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Never-ending Journey: Living in-between simultaneous realities

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Never-ending Journey: Living in-between simultaneous realities

by

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A THESIS
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Abstract

This supporting paper provides the chronological background development in relation to my studio practice, as an international student, an Iranian female artist, a newcomer to Canada, a dreamer, and a traveller, who is experiencing living in two cultures simultaneously. This paper contains reflective statements, critical statements, and a visual and written narrative about my journey of living in between places, moments, multiple identity constructions, and mixed language identities. In this paper, I have a thematic approach to each exhibition I installed throughout my two-year MFA program at the Department of Art at University of Calgary. I am a traveller who starts her story by narrating her personal perspective on the spatial changes in her life, displacement of identities and places, and her second language identity as a result of migration.

In my research creation process, I constantly raise questions such as: How can I picture the sentiment of wavering between two simultaneous realities? How can I express the consequences of being ‘present’ in two separate cultures at once? How can I embody the swings in multiple added layers and fragments of my identity and their relation to place? And how can I address the notion of searching for the perception of belonging, while I am undergoing living and being in-between? My endeavour is to contextualize and articulate my creative research in a cohesive and clear way. I ask my reader to walk with me in every phase of this effort and experience part of my journey.
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I would also like to thank Dona Schwartz, my committee member, who always raised incredibly valuable questions during critique sessions of my exhibitions. Thinking about these questions helped me deepen my thoughts and concepts in my critical writings.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my parents and to my husband for providing me with unconditional support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and during the process of researching for and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who have always, endlessly, and unconditionally supported me through my artistic path and have been proud of me since I drew my first line.

Besides, I would like to thank my husband, Mohsen, in all languages and forms possible in the universe, because of his full-time support through my ups and downs in the two years of the MFA program.
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Preface: Transition and Estrangement

My eyes are wide open. I see dark shadows in the pale blue light coming into my room from the narrow window. For a moment, I do not remember where I am. I look for my glasses on the table next to my bed. Everything becomes clear when I put them on. Now I know where I am. Somewhere far from home.

I open the door. A bone chilling wind hits my face as I search for my keys in my pockets. I lock the door and step into the bright and clean snow. I look at the sky. It is cloudy. It is dull. It reminds me of the gloomy skies of Tehran in the winter. As I cross the street, I look around and see nobody. It feels very strange and empty. Whenever we have snow in Tehran, many people go out just to play in it. The sound of happiness is in the air, and several snowmen are returning people’s smiles. I keep walking, and the only thing I hear is the sound of untouched snow being crushed under my boots.

I step into my studio and enter the middle partition. It is very bright. The window is large and the view is amazing. The sounds of Tehran’s morning frenzy echo in my ears. Countless cars pass the nearby crossroads, honking their way through the crowded streets of central Tehran. Our small apartment-like university buzzes with chatter from hundreds of students. But wait, it is utterly quiet. I realize I am literally half a world away, and for a moment, I feel a distant emptiness. The smell of a used Earl Grey teabag mixed with acrylic paint caresses my nose, and I am pulled back into reality, my own personal studio, which is what I always wanted. I stare at my inchoate drawing. My pencils are scattered everywhere on my desk. I turn the kettle on and wash my huge green mug. I grab a fresh teabag and put it in my mug. The kettle clicks. I pour
boiling water in the mug, and as I take a deep breath, I think about how much I like working in my studio. It is the start of a new day.

As an Iranian woman artist, moving to Calgary has altered many aspects of my life. As I try to find my place in a society far from the religious and political limitations and boundaries of my past life in Tehran, the use of technology and social media has held me strongly connected to my homeland and past self. Thanks to the Internet, my life in Calgary has become a mixture of distant places and times, rather than a fresh start. The thread that keeps me connected to my hometown lives not only by my memories, but also by the photos and videos which my family send to me frequently, and my close friends’ social media activities. I am continuously going back and forth between places and moments, and this gives me the feeling of being suspended between two utterly different worlds; I refer to this sensation as “simultaneity”.¹ It is as though I am living in several moments and places at the same time.

My research creation examines ways of visualizing the notion of simultaneity in the lives of contemporary migrants, in the sense of being in two cultures and multiple states of mind. In my art generation process, I show the shifts, constructions, and reconstructions which take place in one’s identity as the result of immigration and living in a different culture, exploring the sameness and differences of identity, place, culture, and language that I am surrounded by in my daily life. I use an interdisciplinary approach that includes time-based media, photography, printmaking, drawing, and text as means of investigating and narrating my story. My aim is to provide an environment for my viewer to engage with a larger conversation about the lived

¹ In visual arts, the origins of simultaneity can be traced back to the Orphism movement in the early 1900s. Pioneering personalities include František Kupka, Robert Delaunay and Sonia Delaunay. In music, simultaneity first appeared in the works of the late 1800s composer Charles Ives.
experience, the “lived space–time, lived relations, and lived body” (Daskalaki et al., 2015). My hope is to reveal and visualize my process of identity construction as embodied between-space and between-time.

“Simultaneity” has been used to describe a multitude of ideas and senses throughout art history, particularly in relation to Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism. The roots of simultaneity can be tracked back to the discovery of the fourth dimension by Einstein (Miller, 2002), and the heated debates and fascination about the nature of time, toward the end of the 18th century. Concurrent with scientific and philosophical arguments about time, which were mainly heralded by Einstein and the French philosopher Bergson, artists also became interested in incorporating this new dimension in their works.

In my personal experience, I started to get familiar with the concept of simultaneity when I was in the second year of my BFA program. I realized my life had always been involved with multiple layers of ideologies, traditions, contemporary changes, and my artistic perspective. These layers created profound contrasts and contradictions in my everyday life. As a result, I felt I had multiple identities at the same time. I needed to carry different identities along with me in order to fit in different communities within the different segments of my hometown society.

I started to question the notion of simultaneity I was feeling, and to find a way to express it throughout my artistic practice. I learnt that Picasso brought multiple perspectives of singular objects into a two-dimensional painting. By doing so, Picasso was concerned with the conceptual existence of objects rather than what we perceive of them at any given moment. I realized my identity too can be thought of as an object which has distinct angles, perspectives, and layers to it. People cannot observe all sides of my identity at once. The concept of showing “all sides at
once”, which was pioneered by artists such as Picasso, Braque, and Delaunay, became known as “simultaneity”.

In my exploration I started to recognize contradictions in people, places, and everyday objects. When Picasso painted all angles of one object altogether, he navigated around the object, and while I observed the contradictions within my own identity, or people around me, I imagined we all might have transparent layers which could be made visible for all of us concurrently. As a result, in my artistic practice, I shifted to using transparent layers and materials to show all the facets in my identity and my surroundings simultaneously. It slowly became a way of thinking for me. In a sense, I became a follower of Robert Delaunay’s artistic ideology. For Delaunay, who had a crucial role in the growth of simultaneity, the concept became more important than just a technique, and turned into his philosophy of life. Delaunay looked up to simultaneity as the unifying explanation for the inconsistencies of modern life. (Buckberrough, 1982).

When I moved to Calgary, my approach to simultaneity became focused on creating layers of simultaneous moments and thoughts to resemble simultaneous meanings and concepts regarding connections to my home town, and the relationship I am creating with the current process of home-making in Canada. I attempt to visualize the concept and experience of living in-between impressions, instances, cultures, identities, and languages from different angles, as if they are several objects with distinct angles, all of which I can see at once. For me, these angles are born out of being present in two realities contemporaneously, as a result of being connected to my previous life through the use of technology.

In my work, I am particularly interested in how ideas of identity and culture interact with places, objects, and everyday lives of people. I explore the feeling of being dislocated and disoriented as a result of living in-between two cultures and two separate realities. I am
constantly exploring questions like: How can I show the sense of being torn between two worlds? How can I convey the feeling of being ‘present’ in two cultures at once? How can I embody the shifts in layers and fragments of my identity and their relation to place? And how can I address the notion of belonging, while I am experiencing living and being in-between?

