized protests and events related to refugee and asylum seeker causes unfold.

As one moves further from the city center towards Kara Tepe Camp, the landscape is often populated by asylum seekers on the road, usually in transit between Mytilene and the camp. The latter is located by the sea, on a peninsula-like portion of land. In the vicinity of Kara Tepe, most NGOs are located, where asylum seekers go in search of fulfilling a series of demands, which include, but are not limited to, sports, sociality, legal aid, clothes washing, showers, and recreational activities.

Either on Sappho Square, through the small alleyways of Mytilini, or in the northernmost shores of the island, one is constantly reminded by the island's significant role in contemporary migration processes: through the graffiti spread around both the city center and peri-urban areas, the multiethnic and international character the island space assumes, or the lifejackets or rubber boats left by new arrivals along the island shores (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pictures of Lesvos streets and seaside areas. Author's own.

Literature Review

Impact of Waiting and Liminal Spaces

Experiences of waiting have received scant conceptual and/or research attention to date (Conlon, 2011). The event of waiting, according to Bissell (2007), in fact "seems to be the neglected Achilles heel of modernity" (p.277). Likewise, time in relation to migration and to mobility remains largely under-theorized (Griffiths, 2014) and the phenomenology of waiting and its social implications remains understudied (Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018). In light of these conditions, Conlon (2011) emphasizes the significance of exploring the concepts of time and space in the context of migrant experiences, particularly in relation to waiting and im(mobility), as this focus enriches the traditional interests of interdisciplinary researchers and feminist geographers.

Griffiths (2014) identifies four distinct experiences of time: a prolonged period where time seems to elongate (referred to as sticky time), a phase where it decelerates and halts to a standstill (suspended time), a fast time accelerating beyond control (frenzied time), and tears in envisioned timeframes (temporal ruptures). Likewise, moving away from understandings of time reliant on a chronological measure, Bissell (2007) draws attention to how the event of waiting produces a *variegated affective complex*, which acknowledges how emotions vary significantly during different phases of movement and apprehends both corporeal engagement and withdrawal from waiting spaces.

Waiting is historically and geographically produced by the politics of power (Chattopadhyaya and Tyner, 2022). As such, waiting is deeply embedded in the fabric of migration policies shaped by historical patterns of colonization, migration regulation, and international relations (Torpey, 2000; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). These patterns dictate the

strategic placement of borders, locations of refugee camps, and migration routes, influenced by political decisions about who is allowed to move and who must wait (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008).

The imposition of waiting serves as a control mechanism, used by states and governing bodies to manage population movements and enforce compliance, highlighting a deliberate use of power over less powerful groups such as migrants and refugees (Khosravi, 2007; Andersson, 2014). This interplay of historical context, geographical specifics, and power dynamics intricately shapes the waiting experiences of individuals, reflecting broader forms of socio-political control (Cresswell, 2010; Conlon, 2011).

Forced waiting, which include (but is not limited to) increasingly demanding jurisdictional procedures, can destabilize lives and bodies, especially those of non-citizens and racialised citizens (Khosravi, 2020). In this direction, asylum seekers are often denied the right to structure their own time or even take part in the pre-structured time regime of modern employment (Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018).

Waiting is, nonetheless, not passively but actively experienced, as sites of wait are in fact liminal sites of action, struggle and political possibilities (Mountz, 2011). Protests by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in varied locations (from camps in Lesvos, Greece and Kakuma, Kenya, to occupations in European cities) demonstrate how waiting is, as framed by Khosravi (2020), "a state of wakefulness engaged with potentialities for a different future" (p. 206).

Similarly, in studying the experience of asylum seekers waiting for their determination process, Rotter (2016) highlights that, despite describing time as stagnant and articulating waiting as passive, their waiting periods were actually affective (by involving anticipation of the future and reflection on potential outcomes) and active (time was often filled with a variety of

routines and activities). The author goes on to conclude that waiting periods are not an empty interlude but marked by intentional and agential processes.

The need to understand how asylum seekers in the Global North, waiting in liminal spaces, might actively integrate the aspect of waiting within their life projects and into subjective understandings of themselves has been underlined by Conlon (2011), and the present study moves in this very direction.

On the Spatial Dimensions of Wait

Paying justice to the power relationships that permeate and produce places of wait, Vidal & Musset (2015) coined the term waiting territories. Waiting territories are not neutral pockets of space—they can lead to the creation of new identities, no matter if these are conscious or unconscious, longed for or unexpected, bringing forth a variety of new significations to the study of contemporary societies' mobility and movements (Vidal & Musset, 2015). These territories can either enhance or restrict potential actions. Being confined in such areas results in immobility—for example, in immigration detention centers where individuals are forced to stay, leading to a sense of spatial oppression. Conversely, envisioning these territories can promote mobility, as seen when migrants dream of moving to more prosperous lands (Vidal & Musset, 2015).

In exploring the unique spatiality and phenomenological experiences of islands (as waiting territories) such as Lesvos, it is thus important to acknowledge the broader geopolitical frameworks and power geometries that shape these experiences. According to Mountz (2011) and Mountz et al. (2013), islands often (and always more) serve as strategic sites for sovereign states to control and manage migration flows. Detention centers on these islands not only isolate asylum seekers geographically but also restrict their access to legal assistance and vital services,

profoundly affecting their daily lives and personal, social and cultural identity negotiations. This use of geography as a tool of political strategy underscores the complex interplay between place, policy, and individual experience. Such a context is evidentiated, in a context similar to the one of this research, by Topak's (2020) investigation of Lesvos as a biopolitical borderzone, from which waiting cannot be understood in isolation. Biopolitical practices here have consequences for migrants ranging from physical illnesses and injuries to psychological disorders.

Social workers have already pointed, considering vulnerable populations of asylum seekers, to the need for a more timely relocation to the mainland and access to quality support systems, as the living environment, security and peace in the first years of living in a foreign country appears to be very important determinants of their mental and psychological health (Episkopou et al. 2019; Gavalas & Maryam Shayestefar, 2021).

These factors, added to the lack of access to proper communication in an environment where barriers to visits from family and acquaintances are augmented, indicates that island camps and detention centers can further exacerbate feelings of isolation (Mountz, 2017). In the same direction, research on refugees in Australia's offshore processing centers by Boochani (2018) have highlighted how extreme isolation and environmental harshness exacerbate mental health problems and affect asylum seekers' perception of their liminality and temporality.

Identity Development in Adolescence and young adulthood

As identity issues have been recognized by developmental psychologists to be most salient in adolescents and young adults (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2006), these periods of life have for long been deemed as crucial in the process of identity formation, being greatly theorized upon for at least seven decades (see Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968; Marcia, 1980). It is in late adolescence and young adulthood that individuals living in modern societies

engage in perceiving the present, reconstructing personal past and anticipating the future through an integrative narrative of the self that provides life with an extent of psychosocial unity and purpose (McAdams, 2001).

This period in life is one of "identity exploration," where individuals explore various life possibilities in contexts that are highly susceptible to change, driven by both personal desires and external conditions, including the broader political, cultural and economic contexts they navigate (Arnett, 2000). In such a context, the first ideological and occupational options available in society are explored by individuals, and they experiment with varied social roles in the direction of meaningfully situating themselves into new societal niches (Marcia, 1980).

Additionally, by making provisional commitments to life plans and projects, individuals begin to consolidate personal ideology by progressively defining their own values and beliefs (McAdams, 2001). Identity, thus, can be understood as an "integrative configuration of the self-in-the-adult-world" towards making sense of dimensions that are both synchronic (integrating often divergent and conflicting roles and relationships of life in here and now in order that, despite their apparent differences, they can be seen as integral parts of the same self-configuration) and diachronic (making sense of changes across time into an organized role) (McAdams, 2001, p.102). In this same direction, Levinson (1986) describes these years as a "season of change" – a critical phase where life structures are tested and transformed, profoundly influenced by the surrounding social and environmental factors.

Identity developmental process is not, nonetheless, uniform globally but varies significantly with cultural context, as global interconnections and cultural diversity shape the personal identity formation process in complex ways (Jensen, 2011). Furthermore, in a period of increased globalization, rapid creation of multinational citizens and the formation of diasporic

communities and massive flows of transmigration and border crossings, acculturation processes and identity issues become increasingly complicated (Hermans and Kempen, 1998).

Against this backdrop, young migrants face the challenges of creating a cultural identity that must simultaneously incorporate elements of heritage and receiving culture, while dealing with normative personal issues that characterize this developmental life period (Arnett, 1999; Schwartz, 2005). Throughout the migration journey itself, these challenges are added to the uncertainties of asylum processes and the temporalities of waiting periods which can be significantly impactful to individuals' identity development processes.

Theoretical Framework

This section begins by exploring how place phenomenology offers a fruitful ground for understanding how the insular space configurations of Lesvos are experienced by asylum seekers during waiting periods. This discussion sets the groundwork for exploring life stories as identity theory (McAdams, 1993, 2001) through which asylum seekers develop narratives in relation to their circumstances. In this sense, life stories must be seen both as a theory in itself and as a method, which functions in operationalizing the phenomenological lens that grounds this research. Subsequently, the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) is introduced, providing a framework to analyze the complex dialogues and identity negotiations that occur within individuals during their waiting periods on the island.

Building upon these theoretical foundations, the way in which the period of wait (in this case, in the island of Lesvos) can be understood as a crucial point in the migration rite is explored. In this direction, the concept of rites of passage contextualizes the migration journey as a transformative life event and situates changes in self-perception and identity within a culturally and psychologically significant process.

Each of these components collectively addresses the central research question: "***How do the periods of wait undertaken by young adult asylum seekers on the island of Lesvos affect the negotiation and construction of their identities?***" Through this theoretical exploration, the significance of narrative identity, spatial and temporal influences, and ritualistic transitions in shaping asylum seekers identities is comprehensively analyzed.

Place Phenomenology and Insularity

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, seeks to explore and describe how human beings experience the world, emphasizing the subjective interpretation of life events. In the context of migration, phenomenology provides a framework for understanding how the experiences of displacement and relocation are perceived and processed by individuals. Hence, it highlights the profound impact of spatial and cultural contexts on the identities of those waiting for granting international protection.

One of the key aspects of phenomenology in migration studies is the concept of 'lived space' (*Lebensraum*), which refers to how physical environments are experienced by individuals beyond their physical properties. Casey (2001), in his works on phenomenology and place, underscores that lived spaces are not passive backgrounds but active elements in shaping an individual's experiences and identity.

Likewise, Hay (2006), in reasoning for a phenomenology of islands, argues that island meanings are phenomenologically generated and articulated and that there may not be a single meaning of island place. The author notes that the experience of island life is, in fact, often connected to displacement, senses of entrapment and denied opportunities. The island is, therefore, "a fully nuanced, complex and articulated character rather than a mere uni-dimensional backdrop" (Hay, 2006, p. 34).

