

# **ART, COMMUNITY AND BELONGING**

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## Abstract

### Art, Community and Belonging

Communication with others and developing a sense of belonging are challenges that immigrants, including children, must face in a new society. These challenges become a major obstacle when paired with lack of knowledge of the language. This could negatively impact self-esteem and well-being.

As an educator, artist, and immigrant, I have realized that collaborative artwork is an effective and important tool for immigrant children to bridge their lack of knowledge of the language and to communicate with others while learning the new language.

In this study, I have used autoethnography as the research methodology in order to explore my personal experiences as an immigrant in order to better understand the challenges of immigrant children and to help them to overcome those challenges. Through this process, I demonstrate how effective collaborative artwork can be for immigrant children to develop a sense of being welcomed and belonging to their new society.

Key terms: being marginalized, the sense of belonging, immigrant, children, collaborative artwork, the importance of support

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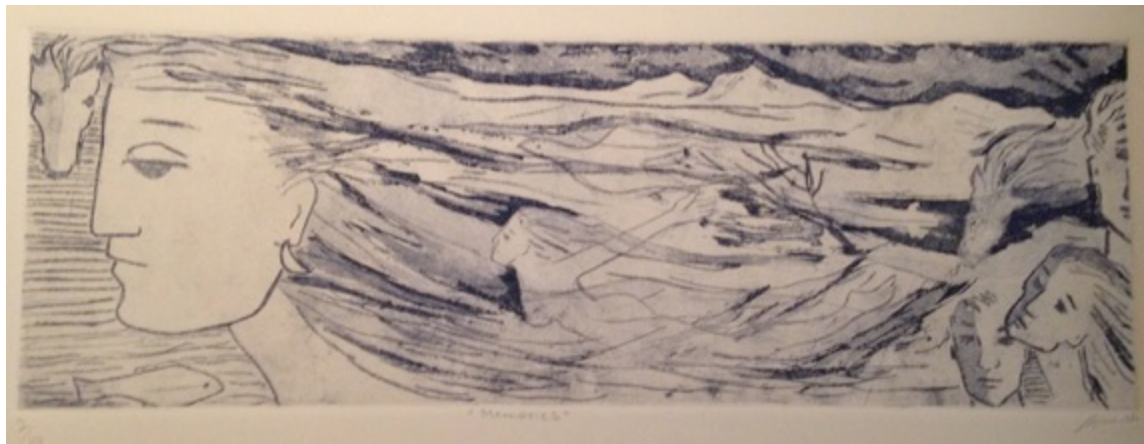
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## Introduction

Remembering is never a quiet act of introduction. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

Homi Bhabha<sup>1</sup>



Niloufar Shahriar Afshar, Memories, Etching 2001

As an educator, artist and immigrant, I realized that I felt most integrated within a new society when I was part of a community. Being active in a community can greatly help people acquire the feeling of belonging and motivate them to be more active members in their new society.

According to Dr. Karyn Hall “a sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter. Feeling that you belong is most important in seeing value in life and in coping with intensely painful emotions.”<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I explore how an examination of my own experience helped me to understand how collaborative artwork helps immigrant children to feel welcome

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New York Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Karyn Hall, "Pieces of Mind Managing Big Emotions, Step by Step," *Psychology Today*, March 24, 2014, doi:<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/pieces-mind/201403/create-sense-belonging>.

and reduces the pressures of being marginalized. I chose autoethnography as my method of research because revisiting my personal experiences as an immigrant has helped me better understand other immigrants (including children) and their circumstances and the obstacles they face. By using my experiences as an artist and art teacher, I hope to show how art and its positive effects can facilitate the integration of children into new environments.

Chapter A, “Art and Belonging,” first focuses on my life as a child and youth in Iran and how I felt marginalized in my own country as a Kurdish and Azeri person. I then explore how going to art school created a sense of belonging in me, bound me to other artists, gave me support, and created a better environment during a very difficult time in my life. In order to facilitate my recall, I asked two of my friends to interview me about my childhood, my sense of belonging, my past and experiences as an immigrant. I have included insights from my interviews in this chapter.

Chapter B, “Art and Expression,” explains how art helped me to express myself and cope in difficult situations. I have used some photographs and some of my artwork as visual documents, not only to unfurl my memories, but also to analyze each image through different lenses. This chapter also focuses on the importance of communication for sharing thoughts, feelings and knowledge. Art can be a tool to help a person express his/her identity.

In chapter C, “Art and Communication,” I explain how my experiences as an immigrant artist allowed me to understand how collaborative artmaking helped children to have a sense of belonging, gain self-confidence and trust their peers.

## My story

Like many educators in an ethnically diverse society such as Canada, I am faced with the challenge of communicating with students who are newcomers and have limited or no knowledge of English. Due to their difficulties with communication and their challenges with language, they become marginalized within the classroom environment, which places them at a higher risk of feeling isolated and too shy to make friends, thereby contributing to lower self-confidence and a lower chance of becoming integrated in the community. My experience as a teacher in Canada is affected by my personal experience of being an immigrant, and also by witnessing my daughter's experience in school when she moved to Canada from Iran. I understand many of the difficulties that immigrant children and their parents face from this personal experience.

While living in Iran, being half Kurdish and half Azeri, I had to deal with prejudice and pressure as a member of a minority. The main language in Iran is Farsi, which is the language that is used in schools, but in the city where I was born Azeri is the language that is primarily spoken. Therefore, when I began my schooling, I did not understand Farsi very well. This was not only frustrating for me because communication with my teachers was very limited and I had difficulty learning new subjects. I also saw myself as an outsider. I experienced the same problem when I left Iran and moved to France, then when I moved to Greece and finally to Canada. In all of my experiences as an immigrant, I was able to eventually learn the language, but I was unable to feel integrated within the culture and society. This realization led me to the conclusion that learning the language is only one fraction of what is required to feel integrated and have a sense of



belonging. Immigrant children in English Canada eventually learn English, and perhaps also French at school, but is this enough for them to gain a sense of belonging?

By exploring my own experiences, the occasions when I felt most integrated were times when I was a part of a community, an art group. Being active in a community can greatly help people acquire the feeling of belonging and motivate them to be more active members in their new society. Azar Nafisi's book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*<sup>3</sup>, tells the story of how Nafisi created an English Literature study group with her students where they discussed literature and shared their opinions. As a result, they befriended one another and the gathering became a safe space for them to share their personal problems. Through their discussions of the readings, they were able to connect with each other. Reading this book, I was reminded of the importance of the artistic group in an underground painting class that I was a part of in Iran. Participating in a small community helped me attain a sense of belonging and, therefore, gave me the ability to better deal with day-to-day obstacles. Even in the most difficult environment with all of its political pressures, which exists everywhere in Iran, art bound me to other artists and gave me support. We all understood the complexities of our society and could communicate these complexities with something that transcended words and logic: visual art. It was important that, not only did we produce visual art individually, but that we experienced the pressures and difficulties as a group. To use an example from the laws of physics, when the surface area is greater, it is able to withstand a higher degree of weight because the weight gets evenly dispersed. It was the same for us on an emotional level. Together as a group, we could handle difficult situations with more ease.

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<sup>3</sup> Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2008).

Since coming to Canada I have taught art to immigrant children in a variety of circumstances such as private lessons, group camps, and through my teaching at a Montessori school. When I was a Montessori teacher, I had an immigrant student who did not speak English. She did not have the confidence to play with other children, because she could not connect with her peers through language. That experience reminded me of my childhood and also when I came to Canada as an adult. I gave her and one of her classmates an activity to create an image. They quietly made a beautiful design. She smiled. Observing this outcome made me think about the positive role that art has had in my life and, therefore, made me wonder what role art making might have in shaping immigrant children's confidence and sense of belonging. According to Panayiotis Agelides and Michaelidou Antonia, collaborative art making reduces marginalization since integration becomes more simple due to the collaborative nature of art.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Antonia Michaelidou and Agelides Panayiotis, "Collaborative Artmaking for Reducing Marginalization," *Studies in Art Education* 51, no. 1 (October 01, 2009), accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/40650399?ref=search-gateway:be19292b9811f9c247320549c66bff4a>.

## Methodology

“Think with the story, not just about a story. Thinking with the story means to allow yourself to resonate with the story, reflect on it, become a part of it.”<sup>5</sup>

Carolyn Ellis states that:

autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth, autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.<sup>6</sup>

As an art teacher for 25 years in Iran and Canada and a Montessori teacher for 4 years in Canada, I have had many experiences that inform my research project. I have chosen autoethnography as my method of research because my personal experiences as an immigrant help me to position myself in relation to other immigrants (including children) to better understand their circumstances and the obstacles they face. By exploring my experiences as an artist and art teacher, I hope to show how art and its positive effects can facilitate the integration of children into new environments. I will use myself “as a starting or vantage point”<sup>7</sup> and I will also draw on examples from other researchers and my observations of the children I have taught throughout the years.

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Ellis, "Heartful Autoethnography," *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 5 (1999): 676, doi:10.1177/104973299129122153.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, 673.

<sup>7</sup> Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Lives History*, 16, MS, York University, accessed September 9, 2015, [https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487595/mod\\_resource/content/1/What%20is%20Life%20History%20Research%20pp.%209-24.pdf](https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487595/mod_resource/content/1/What%20is%20Life%20History%20Research%20pp.%209-24.pdf).

According to Carolyn Ellis:

autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories impacted by history and social structure, which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts, and language.<sup>8</sup>

My data includes my journals, sketchbooks, photos, artwork and the children's artwork that I have collected over the past few years. As part of my research I reviewed my sketchbooks and artworks, which are my visual documents. I also looked at photos and discovered that observing and analyzing pictures was a useful way to remember and gather information. By observing an image we often interrogate ourselves and remember untold stories. Another resource are my memories. Annette Kuhn states, "memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories,"<sup>9</sup> in which case, these particular memories, alongside my personal journals, artwork, and photos, will all help to shed light on the challenges of belonging for immigrant children.