Migration is a journey amid a number of journeys, which encompasses crossing borders. The migrants sense the notion of exile and nomadism while they cross the borders and break the previous barriers of their thoughts and experiences, exploring new territory both physically and mentally (Chambers, 1994). Even though immigrants often voluntarily move, they will face the feeling of living in a vacuumed place for a while. Based on my personal experience, when people migrate, they do no fully live in the host country; they still have strong attachments to their home country. It is as if they live in an isolated place, which is made out of simultaneous moments of their current and previous lives, as if they are living in-between, while they remain attached to other places by invisible strings.

Koser (2007) used the term “transnational” to explain migrants who live in-between nations, holding onto their social, economic and political interests in their countries of origin, living “dual lives”. Some even have homes in both countries, frequently travelling between them. In my artistic research, I am concerned with finding ways to narrate the experience of living dual lives for my viewer by using relevant symbolism.

In the contemporary world, migrants’ dual or even multiple lives are further strengthened by involvement in social networks, as though they are living in separate realities. Information and communication technologies assist to enrich a sense of “collective identity” in diasporas (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). For instance, the personal computer and access to the Internet are considered essential resources for migrants, who according to Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010), use
them to maintain their transnational social network in a way which pre-digital age migrants were simply unable to do. In the same vein, it is highlighted that for most people the effect of technology on international migration is “unquestionable” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). When I left Tehran, my first stop was in Frankfurt International Airport before continuing to Calgary. I immediately tried to find an Internet connection to talk to my family. Ever since, I have been deeply aware of my parallel life in Tehran. Every morning when I wake up, I check my Facebook and Instagram accounts to observe what is going on in Tehran and with my friends and family.

Previous ways of long distance communication involved the strict absence of the individual, such as in written communication. Nowadays, this has evolved to bits and pieces of a person being present, either visually or aurally, through voice and video communication. This creates a reality in which, despite being physically absent, individuals are electronically present (Lijtmaer, 2011). Beyond communication, this phenomenon can be extrapolated to a virtual presence within faraway places. This sense of presence is further reinforced when an element of familiarity is added to the mixture; familiarity of spaces and places from one’s past. For instance, the last few days have been rainy in Tehran, and by looking at photos of the city’s rainy streets, I get the crystal clear feeling of virtually walking in the streets of Tehran once again.

My methodology is heavily involved with auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is based firmly in the experiences of human beings. We try to comprehend and give meaning to our lives through stories (Andrews & Squire, 2008). It is a form of qualitative research that includes collection of narratives, which can be written, oral, and visual. It specifically focuses on the significances people credit to their personal experiences, trying to gain an understanding of the immense complexities of human life (Josselson, 2010). My
narrative is transferred to my audience through the use of visual art, which is sometimes accompanied by audio components and short textual pieces. My stories are based on personal experiences and informally listening to and observing the experiences of other migrants I know personally. In the same vein, reading articles and books, such as “Home: International Perspectives on Culture, Identity, and Belonging” (Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013), “Accidental Immigrants and the Search for Home: Women, Cultural Identity, and Community” (Kelley, 2013), “Travellers’ Tales: Narrative of home and displacement” (Robertson, 1994), and “Somewhere In-Between: Narratives of Place, Identity, and Translocal Work” (Daskalaki, 2015) have helped me have a better comprehension and broader perspective about the shared experience of contemporary migrants.

Auto-ethnography is an approach of autobiographical writing and qualitative research, which evaluates and investigates an individual’s unique life experiences in relation to social and cultural institutions. By having an auto-biographical approach to my artistic research, I question different aspects of my life. As Carolyn Ellis explains in the Handbook of Auto-ethnography (Jones, 2013), the technique is not just a way of understanding the world for me; it is a way of living “consciously, emotionally, and reflexively”, and scrutinizing my thoughts, actions, and feelings. By relying on auto-ethnography, in each of my exhibitions in the two years of my MFA program, I attempted to use my personal experiences as a foundation to explore the stories of a person who is living in parallel lives physically and virtually. For me, it is crucial to characterize the common experiences of immigrants, whose stories I have heard, or whose lives I have observed. I then bring their narratives into mine, and construct an atmosphere for my viewer to live in, even if for a short moment.
In the first chapter of this paper, I explore the sensation of being disoriented and dislocated as a result of moving to a new land. Through my installation, I raise questions about the sense of navigation in simultaneous places and moments. I describe how the Korean artist Do Ho Suh’s fabric installations helped me better comprehend the use and sense of space. I study the role of technologies such as Skype and Google Maps for a newcomer who is in the process of bringing some aspects of her/his new life under control; the senses of control, navigation, and personal expression seem essential in experiencing the feeling of being at home.

In the second chapter, I characterize the relationship between personal identity and place. I investigate how place instills distinct layers to immigrants’ identities and how these identities are constantly in construction and reconstruction. I visually address the notion of living in between identity constructions by my Neither Here, Nor There Exhibition. My intention is to visualize the notion that as immigrants go through life’s passages, they are confronted with transformations of identity which non-immigrants rarely experience (Kelley, 2013). As a result, my interest is to show the ambivalence and uncertainty about the “intertwined understanding of identity” (Deaux, 2006). This intertwined identity manifests in overlaying depictions of my veiled and unveiled self-portraits and in two contradictionary colours—black and red—so as to express the varying layers of my identity.

In the third chapter, I investigate ways of visualizing the simultaneity of language as a newcomer. My The Traveller exhibition combines the predominant languages of Calgary and Tehran—English and Farsi—in my works. Here, language is the place of return; the comforting fabric of a memory with the insisting call from a faraway home (Buonfino, 2007). A specific language brings with it a unique way of expressing concepts and interpreting situations.
Language can certainly be a metaphor to address the notion of belonging, to distinguish ‘we’ from ‘them’. On the other hand, it can also evoke a sense of community, the warm sensation of being among people who understand what you say, and more importantly what you mean (Ignatieff, 1994). In this sense, language can generate a sense of feeling at home (Antonsich, 2010). In my *The Traveller* installation, the sense of being at home is present in the use of pillows, as an object which symbloses home and belonging. These pillows are covered with English and Farsi text on their two sides, and this swing between the two languages brings forward the concept of simultaneity.

In the last chapter, I pull together the significant aspects of my previous exhibitions and expand my narrative. I particularly emphasize upon the dialogues between the distinct layers of my identity and the deep impacts they can have on each other. Two self-portraits with vastly different clothing are used as the basis for six pairs of life-size prints, each portrait representing a different polarity of identity. The interactions between the selves are depicted through stitches, threads, weaved surfaces, careful overlays, symbols and many other elements, with each pair of portraits telling a unique story of tussle and identity construction. This installation is meant to be a culminating examination of simultaneity in my two-year MFA program, and offers a visual portrayal of the complexity of identity after living for two years ensconced in a new language, place and culture.
Simultaneity in Places and Moments: Living Here, But There

As a newcomer, I feel as if I am being pulled between two different places, while I am connected to both. In fact, I feel as though I am truly attached to neither. Research on immigrant identity and place indicates that identities are capable of changing through the act of migration (Antonsich, 2010). There are different ways in which an immigrant is connected to different places. The sense of place is built upon everyday experience and subjective feelings. A mixture of these experiences and feelings can be so intense that it becomes a central element in the construction of an individual’s identity (Massey, 1995). In my work, I am eager to visualize how immigrants live in the host country physically, while their hearts “breathe in the home country virtually”. As a result, immigrants are unsure of where they belong (Gilmartin & Migge, 2015).

My first solo installation in the University of Calgary, *D is o r ienta ti o n/ﺳﺮ در ﮔﻤﯽ*, was my first step in exploring the notion of simultaneity in the sense of places and moments.