Conkling (2007) pays a great deal of attention to the concept of *islandness*, attributing to islands as one of its key differences from other places the very presence of a sea-land limit and its psychophysical effects. *Islandness* is, for the author, "a metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experience that accompanies physical isolation", being reinforced by boundaries of 'frightening and occasionally impassable bodies of water', which amplifies a closer to the natural world sense of place (2007, p. 191).

Islandness can also be understood as a complex expression of identity associated with places smaller than continents and surrounded entirely by water (Stratford, 2008) and the concept of *islandness* is often used by the island studies scientific community for interpreting communalities (both physical or subjective) shared by islanders due to the geographical boundedness and the land-sea limits (Randall, 2020).

I argue that *islandness* can be described as a special attribute that is not only situated within phenomenology but is also significantly enriched by phenomenological analysis, which provides profound insights into the essence and significance of islands as distinctive places. In this direction, an understanding of *islandness* rooted on the shared meanings (derived from the subjective experiences) that transform island spaces into places is kept throughout this research.

Life Stories and Narrative Identity

McAdams' (2001) life story model of identity suggests that life stories are not just recollections of past events but are active constructions that individuals use to make sense of their experiences and to envision their futures. McAdams (2001) asserts that in late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals in modern societies begin to craft an internalized self-narrative, shaping their past, present, and future.

Self-narratives or life stories, grounded in biographical facts, extend beyond as individuals selectively incorporate experiences, constructing meaningful narratives. These stories provide "psychosocial unity and purpose" in contemporary life, being co-authored by the individual and their cultural context. In essence, individuals creatively weave narratives that make sense of their lives, offering both personal and cultural significance to their experiences within a concise framework (McAdams, 2001, p.101).

Narratives are deeply embedded with elements of *agency*—the capacity to act upon the world—and *communion*—the sense of connection with others, which are a vital aid to individuals' maintenance of a sense of control and belonging in often tumultuous circumstances (McAdams, 1993; McLean et al., 2007). *Turning points* in life stories signify moments of significant change that fundamentally alter one's narrative direction. These can be instances of profound loss or gain, such as the experience of fleeing one's home country or the day of receiving asylum. *Redemption sequences* in narratives can follow these turning points, where negative experiences are recast as part of a larger positive transformation. Conversely, *contamination sequences* occur when positive life narratives take a turn for the worse (McAdams, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006).

In contexts of displacement and protracted waiting periods, crafting a narrative can be a crucial coping mechanism in itself. For instance, asylum seekers may narrate their journey not just as a time of loss and waiting but also as a period of learning and transformation. This narrative reframing can foster a sense of agency, allowing individuals to see themselves as active participants in their life stories despite difficult living conditions (Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2008).

Exploring how Syrian refugees reconceptualize time and place while narrating their periods of wait as a way of managing its challenging aspects, Terzioglu (2023) argues that, by creating their own narratives of waiting, agency is acquired. Not only, the process helps refugees in negotiating and redefining their identities, senses of belonging and subjectivities as, through their narratives, a sense of control over time, alongside prospective hope is maintained. Still, in emphasizing how crucial it is for refugees to share their narratives, the author pinpoint that "Thanks to their creativity and flexibility in forming their narratives, they rearrange continuities and ruptures in temporality and spatial boundaries, acquiring not just a sense of agency but also hope and motivation to tackle their problems" (Terzioglu, 2023, p. 96).

An Introduction to Dialogical Self Theory (DST)

Building upon the complexities of waiting periods, the spatiality of islands, and their conceptualizations through narrative identity, the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) offers a comprehensive framework to explore how waiting experiences on Lesvos island affect the identity construction of young adult asylum seekers in Lesvos. The periods of wait in the unique spatial setting of the island foster complex internal dialogues and negotiations within the self. These dialogues are expected to be deeply influenced by the psychosocial dynamics of waiting and by uncertainty, especially in relation to the geographical characteristics of Lesvos and to broader political/legal arrangements.

DST, with its emphasis on multiple *I*-positions and the interplay of internal and external dialogues, provides an insightful lens to examine how asylum seekers negotiate their identities amidst these challenging and transformative experiences and how these experiences and structures manifest as multiple internal and external *I*-positions. On one hand, the theory aids us in interpreting how identities dynamically evolve in response to the unique challenges and

opportunities presented by the environment and socio-legal circumstances. On the other hand, it makes it possible to understand how individuals and groups' agency affect, directly or indirectly, both their immediate surroundings (the island) and broader national and global contexts and policies.

The theory of the dialogical self was initially developed by professor Hubert J.M. Hermans in the early 1990s, with significant collaboration of cultural psychologists Harry Kempen and Ren Van Loon in the elaboration of its central ideas (Zock, 2013). Since then, a wide body of research has emerged, extending the scope and adding to the scope of DST in identity studies, with its conceptual framework being significantly utilized amongst acculturation and post-migration researchers (see Buitelaar, 2022; Bathia, 2002, Zock, 2013). Its key premise is rooted in the understanding that the "self" may actually consist of multiple "selves" which, in a dialogical fashion, interact with each other (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In this very direction, according to Meijers & Hermans (2018), DST can be succinctly defined as a 'multiplicity of *I*-positions in the society of the mind' (p. 7). The mind, in this sense, besides resembling a landscape (as a spatial construction) in which a multiplicity of *I*-positions move around, functions as a soundscape where dialogical relationships between different *I*-positions can assume their own distinct voices.

Zock (2013) draws attention to the fact that the metaphor of the voice is, especially in analyzing self-narratives, particularly relevant in DST. According to the author, "when taking different positions, the *I* tells different stories about itself from different perspectives. All voices are colored by the ideas, values, expectations and behavioral patterns of the various social and cultural groups one is part of" (p. 17). In the dynamic interplay of "voices of the self" and

"*I*-positions", DST examines how the dialogical self is developed by orchestrating the "voices" based on one's shifting *I*-positions (Buitelaar, 2022).

I-positions are relatively autonomous in the self, displaying particular developmental pathways and their own specific history, and can be framed as either internal (e.g. I as a Christian son; I as a prodigious student) or external *I*-positions (e.g. my father (as an external, individual *I*-position); decolonial authors (as a collective, external *I*-position)). According to Hermans *&* Geiser (2011), "The I, subjected to changes in time and space, is intrinsically involved in a process of positioning and is distributed by a wide variety of existing, new and possible positions (decentring movements)" (p.14). The authors further explain that, simultaneously and in contrast with decentering movements, through centering movements, the I reconfigures itself by appropriating some positions while rejecting or disowning others. Whereas the dynamic-temporal manifestation of the *I*-position is manifest through processes of positioning and repositioning, its dynamic-spatial expression is reflected in the process of positioning and counter-positioning (Meijers & Hermans, 2018).

In the eventual interaction of two conflicting *I*-positions, a *third position* can emerge, serving to mitigate the conflict between the original ones. This *third position* not only lessens and mitigates the conflict but also benefits from the energy of the two original positions, aiding its further development (Meijers & Hermans, 2018; Hermans & Gieser, 2011).

It is now pertinent to pay attention to what Hermans & Geiser (2011) describe as *meta-positions* and *transcendental awareness* and *depositioning*. A *meta-position* allows a distancing from one or more positions by providing the ability to elevate oneself above one's interplay of various *I*-positions. In this state, one can observe and analyze multiple *I*-positions at once, recognizing the connections and distinctions between them. It allows for a certain

detachment from these positions, though one may still be cognitively and emotionally drawn to some more than others. The authors emphasize that a *meta-position* is different from their concept of *transcendental awareness* and *depositioning*. In a *meta-position* self-reflexive distance towards more specific positions through thoughts, considerations and comparisons is needed. As such, it is from the standpoint of a *meta-position* that a *third position* can arise. In *transcendental awareness* as a route of *depositioning*, "awareness is direct, non-conceptual, non-categorizing and unmediated by explicit signs or symbols" (p. 19), as well as being non judgemental and non-evaluative, with the boundaries of the self being extended to an unusual degree and the self becoming highly permeable.

Allowing for a comprehensive understanding and identification of the multiple identities that are especially salient during migration processes, DST is particularly suited to exploring identity negotiations of refugees and asylum seekers in and through waiting places. It is noteworthy that, in globalizing societies, there are more voices and more counter-voices populating the self (see Bathia, 2002; Buitelaar, 2022).
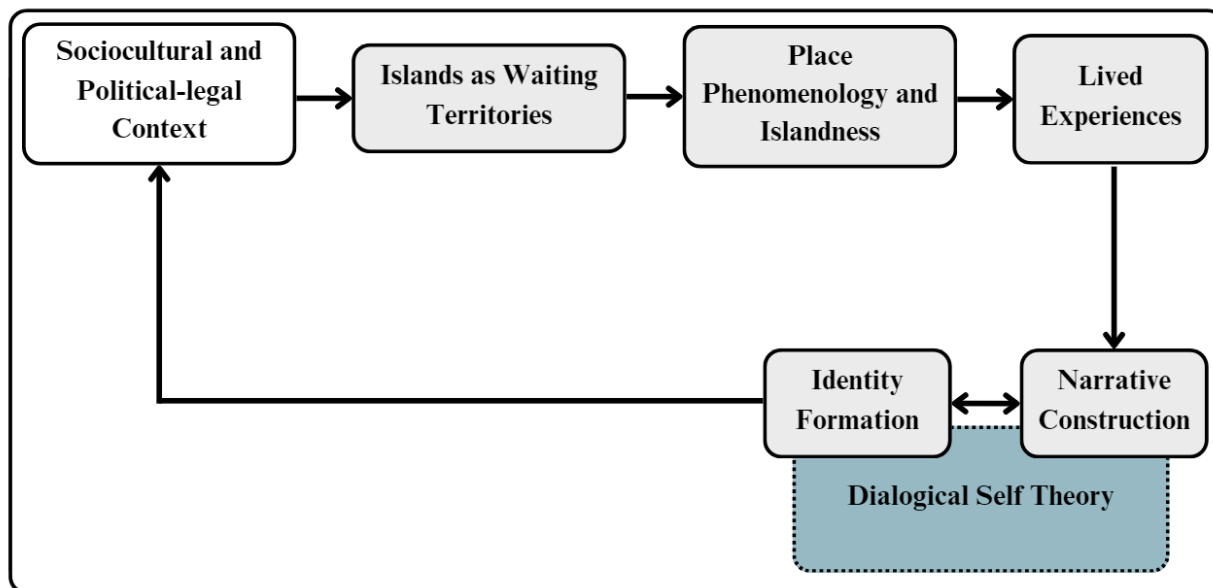
Conceptual framework

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding this research. At the outset, **Sociocultural and Political-Legal Contexts**, which encompass neoliberal politics, economic dynamics, processes of border securitization/externalization, as well as broader sociocultural dynamics, lead to the strategic use of **Islands as Waiting Territories** (Vidal & Musset, 2015). This categorization frames islands not just as geographic locales but as integral components of a complex enforcement archipelago, where the management of migration is spatially and temporally modulated (Mountz, 2020).