In my final project in Naomi Norquay's course, "Life History research Methods and Applications", I wrote:

A memory is like a fragment of our past; it is like a vague map. When we actively think about the past, we remember more details that are added into our memory map, which better shapes the way we see the present and even the future.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Ellis, "Heartful Autoethnography," *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 5 (1999): 673, doi:10.1177/104973299129122153

<sup>9</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Family Secrets: An Introduction," 8, MS, York University, accessed November 16, 2015, [https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487609/mod\\_resource/content/1/Family%20Secrets%20an%20Introduction%20pp.%201-9.pdf](https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487609/mod_resource/content/1/Family%20Secrets%20an%20Introduction%20pp.%201-9.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Niloufar Shahriar Afshar, "How National Anthem Shaped My Perception of Nationhood," 2015, 3, TS, Toronto.

In order to access my memories I used interviewing as a method, which I was introduced to in Professor Norquay's course.<sup>11</sup> I asked my best friends, Aref Mohammadi and Shahram Tabe, to interview me. Being interviewed by someone else enabled me to remember more. They each interviewed me separately, giving me two opportunities to revisit my memories. I did not give them a list of questions to ask me, but I shared my topic with them so they could prepare their own set of suitable questions. I wanted to be unprepared and surprised in order to give the most genuine response. I chose these two people because they lived in Iran during the revolution, they immigrated to different countries and they are experienced interviewers who are both passionate about the arts. Mohammadi<sup>12</sup> is a documentary film director/writer and Tabe is a film critic and the director of Diaspora Film Festival<sup>13</sup>. Most importantly I felt safe to be "vulnerable" and honest, which is important in autoethnographic research.<sup>14</sup> Vulnerability opens a Pandora's Box, which may take us into deep dark places but eventually helps us to find the answers.<sup>15</sup> I audio-recorded the interviews.

Autoethnography invites readers into the inner-life of the researcher for the purpose of shedding light on societal issues<sup>16</sup>. In what follows, I recount my stories, reflect on them, and offer approaches to using art as a way to build community, in order to respond to immigrant children's

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<sup>11</sup> GS EDUC 5221 3.00 A, LIFE HISTORY: RESEARCH, METHODS, APPLICATIONS (Fall 2015-2016).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm5125576/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://diasporafilmfest.com/>

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Ellis, "Heartful Autoethnography," *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 5 (1999): 675, doi:10.1177/104973299129122153.

<sup>15</sup> Hourg Attarian, "Encounters in Vulnerability, Familiarity, and Friendship," ed. Stacey Zembrzycki, in *Oral History Off the Record*, ed. Anna Sheftel (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 77.

<sup>16</sup> Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Lives History*, 16, MS, York University, accessed September 9, 2015, [https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487595/mod\\_resource/content/1/What%20is%20Life%20History%20Research%20pp.%209-24.pdf](https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487595/mod_resource/content/1/What%20is%20Life%20History%20Research%20pp.%209-24.pdf).

struggles towards belonging. Throughout I introduce my own artwork and invite my readers to engage with the images as another form of story-telling.

## Chapter A: Art and Belonging

I only love my country when I am far and away. Elsewhere-that's where I belong: the vast diaspora. Nowhere and everywhere.

-I Lan Stavans<sup>17</sup>

### Being displaced as a child and youth in Iran

I was born in 1967 in Urmia, the capital of West Azerbaijan. West Azerbaijan is in the North-West of Iran, bordering the Azerbaijan republic, Iraq and Turkey. The province is known for its religious and ethnic diversity. Most of the population in West Azerbaijan are Azerbaijanis and Kurds who are Muslims (Shia and Sunni). Armenians and Assyrians also inhabit West Azerbaijan, and they are Christians, along with many Jewish people. Finally, there are also Zoroastrians and Baha'is. Due to its diversity, it is common practice for most people in Urmia to be bilingual or even trilingual. Iran's official language is Farsi, and therefore it is the language that children are taught in school. In Urmia, everyone publicly speaks Azeri Turkish. My family spoke Azeri Turkish at home, although my mother and father decided to speak Farsi with me, so that I would not have problems in school. Unfortunately, it did not help because I ended up learning Farsi with a Turkish accent and everyone, including my cousins, made fun of me. Due to a lack of practice with Azeri Turkish, I could not speak Azeri Turkish properly either. Therefore, I was either made fun of for speaking Farsi with an accent, or reprimanded by my family for not speaking Azeri Turkish well enough. These two reasons were enough for me to be a quiet person with low confidence. I started to pay attention to Farsi pronunciations; carefully,

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<sup>17</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New York Press, 1997), 61.

and eventually, I learned Farsi very well, without a Turkish accent. Even now, if somebody does not know my background, they do not know that my mother tongue is not Farsi.

Many children in Azerbaijan have a similar experience, and therefore, are at a slight disadvantage when beginning school. When I was in grade ten; I had a physics teacher, Mr. Hatamlou, who had the best class in the city. His students had the highest grades in Urmia, and one of the reasons contributing to this result was because he taught physics both in Azeri and Farsi. He understood that, although Iran's official language is Farsi, since people in Azerbaijan primarily speak Azeri, most of his students would grasp the subject much better in Azeri than Farsi. The other reason was his ability to create a little community so that students felt supported. Nobody, including non-Azeri language students, made fun of us and we felt more secure. We felt that we belonged in Mr. Hatamlou's class.

Other than Mr. Hatamlou's class, generally I despised my years attending high school because the stresses caused by Iran's political environment had also seeped into the classroom environment, and it was far from being a safe haven. Every class contained students who were spies who would report everything to the vice principal. They could jeopardize our academic future, or even in some cases, threaten our lives, or the lives of our family members. Coming from a well-known political family, I felt the need to mostly keep to myself. If I wanted to protect my family and myself, I had to keep the identity of my family, particularly my mother's side, hidden due to my mother's Kurdish background. This was a time when Kurdish people greatly suffered.



At a young age, I witnessed many people die. One of our family's sons was arrested in his high school and executed the same night. When the police told the news to his parents, they told his father that if they wanted their son's body, they would have to bring sweets for the policemen's celebration and money for the bullets it cost them to kill their son. That family was exiled to a different city. We were not allowed to cry or have any ceremony. We always had to pretend that nothing happened, including at school. My classmates and vice principal never knew anything about my mother's side of the family, because I had my father's last name. I was physically safe, but emotionally tortured. I had to pretend that I was a Shia Muslim, even though I did not know what I believed in. My mother is Sunni, my father was Shia and my great grandmother was a Christian. Our vice principal told us at the morning's ceremony that we had to be careful when it rained because if our (Shia) wet hands touches a Sunni or Christian hand, we would not be pure anymore and would have to go through a ritual purification. She insinuated that more than half of my blood was dirty, but of course I could never stand up for myself or argue, but had to silently listen to her insults. I did not have a sense of belonging in my own country. According to Latif Tas "‘living in diaspora’ can mean more than one place, including the land of origin."<sup>18</sup> When he was interviewing a Kurdish woman, asking her what “diaspora” meant to her, she answered:

“We [Kurds] have several diasporas. The place where I was born belonged to me, belongs to Kurds, but I didn't have any rights there as a Kurd. We were under a strict state regime and they could do whatever they liked to us. It was a terrible time. That was diaspora for me. My life was not safe. I was not happy. I didn't have any power over my own life. I had no freedom. I couldn't even speak my own language. Then when I moved from Dersim [a city in eastern Turkey] to Istanbul, I faced the same issues all over again.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Latif Tas, "Stateless Kurds and Their Multiple Diaspora," *International Migration Institute*, 125th ser. (2016): 12, accessed June 13, 2017,

<file:///Users/nilouafshar/Downloads/WP125%20Stateless%20Kurds%20and%20their%20multiple%20diaspora.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Tas, 12.

After high school I left Iran and lived in different places such as France and Greece, which meant that I had to learn French and Greek. While trying to learn these languages, I was always aware and self-conscious of my accent since having an accent automatically separates you from the locals and, at least initially, inhibits that sense of belonging. It reminded of my childhood and how I was too nervous to speak both Farsi and Azeri Turkish.

### **Art bound me to other artists**

In 1987, after 3 years of living abroad, I returned to Iran and lived in Tehran for five years. When I was in Tehran, I decided to go to an illegal underground painting class. An artist and university professor, Ahmad Vakili, was our instructor, and the classes took place in his mother-in-law's basement. Not all of the students in my art class wanted to be professional artists. I was a classmate with doctors, engineers, actresses and a "morality" policeman, who was beneficial because of his connection to the law. Since women and men are not allowed to interact unless they are married, his presence allowed our class to be co-ed without the risk of an arrest. Usually in a public environment, such as a university or public transit, men sit in the front and women in the back so that men are not tempted to look at the women. If a woman sits beside a man who is not her husband, brother or father, "morality" police have the power to take them to a detention center and force them to marry. A few times, my husband, at the time, and I were stopped by the "morality" police and asked to show our marriage certificate while we were in our car. It is worth noting that the environment has greatly changed in Iran since then, but the years between 1980-1988 marked the most stressful times in terms of the number of arrests and executions that took place, not to mention the start of the war with Iraq.