*D is o r ienta ti o n/ﺳﺮ در ﮔﻤﯽ* consisted of 15 abstract drawings of my daily impressions as a newcomer living in-between two cultures. The drawings were placed on the gallery floor, connected with white chalk lines, which showed a street map of my daily commute to school. In the corner of the gallery, a laptop played a muted Skype video of me and my best friend in Iran chatting, accompanied by the sounds of my footsteps walking from my studio in U of C to my house. (Figure 1)

One of my goals for this installation was to create a place within a space for my viewers, by combining different layers of materials and conceptual ideas. Do Ho Suh² is a Korean artist

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² Born in South Korea, Suh studied oriental painting at the Seoul National University before completing further study at the Rhode Island School of Design and Yale University in the United States. His
who explores the idea of home and the sense of cultural displacement which comes with immigrating to a new place. His works are heavily involved with creating places within spaces. He invites his audience to walk in a place, which has been created from memory and has been placed in a gallery space. By doing so, he wants to express the notion of living in memories and the current time altogether. In his *Home within Home within Home within Home within Home* installations (Figure 2), he has used the element of folding and carrying one’s dwelling to narrate his story about portability and “transcultural displacement”. The installation conveys a process in which he creates simultaneous places and moments from his memory and his reality, his past and his present. As a result of taking inspiration from Do Ho Suh, the drawings for *D is o r ienta ti o n/ﺳﺮ در ﮔﻤﯽ* embrace the nature of portability. They are light, transportable and mounted on Styrofoam. I can position and fit them into many spaces, by manipulating the arrangement to create my place in a space.

The process of making the *D is o r ienta ti o n/ﺳﺮ در ﮔﻤﯽ* installation was parallel to my struggle in overcoming the feeling of being dislocated and displaced after moving to Calgary. *D is o r ienta ti o n/ﺳﺮ در ﮔﻤﯽ* started with observing and investigating the new environment and its people, and then compiling different photos of my everyday life in Calgary. At the same time, I was saving the photos of Tehran and my home there, which my sister and parents kept sending to me. As I walk in Calgary’s streets, talk to my friends, speak English, go grocery shopping alone, and cook for myself, I am still attached to my hometown Tehran with a hidden thread.

interest in the relationship between place, memory and identity can be traced to his itinerant lifestyle, as he lives and works across his studios in London and New York, and the family home in Seoul.

3 MMCA website http://www.mmca.go.kr/
Figure 1. Direction/Nist. By Marzieh Mosavarzadeh. 2015. Photo credit: Nurgul Rodriguez. Little Gallery

Figure 2. Home Within Home, Do Ho Suh, 1999
This thread remains connected by the blurry or vivid memories that I carry everywhere with me, and by the use of the Internet which makes those moments more than just memories; it makes them present. It is as if I am living in more than one moment and place at the same time. I am struggling to adapt myself to my present life. Concurrently, I am aware of much of what happens in my homeland. *D is o r ienta ti o n* was for me a key to keeping the balance between my present and past. When I began to draw on the paper, I had but a vague understanding of what I was doing. I did not know how I was going to present my project in the gallery. I knew what I wanted to say through my work, but I did not know how I was able to represent my complex and complicated emotional states and thoughts. The feeling of being disoriented and overwhelmed led me to express myself through abstract and semi-abstract drawings. Each day I drew something, I reflected my mood of the day, the weather, and my understanding of place, in lines, colours, flat surfaces, textures and patterns. Through these abstract maps, I did not attempt to reveal a specific state of mind, such as anger, sadness, or happiness. I wanted to mirror my impression of being disoriented and misplaced.

My drawings have two layers (Figures 3 and 4): a collage of mono-printed textures on paper, and a layer of lines, words⁴, staples, pins, flat surfaces; and cuts which I made to create a connection between the collages and the paper. In another sense, the mono-printed collages have a wild and unpredictable essence that has been created by the accidental mix of colours on the glass. Even the cuts of the collages are coincidental; I just “decided” the locations of these “accidents”. Then, with my hand drawn layer on the paper I tried to partially control the happenings and give a meaning to them.

⁴ Both in Farsi and English
Figure 3. Details of my drawings for Direction.
Figure 4. Details of my drawings for D is o r i e n t i o n/
I mounted these fifteen drawings on pieces of foam with two levels of thickness. I painted the foam with the same colour as the gallery floor, as I wanted to give the impression that the floor was risen beneath the drawings. After putting the drawings on the floor (Figure 5), with a white chalk I drew a schematic of my everyday path from my house to the art building based on Google Maps. I specifically used the shape of the famous red pin of Google Maps which signifies destinations. However, I drew two pins on purpose. Two pins for two destinations. Two pins as a symbol of being in two places.

The chalk lines are an invitation for the audience to come inside the gallery, go beyond being just the observer, and experience walking and navigating between the lines and playing with different shapes on the floor. As the audience were navigating between the lines of the map-like drawings on the floor, some of them became interested enough to sit or crouch in order to see the fine details of my abstract drawings. For me, this act has a deep meaning. Once we enter into a new place for the first time, we initially walk. By the act of walking, we gain general information about the place. Later, we look closer, delve into details, and learn more about the place. I used chalk because chalk drawings can change as the audience come and go and walk over them, like our daily commute path which can change every day. Although it is the same road, where we step is not exactly identical to the days before. Metaphorically, this is like my everyday life in Calgary; it is changing as time passes. The chalky maps pose a contrast with my drawings as well. They are factual representations of the path of my daily commute, whereas my drawings depict my impression of this map and all the emotional heft it had for me in the months leading to the installation.
Figure 5. D is o r ien t a ti o n/ By Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2015. Little Gallery. Photo credit: Nurgul Rodriguez
During the exhibition, there was also a video playing on a laptop (Figure 6), located on a plinth in the left corner of gallery. The video was a recorded Skype call, which was muted to show only the facial expressions of a conversation with my best friend in Tehran. Instead of our voices, an audio track with the sounds of one person walking or running, cars passing, and a key chain jingling, is played on top of the video. The sound is recorded from my daily commute, starting from when I grab my key chain and pack my stuff to go back to my place after spending my whole day at the studio. It takes 24 minutes until I arrive home, open the door, enter the dark living room, and stop the sound recorder. For me, the sound of me walking has two roles. One is to act as a self-portrait of me in the installation, giving a live atmosphere to the chalky lines and my drawings on the gallery floor. The other role is in the distraction it creates for the audience who watch the recorded Skype conversation. This distraction signified the contrast between my physical present and the ‘other’ present I am virtually living in.

*Figure 6. D is o r i e n t a t i o n/ Skype Conversation*
I was very satisfied when the audience kept asking me why I was making them hear something which was completely separate from what they were watching. This is so similar to the feeling I have about two things happening at the same time, like hearing the sounds of the streets in Tehran while making tea in my studio in Calgary.

In *D is o r i e n t a ti o n* (سر نورگمی), I realized that being on a certain ground is not essentially about being fixed, and being transportable is not necessarily about being disconnected (Daskalaki et al., 2015). In my artistic development, I use multiple overlapping layers to convey the oscillation of my life between my home and host countries, in order to cross the spatial and temporal barriers and boundaries.
Simultaneity in Layers of Identity: Torn Between

After nine months of living in Calgary, I went back to my hometown, Tehran, for a visit. From the moment I stepped on Tehran’s ground, I started feeling the flood of familiar culture, language, environments, sounds, and smells once again. I knew them all so well, and at the same time, I was feeling so far from them. I was feeling and observing all of these like I was inside a fishbowl. I was dislocated and disoriented once more and it felt so alien; I had a sense of displacement in my own hometown. I had the feeling of not being at home in my home. The feeling of displacement then became a question of memory. I realized that to be able to connect to the present, to feel at home, I had to connect to my past self (Seaman, 1996). I had to cling to memories of a home I had not lived in for months, and such memories were not strong enough; they were rusty and in parts broken. Likewise, in the book “Home and Away: Narrative of Migration and Estrangement” (Ahmed, 1999), the process of returning home is described as being about the failure of memory, of not being re-settled in a way which gives an adequate impression of being acquainted and familiar; a sensation which strongly resembles my feeling of being dislocated and displaced having returned to my hometown.