Place Phenomenology and Islandness serves as a critical intermediary layer, exploring how the physical and cultural contexts of islands shape the **Lived Experiences** of asylum seekers. This exploration emphasizes the interaction between island geography and the phenomenological experiences of individuals, which are crucial for understanding how these settings influence perceptions and experiences (Hay, 2006; Concking, 2007).

These experiences, in turn, lay the groundwork for **Narrative Construction**, through which individuals craft their life stories in response to their ongoing experiences. Through the construction of a more or less coherent (narrative) self story (McAdams, 2001), processes of **Identity Formation** unfold. Simultaneously, new identity structures dialectically interfere with narrative constructions.

In making sense of narrative construction and identity formation, concepts from the **Dialogical Self Theory** such its multivoiced self (which includes, but is not limited to, *I*-positions, third positions, meta-positions, promoter positions) are crucial. Lastly, it is noteworthy that identity formation ultimately affects, influences, undermines and interferes with the same sociocultural and political context that form its backdrop.

Methods

This research was centered on fieldwork conducted by the main author from February to July 2024 on the island of Lesvos. During this period, four key methods were employed to explore the narratives of asylum seekers: *semi-structured in-depth interviews*, inspired by McAdams' (2001, 2006) life stories model of identity; *participant observation*, which provided immersive, direct access to the daily experiences and interactions that shape individuals' identities, offering a longitudinal view of their evolving narratives; *photovoice/landscape-assisted conversations*, which facilitated the sharing of individual experiences and added a visual and spatial dimension to the narratives; and *fragmented vignettes*, which complemented these methods by focusing on specific, illustrative events or interactions, providing poignant snapshots that illuminate key moments of identity negotiation and transformation.

The total of 19 *semi-structured in-depth interviews* investigated how waiting periods in Lesvos factor into participants' life stories, how island spatiality is experienced, and how identity

negotiations take place in relation to temporal and spatial liminality, as well as in relation to changing social and cultural configurations. A purposive sampling method (Etikan et al., 2016; Hennink et al., 2020) was initially employed, targeting young adult individuals that fit into one of three categories: *1.participants who perceived their waiting periods as brief, often due to faster processing experiences associated with their countries of origin*; 2. *participants who felt they had been waiting for extended periods*, often having already received one or more negative decisions, or *3. participants who had their asylum granted and either moved away from the island or chose to stay,* reflecting on their past experiences in Lesvos from a current perspective (Table 1).

The diversity of such a sample adds to the inherently temporal nature of life stories and goes in the direction of Khosravi's (2018) call for longitudinal/trajectory approaches in the scope of migration and mobility/mobility studies. By involving participants who had been under short and long periods of perceived wait, alongside participants who are looking back at their time on the island, in addition to keeping in contact with participants throughout several changes in their asylum processes, this longitudinal character was observed.

Participant	Country of Origin / Second Country	Age (age when arrived)	Gender	Category	Kind of Interview	Status at the time of interview
P1	Eritrea	25	Male	In-depth interview	Online	Asylum Seeker
P2	Palestine	28	Male	In-depth interview	In-person	Refugee
P3	Afghanistan / Iran	24 (13 when in Lesvos)	Male	In-depth interview followed by	Online	Refugee

				photovoice		
P4	Syria	25 (16 when in Turkey)	Female	In-depth interview	In-person	Refugee
P5	Iran	26	Female	In-depth interview followed by photovoice	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P6	Syria	42 (37 when arrived in Lesvos)	Male	In-depth interview	In-person	Refugee
P7	D.R. Congo	33 (26 when arrived in Lesvos)	Male	In-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P8	Gambia	28	Male	In-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P9	Afghanistan / Iran	30	Male	In-depth interview followed by photovoice	Online	Refugee
P10	Iran	34 (26 when arrived in Lesvos)	Male	In-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P11	Afghanistan	26 (20 when arrived in Lesvos)	Male	In-depth interview	Online	Refugee
P12	Afghanistan	23	Male	In-depth interview	Online	Asylum Seeker
P13	Eritrea / Ethiopia	23	Male	Landscape assisted in-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P14	Gambia	28	Male	Landscape assisted in-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P15	Iran	33 (28 when	Female	In-depth	In-person	Refugee

		arrived)		interview		
P16	Eritrea	27 (21 when in Lesvos)	Female	In-depth interview	In-person	Refugee
P17	Sudan	25	Female	Photovoice assisted in-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P18	Eritrea / Ethiopia	26, (25 when in Samos)	Female	Photovoice assisted in-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker
P19	Ethiopia	25	Female	In-depth interview	In-person	Asylum Seeker

Table 1. Research participants' information.

While contact with some participants was personally established through the volunteering practice at a local NGO, initial rapport with others was facilitated by gatekeepers also stemming from the NGOs. Additionally, towards the later stages of recruitment, new participants were identified through a snowball sampling technique, especially put in place to ensure the participation of a greater number of female participants.

In the exploratory and foundational character of this research, a diverse sample proved to be the most adequate way to capture a diverse range of experiences and their overlaps. The use of a semi-structured guide tailored by a life stories approach captures the construction of identities in the island both synchronically (where values, beliefs, and goals are still to be achieved, dropped, or reformulated) and diachronically, when these identity negotiation processes are being looked back at. Additionally, having captured the perspectives of participants who were both in Moria and/or Kara Tepe, marked the findings with nuances throughout time and space, by participants coming from several different countries (see Figure 1).
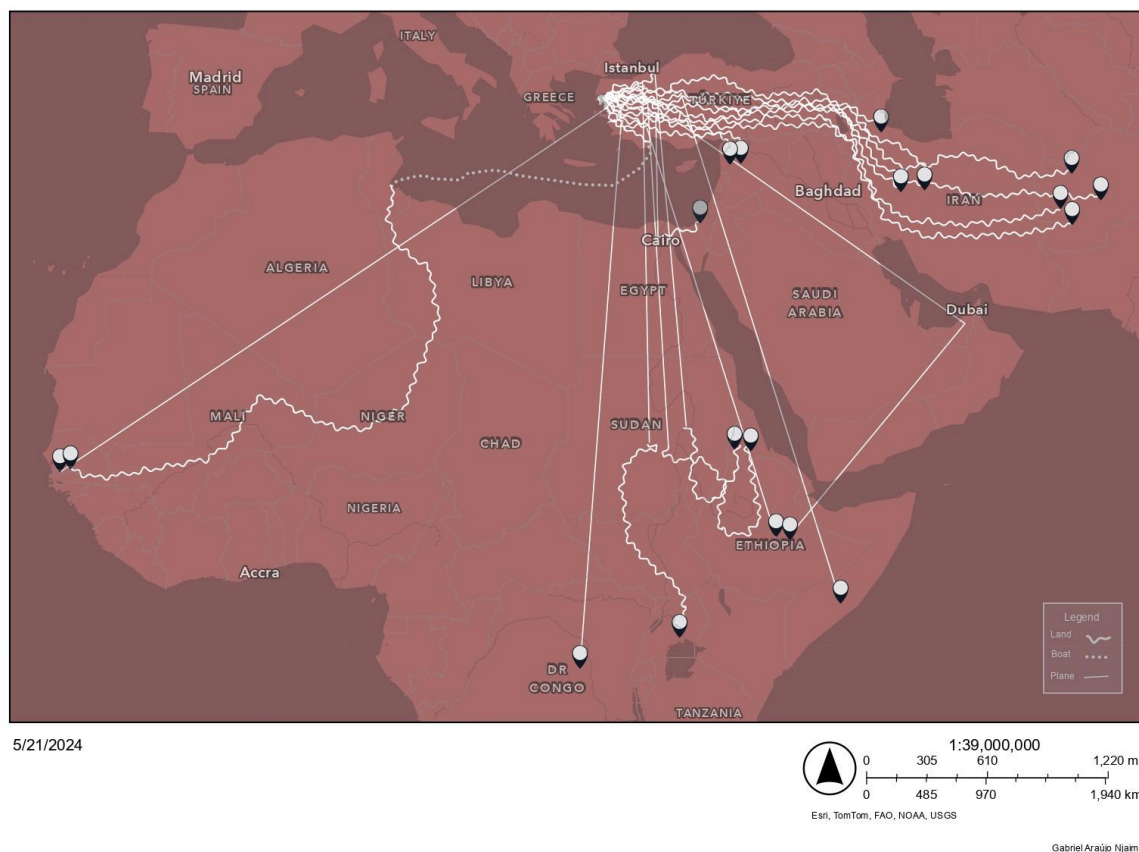
Figure 4. Location of participants origins and journeys using approximate origin locations and routes. Created using ESRI ArcGIS Online. Author's own.

Participant observation was conducted through volunteering at a local NGO in the vicinity of Kara Tepe camp, ensuring depth of contact with asylum seekers, volunteers, and NGO members, and providing an adequate lens to understand daily social interactions between asylum seekers and between asylum seekers and volunteers. Participant observation also served to obtain insights into asylum seekers' coping strategies and their perceptions of daily life experiences through informal conversations and interactions. This immersive approach provides a deeper

understanding of the social dynamics and cultural contexts within the island of Lesvos, as asylum seekers' experience should be assessed through bottom-up and human-centered approaches (Seppala et al., 2019).

Aimed at capturing contextual information and perceptions regarding participants and special events and interactions of observations with broader nuance, ***photovoice and fragmented vignettes*** were employed. These methods aimed at contouring the insufficiency of conventional social sciences methods in investigating waiting periods and mobilities under a phenomenological lens as well proposed by Bissell (2007). Out of the 19 interviews, 5 were either assisted by or followed by photovoice and a series of 24 vignettes was produced.

Fragmented vignettes, narrative descriptions that focus on specific instances to capture detailed and nuanced interactions or events, were a very important element of this research. They function to illustrate and explore the complexities of real-life situations, helping to convey the depth of experiences and the subtleties of personal and social dynamics (Hughes & Ruby, 2002). Not only, they aided in making sense of continuous contact, in which participants reported changes in their status through recent decisions and shared about their next steps. Vignettes also proved especially useful in capturing a variety of non-verbal elements: shaking legs, the moments in which tears fall, or contextual information, such in the following excerpt:

> After the recorder was off, (P1) spoke about how Ethiopian civilization was one of the biggest in the past. He proudly showed me his alphabet using his phone. Then, he showed me his bracelet, written in his alphabet and language: "the one who sacrificed himself", and invited me to one day come to Ethiopia. (Vignette 3)

Aiming at circumventing the fact that my request to access the camp was rejected by the Greek authorities, two interviews were conducted at a viewpoint which offered a landscape largely

populated by the camp (Figure 5). In these interviews, participants were asked to point out and speak about the camp spatiality. Additionally, another participant recorded a series of videos in the camp which further aided in providing insights on its premises.

Figure 5. View of the camp from one of the NGOs` areas, in the vicinity of Kara Tepe. Author's own.