Even with the possible danger these classes posed to our individual lives, as time passed, art bound us to each other and we became a family, regardless of our differences in our professional

or personal lives. To ensure that we would not get into trouble with the "morality" police, when we wanted to enter the class, we had to ring the bell or knock on the door in a secretly coded way in order to be let in. We even organized painting trips, which meant that we left Tehran, and went to smaller cities around Iran to paint the beautiful landscape. We would all pitch in money to rent a house and buy food, cook, and clean for the duration of our trips. For example, once we went to a village in the northwest of Iran, called Ghassemlou. Ghassemlou is a Kurdish village in West Azerbaijan of Iran. In 1980, a war took place between Kurdish warriors and the Iranian government. Many people died and, finally, the Iranian government built a Command post in the Ghassemlou valley. My relatives, who lived in Ghassemlou, invited us to go there to explore and paint. This was something we all wanted to take advantage of, as the Ghassemlou valley is a very beautiful area, with its mountainous nature and lush environment, especially during the springtime. One day, the "morality" police brought a bus to arrest all of us and take us to the "morality" police station in Urmia. Our classmate, who was a "morality" policeman, talked to them and convinced them that we did not break any laws and that we would leave immediately. In the end, they left us alone, but despite the stress and pressure of Iran's political environment, within our art group we had created a sense of belonging with each other, which gave us the power to support one another.

In contrast, when I think about the times when I had to deal with the "morality" police on my own, I realize that I had a very different experience when I went to Urmia, West Azerbaijan, by myself. One time, I wanted to travel to a spot, which was close to town, to paint by myself. I asked one of my male friends to drop me off somewhere beside a mountain, so that I could climb it and paint for three hours, after which he would come to pick me up. I started to paint and, after one hour, two "morality" police came and asked me a few questions about why I was alone and

asked me to leave. They escorted me to the road and left me there. I waited for my friend for two hours in the middle of nowhere to come and pick me up. When my trip had come to an end and I was on my way back to Tehran, at the airport, I encountered the “morality” police because they would not let me take my painting equipment on the airplane. This was completely inconvenient and unfair, since I had been allowed to bring it from Tehran, but they wanted to give me a hard time. When I asked them to give me a reasonable argument as to why I could not take my painting equipment with me since I had been allowed to bring it in the first place, they told me that, in Tehran, women like me are trash and “zanhaaye kharaab”, which essentially means “prostitute”. In that moment, I made up my mind that I was going to fight with them, even if I lost my flight or went to jail. My mother was worried and asked me to calm down. She told me that we would buy new painting equipment in Tehran, but I knew that my anger and frustration was not about my painting equipment. It was about my dignity as a woman, and as a human being, who always had to fight for her rights. Finally, they gave my painting equipment to one of the flight attendants and told me that I would receive it at Tehran's security office within the airport. Eventually, I grew tired and my daughter, who was very young, was with us, so I decided to accept that compromise. While I was showing my boarding card to the airline worker, I was talking to my mother and told her that I would leave Iran and never come back. The airline worker heard my conversation and told me, "you might leave the country, but you will come back to Iran. Everyone who leaves Iran, comes back." My response was "Never!"

These examples show that a supportive group is important in difficult situations. When the “morality” police came to arrest all of us, we were together and knew that we had each other's support; we were stronger in our ability to face anything. However, during the situations

when I was by myself, the smallest obstacle felt like too much pressure, because I was more vulnerable and felt helpless.

## The Interviews

Thinking of one's life as a story, as something that can be narrated, involves social processes and conventions operative well beyond individual processes of reflection or experience. Narrating one's life, then is to situate oneself and to be situated in dialogue with society.<sup>20</sup>

It was important to obtain more information to understand my feelings about my childhood, my sense of belonging, my experiences as a student in Iran and in Canada and my past and present experiences as an immigrant. I asked my best friends, Aref and Shahram, to interview me. I did not give them any questions to ask me, but only gave them an idea of what my topic was. I wanted to be unprepared and surprised in order to give the most genuine response. I was hoping that their questions would lead me to new memories, new ways of looking at my past, new ways of telling my story. Being interviewed was an interesting experience because, although I trust my friends, some of the questions that they asked caused me to be quiet for a while because I was unsure of how to answer them and whether I would regret being completely honest. My experience as an immigrant from Iran includes the knowledge that the Iranian state has long arms and that even Iranians in the diaspora can feel at risk. This made me realize that if I had not known Aref and Shahram, perhaps I would not have told them the truth because I would have feared repercussions. Coming from a political family, and one that was not aligned with the government, honesty was not a practice that was encouraged in our public lives.

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<sup>20</sup> Julia Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova-Low, "'On' and 'Off' the Record in Shifting Time and Circumstances," in *Oral History Off the Record*, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds.) (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 43.

The interviews took place over two meetings in my home. The first one was with Aref who is one year older than me and has, in general, similar experiences as an Iranian and the second one was with Shahram who has similar family experiences including political connections. I hoped each one would bring out different aspects of my experiences. Being interviewed at home allowed me to be more comfortable. Both times, the proceedings were recorded, so that I would be able to accurately transcribe, translate and analyze everything that was said. The interviews were conducted in Farsi because that is the language I speak with both Aref and Shahram. I translated our interviews in English in their entirety, using the translated excerpts in my thesis. Both interviews (translated) are in the Appendix, with the exception of information that I thought was confidential. The way the interviews were organized was that I sent my thesis proposal to them and asked them to come up with questions based on that.

During both interviews, I began to understand the importance of being emotionally and physically secure and how it affects one's sense of belonging. For instance, Aref asked me, "After so many years [of] living in Canada do you have a feeling of belonging? And how much did you try to belong to Canada?" His question was strange to me because, up to that point, it had never occurred to me that "trying" could create "belonging;" that "belonging" was a feeling that had to be worked at. I responded:

No, I didn't have the feeling of belonging. It is better now, maybe because I [have] lived here for so many years. I always felt that I am an outsider...maybe one of the reasons was that I did not know the language properly. It's hard to not express myself. It's hard to be in a group and not understand the inside jokes, or the conversation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Aref Mohammadi, 2016/ 11/ 30

As I was responding, it occurred to me that even when I was in Iran, in my city of Urmia, I always felt like an outsider and that I did not belong in any group. In that scenario, I did not have the excuse of not knowing the language. Aref's questions lead me to another memory. I remembered that when I was a little girl, I couldn't play with other kids in the street. My father always told me that girls shouldn't play in the street. Only "bad girls" play in the street. I was playing by myself, and using my imagination in our little garden, while I was hearing children laughing and playing on the other side of the wall. I never had long hair like other girls, because my dad told us that we have to take a shower every day and having long hair is hard to clean.

After recognizing that my feeling of being an outsider was not dependent on the country that I lived in, I asked myself "did I ever try to not be an outsider?" As a child, some decisions were not mine, such as the inability to play outside, but other decisions I had control over, such as improving my accent when I spoke Farsi, and I was successful at that. Unfortunately, the consequence was that I did not talk Azeri as frequently, and was therefore considered an outsider in my own city. As I became older, there were other factors that contributed to my feelings as an outsider. As I mentioned before, I remembered the incident when the Vice Principal of my school lectured us to not touch the hands of Sunni or Christian people in order to not dirty ourselves, not knowing that I was half Sunni, and had a grandmother who practiced Christianity. These examples show that having a sense of belonging is not related to the country that we are born in. When we feel safe to be who we are and express ourselves, we will feel as if we belong, regardless of which country it is.

As I was looking over my responses, I realized that within the interview, I had not relayed any of this information to Aref or Shahram. I did not want to talk badly about Iran or my experiences

with my family in Iran. My decision to keep these details to myself echoed Bailey's argument about the guilt associated with facing your ancestors and communicating their shortcomings to others who may judge or not understand the way you do<sup>22</sup>. According to Erin Jessee, “Silences affect the stories...we cannot present them as complete, finished accounts”<sup>23</sup>, which is accurate because although I chose to be honest about the information I gave Aref and Shahram about my family, I could not face my own insecurities about my hardships and the way I felt about my past.

There is an apparent effort that has to be made to feel like one belongs, and this sense of belonging is not necessarily correlated to the country one is living in. Having said that, different cultures do bring with them different expectations and reactions to situations. In the interviews, I went into detail about my disappointment in not being able to create a small group of artists when I attended the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), the way that I had in Iran. While at OCAD, I suggested organizing a gathering where we could draw, but no one was interested. Perhaps, I wondered if the collective experience of creating as artists has not been culturally integrated in Toronto. There seems to be more emphasis on the individual than in Iran where the culture is more about the collective experience.

On the other hand, I was shown support by my teachers and fellow students when the decision had been made to discharge me from the school due to my failed TOEFEL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test. Without people's support, I could not have stayed at OCAD; their

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<sup>22</sup> Lucy E. Bailey, "Necessary Betrayals: Reflections on Biographical Work on a Racist Ancestor," *Vitae Scholasticae* 26, no. 1 (2009), accessed 2017, [https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1472612/mod\\_resource/content/1/Necessary%20Betrayals.pdf](https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1472612/mod_resource/content/1/Necessary%20Betrayals.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Erin Jesse, "Considering Silence", in *Oral History Off the Record*, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds.) (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 219.



collective aid truly made a big difference in my life. It goes without saying that I am thankful for the energy and time that my professors and peers gave into keeping me registered at the school, but that one act alone did not automatically make me feel integrated for the whole duration of my schooling at OCAD. However, as I stated in the interview "when I came to Canada and got accepted [into the school] ...I knew a language that wasn't English, it was art. Because I was really good at it, and that helped me to find myself."<sup>24</sup>

I was an adult when I moved to Canada. Shahram reminded me in the interview that "there is a big difference between adults and children because adults can continue their professional lives in a new country," causing a smoother transition, whereas children have nothing that bridges the gap. However, children have the advantage of playing, and as a teacher, I have witnessed many situations where children who cannot speak the same language play with one another. Art activities, and specifically group projects are the best ways to make this happen. In interview, I explained my experiences in such cases where I dealt with "some kids [who were] shy or [had] learning disabilities" and they were unable to integrate easily, so they would cry or sit by themselves. To help, I would "always offer them [the option] to draw or I [would] draw something for them so they [could] colour it," which they really loved to do, and it calmed them down. Eventually, I slowly saw them become more independent, and although this might have happened without the addition of art activities, I recognized how much it helped to center the children when they felt insecure.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Shahram Tabe, 2017/ 01/ 08

Both Shahram and Aref were interested to know how much the group activities helped children to be better integrated into their new environments and to be better included with their peers. I explained that "as an art teacher and artist... I realized that when children do an art project, they help each other, they don't pick on others and most importantly when a child is not happy about their artwork, other children make him/her feel good" Further to this, I believe that they compliment each other's art work, perhaps because they understand the effort it takes to create something since they are doing it collectively.