It took me a while until I could come out of the fishbowl, at which point all the familiarities embraced me so tight once again. All the places, people, and moments were almost exactly like nine months before. While nine months is not a long time, I felt I was looking at these familiarities in a different way. I was interpreting everyday endeavours from a new point of view. I could not fit in completely. I wondered if this place, my hometown, was playing a significant role in shaping and adding new layers to my identity once more.
In my *Neither Here, Nor There* solo show, I explored the notion of simultaneity in relation to hybrid identity, overlaid places and translocation. My aim was to visualize the process of changing and shifting in layers of one’s identity because of migration and displacement, particularly, when a person is in the midst of severe identity construction, being neither of the things and both at the same time (Daskalaki et al., 2015). I wanted to represent this notion of living in-between identities, a state which leads one to experience the feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty by inhabiting utterly different cultures at the same time. There are many versions of me occupying inside me in unique layers of a shattered identity. They are overlaid and transparent. Different layers are added to my identity constantly, and these layers inherit a significant part of their existence from the places I reside.

*Neither Here, Nor There* was the result of questioning these facets of my identity that are existing altogether. Before moving to Calgary, when I lived in Tehran, I had two completely different characters in and out of home because of religious and political considerations. I was very isolated outside, while I could be more of myself inside. Moving to Calgary brought a new dimension to this notion. I realized that the simultaneity I felt in Tehran had shifted into a larger concept—similar to the notion of “identity transformations in-between space–time” put forth by Daskalaki et al. (2015). Although the article focuses mainly on translocal workers, the auto-ethnographical narratives of displacement and identity construction greatly resemble my experiences. I found that by being in a place, I gain new dimensions of identity, but this does not mean I erase or abolish my past self. On the contrary, I have the opportunity to explore my possibilities and accumulate different facets of identity constantly.

In the exhibition, I revealed that I am becoming the spaces between selves. My analogy has roots in the concept of being divided between inside and out, public and private, and you and
me. During the last days of my stay in Tehran, I was checking my Facebook account frequently to update myself on what my friends and peers were doing in Calgary. I was eager to return, go to my studio, and start making art once again. That was when I recalled I had similar feelings in Calgary, checking my family and friends’ activities on Facebook to follow what they were doing in Tehran. I wanted to go back to Tehran, be with my family and friends, and walk in places with which I have so many memories. One more time, I realized I was continuously going back and forth between places and moments, and this gave me the feeling of being suspended between two utterly different worlds. The simultaneity I was feeling before going back home was mostly engaged with places, moments, and memories which I encountered every day. When I returned to Calgary after staying in Tehran for fifty days, I experienced a new version of it. More and more partial identities were being added to me as the result of going back and forth between Tehran and Calgary, each belonging to a separate slice of space-time in-between my travels. I realized I was full of rather contradictory identities, however, I also learned to accept these layers to be part of me.

*Neither Here, Nor There* consists of nine photo-plate lithography prints, and a 20-minute looped video with sound. The contents of the exhibition were accompanied by a part of an immigrant’s diaries that I included in my artist’s statement, taken from the article “*Somewhere In-Between: Narratives of Place, Identity, and Translocal Work*” (Daskalaki et al., 2015):

> In a week’s time, I will be leaving again, and I have already started considering the changes that my other life will bring about. For years, the effort to create a homogeneous, continuous and flowing transition between the two national and cultural contexts seems futile, as I continue to experience a break; I carry on living my fragmented and disparate realities.
Departures, which for some reason seem more than my returns: I can see you as I am leaving you behind getting smaller and smaller, when I return again you will be different. And the time we spend together appears like a dream, an interruption. It never happened: I never left and I never came back. I remember only my departures; the returns have a faded colour. I have learned to be away from you, to be a different me. Soon, I am leaving you again; soon, I will be at some place else, someone else. When I come back, the dream will continue; I never left, I never came back. In transit-ion, in-between, re-placing myself here and there, with you, without you, I feel like leaving the movie before “THE END” appears, always leaving so not to watch how the story ends. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, time changes changing me, changing everything. I am learning to leave you behind only to find you again. I am learning that continuity and stillness only exist because of movement. I open my eyes and look outside the window; in a week everything will be different, everything will smell differently, and because of this, I will become another me. I pull the door and drag my suitcase down the corridor with hesitation . . . How many times? I am leaving again . . . A new suitcase, another trip, another departure, vivid red (the colour of my suitcase and of my mood), this time is a large one, a lot of memories and stories have to fit in it, stories that will search for a new audience upon return—only then when sharing stories, the fragments can come together, the links can be found, my life to appear, for a moment in time, complete; not to you, to me. You only know some fragments, and the
fragments that are missing are the ones that I constantly re-arrange trying to re-construct a reality: not for me, a reality for you, so one day you can say that you have met me once . . . only for a while though; and then I left again . . .. (Diary Entry 3, September 30, 2010)

The first thing the viewers are exposed to when they enter the gallery is a sheet of white cloth which is hung from a thin white rope and divides the gallery space into two sections (Figure 7). The cloth floats between ground and ceiling in the semi-dark atmosphere of the gallery. By projecting a multi-layered video on the hung piece of fabric, I hoped to immediately immerse the viewer in the sensation of simultaneity in place and its relation to identity. The video gives a strong impression to the viewer of being ‘present’ in two places and moments at-
the same time. The viewer can see me from behind walking, while the camera is following me, in two different places (Tehran and Calgary), wearing two completely different attires appropriate for the two utterly different cultures. The notion of simultaneity in place and identity is explored by overlaying two transparent videos into one, keeping me centered in the frame as I walk (Figures 8 and 9). The video is an invitation for the viewer to walk this journey with me and observe and engage with the environments: to notice the similarities and differences in the two cities and cultures. With them being overlaid on each other, it is not always easy to distinguish the two cities in the video; sometimes, they look so similar that the viewer is meant to be lost between them, something that mirrors my own sense of dislocation. The video is in a constant loop, as my journey is by nature a never-ending one. As a result, the viewer is confronted by the feelings of unease and confusion, while the video repeats itself. The large piece of fabric functions as a curtain (veil) to block the audience’s view of the nine prints behind it. Therefore, the viewer is encouraged to walk past the curtain, and in a sense, “overcome the veil” to access the prints. The photo-plate lithography prints are attached to the wall by double sided tape, with no frame or other support.

The prints are two overlaid self-portraits of me in two different expressions, and in two different colours. One self-portrait represents a veiled woman, in black and white, and the other one depicts an unveiled woman with her playful braids in red. The overlaid images of these two styles reflect the different layers of my identity, as if two completely different personalities are living in one body. This puts forward the notion of discovering distinct facets of identity during immigration or other major changes that happen in one’s life. My attempt was to depict these layers concurrently so as to stress their contradictions and similarities, and to represent how these layers challenge one’s identity by their very existence. By making different imagery and
examining distinct compositions that I could create out of the repetition of only two plates, I attempted to study various “hybrid identities” which are shifting and shaping constantly inside of me because of the place I am living in and my travels. My endeavour is to show that one’s being can consist of complex dimensions of character, none of which are thoroughly erasable. I am the same person, adjusting myself to the environment—or perhaps the environment is giving me the chance to be two different people.
Figure 8. Neither Here, Nor There, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2015, 621 Gallery, Snapshots of the video
Figure 9. Neither Here, Nor There, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2015, 621 Gallery, Snapshots of the video
The photo-plate lithography images are printed on Stonehenge and rice paper. All the Chine-collé are unique and one-off prints and all the compositions are carefully crafted to depict the confictions between selves. In some of them, I have overlaid two self-portraits to emphasize the disparate sides of one’s identity. In others, I have put the components of two portraits next to each other or have had them overlap a little, in order to highlight the inter-meshing of identity. The self-portrait in red ink with braids is looking fearlessly into the viewers’ eyes, while grabbing her two braids from both sides of her head. In contrast, the self-portrait in black ink with a scarf covering her hair is looking down, avoiding eye contact with the viewer, while trying to fix her scarf with her hands, as if she is afraid to lose it.