With ratification through both oral agreement and informed consent, all in-depth interviews were recorded using a dedicated recorder to ensure clear and reliable audio capture and to minimize the risk of any data breach. Accordingly, data were securely stored in a personal external drive and only accessible to the main researcher. The recordings were transcribed *a posteriori* as verbatim, coded, and analyzed with the assistance of the software *Atlas.ti*.

The coding process employed was both deductive and inductive. Deductive coding was used based on predefined concepts, such as those inherent to the life stories approach (e.g. *turning points, redemption series, contamination series, agency, communion*) and to Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (e.g. *external positions, I-positions, promoter positions, centering processes*).

Such concepts guided the initial identification and categorization of themes directly related to theoretical constructs.

Concurrently, an inductive coding strategy was also utilized to remain open to emerging themes and patterns that were not pre-established. This approach allowed for the discovery and integration of new categories of analysis that arose organically from the data (e.g. uncertainty, racism/inequality, altruism, fear). This combination of deductive and inductive coding thus provided both a theoretically informed and a data-driven insight into the complex identity negotiations of asylum seekers. Their interrelations throughout the analysis processes are represented in the code tree below (Figure 6).
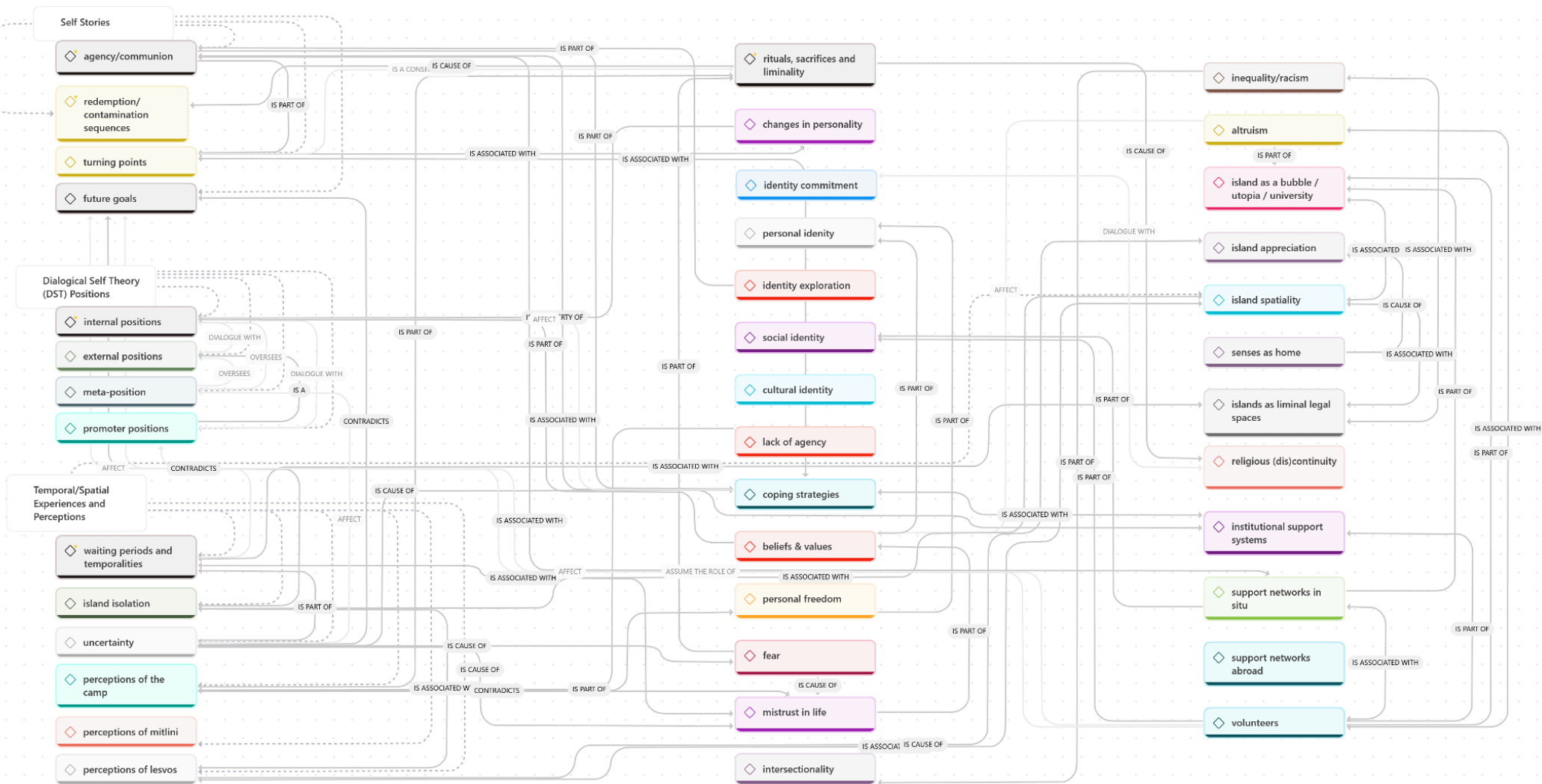
Figure 6. Code Tree with deductive and inductive codes, and their most prominent interrelations. Created with Atlas.ti. Author's own.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting research on identity negotiation processes with asylum seekers in Lesvos, ethical considerations were paramount, as the study engaged deeply with issues of vulnerability, displacement, and intimate backgrounds and personal stories. Recognizing the sensitive nature of shared accounts and experiences, informed consent was a critical first step. Participants were fully briefed on the study's aims and methods, and their autonomy was respected, with clear communication that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. As mentioned in the above section, the highest care standards were kept to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected, not only adhering to ethical research standards but also honoring the trust and openness of the participants who shared their life stories.

Further, the research was designed to minimize any potential harm to participants. This involved careful consideration of how questions were framed and the timing of interviews to avoid retraumatization. Ethical reflexivity guided the entire research process, prompting ongoing evaluation of the research activities to ensure they remained sensitive to the psychological well-being of the participants. The ethical review process by the University of the Aegean and adherence to the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, 2018) ensured that the study upheld high ethical standards, contributing constructively to the discourse on migration and identity, while respecting and safeguarding the dignity and rights of all participants involved.

Findings

This section delves into the lived experiences of young adult asylum seekers in Lesvos, exploring the impacts of undertaken waiting periods on personal identity formation and future

life trajectories. Through in-depth analysis, the findings reveal how these periods of liminality—characterized by uncertainty and stress, but also by the envisionment of future possibilities—shape and often transform the participants' sense of self and their visions for the future. The narratives collected underscore the complex interplay between individual agency and the structural constraints imposed by the asylum process and island spatiality.

The findings are structured around key themes of relevance that, having their contents emerge directly from the collected data, are in strict connection to this study's research questions:

- **the direct impact of prolonged waiting times on personal goals and identity negotiations** [*How do prolonged waiting periods influence the identity negotiation processes and future aspirations of asylum seekers?*]

- **the adaptive strategies developed by asylum seekers to cope with these challenges** [*What coping strategies do asylum seekers employ to manage the stresses associated with indefinite waiting periods?*]

- **the significant role of interactions with NGO members and volunteers in shaping asylum seekers' perceptions of the Western world** [*How do institutional support systems in Lesvos interact with asylum seekers' perceptions and expectations of the Western world?*]

- **the dual nature of the island as both a physical space and a symbolic landscape in the interstice of the migration rite, influencing emotional and identity-related processes**. [*In what ways does the dual nature of Lesvos as a physical and symbolic space affect the identity and emotional experiences of asylum seekers?*]

Each theme is supported by accounts from participants, whose stories not only highlight the diversity of experiences but also illustrate common patterns and shared emotional responses to

their surrounding environments. These narratives provide a grounded understanding of the ways in which the unique context of Lesvos as an insular liminal space facilitates and hinders personal development, social integration, acculturation and home making.

By intertwining these themes through the lens of Dialogical Self Theory (DST), this section aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how identities are negotiated in transition, offering insights into the dynamic processes of self-construction in the face of adversity and uncertainty. In spite of understanding and acknowledging that each participant upholds and displays a multitude of *I*-positions, I opt to revolve the following section around *I*-positions that are, to a greater extent, collectively shared. These are the *I-positions* of *I as an asylum seeker, I as an islander, I as participating in NGOs, I as a winner* and *I as a dreamer.* Nonetheless, as the reader will notice, variations in these *I*-positions will also be presented, alongside other, more context specific and individualized ones.

Temporalities, the Impacts of Waiting Periods and the Changing Nature of Perception

Waiting periods undertaken by young adults in Lesvos factor in participants' life stories as phases marked by uncertainty and stress, directly interfering with participants goals and future plans, and thus with their unfolding identity negotiations. Thus, participants often feel exceptionally wretched during their periods of wait, especially because their life goals are on hold.

Through the collective *I*-position of *I as an asylum seeker*, in congruence with Griffiths (2014), as explored in this research's literature review, individuals tend to experience temporalities that are sticky (a long, slowing time of waiting), suspended (decelerating into complete stagnation) and ruptured (tears in people's imagined time frames). Elements of uncertainty, as we shall see, are nonetheless experienced in multi-varied and intersectional ways.

Although present in all narratives about waiting periods, participants who (expect to) wait less can often cope more effectively during their time in Lesvos. When processing time begins to be perceived as extending beyond one's expectations (or negative decisions come), the initially positive experience of "arriving in Europe" evolves into anxiety and coping strategies seem to not suffice. The *I*-position of *I as an asylum seeker* is thus added up by new layers, displaying two different facets: *I as an asylum seeker who is leaving soon* and *I as an asylum seeker waiting indefinitely*.

Nuances on Agency

Especially in the case of participants who, having been on the island for a perceived short period, expect their waiting periods to end soon, the very much agentive *I*-position of *I as a dreamer* is particularly significant. This position can be interpreted as in close connection with *I as an asylum seeker leaving soon*, as participants who perceive their departure as imminent often exhibit a more pronounced engagement with their dreams and goals.

The *I*-position of *I as a dreamer* is brought forward by the empowering role of envisioning future scenarios and dreams of a nearby future, as displayed by the account of the following participants:

I have a dream. I will continue my study. I will like, I will study forever. I will study like, Master, Doctorate, this is my first goal. (P2)

I wanted to be a doctor in my country. In my country, because the people need me. But everyday, I want to be a doctor, I help people. Like that. My heart is very happy to help people, it is my nature. In the future, maybe. (P13)

It has always been my dream to be a sportsman. Uh, and that's what I want to do. (p8)

As highlighted by Khosravi (2020), hopeful visions and practices, even in the form of daydreaming, are agentive and come from the very dialectical wakefulness between the now and the not yet. The author goes on: "Daydreaming, orienting oneself towards not-yet fulfilled promises, is pre-eminently a political act by which migrants claim their right to potentialities that make prospects for a better future possible" (p. 206).