In conclusion, being interviewed by Aref and Shahram helped me to understand that the sense of belonging does not come with just living in our own country. Anywhere that can provide a safe and respectful environment can give us a sense of belonging. In Iran, I found a sense of belonging in art class and, in Canada, at OCAD, York University and ArtCave<sup>25</sup>. In all these situations, I realize now, that it is something I had to work at. However, in all situations, when I did not fit in my environment, be it politically, or culturally, art helped me escape and find refuge, and eventually re-centre my sense of belonging.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://art-cave.ca/> **ArtCave** is an artist collective and studio, run by two professional artists, and certified educators, Nilou Afshar and Naz Rahbar, founded in 2013. I will describe ArtCave in detail in 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter.

## Chapter B: Art and Expression

### How art helped me to express myself and cope in difficult situations

The images that surround us, whether in advertisements, personal photographs or artwork, have a powerful effect on us because the images we see are defined by our own personal filters. According to Annette Kuhn, our filters cause us to give meaning to those images based on our experiences and our memories of those experiences, resulting in a connection between the images we see with our own individual stories<sup>26</sup>. Understanding the power that images have on us, on a daily basis, goes beyond understanding how they may affect us on an individual level. There is a broader implication that is made because as we take the lens from a micro level to a macro level, it is understood that images, and the unearthing of the memories that they cause, contribute greatly to our understanding of current and past societies.

Annette Kuhn also suggests, “memory work makes it possible to explore connections between “public” historical events, structures of feeling, family drama, relation of class, national identity and gender, and “personal memory.”<sup>27</sup> Kuhn uses her own childhood photographs as a means of remembering and retelling her past. She explains how family photographs and memories work together to shape the story of, not only our personal and public life, but also the secrets that are embedded behind what the photographs may show. Decoding the secret messages communicated in photographs, also brings to light information about societal norms, political ideals, the economy, and the broader pressures that people are collectively dealing with. Kuhn aims to show this by analyzing and decoding her family photo and she describes how the image redirects her

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<sup>26</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Family Secrets: An Introduction," MS, York University, accessed November 16, 2015, [https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487609/mod\\_resource/content/1/Family%20Secrets%20an%20Introduction%20pp.%201-9.pdf](https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487609/mod_resource/content/1/Family%20Secrets%20an%20Introduction%20pp.%201-9.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

from the present to the past, by exposing her relationship with her father and mother.



Figure B.1



Figure B.2



Figure B.3



Figure B.4

The four photos (Figure B. 1, 2, 3, 4) are from my various trips to North of Iran with my art classmates and art teachers. The first photograph shows a group of painters, placed in a domestic setting, not in a classroom, where many are sitting on a Persian rug on the floor. There is a blurred image of a child at the centre-right in the second photo (Figure B.2). We may ask ourselves: who is she? Why is she there with the other painters? In the third photograph, many of

the women are attired in long dresses over their t-shirts. Is this a cultural dress code? There are a lot of hidden messages in these photos<sup>28</sup>, especially for someone who has never lived in Iran, and is not familiar with the environment. However, with further analysis one could deduce that, in the first photo, we are gathered to paint; women and men are sitting together with a female model (seated on a couch, top-right corner, Figure B.1), which is against the law in Iran. Therefore, it may be deduced that there must be a level of trust amongst us. The little girl in the second picture is my daughter (bottom, centre-right). I took her to my painting field trip and she was treated like everybody's child, in terms of the collective effort everyone put into taking care of her if I needed help, which is evident as she sits on my art teacher's lap. She was loved. We were like a big family. In the third photo, we were outside and ready to leave the house; therefore all the women wore their long dresses and scarves on their shoulders to eventually cover their heads when they left the house. Having a double life in Iran is the norm. I wanted to include the fourth photograph to show how much of a communal experience it was. Many people brought their families and we all took care of each other.

I agree with Kuhn that "memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories."<sup>29</sup> Images and photos have a powerful effect on us, whether they are personal images or not because, either way, looking at parallels pictures the process of gathering information through interviews. In my journey here, by closely analyzing my photos, I ask myself questions and remember untold stories and, therefore, through this inner dialogue, give meaning to an "image" and transform it into "text". Therefore, similar to the stories I told

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<sup>28</sup> For reason of anonymity, all people in photos are blurred, except for me

<sup>29</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Family Secrets: An Introduction," MS, York University, accessed November 16, 2015, [https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487609/mod\\_resource/content/1/Family%20Secrets%20an%20Introduction%20pp.%201-9.pdf](https://moodle.yorku.ca/moodle/pluginfile.php/1487609/mod_resource/content/1/Family%20Secrets%20an%20Introduction%20pp.%201-9.pdf).

through being interviewed, an encounter with a visual image can be translated or transcribed into written language. If this process was to be analyzed chronologically, it would begin with the visual stimulus, transformed into spoken word (oral), and eventually be documented into written form, which is the more traditional and systematic way of revisiting and comprehending human history.

Kuhn suggests using different scenarios for each picture in order to unfold her memories, layer-by-layer and she does this by analyzing each image through a different lens because memories have so many layers. According to Kuhn, depending on which lens we choose to view a memory, a different layer will be highlighted. For example, when I am confident in my life and look at my daughter's childhood pictures, it reminds me of the sweet moments she had, which makes me smile. However, the same picture can be upsetting when I am not feeling confident or going through depressive moods, because it also reminds me of my broken marriage and the struggles I faced as a single mother, and the effects this surely had on my daughter as well.



Figure B.5



In this photo (Figure B.5) my daughter is not in the picture and it always reminds me of bittersweet memories. Even though I am reminded of the good times that I had with my friends, what is not shown in the picture is how I felt inside. It was late and my daughter was tired. I didn't know what to do. I tried to put her to sleep, but it didn't work, so one of my friends offered to put her to sleep. I was really thankful, but at the same time I was very sad because I remember that I wished my husband would be there. We were going through a difficult time. I was confused and felt lonely.

As previously mentioned, one process of comprehending the political, economic, and social environment begins with observing images, which can transform into oral communication, which can result in written documentation. Part of our identity, as humans, is communicated and, simultaneously, created through this communication, by speaking to share our thoughts, knowledge, memories and feelings, making language an important tool in human development. Without the knowledge of language, the need to find another tool/way to communicate becomes necessary. As globalization has taken place and immigration is an experience that is shared amongst many people, without a common spoken language, language can be a barrier for those who need to be integrated into new communities. Art can be a tool used to help express a person's self-identity, especially if he/she do not have the words to do so. My art helped me communicate a part of my self-identity to others, and by doing so, also helped me slowly build my confidence.

My artwork, like the photographs included above, helps me to remember a specific time of my life. It is even more personal than a photograph because, not only am I projecting the external forces that affect my life, I am also projecting my inner feelings and thoughts about the obstacles



that I face. Most of my artwork displays my desire to create and recreate my layers of identity. Therefore, I chose my artwork as a part of my collected data to help me better understand the past. I believe that by analyzing my artwork and the context that it was created in, it will help to relate to the emotional obstacles that other immigrant and marginalized children face.

When I moved to Canada, in many aspects, I had freedom in a way that I did not have in Iran, but I was faced with other difficulties. A similar artistic community to the one that I had engaged with in Iran, and the support I needed as an immigrant artist, who was also a single mother, did not exist for me. Or, I could not find it. The obstacle of not knowing the language is hardly a unique experience for most immigrants. In Zahrah Kizilbash and Cian Knights' research, language as a barrier was one of the core issues raised in their online survey. For example, Jimmy, a Chinese visual artist immigrant, did not face the challenge of racial or ethnic discrimination, however, due to language and cultural barriers, he felt isolated and was unable to integrate himself into a group.<sup>30</sup>

This speaks to my personal experience. When I came to Canada and was accepted into Ontario College of Art and Design, I did not speak English very well. Sometimes when the teacher asked a question and I was the only one who knew the answer, I did not have enough confidence to answer the question. I knew that I had limited vocabulary. Even if I could explain the answer correctly, because I had an accent, I was too embarrassed to try. It reminded me of my childhood and how I always suffered to speak Farsi or Azeri without somebody ridiculing my accent.

Having an accent is, and always has been, a part of my identity as an immigrant; it is a tangible

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<sup>30</sup> *Final Report: Issues, Challenges and Barriers Faced by Immigrant and Culturally Diverse Artists in Toronto and Scarborough*, report, 8, accessed September 13, 2016, <http://www.scarborougharts.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Creative-Mosaics-Final-Report.pdf>.

indicator that English is not my first language. As soon as I start to speak, people ask, “where do you come from?” Even now as a Canadian, if I say that I am Canadian, the question changes to “where do you come from originally?” This question can be alienating and serves as a reminder that I do not fully belong here. It definitely made me much more uncomfortable when I first moved to Canada, than it does now.