There is also another visual component in the depiction of long red braids drawn on rice paper, which exists in three of the prints on the wall. In one image, the veiled face of the self-portrait has been cut out (Figure 10). However, the viewer can still see the stencil/shape of the veil and the two long braids that come out of it resembling two red veins. This image highlights the notion of presence of absence, and how the absence of something can insist on its existence.

In another composition, the shapes of the braids have been cut out from the paper which shows the black and white image of the veiled self-portrait (Figure 11). In its place, there is a long red braid which has been cut into three sections which overlap each other to create a long braid at the bottom of the composition. The outline of braids cut out of the scarf denotes the actual braids it covers. As such, the viewer is able to perceive the existence of braids even though they are meant to be concealed. It is significant for the viewer to experience the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, in order to engage with the sensation of concurrently of identity (Kruger, 2011).
While being engaged with the prints, the viewer can still see the video from the other side of the semi-transparent cloth. As such, the cloth presents the video twice, once when the viewer steps inside the gallery, and once more when the prints become the center of the viewer’s attention. The overlaid videos and the two-sided screen address the essence of hybrid identities in relation to space–time and the liminal performances, which make me part of culture and society (Hetherington, 2007). My fellow MFA student, Brandon Hearty, in his critical writing of my exhibition, explained the relation between my use of material and the contents of my show in an interesting and poetic way. He remarked that the time-based nature of video has a momentous relation to the contents of change and chronology. The procedure of lithography also relates to the subject matter: “the ink transfers from the printing matrix to the paper, for a moment connected to both surfaces in the same moment of simultaneity so apparent in the works themselves.”

5 Hearty, Brandon. 2015. "Critical Writing on "Neither Here, Nor There" Solo Exhibition by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh." Essay for the Art 661 Course, Department of Art, U of C.
Figure 10. Is she staring at me, or am I staring at her, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh. Photo-plate lithography on rice paper and Chine-collé on Stonehenge paper, 2015

Figure 11. Is she staring at me, or am I staring at her, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh. Photo-plate lithography on rice paper and Chine-collé on Stonehenge paper, 2015
The diary excerpt, noted on page 29, was used in my artist’s statement, as it expresses how departures are more vivid, bolder, and more unforgettable than arrivals, and articulates how each departure adds a new layer to the writer’s personality and how it changes the essence of “self”. In recent studies, “life story” researchers have underlined the significance of personal documents, such as letters, diaries, journals, and auto-biographies for embodying an experience (Cooper, 1987).
The diary excerpt perfectly reflects upon an intercultural existence. It characterizes how the choices one makes can compose and re-compose one’s identity. I found the piece complementary to the contents of my solo show, as it echoes the notion of cultural hybridity and identity transitions during continuous journeys from/to home/host countries.
In three of the nine prints, the viewer can see some text in Farsi\(^6\). In each piece, there is one fixed sentence that I have repeated over and over again. The sentences translate to: “I am a thousand people.”, “As I get closer to myself, I get further.”, and “Is she staring at me, or am I staring at her?” In *D is o r i e n t i o n*، I used English and Farsi words next to each other. The integration of these two languages conveyed the sense of simultaneity speaking, which immerses me at all times. However, for *Neither Here, Nor There*, my intention was to use only Farsi texts to highlight parts of my identity being alien and unknown to the non-Farsi speakers. That is, although I am sharing some layers of my identity with the viewers, there are still other layers which remain unidentified to them.

In *Neither Here, Nor There*, my goal was to show the shifts which take place in one’s identity as the result of immigration and living in a different culture, with the lens of simultaneity in identity and place. I provided an environment for my viewers to engage with a larger conversation about identities developing in the space between two or more societies (Glick Schiller, 1992). For instance, my veiled self-portrait has reference to the mandatory *Hijab* in Tehran, and my unveiled self-portrait addresses my choice of attire in Calgary.

There are a number of projects in the fields of social sciences and interdisciplinary arts which have been greatly involved with reflecting intercultural spaces and identity. One such project which has had a great influence on my artistic research is *Somewhere in Between: Chicago* by Bia Gayotto, which is a visual essay based on a video project the artist planned during a residency in Chicago in spring 2011. It is the product of her ongoing interest in representing the intercultural space typical of those who generally fluctuate between two or more

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\(^6\) Iran’s first language.
cultures (Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013). Chicago residents were invited to contribute in an interview and a video shoot, which happened at a location of their choice. Gayotto notes: “The relationship between self and place is not just one of give-and-take influence (…) but also, more fundamentally, each is essential to the being of the other. In fact, there is no place without self and no self without place.” Reading these interviews led me to a deeper comprehension of the relation between identity and place. What I propose here is that one’s identity is in a tight relationship with the place that one is living in. In this relationship, identity collects distinct layers from the place, which are shaped in different forms and directions. For instance, living in Calgary has offered me opportunities that I did not imagine before immigration. It has also developed my ideology in ways that are specific to the current dominant conversations in North American societies; concerns such as feminism, equality, and diversity.
Simultaneity in Languages: The Traveller

In my project *The Traveller*, I sought effective ways of further materializing the simultaneity that surrounds me, here particularly through the use of language as a newcomer. *The Traveller* involves combining the predominant languages of Calgary and Tehran—English and Farsi—in my works. This body of work contains two components: one is a sound piece containing intertwining voices in Farsi and English which envelops the gallery’s atmosphere; and the other is a collection of 20 pillows which are covered with hand-printed and hand-dyed pillow cases, scattered around the gallery floor, with dim lighting on them.

Here, language is the place of return, the warm fabric of a memory, along with the insisting call from a far-away home. As author George Robertson notes: “But, here also, there, and everywhere, language is the place of change, an ever shifting ground” (1994). Language brings with it the sense of belonging and memory; it is what surrounds us in our thoughts, and in our interactions with our loved ones.

For this piece, I recorded an audio and subsequently printed, *I am still travelling. Where will this Journey take me?* in English and Farsi on pairs of sheets of fabric. I borrowed the piece from the poem *The Traveller* by the renowned Persian poet Sohrab Sepehri. The fabric pairs were sewed together to make pillowcases. With both the visual and audio aspects of the poem, the audience can both listen to and observe the differences between the natures of these languages. The obvious visual and aural differences in how these two languages are written and spoken can signify a strong sense of distance. Farsi symbolizes the part of my identity which is alien to this place, and my accented English further reinforces the
notion of being an outsider. As a result, in this body of work, I aim to explore the notion of belonging and estrangement through the collision of the languages.

In my sound component, I focused on a simultaneous aural experience, where I intertwine and entangle two streams of my voice reading the same poem (The Traveller), in my two languages. There are many significant aspects to this poem. It discloses the feelings and thoughts of a traveller: being in-between places real and unreal; the notion of displacement of identities and places; an isolated traveller who is talking to a presence that is likely to be imaginary; the state of emptiness; feeling and defining profound distances and times long passed, and more importantly; the burden of travelling and carrying the sense of exile and estrangement.

Translating the poem to English was not an easy task. It is very challenging to convey deep meanings and emotions from one language to another. I could not find an official translation of this poem to English. However, I found an unofficial translation online and then modified some parts of it to better transfer the poetic meanings. During translating the poem, I learnt how “the translator transforms while being transformed” (George Robertson, 1994). I utilized this difficulty in translation as a noteworthy factor in talking about the language barriers, and how exhausting it can be to transform and translate ideas constantly from one language to another. My concern was to express the pull and push of a migrant who is living between two languages, by overlaying the two versions of the poem.