Through this very envisionment, asylum seekers agency is manifest and resistance against the immobilizing effects of waiting periods in spatial constrics is expressed. Not only, visions of the future seem to serve as a crucial coping mechanism to endure current adversities and the act of dreaming becomes an existential strategy, a way to reclaim agency in a situation where their physical freedom to move forward is restricted.

Contrapuntally, if *I as a dreamer* is connected with *I as an asylum seeker leaving soon*, the *I*-position of *I as an asylum seeker waiting indefinitely* is often associated with the experience of the stealth of the mindspace needed for elaborating new possibilities. As such, it can be interpreted as holding a remarkably conflicting relationship with *I as a dreamer* and in close connection to the experience of a suspended temporality: "I don't plan anything unless I have my decision. If I have my decision, that's the way I would start to plan something for my future. But at this moment now, no" (P14). Or, as illustrated by the words of P10: "Eight years waiting for nothing. Spent my whole life.[...] I don't have any future and hope till I understand what's going on to me. After that, I will make a plan, step by step".

In fact, in not yet receiving their asylum and seeing years go by, *I as an asylum seeker waiting indefinitely* notes that most of their personal goals were in vain (e.g. moving to a new country, raising a family, continuing specific educational or professional paths), and that they cannot pursue them anymore:

I say I can't make any plan.[...] I had maybe two or three biggest plans, and these plan, I… I will never forget because they were my plan for my life. And all the plans… [long pause] None of them were realized as I wanted. I didn't have a plan to stay here. I didn't have a plan to leave my country. I had a plan to finish my studies—I will study, I will work, I will have a family, I will have children, I will support my mom, my father, my children, my brothers. This was my plan, to be together, to be in a good life, to travel, to be. This was the plan. (P7)

Thus, for those facing longer stays and negative decisions, the waiting period involves a dichotomy between redemption series and contamination series. Although at times participants find resilience, adopting the *I*-position of *I as patient* ("This period of waiting just teaches me". P7), most of them seem to descend into a state of overwhelm, inhabiting positions such as *I as overstressed* or *I as numbing myself*.

A significant aspect of their temporal experience is the strong comparative dimension, where participants observe the departure of friends and other asylum seekers who receive favorable outcomes. This observation intensifies their feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, as noted by (P7):

Okay, in the beginning, they were in the camp… They were like 'Oh, you are a friend here, but now we have to go.' You are in the camp. You feel, 'Oh my God, my friend left!'. You do not eat. And he sends you a video, a photo, you say, 'Oh my God, I will die.' Pain, pain, pain. After some time, you are over pain, the body doesn't feel it. Like … How can I say it? It's like you hit me a lot, you hit me a lot. Afterwards, my body doesn't feel anything. Whatever you do for me, I just wait, till I will die.

Thus, anxiety and pain are augmented by the circumstantial exit from ones' established in-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), as "those friends of yours leave you alone". These events give emergence to the experience of frenzied (Griffiths, 2014) temporalities in relation to the rapid leaves of external figures that are part, no matter how temporary, of individuals' social identities.

A parallel situation develops in instances where participants' rely on cultural identity as one of the tools with which to navigate their waiting periods:

> My friend is now in Samos. She's been there for around seven months… Now she is becoming crazy. She waited too much. [...] Now she's the only Habesha. From Eritrea, she's the only person in the camp. So she doesn't have a local friend. Uh, and everyone gets transferred, but she's, she's still in Samos. So it's boring. And her card is closed, she could not leave the, uh, the island. So it's not good for her. She's not in a good situation. (P19)

Coping Strategies

While some individuals struggle to find enough strength and motivation to participate in activities offered by institutional organizations due to "not being able to think about anything else" (P10) but their asylum process, others (more often inhabiting positions such as *I as an asylum seeker leaving soon* and *I as a dreamer*) attempt to fill as much as possible of their free time in order to occupy their minds and cope with the extended periods of wait.

Common coping strategies rely on engagement with initiatives offered by NGOs, such as varied educational and language courses, skills workshops, going to the gym, to the women's center and/or participating in sports and other body movement activities. More precisely, the initial engagement in extra-camp activities seems to be a turning point from withdrawal into participation in individuals' narratives: "I volunteer here at (NGO name). Now, it's been almost

50 days of work. Before, all the other days, I was sleeping all day. Sleep, go to the food line, and repeat" (P13).

As the above quote illustrates, the broader position of *I as an asylum seeker* is counter positioned by the emerging *I*-position of *I as participating in NGOs*. As such, the space in which institutional support activities take place begins to be marked by a series of positive associations related with personal growth and identity, social interaction, and experiential structure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) through a semblance of normalcy and routine.

Functioning as an interactive learning environment, the island is often referred to as a "university". Nonetheless, this might be less because of educational activities, and particularly so due to the experience being perceived as a "first contact with European identity and the occidental world" (P11), which is especially framed around the interactions with volunteers and NGO workers from a diverse range of nationalities.

Interactions with Volunteers

As volunteers who participate in NGOs come to the island, they bring with themselves their own set of expectations and predispositions (Guribye & Mydland, 2018). These are coupled with a selective display of their own specific *I*-positions. These *I*-positions tend to be related to kindness, openness and philanthropic behavior (*I as humanitarian, I as altruistic, I as sociable*). As such, volunteers often assume, in the society of the mind of asylum seekers, the role of *promoter positions*, as it is described in the following excerpt from a participant who recently started working as a volunteer in an NGO:

> There is one guy I mingled with… He is a very, very good man. He is very open and, you know, a very, very kind hearted man. He always supports me and always encourages me. He says like: "it is a matter of time, everything will be renovated", and so on. The people

I met now, they are making me like this island more. Especially the man I mentioned. Really, that man is encouraging me, giving me hope. "Calm down, everything will be cool. It's a matter of time, it's a matter of period". (P14)

Although these *promoter positions* are very much positive and needed, they function in an ambiguous manner. This is due to the fact that asylum seekers, having their first contact with Europeans through socialization with volunteers, tend to assume that the laters are truthful representatives of the countries they are coming from. Such an interpretation does not only interfere with asylum seekers beliefs, but also shapes their goals and future plans, as the perception of external *promoter positions* such as those of the *humanitarian/altruistic/sociable* tend to be stretched to an external collective (e.g. Germans, Dutch, French) and thus to a potential future destination. This dynamic is well-captured by the post-migrant P11, who was in Lesvos for over two years:

The kindness that you see in Lesvos does not exist outside, but you get introduced to that kindness in Lesvos, that is not a lot at all, and, as a refugee, you think that this is the reality of Europe. cause I see someone from…. For example, Portugal. I see someone from Germany. I see someone from France, and I think: "Ah, all of them, they're the same, they are nice people. They're smiling. They're helping me. So it's been that they're a representative of their country." No… That's not true. When you get out of there, when you come to Paris, when you see that, how many thousands of people are sleeping in the street… [...]That is reality out of Lesvos. (P11)

Participants' initial perceptions of Europe, shaped by positive interactions with volunteers in Lesvos, may thus clash with their experiences on the mainland. This mismatch could lead to renewed identity negotiations or cultural dissonance (Lahire, 2008).

In addition, the traits and behaviors volunteers bring to the island through their positions of *I as humanitarian/altruistic/sociable,* in their interactions with asylum seekers, contribute to the creation of an "island utopia", further enhanced by island boundedness, which favors a continuous and intense conviviality. In Figure 7, the augmented cohesion of social interactions created by NGOs and favored by islandness (A) are expressed in contrast with weaker social ties in the same institutions in Athens (B), as of the report of an interviewee who has had extensive engagement in both contexts.
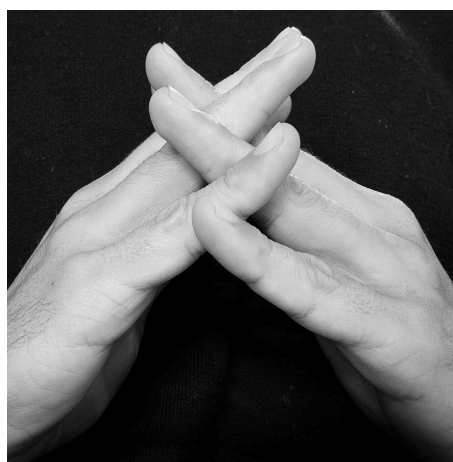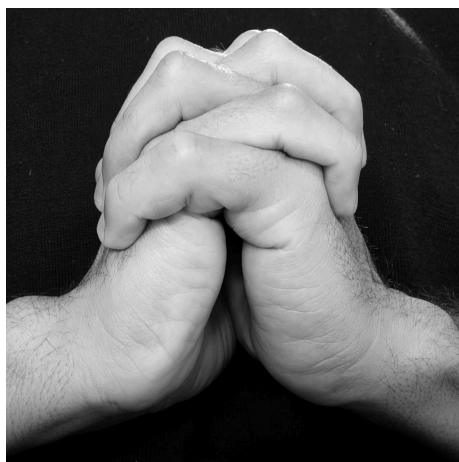
Athens   Lesvos

Figure 7. Social cohesion as represented by the hand signs of a participant (replicated by the author) in Athens and in Lesvos. Author's own.

In summary, the ways in which the intensive interaction with volunteers affect asylum seekers are manyfold. The perception of altruism, friendships forged and great appreciation of help affect participants' life goals, values and beliefs, which then tend to be tailored towards humanitarian and altruistic purposes (e.g. helping other people, extending the scale of ones' humanitarian outreaches). The social dynamics present in the island can, in this direction, turn the island spatiality into a place where one is "created" and has their "broken pieces are put back together"

(P11). In addition, such contact works in reconfiguring asylum seekers' social interactions and perceived social networks, both on the island and on their journeys, as expressed by P2: "I know like so many people now. In all European countries. Because I was working with NGOs here and I have friends all over Europe. That's, like, a wonderful thing for me."

The Multilayered Experience of Island Spatiality

The island space is, nonetheless, experienced in very much fragmented and intersectional ways. Whereas the NGOs, through their offered activities and space for conviviality, are associated with a specific set of positive emotions and *I*-positions such as *I as participating in NGOs* (e.g. belonging, feeling respected, valued) and *I as a dreamer*, the spatiality of the camp is associated with an antagonistic set of *I*-positions marked by an array of negative emotions, stress, uncertainty, sadness and unpredictable legal processes (*I as an asylum seeker*). Speaking of the good days that he has when he frequents one of the NGOs in the vicinity of the camp and contrasting its spatiality with that of the camp, P14 notes:

> I have good days, sometimes… Especially when I come here (at the NGO space).
> Sometimes when I come here, because we are with different people, we make jokes, my
> mind is free. But as soon as I enter the camp, everything gets back to my, my brain. (P14)

In the same direction, another participant states: "being outside of the camp, I am good, because I am not thinking about the decision. But when I come in the camp, I lock in" (P12).