I don’t look like a typical Iranian woman and most of the time people think that I come from Greece, Italy, France or from Romania. They are friendly at first, but I have had many experiences where their attitude changes when they learn of my Iranian origins. They equate me with the actions of the Islamic government. In *The Globe and Mail*, there was an article written about an Iranian immigrant/refugee Dina Nayeri and her memories and experiences. She explains how she suffered as an immigrant when she and her family moved to England. During her schooling, all of her classmates were friendly at first, but as soon as they knew that she was from Iran, they started to abuse her. She says:

At first, the children were welcoming, teaching me English words, using toys and pictures, but within days the atmosphere around me had changed. Years later, I figured that this must have been how long it took them to tell their parents about the Iranian kid. After that, a group of boys met me in the yard each morning and, pretending to play, pummeled me in the stomach. They followed me in the playground and shouted gibberish, laughing at my dumbfounded looks. A few weeks later, two older boys pushed my hand into a doorjamb and slammed it shut on my little finger, severing it at the first segment. I was rushed to the hospital, carrying a piece of my finger in a paper napkin. The segment was successfully reattached.<sup>31</sup>

In her article, Dina explains that her mother was a doctor in Iran, and later when they moved to

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<sup>31</sup> Dian Nayeri, "The Ungrateful Refugee: 'We Have No Debt to Repay'," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2017, world, accessed June 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/dina-nayeri-ungrateful-refugee>.

the United States, “she worked in a pharmaceuticals factory, where her bosses and her co-workers daily questioned her intelligence, though they had a quarter of her education. The accent was enough. If she took too long to articulate a thought, they stopped listening and wrote her off as unintelligent.”<sup>32</sup> Again, this example shows the obstacles immigrants face when language is a barrier, and this must be more apparent in other professions. As an artist, I have been fortunate to constantly be surrounded by people who understand that the expression of art is not dependent on anything other than being human.

In the beginning of my move to Canada, the only place that I felt safe was at the Ontario Collage of Art and Design. I felt that I could communicate through my art, and that my teachers and fellow students supported me in that. After I registered at OCAD and attended for a month, my TOEFL result showed that I had not received a high enough score to be accepted into the school. At the registrar's office, they decided to discharge me as a student, but a few of my professors and classmates wrote a letter to the office and asked them to change their mind. One of my printmaking teachers saw my artwork and knew that I should be a part of his class; he recognized that my potential as an artist should not be hindered by my difficulties with the language. That gave me a sense of belonging. I worked hard and graduated with honours and also won an award for one of my prints.

The lithography print (Figure B.6) that I found when I was collecting the data for my thesis reminded me of the stories of my life during that time. After I graduated from OCAD, one of our teachers, Lisa Neighbour, gave me and my friend the opportunity to work at Sheridan College as guest artists. Printmaking was new at Sheridan College and the department needed someone to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

encourage the students to print and help them if they needed it. This was volunteer work, but in return, she gave us the opportunity to work on our own projects and use the equipment.

It was during my time at Sheridan College that I decided to work on a self-portrait. I needed to express myself. I was struggling because I wanted to find balance in my life between two part-time jobs, being a single mother and an artist. Alison L. Bain's research<sup>33</sup> explores the difficulties women face when wanting to pursue their art careers, as they have to balance domestic and financial responsibilities alongside their artistic endeavors. Having support makes a big difference in anybody's future. In Iran, not only did I have support from my art group, but I had it at home, as my mother could stay with my daughter when I needed her help.

Unfortunately, when I came to Canada, I did not have that same support. For example, when I went to OCAD my teacher offered me a position as a technician in the printmaking department for the night classes. I was flattered and really appreciated his offer, but I had no one to stay with my daughter. I lost a few opportunities that I was given when I was in Canada, because I did not have the support or money to hire a babysitter.

After I graduated from OCAD, during the time when I volunteered at Sheridan College, I was also working in Sheridan Nurseries, and also had another part-time job at Loblaws' flower department. It was hard as a single mother to work in two different places and simultaneously pay attention to my art, but going to Sheridan College gave me hope and, once again, that sense of belonging that I desperately needed.

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<sup>33</sup> Alison L. Bain, "Female Artistic Identity in Place: The Studio," *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, no. 2 (2004).

Here, I wish to discuss four pieces of my artwork, juxtaposed in pairs, both sets containing artwork done in Canada and Iran, at different points in my life. Juxtaposing the first pair (a lithograph in Figure B. 6 and an etching in Figure B.7) has led me to insights about myself and my struggle for finding my identity. To make a lithographic print, I drew a woman who is hanging in the sky, holding onto a shape, which resembles a crescent moon, but I drew a sickle to show how a dream can be two-sided (Figure B.6). She is hanging on a very sharp object to save herself from the hands that are pulling her down. The background is a starry night and when you look at it carefully, you will see lots of eyes that are staring at you and at the woman. Are they judging her or judging you? Are they witnesses of this scene, or are they witnessing you witnessing the scene?



Figure B.6, *untitled*. Nilou Afshar, Lithography, A/P 2001



Figure B.7, A copy of *They carried her off*. Nilou Afshar, Etching and aquatint

When I was looking at the woman's figure in my print, I realized that I have another print that resembles her, which I printed in Iran (1994). In Vakili's class we learned about prints and famous printmakers such as Goya. We had to choose one of his prints to copy in order to learn how aquatint<sup>34</sup> works. I chose to copy Goya's print entitled "They carried her off" (Figure B.7). In the following two images, both of the women's heads are similarly positioned, but the big difference is that in Figure B.7 the woman is carried by two men. We don't know if the woman is alive or dead. Also, if she is alive, it is unclear whether it is her choice where the men are taking her, or whether she wants to be carried at all. Her powerlessness echoed my own feelings during the time when I picked that specific print to copy. I was getting divorced from my husband and my family was angry at my decision. I felt that I was dying inside. I also had to say goodbye to my friends who always supported me when I left Iran to live in Canada. However, as I was observing these two prints, I noticed a difference in the mood that the prints expressed. Although both of them seem powerless, in Figure B.6 the woman does not give up; she tries to pull herself up; there is hope.

I agree with Lucy Lippard: "artists connect the dots from past to future"<sup>35</sup>. My artwork not only helped me to remember how I expressed myself, but also reminded me how being part of a group or small community can play an important role to cope with difficult time in my life.

In the second pair, I juxtapose a lithograph print (Figure B. 8) and a charcoal sketch (Figure B.9)

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/aquatint>

<sup>35</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local Senses of place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 100



Figure B.8, Self portrait, Lithography, at OCAD in Toronto



Figure B.9, Sketch, Vakili's art class, Tehran, Iran

In Figure B.9 I was sketching my friends at Vakili's class in Iran. This was one of hundreds of sketches I made with charcoal on my sketchbook. Sketching has always been a part of my art practice. I like charcoal as a medium because it is very smooth and it glides over the paper. When I draw with charcoal, it is right at my fingertips so I can feel the lines as I draw them. This image shows that even girls were covering their hair and body, but boys and girls were together. When I came to Canada, I lost my friends, family and all emotional support that I had had and needed. In that time, I was lost on so many levels. I was searching to find the essence of my identity. I thought if I want to find myself, I have to break the layers that were built over time by culture, society, and family. In Figure B. 8 I drew the lines on the stone with Lithograph crayon. I then drew my portrait on top of the lines and shifted each part of the image of my portrait a

little bit in order to further break-up the image. I was inspired by a friend's story. He said that when he went to a mosque, Shah Cheragh (Shiraz, Iran)<sup>36</sup>, he looked at the mosaic mirrors and saw his broken reflection. In Islam a mirror is a symbol of purity, and mosaics are symbols of all in one (the small pieces as part of the whole). For me, the broken mirror mosaics reminded me of all my layers, all the pieces of myself. By deliberately creating a broken image of myself on a lithograph stone, I could see my brokenness reflected through that process, and I began to find myself again.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.curbed.com/2015/1/23/9999680/shah-cheragh-mosque-iran>



## Chapter C: Art and Communication

The sense of belonging helps people cope better in difficult times. It helped me when I lived in Iran and now, living in Canada. It helped my students when I was a teacher at a Montessori school. When people are marginalized, for different reasons, such as economic, ethnic, racial, or geographic displacement, they have less confidence as new members of a community. This lack of confidence has negative results on a community as a whole. Art activities build confidence. In terms of integration, the activities given to people allow them to work together to create art as a group, which reinforces their sense of belonging, and welcomes them into the group.

### Ways in: bringing children to artistic expression

Panayiotis Angelides and Antonia Michaelidou's research shows how collaborative art in a pre-primary school in Cyprus reduces the social and academic marginalization, increases the participation of all students, makes the students feel closer to their peers and helps them start to trust each other.<sup>37</sup> I had a student in my Montessori class who did not speak English and she was always quiet. I sat close to her and started playing with the melting beads and quietly started to add beads to the plate to make a colorful design. She smiled and started to help me by handing me the beads. This was the first step to our non-verbal communication. It helped her connect to me as a person without feeling pressure to speak the language, and this connection enabled her to feel safe in the space of the classroom. Slowly she started to add beads to the plate. After some

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<sup>37</sup> Antonia Michaelidou and Agelides Panayiotis, "Collaborative Artmaking for Reducing Marginalization," *Studies in Art Education* 51, no. 1 (October 01, 2009), accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/40650399?ref=search-gateway:be19292b9811f9c247320549c66bffa>

time had passed, I asked another student to come and join her to complete the project. I slowly removed myself and let them communicate and create an image together. Figure C.1 contains images of this activity, which I did with other children.



Figure C.1

### Group projects and Graphic storytelling

A group project that I assigned my students was to create a drawing on a large piece of paper. This task allowed them to use their whole body and arms, therefore, giving them the opportunity to release pent-up energy and connect with their bodies, while committing to creating a large collaborative image together. (Figure C.2)

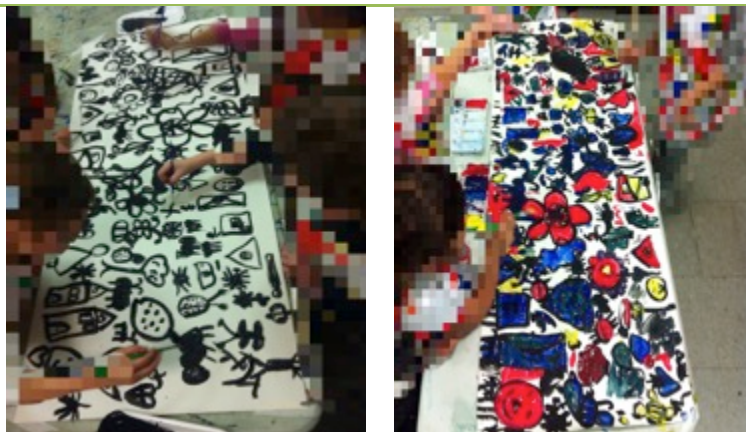


Figure C.2

Another activity included a large paper on the wall, which is divided into more than ten sections. I would usually start the first image in the first box and ask the students to continue the story. The next person would build on it the way that s/he saw fit, and so on, until the boxes were completed and the story came to an end. This collaboration work did not need language, but rather, visual information was enough for them to complete the project. This task helped them to make decisions by creating the next image, using their imagination. Every player had the chance to lead and change the story, but there was also an element of learning to accept other players' contributions, because they had to build on what was drawn before them.