Newly arrived migrants have to learn a new language and culture. Even if they are versed in the language of their new country, there are differences in dialects, parlance, and accent. They have to adapt not only to the pain of separation, but often to the dislike of an unfriendly population, and try to fit in (George Robertson, 1994). As identity and language are entwined subjects, not understanding a language can be a metaphor for being alien to one’s identity.
In my audio component, which is approximately four minutes, there are two aspects which made the process of producing the piece complicated. I understand both Farsi and English, and when I hear both voices at once, my mind shifts between the words in the two languages, which is very overwhelming. For most of my audience, who understand the English parts only, it can be challenging to pick the English sentences and words out of the mixture of Farsi and English. I cannot remove the ability of understanding Farsi to become like most of my audience, and at the same time, my audience who are non-Farsi speakers cannot fully comprehend my feelings by listening to both languages.

As such, I use the contrast between pauses and loud chaotic sections to give context to my audience. By manipulating the volumes of my voices, I make it so that at one moment the audience could hear the Farsi sentences clearly with the English voice sounding more like a whisper, and the next moment the loudness of the voices would flip, and this would continue. By overlaying the two audio streams and manipulating my tone and volume I intensified the overwhelming feeling of simultaneity for audience.

Many artists have used different formats of language (written and spoken) in their artwork, in order to speak about language and identity. In a sound installation called Tongue by Kapwani Kiwanga, the artist repeats Swahili proverbs that her Swahiliphone brother pronounces for her, without understanding them. The proverbs are deformed when passed from one person to another. This way, Tongue explores the mutation of culture through its transmission. As the person who is repeating the proverb does not understand it, Tongue addresses the notion of estrangement and being alien to one’s culture, language, and perhaps identity. I found this sound installation greatly related to the contents of The Traveller, as I tried to accentuate the concept of estrangement and otherness through the act of reading an identical poem in two languages.
I printed 40 lithography prints (20 with English text, 20 with Farsi text) on 40 separate sheets of fabric and made 20 pillowcases by sewing together pairs of English and Farsi sheets. Creating pillowcases with English and Farsi sides has the potential to be interpreted in a few different ways. The main reason for my choice of pillowcases was that pillows can be transportable and easily moved or carried (Figure 13). Sometimes, when people travel, they bring their pillows or pillowcases with themselves to feel more at home and increase the sense of familiarity and security. I brought two pillowcases with me from Tehran, and my roommates and my best friend have brought their pillows with them. Each pillow can provide the sense of belonging, of finding a place to sleep at and feel at ease.

Figure 13. The Traveller, by Mrazieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, 621 Gallery, Details of pillows
A pillow also has two sides, which relates to the complexities of belonging both here and there simultaneously. The shift and travel between the languages is similar to turning your pillow over during the night to feel more comfortable or to find the right side to sleep on. Two sides of the pillowcase encase one body, which is the pillow. Pillows can be considered as portals to dreams; places between the real and the unreal.

In *The Traveller*, I spread out the pillows on the gallery floor in a casual way, looking as if somebody has used them (Figure 14). By doing so, I invite my audience to navigate between the pillows, and to lie down if desired. This has a similar sensation of navigation through space to the *سَرِّ دِرْعَامَيْنَ* installation. By navigating around my pieces, I want to awaken the impression of being in a journey for my audience. Some pillows have their Farsi side showing and the others their English side. The reason I used printmaking to create 20 pillow cases is that I wanted to give the impression of telling the story of one pillow which has gone through different journeys and has been in several places. I hand-dyed the pillowcases in order to give them a worn-out look, as if they have been used for a long time in the journey. One could imagine them belonging to different people, who can potentially share distinct, but similar experiences in the sense of estrangement and belonging.

The texts on the pillows are in a spiral shape. They repeat, become bold, fade, and finally disappear. The circular shape is the analogue for an infinite journey of finding a place to feel at home for an immigrant. The printed words on the pillow are an embodiment of everyday thoughts and feelings of an immigrant, imprinted into the pillow.

The placement of the pillows directly on the hard and cold gallery floor was purposeful. I intentionally did not use any blankets, and this raised some questions for my audience. Some wanted to see each pillow with a blanket. In this case, the gallery space would have had a
meditative atmosphere and a comfortable ambiance. However, this was not my intention. It was important not to convey a feeling of comfort, as migration, entering a new land, and adjusting are not comfortable processes. You might bring along your pillow to strengthen the sense of belonging, however, the ground is rigid and cold. The contradiction between the hardness of bare floor and the softness of pillows can draw attention to the sentiment of alienation and being detached and separated. In essence, *The Traveller* summarized the sometimes hazy, sleepwalking feeling of an immigrant, an in-between of familiar and unfamiliar, never quite settled.

*Figure 14. The Traveller, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, 621 Gallery*
Growing Apart

From the day I had my first solo show in the Department of Art, I knew I wanted my thesis exhibition to be a culmination of all my previous exhibitions during my MFA program. I explored effective ways of combining all my notable achievements in order to create a cohesive narration which expresses the experiences of a contemporary young immigrant. My biggest challenge was to immerse my audience in the notions of navigation and travelling, identity shifts and constructions, and mixed languages. As a result, my thesis show became a reflection the core of my artistic research. Going Back and Forth is the title of my thesis show at the upper level of the Nickle Galleries. The installation consists of 12 bodies (six pairs) of life-size photo plate-lithography, which have been suspended from the ceiling of the gallery at eye-level (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Going Back and Forth, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, Nickle Galleries
Each pair is made out of two self-portraits, both of which are in a seated position, with the faces looking at opposite directions⁷. In one of the portraits, I am wearing a floral scarf, a black long dress, a black long-sleeve shirt, black jeans, and black boots, and I am fixing my scarf. This portrait has been printed in black ink. In the other portrait, I am wearing a red top, a black skirt, and I am barefoot. I have red nailpolish on my toe nails and I am braiding my hair. This image has been printed with red ink. All six pairs are based on these two opposing portraits.

In the Going Back and Forth installation, the same two self-portraits are repeated in each pair. However, through collaging, mono-print, and stitching threads onto the works I aim to turn

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⁷ As the images have been printed on a semi-transparent surface, in some compositions I have used the back of the prints, so in those cases, the portraits are looking at the same direction in the final piece.
each pair into a distinct conversation between portraits. I have made each pair convey its own unique story, with the group of works converging into a single cohesive narrative. Alongside the handmade prints, *Going Back and Forth* has a sound component, which is the same sound piece from *The Traveller* installation; a repeating stream of my voice in Farsi and English intertwined and weaved together, while I read part of a famous Persian poem called *The Traveller* from Sohrab Sepehri. As the poem engages in depictions of distance, emptiness, and sorrow, this sound component is an effective signifier for presenting the confusion and disorientation of identity that result from experiencing simultaneous lives and languages, and helps to complete the concept of multiple identities in the handmade prints.

My interest with this installation is to convey the existence of simultaneous states of identities in an individual as a result of migration. Specifically, I target the dialogues between these identities and their various interactions. I attempt to demonstrate how these different facets ultimately stem from the same roots but diverge significantly; how they hang on to each other while apparently growing apart, and how they deeply influence each other. In this state of being, the borders of past and present selves are constantly changing, shifting, constructing, replacing, and reconstructing as the immigrant physically or virtually goes back and forth between the moments, memories, and places in her host and home countries. As Romain Gary, the French novelist, questions in his book titled the *Exploration of Trans-national Identity*, “How many identities make one?” *Going Back and Forth* proposes that one’s identities are not abandoned or replaced by new identities, rather, they are woven together to become something new.