Occasionally, the biopolitical impositions of the camp and its associated temporalities (Topak, 2020) are disrupted, providing moments of relief and normalcy. These moments are described as liberating and memorable, significantly contrasting with the usual restrictions:

> They invited me for dinner and I spent the night with them. For the first time, on that day,
> I felt normal. I didn't have to go back to camp. Because in the camp we have a time

limit—after nine o'clock, you cannot come back, you have to spend the night outside.

And for the first time, I was feeling like a normal person. (P18)

In the above quote, the participant notes feeling like a "normal person" for the first time when sleeping over at a friend's house. Here, the *I*-position of *I as an asylum seeker* is, once again, displayed in explicit contrast with *I as a normal person/civilian*, and this counterposition is clearly spatialized regarding contrasting places within the island.

Needless to mention, the experience of islandness and insularity is highly subjective and intricately linked to individuals' specific personal experiences, living circumstances, and legal status. For asylum seekers inhabiting the immediate spatiality of the camp, typical advantages and disadvantages associated with insular environments (Baldacchino, 2015; Conking, 2007), chiefly aspects of isolation or boundedness, aren't as relevant. As their most immediate phenomenal awareness unfolds in the constraints of the camp, the latter becomes the most prominently experienced place, which is permeated by a sense of confinement, uncertainty and stress. Henceforth, participants living in the camp have the *I*-position of *I as an islander* (here, *I as an islander* refers to recognized benefits and drawbacks of insular conditions) in a hierarchically lower position than *I as an asylum seeker*.

Nonetheless, for participants that end up staying longer in Lesvos, and therefore choose, have the financial means for, or are pushed to live either in Mytilene or in surrounding villages, perceptions common to the collective position of *I as an islander* begin to be more often experienced and reported. These include the islands' appreciated temporalities, smallness, conviviality, frugality and values of slowness and moderation, but also the lack of access to needed doctors and health services, to jobs, educational opportunities, and even the feeling of "knowing everyone and always listening to the same conversations" (P10). They are, however,

closely related to the broader theme of agency. For those who personally opt to stay on the island (after a positive legal decision), they are often spoken of in positive terms. For those who have been obliged too, they carry mostly negative connotations.

In a similar way, as most participants elaborate on perspectives of life off the island, it is apparent that the mainland (and especially Athens) is closely associated with greater personal freedom and with the continuation of the pursuit for one's personal goals (either in terms of work, education, or other opportunities). In terms of education, for example, the importance of not relying solely on informal learning through NGOs (as it is remarkable in Lesvos) is pinpointed. The same has also been stated by a post-migrant participant (P18), noting that, whereas all the (language) activities are informal in Lesvos (and thus not as effective as they need to be), they are professionalized in Athens.

In a similar direction, another post-migrant interviewee (P12) noted that the time in the island should be even more focused on improving language and other skills in accordance with individuals' future objectives, preparing migrants so that when they arrive, for example, in Germany, they can actually be active, full of agency and less reliant on insufficient social support structures.

Additionally, a participant who, during the timeframe of this research, received a positive decision and was about to move to Germany, noted that although she will still need to apply for asylum and wait once again, because she will be able to continue her university studies and work, the waiting period will be substantially more bearable.

The Island Space as a Symbol in The Interstice of a Rite. Having undertaken a periculous journey, and having embarked on their journeys often as a last resource—a point in which

participants often report not caring anymore if dying or living—the experience of arrival is frequently described as one of being reborn:

> When you are reborn, when you come from water, from the beach, from the boat ship… If you arrive in Greece, you think you were born new. You are born new. And when I come here, also if I have my ID and passport… Okay. You know, I can go everywhere, and if I'm a right girl, I can go everywhere in Europe. Do everything that I want. (P19)

The impactful quality of such an experience gives rise to the *I*-position of *I as a winner*, which can be both an individual and collective: "I'm a winner. Not only me. All, uh, Eritreans and Ethiopians are winners. Because, uh, our background is of winners, yeah?" (P1).

I as a winner is forged in contrast with both the internal, individualized position of *I as a defeated* (most participants have attempted the crossing several times and were pushed back or intercepted still on the Turkish shore) or with the external, collective position of those who didn't succeed in their attempts.

Meanwhile, for some participants, the very need to undergo such a journey and the risks associated with the later, coupled with life conditions in the camp and the hardships of the waiting period function as a particularly antithetical turning point, eliciting a negative, contamination series (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). As expressed by P5: "I am a winner. But I am not sure I want to win in these situations".

What appears through P5 is the emergence of a counter-position to that of *I as a winner* which is directly tied to external forces, political frameworks and migration policies. The two *I*-position, *I as a winner*, and *I as a winner who cannot win against all odds* are conflicting, and the emergence of a third position (*I as a recognized refugee* or *I as a normal person/citizen*) is inextricably linked to top-down legal processes and political decisions.

In further exploring the symbolic meanings attached to the island landscape, the following excerpt is particularly revealing. It not only captures turning points associated with the journey of a specific participant, but also illustrates how these can lead to a contamination series in the life stories of asylum seekers:

When I say life is meaningless, it is because, right now, we're sitting here, we can hear the sound of the sea, right? The weather is so good. The sea, like, looks so good. It is a good place. Yeah, it is a good place, right? But when you're on a different side of the story… And… [long pause] Like, when you're on the different side of the story, it is really, really scary. And, when we're in Turkey, looking at the sea, the only thing that I was thinking about is "what if something happened to my little brother that is 11 years old?", and "what if something happened to my niece, maybe?" How am I going to answer to that? What would I do? Why didn't I do anything to stop this?

You know when someone wants to torture you, they don't hurt you. They hurt the person that you love, or they hurt the things that you love. Or that you really take care of, that is really important for you…. And it is not really important for me, that I'm going to live or die. It's not really important. But what if something happened to my little brother, and when he is a grown up man and he tells me that… "why didn't you stop this? Why didn't you protect me?" So, this is why life is really meaningless. And I just started to know it when I started to undertake the journey. So, I hate it here. I would prefer it to be a city. I would prefer it to be much more far from the sea. (P5)

In the above excerpt, a series of new and more individualized *I*-positions appear in relation to the intricacies of the migration passage. The *I*-position of *I as a caretaker,* responsible for the younger brother and niece, is counter-positioned by *I as forced to put those I care for in danger.*

The conflicting *I*-positions, still, are colored by another layer, as *I as a caretaker who appreciates the sea*, which transmutes into *I as forced to put those I care for in danger through the sea* (and now, dislikes the sea). In this specific case, the conflict is negotiated through the third position of *I as wanting to live far from the sea*. Notwithstanding, the same traumatic process which gave rise to this new set of conflicting *I*-positions also gives rise to a new *I*-position: *I as without trust in life*—arising from the very challenges, powerlessness and inner contradictions brought by the journey.

If positions such as *I as a winner* can assume the role of a promoter position (which provides guidance and direction), *I as without trust in life*, in the case of (P5), assumes the role of a counter-promoter position, diminishing the excitement, desire and willingness to deal with new phases to come.

The above passage significantly relates to the ways in which political frameworks (related to the externalization of borders, securitization discourses and changes in legislations) directly impact individuals' psychological makeup and thus identity building process, here expressed through a sensorial and symbolic level. *I as a caretaker* feels guilt for putting family members at risk due to the journey, whereas this is not her personal choice or fault. In this same context, the voice of family members (brother, niece) assume the role of internalized, external positions, in conflict with the position of *I as a caretaker*.

What is observed, therefore, is an internal conflict reflecting broader structural dynamics beyond the individual's control. This systemic guilt is not born from personal failings but is originated by external political, social, and economic forces that dictate the conditions of migration and displacement (Sassen, 2014). The very way in which migration policies intersect

with individuals' identities, here expressed by the rise and subsiding of varied *I*-positions, is by forced resignifications in personal identity.

On The Senses As Home

The senses and island symbols also function in home-making and in accommodating feelings of belonging. Close to what Fathi (2021) describes in interpreting the senses as home, participants who were granted asylum and decided to remain (or move back to) the island relate that the surrounding landscapes, the slower temporalities of the island or food similarities remind them of cherished places and previous homes earlier in life:

> More or less, it looks like here. It's greeny, with the water. Where we lived, we also had the connection with the… You know, with the nature. (P15)

> I grew up in Bahir Dar. Bahir Dar means "near the sea". And when I see the water, I'm feeling like home. (P18)

Also through the senses and in connection with the island's spatiality, closeness to nature and the land-sea boundary which marks the overall islandness experience, processes of *depositioning* seem to be favored. Despite most reporting traumatic experiences with the waters (which now repel them from the shores) being common amongst participants, several also mention frequenting the seaside to wear off accumulated stress and clear the mind in coping with the stresses from the waiting period: "Because sometimes I am thinking so much, and I am so tired, in the night, I go to the sea. And I sit for one hour, two hours. The sea is good for me" (P12).

Another participant closely ties her spiritual experience with the way in which she experiences the sea. She describes an epiphanic and immediate identification with the environment, while in Lesvos:

I looked, I watched the water, and I saw the water was kind of like moving in some way, and when I stare at it with my eyes, it takes me. I looked at the sea, and the sea, the water took me.' (P16)

The experience reportedly made her closer to her God and his creation, and became a habit in life: "Sometimes when I feel overwhelmed about my work and the study, I leave everything, I go to the sea, I feel good when I come back." (P16)

Cultural Identity, Religions Interaction and Continuation

While discussing the multifaceted impact of the island's geography and social structures, it's crucial to address the cultural and religious dimensions that intersect with asylum seekers' identity experiences. The Orthodox churches on the island, which might be presumed to offer familiarity and solace to asylum seekers sharing this religious background (e.g. Eritreans, Ethiopians), have instead been reported as largely unwelcoming. This revelation introduces a significant layer of complexity to the asylum seekers' integration process and their negotiation of identity, as these spaces would be expected to provide some sort of continuity in terms of cultural identity for asylum seekers who partake of this same Orthodox Christianity.

Participants identifying with the *I*-position of *I as a (black) Orthodox*, express a sense of alienation from a space that should represent spiritual sanctuary and source community cohesion and cultural identity. Here, *I as an Orthodox* is counterpositioned by *I as unwelcome in Orthodox churches*, which is believed to be especially due to skin color. The reported unwelcomeness in religious settings impacts their overall integration into the local community, which may be especially relevant for those who, after receiving their asylum, opt to stay.

In a broader analysis, while religious practices and identities were strengthened during periods of wait in the life stories of some participants, others reported significant changes in their

belief systems and religious identities. Several participants mentioned losing all their beliefs due to the hardship of the journey. Others seem to have resignified their former religious backgrounds while undertaking their journeys or waiting periods, reporting an increased understanding of their own religious roots through more access to information and through contact with other religious matrices and individuals. This is particularly connected to cultural identity, as expressed through social contexts, being severely shattered through the migration process (Schwartz et al., 2006). For instance, a participant with Christian (*I as a Christian*) and Muslim (*I as a Muslim*) backgrounds and identities that were inherited from his parents, through his journey and waiting time on the island, reformulated his religious identity according to a new set of beliefs that were mostly related to the journey and to new, personal reflections through a third religious identity (*I as Rastafari*).