In both activities, students realize the importance of their role in the story or art piece. This helps them to identify themselves as individuals who make a difference in a team while understanding the importance of other team members and respecting their opinion and turn; it helps them to listen to each other quietly. In the storytelling activity, nobody knows the end of the story and this makes them excited by another person's image. (Figure C.3) With time, this simple assignment enables them to understand the concept of risk taking and expressing themselves without fear, which in turn helps them gain the confidence to learn new subjects. Collaborative artwork helps children to socialize more openly with their peers and it "help[s] students see things differently. Students can come closer to each other, and can understand each other's emotions".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Antonia Michaelidou and Agelides Panayiotis, "Collaborative Artmaking for Reducing Marginalization," *Studies in Art Education* 51, no. 1 (October 01, 2009), accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/40650399?ref=search-gateway:be19292b9811f9c247320549c66bff4a>

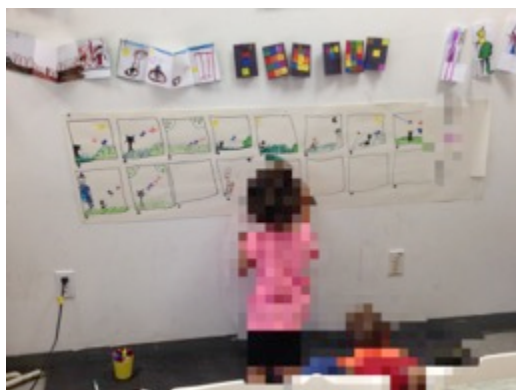


Figure C.3

Dr. Elizabeth Miller, Professor in Concordia University, Montreal and director and founder of the Mapping Memories project focused on youth immigrants and refugees who shared their personal stories with people by using media tools. This collaborative work gave a voice and power to youth immigrants and refugees, and by sharing their stories, they had an impact on others.<sup>39</sup> According to Dr. Miller:

Through this experience, I learned a great deal about the value of creating safe and supportive environments in collaborative oral history projects. Incorporating meals into our workshop, letting technology play a value but secondary role, offering a range of creative exercise to participants, and giving space for the youth to develop relationships with each other was essential to establishing the intimacy we developed as a group. Rehearsals were key in building confidence and group dialog helped us identify our goals. Perhaps most important to the process was structuring time for reflection, which offered members the clarity and courage they needed to take their stories public.<sup>40</sup>

### Bringing Children and Creativity Together at ArtCave<sup>41</sup>

“Drawings can communicate across ethnic and national boundaries, creating bonds between children.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Miller, "Going Places: Helping Youth with Refugee Experiences Take Their Stories Public," ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, in *Oral History Off the Record toward an Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Miller, 124-127.

<sup>41</sup> <http://art-cave.ca/>

<sup>42</sup> Bob Steele, *Draw Me a Story: An Illustrated Exploration of Drawing-as-language* (Winnipeg: Peguis, 2003), 30.

ArtCave<sup>43</sup> is an artist collective and studio, run by Naz Rahbar and myself, founded in 2013. We were asked by the organizers of Jik Jik Mastoon, an Iranian cultural festival, to create different activities for the children<sup>44</sup>. We decided to put a large piece of paper on the wall and draw blank human figures beside each other without any details. Naz and I created our own characters by adding details such as face features, hair, arms, colorful clothes, and accessories. These two colorful images encouraged children and even some of the parents to create their own characters (Figure C.4). Although JikJik Mastoon is an Iranian cultural festival, people of other ethnic backgrounds were also present, and this was an activity that everyone, regardless of language barriers or cultural differences, could participate in to make the whole image more complete.



Figure C.4

<sup>43</sup> <http://art-cave.ca/>

<sup>44</sup> “2<sup>ND</sup> Annual Spring Equinox Festival: Jikjik Mastoon,” *Community Social Onnovation*, last modified October 19, 2017, <https://community.socialinnovation.ca/node/93145>

ArtCave was also invited to an Iranian Canadian Congress event to create an activity for children.<sup>45</sup> In this event we gave premade human figures for children to use to create their own characters. A few children also wanted to add a message about friendship. (Figure C. 5)

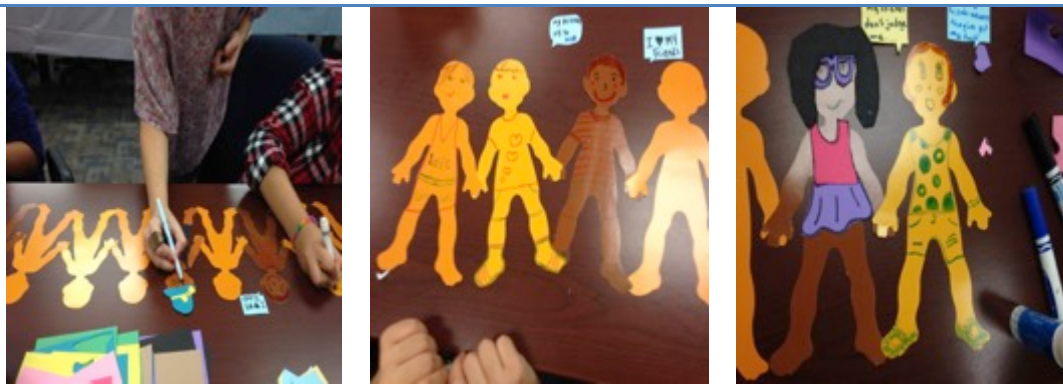


Figure C. 5

### Public activity

When children become more comfortable within a group, they can better interact with people outside of that group because they know they are supported. This idea resembles my experiences in Iran. We knew that we would be supported by each other, and our teacher, which enabled us to be brave and to face adversity head on. An art activity that ArtCave conducted to blend the group with the public was to take children outside to draw one another's shadows, including mine, and then adding the details later or even creating their own character. (Figure C.6) They gained confidence knowing that their art was publicly available for everyone to see, and it was also accepted by others and, sometimes, it even received compliments.

<sup>45</sup> Arsalan Kahnemuyipour, Iranian Canadian Congress AGM, May 15, 2016, last modified October 19, 2017, [http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/iraniancanadiancongress/mailings/51/attachments/original/ICCPresident'sReport2016-\\_ArsalanK.pdf?1463182050](http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/iraniancanadiancongress/mailings/51/attachments/original/ICCPresident'sReport2016-_ArsalanK.pdf?1463182050)





Figure C. 6

### Visual communication

People often communicate verbally, and it is what they are accustomed to; it is the easiest form of communication. But learning to read body language is a skill that not everyone practices.

Communication changes when people look at each other in silence. One of the tasks that I give to children to work on is to draw my portrait. At first, they feel uncomfortable staring at me, but then I ask them to look at my facial features carefully. This way they start to describe me and find characteristics that represent me in their eyes, be it my hair, a necklace that I'm wearing, my eyes and so on. Then, they are not shy anymore, but excited to try to draw me. After the discomfort has worn off, I ask them to sit in front of each other to draw each other's portraits. This enables them to look at each other carefully, and it is a non-verbal method of connecting with one another. The last step is to draw their own portrait, which allows them to connect with themselves. (Figure C.7)



Figure C. 7

Through my experience as a teacher and by reflecting over my own experiences in different stages of my life, I have come to realize that working as a group to create and do artistic work helps to create groups from individuals that encourages communication, cultivates trust, improves the confidence of the individuals, and gives them courage act, bond, and gain a feeling of belonging to the group. This is particularly effective when working with immigrant or marginalized children as the ability to use non-lingual means of communication ultimately also helps them to place their learning of a new language and culture on the fast track.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, the reflection of my own experiences helped me to understand how complex is each child's situation in a new environment as an immigrant. By sharing my experiences it is my hope that educators will gain insights and sensitivity in their work with immigrant children.

However, in my thesis I have only integrated my own experiences, therefore I hesitate to make generalizations.

As an immigrant woman, who has immigrated many times in her life, and has been displaced, even in her own country, I can confidently say that I have experienced the struggles that many immigrants have dealt with. Learning a new language and becoming more familiar with a new culture is not an easy task, and the separation that is caused by not knowing a language or understanding a culture is detrimental to functioning in society. However, through the process of being interviewed, I also learned that a sense of belonging is not dependent only on overcoming language barriers and cultural differences, since my feeling of alienation was present even when I lived in Iran. It is important to feel safe and supported, and in my observed experiences, art has been the one tool to continuously provide me with those important qualities of life. In this thesis, my focus has primarily been on the integration of immigrant children, because I have had many experiences with them as a Montessori and art teacher, and I believe that the smoother the process of integration is for children, the more included they will feel in their new environment, which in turn results in their ability to create fulsome Canadian identity for themselves. Also, I provide different examples of art activities to illustrate the ways in which such activities encourage children to feel safe, support one another, and encourage them to branch out and learn other subjects due to their improved confidence. Art and expression allow people to have hope

while engaging in a creative activity, and through this visual language, it allows people to communicate and connect across all barriers of languages and cultures. At the very last, this autoethnographic process especially after my interviews that I discussed earlier, helped me to understand better that the sense of belonging is not created by itself, but being in a safe environment can help to create a sense of belonging. Also, it is something one must work toward, it does not happen on its own. It was surprising when I reviewed my memories. Each one of them reminded me of a different memory and like a piece of puzzle helped me to have a clear image. These stories encouraged me to compare my artwork from Iran and Canada. I found the similarity and differences reminded me of how visual language can reveal our past in different time and help us to understand the present.