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8 Renowned Persian poet of the 20th century
The environment can impact how people perceive themselves; how they interact with others, and act in the world. In my case, the environment of my home country developed my identity in a certain way: I thought in a certain way, and acted in a certain way. However, moving to Calgary has broadened my point of view and made shifts in my process of self-making as an Iranian female artist. Meanwhile, my simultaneous identities are constructing and reconstructing themselves. A profound confliction and confusion starts brewing in the dimensions of my identity each time I virtually or physically go back and forth between my home and host countries. The main reason for this pull and push might be the passion to “fit in”. One might ask why I am still struggling to fit in my home country while I am away and have chosen to live somewhere else? I believe the answer lies within the strong memories I carry from my past. Every time I go back to my hometown, Tehran, the memories start to resume, and the layers of past self slowly start to retake my state of mind and consume my sense of self. In this period, the borders between past and present start to fade away and vanish, with the two eras getting fused together.

In the process of making Going Back and Forth, I became familiar with Shirin Divanbeigi’s artistic practice. Divanbeigi is an Iranian female artist who lives in Toronto, Canada. She has several bodies of work which closely relate to the concept of simultaneous identities in my own work. In Multiple Self-portraits, she uses two sides of her identity in one black and white photo. In one self-portrait, she is wearing a scarf, and a long dress with long sleeves which cover her arms. In another self-portrait, she is wearing a white top and you can see her short dark hair. In a panoramic composition, the viewer can see 8 self-portraits in total (4 pairs). In each pair, the veiled version of Divanbeigi is preventing the unveiled self-portrait from performing one specific action. For instance, in one pair, the veiled one is covering the eyes of
the unveiled self-portrait, or in another, she is covering her ears to prevent her from hearing. In my view, the Multiple Self-portraits of Shirin Divanbeigi are addressing the intense pull and push between two sides of her identity. In my Going Back and Forth series, the confliction and confusion are there but its essence is conceptually different from that in Divanbeigi’s artwork. She implies that one identity limits and blocks the other by keeping it within pre-constructed bounds, whereas I address the process of shifting between identities and their interplay. That said, the tension between sides and facets of identity in her and my works grow from the same root, which is being displaced through the act of immigration.

On top of each set of my prints, I have stitched with varying coloured threads elements such as airplanes, lines, and contours of the body. All of these play crucial roles in depicting the relations, dialogues, and affects between identities. The invisible thread that held me to another place is made overt here, as a connector. The use of thread and stitches have different conceptual meanings in each pair. I have used threads in three different colours: red, black, and white. Throughout all the portraits, the colours red and black signify the multiple layers of identity in the pairs of prints, and this is true for both the stitches and the prints themselves. White threads, on the other hand, are used to define clothing, movements, and actions. Initially, the use of thread and stitching started with addressing the notion of the “journey” (Figure 17). I used white thread to define the borders of pieces of clothing in the self-portraits for my viewer, and at the same time, by adding the stencil of airplanes I elevated the meaning of the stitches beyond defining the clothes, having them address the path of the journey. For instance, in one of the pairs, in which the portraits are connected together at the feet and separated at the head (Figure 18), I have attached several airplane stencils on the leg area of the two portraits, then added linear stitches to convey a sense of travelling and passage between the two states.
Figure 19. Going Back and Forth, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, Nickle Galleries
In another pair, I have completely glued the two self-portraits together, having them become one body to the viewer’s eyes (Figure 20 - left). As the works are double sided, the viewer needs to walk around the suspended body in order to see both sides. I have hand-stitched with white thread to emphasize the wrinkles of clothing and the edges of my hands. The stitches also have two sides, with the back side of them being visible only from the other side of the self-portrait. In a sense, the deep affect of the stitched wrinkles on the veiled self-portrait is reflected on the body of the unveiled one. By doing so, I attempt to address the influence of the existence of one identity on the other, suggesting that these layers of identities are not living individually and independently, and have deep impacts on one another.

*Figure 20. Going Back and Forth, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, Nickle Galleries*
The threads in the *Going Back and Forth* series also visualize the impression of confliction between identities. In one of the pairs, I have used a sewing machine to create numerous vertical lines from top to bottom, with haphazard horizontal rows cutting through them at various places, creating a dense and chaotic grid (Figure 20 - right). Some of the lines are intensified by repeatedly moving the needle of the sewing machine back and forth on them, adding to the chaotic sensation (Figure 21).
The leftover threads which form the vertical lines are left hanging at the top and bottom of the work, creating the illusion of the body being pulled up and down. While I was sewing these lines to attach the two bodies together, I felt the tension and force within the stitches. Moreover, the repetition of linear stitches has activated the negative space, as if the bodies are tied to their environment. This repetition of stitches also reminds of the notion of veiling.

Iranian/American artist, Golnar Adili’s works are largely inspired by images of her deceased father and his hand-written letters. In the work *Perhaps All of the Sky is Unable to Lift a Page of This Sadness* (Figure 22), Adili has stitched the Farsi words from one of her father’s letters onto the image of a Spantax airliner, representing the “cross-continental” division between her and her father. In her *Gestures* series (Figure 23), she has hand-stitched ghostly images of her father’s arms, pressed into bedding which is reminiscent of both his physical absence from her childhood, as well as his deathbed in his struggle against cancer. The use of thread and stitches in Adili’s works is very evocative; as the stitches go onto the surface, make a hole, leave an influence on the back of the surface, and come out, they conceptualize a deep combat.

*Figure 22. Perhaps All of the Sky is Unable to Lift a Page of This Sadness, by Golnar Adili, 2015*
Figure 23. Gestures by Golnar Adili
In *Going Back and Forth*, I visualize and translate the experience and memory of the confliction in construction and questioning of my simultaneous identities by the use of stitches, more so than with my *Neither Here, Nor There* print series. In that installation, my challenge was to visualize the shifts in the simultaneous facets of my identity. This time, however, I strive to focus on the affects, influences, erosions, and pull and pushes between these facets. The actions of gluing and stitching merge together the two dissimilar sides of my identity in order to construct one body.

My use of threads also embodies the psychic pain and wounds caused by the conflictions.

*Figure 24. Going Back and Forth, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, Nickle Galleries*
between selves. For instance, in one of the pairs, I have created some holes in the center of each self-portrait (Figure 24). These portraits are placed side by side such that they look toward each other. I have stitched around the holes with white thread, and red and black threads come out of the holes which are reminiscent of blood gushing out of wounds. Some of these threads are left hanging, while some are tied together in-between the two portraits. These suggest parts of the identities that are still connected to each other, while the hanging threads depict the deep divide between them.

Alongside the appendages of airplanes, threads, and stitches, I have also revisited the text from my previous work, Neither Here, Nor There. There are three pieces in both Farsi and English: “Is she staring at me, or am I staring at her?”; “I am a thousand people”; and “going back and forth”. Both language versions of the pieces were carefully constructed to be fairly vague, so as to increase the level of uncertainty and have the audience think about the possible meanings. With the “Is she staring at me, or am I staring at her?” sentence, I try to separate the layers of my identity by referring to the present self as “I”, and my other simultaneous self as “she”. As these stare at each other, the viewer is reminded of how they are constantly influenced by witnessing one another’s actions. The phrase “I am a thousand people.” addresses the notion of multiple notions of self living in one body at once. In addition, it suggests that I am experiencing circumstances which perhaps a thousand other people are experiencing. By using the “going back and forth” phrase I wanted to emphasize the notion of physically going back and forth between my home and host country, and how I am virtually going back and forth between layers of my identity.

In Golnar Adili’s The Jasmine Scented Ones collection (Figure 25), which is a series of screen prints on tissue paper, she visually pairs verbs borrowed from a Hafez poem whose title
loosely translates to ‘The jasmine scented ones’. These works play on the tension between verbs, with each stanza of the poem focusing on the interplay between two similar looking verbs from the same root, which could at times contradict each other in meaning. She utilizes the visual form of the words and achieves the final design by layering the printed tissue papers on top of each other, so that the viewer can see the two verbs intertwining and becoming one.

Figure 25. From The Jasmine Scented Ones series, by Golnar Adili
In the *Going Back and Forth* series, I have placed the Farsi and English pieces of text next to each other, as if one piece becomes the other. At first glance, the viewer cannot distinguish between Farsi and English; it looks like as if the whole text is in one united language. In one of the pairs, I have cut each portrait in two-inch wide stripes, one horizontally and one vertically (Figure 26).