The exploration of young adult asylum seekers' identity negotiations in Lesvos reveals a profound intersection of temporality, spatiality, and social interactions within the insular liminal space of waiting. As important as the nuances across space, are the varied temporal dimensions associated with the periods on the island. Emotions and feelings progress from an initial sense of accomplishment (*I as a winner/I as an asylum seeker leaving soon/I as a dreamer*) towards increased anxiety (*I as an asylum seeker waiting indefinitely* and unable to plan or continue to pursue my life goals). This progression underscores the profound impact of temporalities on their emotional state and overall perception of the asylum process and is interconnected with a broader set of more contextual and personal *I-positions*. The narratives detailed illustrate agentive strategies used by participants in navigating uncertainty, and also shine light on how extended waiting not only can cause a pause on personal goals, also actively affecting personal, social and cultural identities.

Discussion

By exploring the intricate dynamics of identity formation among asylum seekers on Lesvos, this research focuses on how prolonged periods of wait during the asylum application interfere with individuals identity building and negotiation processes. By examining the interplay between identity, temporality, and spatiality in a liminal setting, this study uncovers how these elements converge to influence the self-conception and narrative identity of young adulthood asylum seekers.

Answering the research question *"How do the periods of wait undertaken by young adult asylum seekers in the island of Lesvos affect the negotiation and construction of their identities?"*, the findings highlight how asylum seekers on Lesvos experience identity formation as a continuous negotiation of *I*-positions influenced by the liminality and uncertainty of their circumstances. They show that key *I*-positions such as *I as an asylum seeker*, *I as participating in NGOs*, *I as an islander*, *I as a winner* and *I as a dreamer* evolve and subside in response to the socio-temporal dynamics and spatial configuration of the island and in relation to changes in participants legal status. These *I*-positions, often in superposition or friction against each other, illustrate how significant fluctuations in temporality, spatiality, and legal status affect participants' self conceptions and their emotional and psychological states.

Due to the often contradictory nature of *I*-positions, experiencing and owning these can offer a sustained hardship in building a cohesive and integral self narrative. Additionally, when asylum application processing periods are perceived to extend, agency, especially in the form of *I as a dreamer*, tends to be diminished or to fade, as participants perceive future orientations (as goals) to be in vain. In the same direction, very prolonged waiting periods can function as

turning points in participants' narratives leading to *I*-positions that reflect either redemption series (*I as patient*) or contamination series *(I as numbing myself/I as without hope)*.

Theoretical Implications

Identity, Self Stories and Dialogical Self Theory

Waiting periods in Lesvos factor in participants' narratives as a liminal stage, marked by uncertainty and significant reformulations in their identities, which are here illustrated by the arisal of the several *I*-positions on, or in association with, the island. The narratives shaped by participants' experiences on Lesvos adds to the understanding that identity is constructed through stories that individuals tell about their lives (McAdams, 1993, 2001, 2006; McAdams & Bowman, 2001), highlighting the critical role of narrative coherence in coping with adversity—which is severely put in question during extended periods of uncertainty.

In light of DST, this research identifies several *I*-positions (both internal and external, collective and individualized) that emerge in the interstices of Lesvos as a liminal territory. In showing how external and internal dialogues are expressive of self-conception, the emergence of varied *I*-positions amidst uncertainty exemplifies DST's applicability in contexts of migration and liminality. In close dialogue with the uncertainties of the migration rite, these *I*-positions are marked by frictions of temporality, spatiality and social/legal status changes. Amongst others, I paid special attention to the more collectively shared *I*-position of *I as an asylum seeker*, *I as participating in NGOs*, *I as an islander*, *I as a winner* and *I as a dreamer*, and to the contexts in which they arise through participants' life stories.

In investigating centering and decentering movements within the self (Hermans & Geiser, 2011), the contact with NGOs and their volunteers often function as a decentering movement that disorganize a position repertoire mostly related to the camp spatiality. In doing so, it also offers a

centering process that contributes to the organization and integration of a new position repertoire, this time, related to the NGOs. Nonetheless, given the aforementioned "utopian" character of the social configurations present in the island, such individual identity configurations that are especially tied to interactions in NGOs are bound to be again decentered, once individuals continue their journeys in new countries.

In this light, the island environment functions as a central display of globalization cultural historical processes, marked by the culmination of migration and by the intercultural interactions which entails hybridizing and decentering movements in the self (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Nonetheless, it is also connected with localization movements, highlighted by island spatiality and by the conviviality and social interdependence favored by boundedness and by the views that volunteers, tourists, and *voluntourists* (Wearing & McGehee, 2013) often entertain of insular landscapes (Guribye & Midland, 2018).

In the "island bubble" environment, volunteers and NGO workers are often active participants in the configurations of new social identities of asylum seekers. Being frequently associated with promoter positions, members of NGOs are reported to offer much needed support and connection. Simultaneously, the interaction of asylum seekers with NGO members and volunteers affect their values and beliefs, also shaping the choice of possibilities for future movement by participants. Contact in the NGOs, likewise, affect asylum seekers' perceptions of what Europeans (and their multiple nationalities) are like. Although not the focus of this study, it must be noted that the meaningfulness of these interactions also directly affect volunteers and NGO workers, bringing forward a much dialectical character to these relationships.

Despite dwelling in a context of uncertainty which cannot be resolved by personal willingness alone, asylum seekers more often than not are able to identify, describe and speak of

their internal *I*-positions—especially those discussed here. The ability to oversee one's positioning processes requires the distancing characteristic of the standpoint of a meta-position (Hermans, 2013). Nonetheless, the main function of meta-positions (to foresee and plan), remains unfulfilled, as participants' life goals and personal timeframes are put on hold.

Simply put, asylum seekers are compelled to inhabit prolonged meta-positions which, despite offering a reflective vantage point, are hindered from proactive future planning due to the pervasive uncertainty of asylum processes outcomes, causing participants to feel "stuck in their minds".

In this context, it is remarkable that, due to the exceptionally contradictory nature of the *I*-positions investigated in such a context of liminality and uncertainty, the creation of narratives that accommodate the several voices within the self in search of some sort of unity and purpose (McAdams, 2001), is specially challenged. The arisal of third positions, which would solve conflicts between other *I*-positions, is mostly impossible from an individual perspective, as third positions aimed at solving conflicts (e.g between positions such as *I as an asylum seeker waiting long*, and *I as a dreamer*), are often externally dependent on top-down decisions that lie in the realms of external political-legal frameworks.

Although it has been argued by Bathia (2002) that conflicting voices and *I*-positions are inherent parts of the migrant self and as such do not need to be integrated and harmonious with each other, this research emphasizes that *I*-positions coming from often unfair, untimely and externally imposed political-legal frameworks are unwelcome and add a very much unnecessary and avoidable layer to asylum seekers positioning processes.

Islands display key functions as strategic locations in the geopolitics of international migration (King, 2009), making themselves evident here in their impacts with migrants

I-positions. As it has been argued by Raggatt (2012) "outside forces, both historical and cultural, also drive positioning movements, and these can lead variously to innovation, disorganization, integration or restriction of the position repertoire (p.42)". I argue that these processes are, in the context of this research, also spatialized and spatially differentiated within the island. As such the spatial dimension and the meanings attached to specific places must not be neglected.

In relation to studies that target a broader understanding of waiting periods and temporalities, this research suggests not only that different temporalities coexist in one's perception (as it has been noted by Griffiths, 2014), but also that the experience of different temporalities is reflective of, and interacts with, the specificity of different places and their associated connotations. Additionally, the physical isolation of islands has their very importance attached to individual perceptions and possibilities of movement, smallness becoming effective and being realized, as noted by Nimfuhr and Otto (2021), at the intersection of islandness and (im)mobility policies.

Rotter (2016), exploring asylum seekers' experiences in Glasgow, highlighted that individuals describe their time as stagnant and their periods of wait as passive, and argued that in reality their waiting periods are affective and active. The present research showcases how, through the lens of DST and its *I*-positions, stagnancy and passivity can coexist with affective and active dimensions within one-self through different *I*-positions that constitute oneself. *I*-positions, in experiencing different and often contrapunctual dimensions of agency and passivity, showcase how these are associated with specific spatialities (e.g different places in the island) and their associated temporalities (shorter or longer waiting periods).

In a similar context, Khosravi (2020), arguing that waiting is not merely suspended time in a temporal progression towards a future, highlights that the now and the not-yet constantly

make and remake each other. In this interaction, agentive hopeful visions and practices, marked by potentialities that make prospects for a better future possible, are generated. In relation to the author's argument and accepting the existence of divergent *I*-positions within oneself, this research shows how agency is indeed manifest, both through active coping strategies, social practices, and through the envisionment of better futures. Nonetheless, this research showcases how, as waiting time progresses and/or negative decisions begin to repeat, individuals often opt out of coping and social activities, also stopping future planning and goal envisioning processes. This is much in accordance with Bendixsen and Eriksen (2018) investigation of Palestinians' asylum seekers waiting periods in Oslo. The authors argue that through time spent in social activities, waiting can seem productive and meaningful. Nonetheless, this is momentary. If the objective of waiting is never reached, they argue, social time will eventually be perceived as useless and wasteful retrospectively.

Illustratively, in DST terms, it can be said that, with time, *I as a dreamer* becomes suppressed by the monologue of *I as an asylum seeker waiting indefinitely*—uncertainty puts participants' plans on hold, rendering them out of control of their present and personal futures. Furthermore, from a cognitive psychology perspective, with their life goals in suspension, autobiographical information—the building blocks in the crafting of self narratives—is compromised in their organization and absorption (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2001).

Agency in Transition

For many participants, starting to actively volunteer or participate in NGOs is a key turning point in their narratives. The meaningfulness of this event underscores asylum seekers' agency. As highlighted by Khrosravi (2020), asylum seekers "are not waiting for a chance to

belong but rather to participate" (p. 215). Engaging with NGOs and participating in activities not only provides immediate relief from the stresses of displacement but also influences how asylum seekers perceive themselves and their futures. For instance, these engagements often introduce asylum seekers to new social networks and skill sets, reinforcing a sense of agency and potential for personal development (see Hynie, 2018). These interactions can lead to a redefinition of self-identity, as individuals incorporate these new experiences and the roles they play into their ongoing narrative of self.

By rebelling against imposed passivity and clientification, as argued by Bendixsen and Eriksen (2018), asylum seekers challenge the political order through which state power is expressed and where temporal autonomy is unequally distributed. In Lesvos, perhaps, the graffitis around the city, protests and manifestations in favor of Palestine (at the time of this research), running rallies around the island for fundraising purposes with the participation of asylum seekers, alongside individuals very existence and envisionments of future, can be perceived as a challenging of the political order.