#### Coda:

Dear committee,

I am ending my thesis with this letter to you because after writing my conclusion, I realized that my journey to understanding the important connections between art, community and belonging, is not over. Since 1985 I have lived in many different places, which has caused me to often wonder where I belong. However, this question has never had a definite answer. Every place that I have lived has had a different impact on me and has added layers onto my identity. As an artist, it is important for me to add my artwork in this final assignment for the graduate program at York University because all of my artwork displays a desire to create and recreate my layers of identity, as I am always searching for answers. For example, I created a handmade 'tunnel' book in which I drew different female images on acetate (Figure 1). Some of the images were clearer and some of them were just colour or different lines. On top of each image I wrote different issues that I, as a female immigrant artist, am struggling with such as: culture, immigration or

gender. I wrote “R” on the top-right of each image to make it resemble an X-Ray, which is an image that physically shows us the deeper layers of our anatomy. The image changes every time that the layers change, or are added on top, which parallels the idea that there are many factors that shape the identity, and cause it to continuously evolve and change. We cannot analyze the whole of an identity if we do not pay attention to each layer separately, but also, we must recognize that each layer is a part that contributes to the creation of the whole picture.

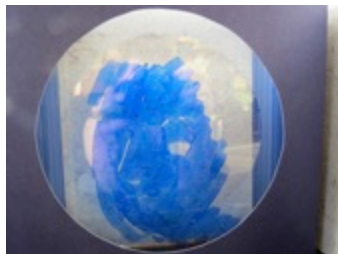


Figure 1

The unfolding of memories is endless. While writing my thesis I started to compare my artworks from Iran and Canada, and I realized that I have had different experiences in Canada from Iran. Most of my artwork in Canada shows my loneliness, whereas my art in Iran shows some of my repression, but in both cases, art has helped me to express myself. When I started my graduate studies, I wanted to share the layers of my identity and show how each one of them is important. Each person has a different story and sometimes it is hard to talk about it. Art projects

undertaken in a supportive environment can facilitate the creation of a safe place to express ourselves and give us a sense of belonging.

Here, I present some more of my artwork from Iran and Canada in order to share how my art is the language in which I am most comfortable expressing myself.

Most of my artwork in Canada is comprised of either my self-portraits, or images from my imagination. Each of them shows different layers of me and how I felt lonely but at the same time was hopeful. This is represented by the addition of some gold and silver ink into my print (Figure 2) or in the figure of me holding a bird (Figure 3 and 4). In contrast, most of my sketches in Iran were made in the company of my classmates. We were either in the classroom or at my place, because my daughter was 5 year-old and it was difficult for me to go elsewhere. In all my sketches done at home, my female classmates are not covering themselves and their hair (Figure 2, 3, 4 and 6), because when we were in the classroom, women were required to cover their hair and wear a long coat (Figure 5). This is another layer of my life, which shows the need to have a double life, in Iran, in order to protect my family and myself.

In Figure 3, I have added text into my artwork. In my self-portrait I translated a poem by the famous Iranian poet, Sohrab Sepehri <sup>46</sup> that described my feelings at that time when I moved to Canada:

Should you want to call on me  
come soft,  
come slow,  
come in fear of cracking

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<sup>46</sup> (Wikipedia), "Sohrab Sepehri," last modified October 19, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sohrab\\_Sepehri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sohrab_Sepehri).

## My fragile loneliness

In my sketch book I copied a poem by other famous Iranian poet, Nima Yooshij<sup>47</sup> and added:

I like sketching, I like my classmates and working with them. Sometimes I feel that I am alive and sometimes I feel I live my life and learned how to live my life like today. Life is beautiful when I sketch, paint and talk about them.



 A self-portrait etching of a woman with dark, curly hair, looking slightly to the left. She is wearing a patterned garment. The background has some yellowish-brown textured areas.	 A sketch showing a group of people in a dynamic, expressive pose. One person is standing with arms raised, another is sitting, and others are in various poses, suggesting a gathering or performance.
Self portrait, Etching, at Ontario Collage of Art in Toronto, Canada	Sketch from art group gathering at my place in Tehran, Iran

Figure 2

<sup>47</sup> (Wikipedia), “Nima Yooshij,” last modified October 19, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nima\\_Yooshij](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nima_Yooshij).



 <p>Should you want to call on me come close, come in fear of cracking my fragile loneliness</p>	
<p>Self portrait, Relief print, at OCAD in Toronto</p>	<p>Sketch from art group gathering at my place in Tehran, Iran</p>

Figure 3



	
<p>Untitled, Relief print, at OCAD in Toronto</p>	<p>Sketch, my daughter and my classmate from art group gathering at my place in Tehran, Iran</p>

Figure 4





	
<p>Self Portrait, Relief print, at OCAD in Toronto</p>	<p>Sketch, Vakili's art class, Tehran, Iran</p>

Figure 5

	
<p>Self Portrait, Toronto, Canada</p>	<p>Sketch, art group gathering, at my place in Tehran, Iran</p>

Figure

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## Appendix

### Aref's interview

2016/11/30

Aref: After living in Canada for so many years, do you have a sense of belonging? How much did you try to belong to your new country? What were your challenges in this path?

Nilou: No, I didn't have a sense of belonging to Canada. It is better now, maybe because I lived here for so many years. I always felt like I was an outsider not belonging to any group. Maybe one of the reasons was because I did not know the language properly. It's hard not to express yourself in a group and not understand the inside jokes or the conversations. When I came to Canada as a painter I had so many challenges.

When I was in Iran, even though our art group was a small we supported each other. We got together all the time and worked hard. We supported each other with limited opportunities! This group gave meaning to my life. When I was at OCAD, I really wanted to create a small group to work with and create art with but no one was interested! Because I was shy, I didn't pursue it. Just assumed if they wanted, to work together, they let me know. I slowly lost motivation and passion for creating art. I always say that I miss the passion that I used to have. I had to get a part time job because I didn't have a choice. I remember when I was in art school in Iran; we had to be careful because boys and girls were together. We had to always be careful when we went to the class.

There was no entrance sign for Mr. Vakili's art class. His class was in his mother-in-law's basement; we had to ring the bell to get inside. Everyone really wanted to go to this class despite all the dangers and challenges. We went on a trip together. We always had to be careful so the morality police would not arrest us. We did get in trouble one time when we went to Urmia. But we were all together and we supported each other. Our teacher always tried his best to support us. He planned an exhibition for us in our class. He also took part in a group exhibition with us. We took care of each other. I think the sense of belonging doesn't have to be for a country, it could happen in a small group.

Aref: Some parents, when they immigrant to a different country, put their children far from their own community. The children blend into their new country, learn the new language faster, and integrate into a new environment. On the other hand, some parents are worried that their children will forget their roots and past. In your opinion does this create a duality between parents and children?

Nilou: It probably does. Farrokh, my ex-husband, and I decided to speak Farsi with Banafshe, because both of us learned three languages when we grew up – Farsi, Azeri, and Kurdish. We knew that children have an ability to learn different languages because we did it. In Iran, children

who grow up in Azerbaijan don't speak Farsi. When they go to school, they learn Farsi and they are okay. I think duality is a complex topic. I think duality for children depends on their parents. I have had students whose parents asked me to speak Farsi with them but their child hated it. They didn't want to speak in Farsi even though they didn't know English fluently either. Maybe they didn't want to be like their parents; maybe they wanted to belong to the host country. I really didn't know what the reason was. Farrokh and I always told our daughter that it's nice to learn different languages. I think the conflict between parents and children can make a child's duality worse.

Aref: In your opinion, how can group activities help children integrate into a new environment with their peers?

Nilou: I think it would be helpful because when children are in a group working on a group project, language becomes less important and the activity itself becomes more visible and highlighted. I think children are not like adults. They don't see each other's flaws as much as adults do. I think children can have a sense of belonging much easier because they tend to feel better about themselves when they realize that they are useful and did something positive for the group.

This feeling of accomplishment is good enough to feel better about themselves. As an art teacher and artist, I realized that when children do an art project they help each other. They don't pick on each other. Most importantly, when a child is not happy about their artwork, the other children try to support them.

It's very interesting for me to see when a child doesn't do a good job in a group activity or project, the other children get upset at first but they soon forgive easily. This could help create a sense of belonging. Just learning a new language doesn't create the sense of belonging. It's more complicated than that. Children could learn the language very well but they may still feel that they are an out-sider.

Aref: Do you think the immigrant children who come to Canada don't integrate easily into a new environment compared to countries with much less multi-cultural immigrants? For example, some European countries don't have multi-cultural immigrants like Canada. Do you think this could be a problem for integration?

Nilou: I don't think so. I lived in France and Greece and I felt like more of an outsider in those countries than being in Canada. This is my experience. I always felt that I was not French. In here [Canada] even though I don't feel %100 Canadian, I still feel less an outsider. Being an immigrant in Canada feels like we (the immigrants) are all the same. Maybe most of us don't have a sense of belonging but we are all in the same boat. Do you know what I mean? Every immigrant is happy and thankful. Everybody came to Canada for a reason but I know people who, if they had an opportunity, they would go back to their birth country.

Aref: Based on immigration statistics, every year approximately 200,000 immigrants come to Canada. These past few years' statistics showed that many people returned to their home countries. This raises a question about why these people feel like they don't have a sense of belonging. I read an article a few months ago I read an article a few months ago about immigrants who chose to return their Canadian passport when their own country didn't accept dual citizenship. They would return back home for example to China, Korea or India. What are your thoughts on belonging? Why do some people who have lived in Canada for 15-20 years don't have a sense of belonging?