*Figure 26. Going Back and Forth, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, Nickle Galleries*
Then, I weaved these stripes together, and as a result, the English and Farsi texts have become entangled and in some cases reversed. This positions the viewer as momentarily experiencing the difficulty and chaos of living as an immigrant, thinking and speaking in two different tongues, where sometimes words get lost. On some surfaces, I have handwritten these phrases with black markers of various sizes. Elsewhere, I have used glass mono-print transfer, which impresses pigment into the material. The pieces of text have been repeated over and over again to create movements and textures, much like the threads.

In one of the pairs, I have used ghosts of my prints, which have been made by putting an extra layer of interface on top of the actual interface on which I wanted to print my image (Figure 27). The ink penetrates from the first layer of the interface onto the second layer and creates a faded image which I refer to as a ‘ghost’. Afterwards, by using watercolour I added some extra definition to these self-portraits. Then, I rubbed white coloured pencil over the images so as to make them more faded. With these ghosts, my intention was to demonstrate a feeble identity going through simultaneous construction; a ghost of other identities which is identical to none of them. To this end, on the faded red body, I have stitched traces of fragments from the black self-portrait and on the faded black body, traces of the red one. These stitches visualize the process of transformation and conversion of identities.

*Going Back and Forth* is the culmination of my artistic explorations in my two-year MFA program. My attempt was to unify the significant aspects of my previous exhibitions in my final thesis show. For instance, I have borrowed the concept of abstract mark-making from the *Disorientation* installation, in which I have used staples, and several direct and indirect mono-print collages to convey the notion of displacement, disorientation, instability, and navigation. In my installations, I am interested in creating space for my viewer to walk between
the pieces and experience them by becoming part of the whole. In *Going Back and Forth*, similar to *D is o r i e n t a t i o n* and *The Traveller* installations, I have placed the pieces in such a way that requires the audience to inter-animate around and between them, in order to observe all the angles and details of the works.

*Figure 27. Going Back and Forth, by Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, 2016, Nickle Galleries*
The use of self-portraits has also been repeated in many of my works, since they are about my own experiences, as an auto-ethnographic research project. In *Going Back and Forth*, I have used similar imageries (self-portraits) to my *Neither Here, Nor There* exhibition. By using these self-portraits, I dive into the relationships and dialogues between my multiple identities and states of mind as a result of migration. Despite this similarity between installations, the self-portraits in *Neither Here, Nor There* look directly into the viewers’ eyes, whereas the ones in *Going Back and Forth* look sideways and in opposite directions. This way, I wanted to show the notion of being incomplete, as though the viewer can never see the whole and full image of the self-portraits. In the viewer’s perspective, parts of the images are missing or are unrecognizable, emphasizing the unknowable nature of the constantly shifting and morphing identities. I have also borrowed the experience of simultaneous languages from *The Traveller* installation, which further reinforces the sense of multiplicity and bewilderment of identities. With the complexity resulting from interweaving of two languages, I want to raise the level of ambiguity and uncertainty, suggesting that there is no definite way of perceiving my or any immigrant’s multiple selves.
Conclusion - Still Travelling

While I stare at the white screen of Microsoft Word, I ponder the fact that in 10 days it will be two years since I moved to Calgary. In these two years, my experience of living here as an Iranian woman artist formed the roots of my artistic research. All my explorations were fed from an auto-ethnographical point of view. I set out to raise questions in relation to my own experiences as an immigrant and suggest possible answers for them through my artistic practice. As a result, each one of my solo exhibitions during these two years was an exploration of my personal concerns as a newcomer.

My *D orientation* installation was an investigation of the state of being dislocated and bewildered as the immigrants go through the process of settling in and getting their bearings in the host country. I wanted to narrate confused and overwhelmed feelings of contemporary immigrants and their scramble to find their place in the new land, and reflect upon their attachments to their past life through the use of social media and the Internet. Many visitors were curious to know what locations both the factual and emotional maps on the ground were showing. Walking between the lines of the unknown map made them perceive the sensation of being misplaced. Some of the viewers told me that watching the Skype conversation and hearing the sound of footsteps gave them the impression being estranged in an unidentified location, an experience similar to my own relocation.

In the *Neither Here, Nor There* exhibition, I further explored the notion of simultaneity in identity and how the multiple states of identities are influenced by the places and environments we live in. Some visitors asked me if identities which one might embody in different social contexts, such as being a teacher, a mother, a child, or a professional are similar to the
simultaneous layers I am concerned with. While one could find analogies between the two concepts, the environmental and social differences that establish such sense of bewilderment and multiplicity of identity in the immigrant can be much more profound than everyday social positions which might impose certain behaviours in daily lives of non-immigrants. Of course, one has to consider the unique context around each immigrant’s circumstances as well. In my case, the parallel societies I live in are so deeply contrasting that the consequences of immigration overshadow all my other social norms. For instance, in one society, I obey a certain dress code, act in a pre-defined and rigid structure for social behaviour, and even produce art according to a certain framework. Whereas, in another society I am left to discover my own structures. It is worth noting that unlike many other immigrant artists, my research is never concerned with whether one situation is superior to the other; rather, it is engaged with the process of identity transformation which occurs in-between.

I started *The Traveller* project with the idea of conceptualizing the perception of simultaneity in languages. I was concerned with expressing the sensation of living in-between Farsi and English in my everyday life. Later, as I was looking for an effective way of symbolism for the texts I was printing on sheets of fabric, I became interested in characterizing the notion of memory and attachment. I learnt that as I try to strengthen my sense of belonging, I make connections with objects, places, or people. As a result, I made pillows —which are extremely personal objects— out of my printed fabrics, so as to address the concept of belonging. Turning the pillow over while one sleeps is similar to going back and forth between languages in daily communications. The scattered identical pillows on the gallery floor are metaphors for a traveller, an immigrant who has gone to different locations.
In *Going Back and Forth*, I brought together the strongest ideas, techniques, and concepts from all my previous shows to express the growing complexities of ‘self’ I explore. In this final show, I told the story of how the dimensions and polarities of my identity deeply and continually influence each other, how they leave long lasting impressions on one another, how they differ profoundly, and how despite all the conflicts, they belong to the same roots. I learnt I work intuitively in respond to my surroundings. My methodology is deeply motivated by accumulation of thoughts and materials. It means as I dig into my subject gradually, I add more facets and accumulate more materials in my work, until I get to the point that I become satisfied with my work conceptually and technically.

In my future artistic research, I would like to further explore the relationships between the notion of home-making in a host country and second language identity. For immigrants, language is often a barrier in social interactions and can cause alienation and isolation. In my two years in Calgary, I have seen how some immigrants embrace their circumstances and try to converse in English as much as they can manage, while others distance themselves from social interactions for fear of language-related embarrassment. As such, I plan to visualize the relation between how one accepts and indulges in a second language and how well one fits in and finds a home in the host country.

In these two years in the MFA program, I discovered and experimented with my own way of meaning-making. I realized that even my art-making process is made out of distinct layers. When people observe my work in the middle of the process, they usually do not understand much of what I am trying to convey. That is because I often do not start with an established idea, but as I go, I struggle, I wrestle, and I live in my art. And only then, I discover
more and more details and concepts which help elevate my work to its final state. Through the process, my themes always arise, and are made apparent.

Two years of scrutiny into unique sides and polarities of my identity have helped me come to terms with the circumstances I find myself in. By putting myself under the microscope and magnifying each minute detail of my thoughts, feelings, worries, and hopes, I am starting to feel a sense of tranquility which only comes with confidence and knowledge. What I see in my fellow immigrants is often a state of confusion and uncertainty. My research brought me to where I am today, and I hope that I can play a role, even if it is a minimal one, in helping my immigrant audience to reach clarity and serenity, and my non-immigrant viewers to experience and understand our bustle.
References