Additionally, coping mechanisms that foster a sense of control and purpose can mitigate the negative psychological impacts of uncertainty through the rooting of a more stable *I*-position (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), thereby supporting more coherent identity construction over time. It must not go unnoticed, nonetheless, that due to the very lack of predictability in planning their futures, many asylum seekers prevent themselves from choosing to engage with NGOs, as they do not know what turns their lives will take and when (Griffiths, 2014).

As it was investigated in previous sections, the most prominently inhabited temporalities are sticky and suspended, but also marked by temporal ruptures which are often associated with frenzied temporalities (in terms of rapid departures and changes of configurations—either of

oneself or others) (Griffiths, 2014). In highlighting the way *I*-positions arise and subside in relation to individuals' body movement through the island space (as well as how these change across time and due to legal status changes), I draw attention to how the island as a place is not only perceived by individuals, but also active in the shaping of these perceptions in a dialogical manner .

A note on religious identity. Ideas of ascription and achievement are often combined in narratives of religious identity, both elements being incorporated into individuals' life stories and identities (Cadge & Davidman, 2006). Nonetheless, if it is true that migrants tend to become more religious when abroad (Quero, 2016), the same might not be necessarily accurate in transitional spaces, through waiting periods and throughout the duration of the journey itself.

In the liminality of such circumstances, there are certainly those who keep or strengthen their beliefs and religious identities, for whom it is not an extra weight, but as noted by Quero, a source of significant support. However, through a different positioning process, there are those who changed their beliefs through the journey (and often as an outcome of it). This very process of reformulation and reflection seems to strengthen personal identity, as it allows religious *I*-positions to fade or be enhanced according to personal choice (and often away from external influence). This might be especially so in the international context of Lesvos, as often, upon arrival, external pressures on cultural and religious identity seem to be lessened.

As much as religion can prompt social identity and cohesion in contexts of change even amongst migrants from distinct backgrounds (Zock, 2013), it is also true, I argue, that the very disruption of pre established social, cultural and religious identities open up space for new spiritual reflections and formulations which might, in turn, strengthen personal identity.

Phenomenology of Place and Island Studies

The phenomenological approach used throughout this research reveals how Lesvos island's spatiality and character interact with asylum seekers' experiences and identity negotiations. It underscores the significance of *place* in shaping psychological and social outcomes. Not only, in rooting this research in phenomenological grounds, I aimed at offering a unique perspective on insularity through the lens of asylum seekers. In this sense, this research highlights how islandness and insularity is perceived differently by varied participants in their multiple *I*-positions, emphasizing how the problematics often associated with insularity mean more for participants who do not inhabit the camp than for those who do.

Similarly, this research has also highlighted how, for longer term participants, both the positive and negative perceived expressions of islandness (isolation, lack of services, but also conviviality, community, slowness, beauty) tend to be mentioned. Nonetheless, these perceptions fluctuate and are closely related to personal experiences and to the broader theme of agency. For those who opted to stay, insularity is more often spoken of in positive terms. For those who have been obliged too, they come associated with negative connotations.

On understandings of home, an important category in understanding identity (Sarup, 2005; McIntyre et al., 2006), this research drew attention to how the senses can work as one's home. In connection with the island environment, it displays how the senses can function in recognizing what is familiar and in assisting us in feeling included in new environments where pressure to adjust might be present (Fathi, 2021).

Hay (2007) notes how "'homeness' mandates a deep and ongoing conversation with place", and draws on Relph, who highlights that such a conversation with place is as necessary as close social relationships with people. Similarly, Fathi (2021) speaks of the complexities of home in migration as being composed by the contradiction of roots and uprooting and by the

need of a sense of belonging and of being recognized. In the context of this research, I explored the fulfillment of this need of recognition through the place-bounded *I*-position of *I as participating in NGO*s. Contrapuntally, the camp, described by Fathi (2021) as fitting the category of "unhomes", is remarkably where individual agency is perceived as suppressed, thus being associated with the *I*-position of *I as an asylum seeker.*

As a result, this research recognizes Massey's "geometries of power" (Massey, 1994), acknowledging the multitude of meanings that can be integrated to the island as a place and to different places within an island, from a sense of entrapment and opportunity denied to the choice, upon agency, to stay and make the island a home (Hay, 2006). Although Accaragi (2017) notes that everyday practices seem to be more important in homing than geographical places themselves, in concluding this investigation I highlight that everyday practices, in their very existence and configurations, are, in fact, posed by geographicity, power relationships and the geopolitical frameworks of migration.

Practical Implications

In pointing out practical implications that are brought forward by such a study, one falls into the ambiguous position of risking, concomitantly, lacking depth and novelty in terms of future policies, or remaining silent against much needed changes. In such circumstances, a realistic and yet hopeful departure ground is essential.

In understanding the 'hard to change' nature of current migration policies, and their rootedness in much broader geopolitical strategies and contexts, we are left with an approach that must be integral and honest. Such a perspective would lead us to acknowledge that individuals must, at the very least, be well informed of the hardships, unpredictability, and nuances of experienced temporalities and of the locations with which these are associated.

In this direction, a thorough information process and psychological support sessions that explain common patterns of emotions and *I*-positions that can arise according to time and the multilayered island spatiality is crucial. Coupled with other already known personal identity interventions (see Schwartz, 2006) and with further identification and advocation of *promoter positions* that are relevant sources of aid for asylum seekers, such an awareness raising method can substantially facilitate individuals' navigation process of their waiting periods and identity (re)configurations.

As this research shows, a paramount source of stress for asylum seekers is the uncertainty surrounding the duration of asylum decision-making processes. Accordingly, it is known structured timelines can significantly enhance mental health and well-being among asylum seekers (Laban et al., 2004) and could mitigate the lack of engagement in activities due to uncertainty about departure dates (Griffiths, 2014). However, establishing a maximum reasonable and reliable time frame for these processes does seem like a distant future step. Nonetheless, the very process of raising awareness about the nuances of the asylum seeking process might aid individuals in identifying where pain, anxiety and identity conflicts come from. This form of self-understanding process is extremely important, as understanding the causes of suffering is essential for alleviating it (see Cassell, 1998; Bueno-Gómez, 2017).

In acknowledging that the physical and emotional setting of asylum camps also critically impacts the sense of home and belonging among residents, efforts to make these environments more hospitable and home-like should be furthered, as they have been shown to significantly improve psychological well-being (see Crea et at. 2015; Feldman, 2015). Nonetheless, enhancements should not only focus on improving living conditions, creating spaces for social interaction, and providing areas for private and communal activities, but also make asylum

seekers, in all their diversity, active agents in the process of conceptualizing and creating such spaces.

Moreover, the newly planned Vastria camp's isolated location poses significant challenges to the integration and support of asylum seekers, having faced a great degree of resistance. This isolation severely limits NGO outreach and restricts asylum seekers' access to the broader community, thus impeding their right to social integration and participation in city and island life. In understanding how specific *I*-positions arise and subside according to the island spatiality and to specifically attributed place attachment, the strategic location planning of asylum camps should take such knowledge in high consideration. Lastly, this knowledge should be used in order to enhance accessibility and community engagement and well-being, instead of in congruence of inhumane geo political agendas.

Additionally, incorporating sessions that provide a realistic portrayal of life in Europe could demystify the expectations and realities of living in host countries. These informative sessions should articulate both the challenges and opportunities that await, enabling asylum seekers to make informed decisions about their migration journey and future plans. Clear, factual information empowers individuals (see Brekke, 2004), fostering a sense of agency and enhancing their capability to plan strategically for their futures.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

Strengths

This paper sits within a new generation of island migration studies, which takes seriously islands' new roles as strategic locations in the geopolitics of migration (King, 2009). At the same extent, this research collaborates with identity studies by asserting the influence of waiting periods and places in the identity negotiation process of individuals.

The research enriches our understanding of how asylum seekers negotiate their identities under conditions of uncertainty and liminality. It highlights the profound impact of waiting and transitional spaces on personal identity formation and emphasizes the role of place in these processes. By integrating DST with phenomenology and narrative identity theories, this research offers a nuanced perspective on the complex interplay of factors shaping asylum seeker identities in Lesvos.

My biggest contribution to island studies is to elaborate on islandness and on the human perception of islands from a standpoint that is neither pertaining to a top-down/positivist/mainlander lens, but to passers-by along their journeys. Islanders, if solely in one of their transitory *I*-positions. It thus demonstrates how island spatiality should not be interpreted in essentialistic or objectivistic ways, but tied to a broad range of circumstances that, as much as they are personal and subjective, are in direct connection to broader political frameworks and contexts of change. By using the lens of asylum seekers, this research underscores that the construction of place meaning arises from the dialogue between the physicality of place and the interactions and shared meanings of people within it (Hay, 2006), the very arisal and subsiding of several *I*-positions are reflective of the dialogue between place and perception.

Limitations and Future Research

To depart from the self stories of persons is, simultaneously, to delve into the depth of individuals' existences and, in doing so, to acknowledge the existence of all the accounts that might not be represented or endorsed through my selection of participants. Having carried out all interviews in English and with participants who were reachable and willing to speak, the voices of those not fluent in English were unheard. So were the nuances of perception of those who,

dwelling in inner complexities that by far escape the scope of my experiential understanding, opted to remain silent or out of sight.

Notwithstanding, the study's focus on a specific asylum seeker population in Lesvos and reliance on qualitative methods, although sufficient in themselves, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider comparative studies across different geographic settings and, perhaps of even greater importance, further include longitudinal approaches to better understand the evolution of asylum seeker identities over time, which was invisible within the timeframe of this study.

Lastly, closer attention should be paid to the intersectionality of experiences regarding groups from different ethnicities, gender identity, racial backgrounds and age. Such an endeavor would not only require more extensive fieldwork, but also access to comprehensive databases and a broader pool of participants. The latter would, in turn, demand new reflections on positionality, pointing to the importance of collective work and, potentially, community-based research approaches.

Conclusion

By making use of Dialogical Self Theory to understand and interpret asylum seekers' narratives on their waiting periods, this research reveals how nuanced, different and often divergent *I*-positions arise and subside in relation to both time and space. As such, the study highlights how Lesvos, with its unique, complex and multilayered spatiality, combines with the temporalities and uncertainty of asylum processes, profoundly impacting the identity formation of young adult asylum seekers.

Through detailed qualitative analysis, this research illustrates how asylum seekers navigate their prolonged waiting periods by adopting various coping strategies, which include

substantial engagement with NGOs and volunteers—as it would be expected, I-positions and promoter positions also arise within their contexts. Finally, the dynamic interplay between personal agency, structural constraints, and the symbolic meanings attached to the island space underscores the complexity of identity formation under conditions of forced waiting and liminality in Lesvos. In investigating these, this research highlighted how broad scale policies regarding asylum procedures, timelines and locations ultimately affect, interfere with, promete and/or block asylum seekers' identity negotiation processes.

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