Nilou: That's a very interesting question. I really don't know the answer. Maybe in Canada, as they say, it's like a mosaic and everyone lives in parallel but they don't blend and become one but they don't really blend and become one. In the United States, they use the term "the melting pot". In Canada, we can separate the pieces. I really don't know the answer. Is this the reason? I don't know why the population doesn't grow in Canada, as it should be. It seems to me that people come to this country and after a while they return back home.

Aref: Canada paid a big price when Israel bombed Gaza. The Canadian government had to support the Canadian Lebanese citizens and return them safely to Canada. Following this event, the Canadian government had to come up with a plan in order to create a sense of belonging among its immigrants? The population in Canada hasn't grown that much in the past 20 years. This could be a very interesting topic to think about and research.

Nilou: Very interesting!

Aref: In Canada, we have plazas made up of Iranian stores and restaurants. Do you think it's a good idea that each ethnic group has their own place/ pocket? This separates them from each other and they don't blend.

Nilou: Don't you think that this is the beauty of being in Toronto? We are free and we can do anything that we want. We can even have our own plaza with Iranian shops and restaurants.

\*I didn't include this part of our interview, because he talked about his own problem that I didn't want to include in this thesis paper. Confidential.

Aref: As an educator and teacher, what kind of opportunity/support do you think you need to help children integrate into a new environment?

Nilou: I am not really sure. I think art can help children work together and create a group project. I wish children had access to a free art community so they could work together.

Aref: You think it's a good idea for the immigrant children to be together without having to speak which allows them to feel included.

Nilou: Yes. I think when immigrants come [to Canada] all the focuses are on the parents but the children really need a community too. The children need some activities that they can do together. They learn from each other and realize their similarities are more prevalent than their differences. Free programs for children that are not necessarily art; they could be sports.

Aref: My last question is about language as a tool to communicate. What do you think are some other activities that could help create a sense of belonging?

Nilou: Anything! Art or playing can bring children together. One other important issue is competition. When children arrive from their home country, we don't know if they have been through drama such as war, which can affect their confidence. If they have to compare themselves to others, this can damage their confidence.

It's important to be sensitive to other people's feeling. For example, on one occasion, I went to an airshow on the beach. It made me so uncomfortable. It reminded me of war. Why doesn't the government pay attention to this?

Toronto has a lot of immigrants who came from war and experienced war. In the end, I think it's a good idea to teach children to be united rather than being comparative. It could reduce anxiety.

## Shahram's interview

2017/ 01/ 08

Shahram: When you were a child, what language did you speak at home?

Nilou: I learned Azeri and Farsi because my parents didn't want me to be clueless when I went to school. I remember that I always had a thick accent when I spoke Farsi. When I went to Tehran [official language in Tehran is Farsi], people made fun of my accent, which broke my heart. I didn't speak Kurdish because of issues that we had at home. I learned Kurdish after my father's death when I was teenager. When I was a child at home everyone spoke Azeri including my brothers, my father and my mother. I grow up in Azerbaijan where everyone spoke Azeri.

Shahram: Did your mother try to teach you Kurdish?

Nilou: No! One of the reasons was the complex relationship that my parents had.

Shahram: I had a similar experience about making fun of someone who had an accent. I was born in Shiraz and when I was 13-14 years old, I went to Jahrom, which is not far from Shiraz, where they made fun of me. I believe this is part of the narrow-minded culture that we have.

Nilou: I understand, but there is a big difference between your experience and mine. You spoke Farsi with a Shirazi accent, but Azeri and Kurdish are languages. They are not even similar to Farsi. I remember when I spoke Farsi, my mom's cousin made fun of me and even didn't answer my question because I didn't speak in Azeri. I always had this conflict when deciding which language to speak well. I chose Farsi because I wanted to speak Farsi at school without an Azeri accent. I remember one of the most interesting experiences that I had in high school was with a physics teacher who taught us in Farsi and Azeri. His class was the best in Iran because his students understood better when he taught in Azeri. This teacher knew it was illegal to teach in Azeri but he did it anyway.

Shahram: When I read your proposal, I realized that you mixed two different concepts, which would be better, if you separated them: Language barrier and group identity. For example, when you went to underground painting group classes in Tehran you didn't have any problem speaking in Farsi. You didn't have language barrier because you had a group identity that you needed. It was a group that saved you from an oppressive society. You created this elite group which allowed you to identify yourself through this group. You also gained self-confidence through

this group. You felt that you belonged to this group. I want to know how you mix and juxtapose the language barrier with group identity?

Nilou: This is a good question. When I went to Tehran, I spoke Farsi very well. When I went to Greece and France, I didn't speak their languages. Before you go to any group, you need to speak the language. Sometimes it's not about learning the language; it's about the culture of that language. If you don't know the culture, you won't understand what is going on. I had this experience when I went to Greece, to France and here in Canada. Although I had a basic level of communication, I didn't understand the jokes. This isolates you from any group. You don't know what they are saying or why they are laughing. This makes everything more complicated. You not only want to find yourself and your identity in new a country but also you need to learn the new culture. A language barrier could affect the new layers of your identity that you are trying to build or find. When I came to Canada and was accepted into OCAD, I identified the language that I was already knew, which was art. That helped me to find myself.

Shahram: So you're saying that if children can use art as an international language, they can better integrate in any new environment.

Nilou: I am not sure how art could be an international language but at least it could be a bridge between you and others. In art there are different languages and styles, if you don't know that language you cannot communicate with others. When I was at OCAD, all of us shared the same interest, which was art. In my mind and in my thesis project, I believe if children can be part of a group that doesn't require them to speak a particular language, they can use the art project as a means for them to feel better about themselves. This will also allow them to express themselves and share part of their identity with others. They wouldn't have to seat in the corner being anxious about expressing themselves by talking. This happened to me many times at OCAD when the teacher asked a question and I was the only one that knew the answer, but I didn't have confidence to raise my hand and speak. I was worried about speaking English so others wouldn't make fun of me. This type of situation can make you feel really isolated. Imagine that you know the answer but you are not able to speak correctly.

Shahram: We talked about group identity and the differences between Iran and western countries; therefore the group identity has different meaning. For example in Iran the government's law is oppressive. When you find your group, you basically found a shelter to protect yourself. In a free country like Canada, which is not oppressive, if you seek your identity in a small group from your own ethnicity it will stop you from being progressive and well integrated into a new society and environment. Imagine if you spend most of your time in your Iranian community you won't be able to learn the new society.



Nilou: I agree with you. I would really like to have an opportunity to create a small community for immigrant children. They could have a group project with other Canadian-born children. They could have more opportunity to integrate into a new society by knowing each other and creating a group project. When I was in OCAD, I had more peace in my life but I didn't really find my group. When I was in Iran, I had a small group and we supported each other. It was not just an art group; we supported each other in other ways. I couldn't find the support here [in Toronto], maybe because of being a single parent, or because I had to work and I was busy supporting myself. Maybe I was not able to balance my life in terms of being an artist as well, I don't know.

Shahram: I think in Iran belonging to a small group is like a small savior island that can save you from the bigger oppression from the government/country. Everyone wants to go to that island to be saved. In Canada, everyone is saved by blending/integrating into a bigger society. Your argument is to make and create a bridge from a smaller group to a bigger group/society. The bridge that you are suggesting for immigrant children is art. Do you think that it will work?

Nilou: I agree with you that in Iran the small art group was our savior. In Canada, if we don't integrate into a bigger society, we will be isolated. I know so many people who came to this country and they have been successful. This country has lots of opportunities. We cannot just see the majority of people who are successful, we have to pay attention to the minority who haven't or couldn't find their way because of having a more complex background or lacking self-confidence. This can make them more isolated. I am thinking of them. Maybe visual art or art in general can make them more socialized and create the sense of belonging.

Shahram: Are you talking about adults or children?

Nilou: Children

Shahram: Why children can't integrate easily?

Nilou: I had experiences at school with some kids that were shy or had problems. They didn't integrate easily. They cried or sat by themselves. We didn't know their background. Why were they crying? Why were they shy? Why were they quiet?

I remember when I taught at Montessori, I always asked them to draw or I drew something for them so they can colour it. They really liked this interaction. I had a student who didn't speak English and she called me Mama. I didn't teach at first, I communicated with drawing and she loved it. Slowly she became more independent. It's possible that even if I didn't offer any art, she could have integrated into a new environment, I don't know. But when we can create a calm environment with art, why we don't use it? I can see that art could help children in this integration process.

Shahram: I think there is a big difference between an adult and a child. When an adult goes to different country, they can continue their profession. Their knowledge can be the bridge between themselves and the society. But children don't have a profession; they know one thing, which is playing. Art and playing can have the same role. You could see that even if children don't speak the same language, they can still play together. Like my son when we went to Mexico, he didn't speak Spanish but he made friends with a boy who spoke only Spanish. They could communicate very well.

Nilou: It's a very interesting point. You are right. When we teach art, we teach them through play even if children don't have a language barrier. My business partner and I created activities for children to learn drawing and painting through play. For example, I ask them to draw a body, any shape that they want, and then pass it on to the next person. I ask the next person to draw a face; any shape that they want and then they pass it on to the next person. At the end, they create a funny character and each one of them is different. They love this collaborative art activity.

Shahram: This can create an identity and a communication bridge. Once they are comfortable with each other without talking, they can talk and speak after.

Nilou: Yes indeed. I remember when Banafshe[my daughter] was young, she was sad and cried all the time. No one wanted to play with her because she couldn't speak English very well in order to follow the rules of any kind of game. Once she came to me and asked if she was ugly and because of that no one wanted to play with her. That broke my heart. A visual activity can help children to communicate and play with each other. Other games need language to understand the rules and culture, which doesn't help the integration of a child.

Shahram: This is great. Children can be part of the group. They basically communicate with each other through art and they become more comfortable and then language comes next.