

In Search of a New Homeland

Bashar Kalash

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Design.

Graduate Program in Design
York University Toronto, Ontario

June 2020

© Bashar Kalash, 2020

Abstract

The origin of my MDes thesis/project is a story I wrote to document my journey from Syria to Canada as a refugee. It motivated the visual and theoretical research that came to inform the thesis that follows and the three multimedia books that constitute its visual component. My thesis/project employs autoethnography and research-for-creation methods to capture and convey the experience of my journey. It marries this exploration of personal experience with theoretical investigation—specifically, Edward Said’s idea of “Orientalism,” Frantz Fanon’s notions of recognition, performance, and “interrogative subjectivity, and Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity—in order to examine refugee identity. Relying on self-reflection and the findings of my theoretical investigations, my thesis consider the importance of cultural identity in asking the question: “what is the experience of losing one’s homeland?”

Acknowledgements

To those who were displaced by the madness of the new world. To those who drowned or fell from exhaustion. To those dreamers who fled. To those who journeyed and crossed the lines. To those who are resettling in new lands.

To my mother city, Damascus. I was displaced, but my home is always in my mind.

To the one who nourished my mind and my spirit. My late grandmother, Marlene.

To my family back home. My mother Randa, my elder brother Sami, and my little sister Dana. My heart aches to see them again.

To my late uncle Bassam, who guaranteed my safe arrival in Canada and opened many doors for me.

To my aunt Huda, who was a second mother to me as a newcomer to Canada.

To my cousins Elias and Allan, who always kept things lively with their sense of humor.

To my cousin Moni, who teaches me something new every day.

To my academic committee, who made this project possible with their tireless support: Dr. Jan Hadlaw and Dr. Patricio Davila.

To Professor Daniel McCafferty, who accepted to be my external examiner for my defense.

To the faculty and staff at York University; especially to Andrea DiFlorio Sgro and Diane Mikahel for their valuable help.

And last but not least, to Canada, where I found a new Homeland.

Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Methodology.....	4
3. Theoretical Framework.....	11
a. Orientalism and the Refugee.....	11
b. Recognition.....	17
c. Cultural Identity and “third space”	26
4. Design Work.....	30
a. <i>In Search of a New Homeland</i>	40
b. <i>Fear of the Unknown</i>	48
c. <i>The Story of #9331</i>	55
5. Conclusion.....	58
References.....	62
Appendix I: <i>In Search of a New Homeland</i>	66
Appendix II: <i>Fear of the Unknown</i>	84
Appendix III: <i>The Story of #9331</i>	89
<i>In Search of A New Homeland</i> (written story)	93

List of Figures

1. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the contents of my suitcase.
2. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, outside Damascus, dawn.
3. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, at the Syrian-Turkish border.
4. Bashar Kalash, sketch of my grandmother
5. From *Cathédrales*, 2014. An example of Aëgerter's experimental photography.
6. An example of Idris Khan's experimental work in design and photography.
7. Michal's photography demonstrates sequence and narrative.
8. Jan van Toorn juxtaposes text and images to create a "visual journalism" effect, presenting events to the reader.
9. Wael Marcos demonstrates cultural hybridity with his use of bilingualism in his posters.
10. My books alongside my passport and suitcase.
11. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, flipping the pages in my book to show sequence and narrative; the passage of time.
12. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the sea seen from the bus window.
13. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, reading a book of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry on the Homeland on the bus.
14. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a new homeland*, my view of the vast mediterranean sea.
15. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, details of images.
16. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the cover of my auto-ethnographic account of my journey as a Syrian refugee.
17. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the opening pages (English Version)
18. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the Arabic edition of *In Search of a New Homeland*.
19. Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, excerpt from the story in Arabic.
20. My process while creating the *Fear of the Unknown* book, printing on translucent paper.
21. My process while creating the *Fear of the Unknown* book, printing on translucent paper.
22. Bashar Kalash, cover of the book *Fear of the Unknown*, printed on 8"x8" translucent paper.
23. Bashar Kalash, *Fear of the Unknown*, anxiety in Turkey; Fidgeting hands.
24. Back cover of *Fear of the Unknown*.
25. The objects I discuss in my book, *The Story of #9331*.
26. The objects I discuss in my book, *The Story of #9331*.
27. Details.
28. Left: Vest purchased from local bazaar in Bab Touma. Right: The cell phone I carried during my journey.
29. My suitcase, open to show its contents.
30. Bashar Kalash, as of January 14th, 2020, I am now a Canadian citizen.

Introduction

Forty thousand and eighty-one Syrian refugees have fled to Canada since November 4, 2015. They face many challenges in cultural and social integration, such as the need to learn new languages and adapt to new values, as well as dealing with misrepresentative stereotypes and few opportunities for social interaction. Most also have to process difficult feelings associated with their experiences in Syria and leaving it. I have experienced the war in Syria firsthand since it started on March 15th, 2011. Having left Syria in 2016, I experience the war indirectly through my family living in Damascus, whom I contact regularly over the internet. Shortly after the war affected Syria, the country's border regulations became much more strict. After this change to border policies, it has become increasingly difficult for outsiders to enter, and in particular, for Syrian citizens to leave the country. These government border policies were purposely designed to control Syrian people. The government did not want people fleeing the country, so they made it illegal to leave for longer than a period of 48 hours. These new regulations, then, have created the dangerous conditions Syrian refugees have faced and continue to face today. These stricter border regulations affected me personally in 2015, when the Syrian military was forcing young males over eighteen out of school (secondary or postsecondary) to enlist in the military for an indefinite period. At the time, I had just graduated from Damascus University with a degree in Fine Arts and Visual Communication, and I knew that it was only a matter of time before I would be required to join the military. While many young men in my situation, many of whom being lifelong friends, joined the service, I decided to risk my life and flee my country in hopes for a better, safer life. I thought that I could help secure a path for my mother and younger sister in the future, with whom I lived (my father being deceased for years).

Due to all these conditions, including the restrictions, the flight from Syria, and the shock of a different culture, refugees often arrive at their intended destinations with a heavy

load of pain, fear, and confusion. These feelings, in turn, are a negative influence on their sense of identity and belonging and limit their ability to integrate in a new environment.

As a Syrian refugee who arrived in Canada three years ago, I will employ my life experience to inform my autoethnographic research-creation thesis project. I am interested in understanding the process of transition from one's old "home" to a new home in a new country. It is in part a therapeutic project of self-expression. My goal is to mend not only my wounds but also to acknowledge those of other refugees who have had similar experiences in their journeys to now. By sharing my personal story, I hope to make it possible for others to share their stories. This project is also about coming to grips with an altered self and new identity. What does it mean, ultimately, to have lost one's homeland? What happened to me between homes? How can I capture and share my experiences of fleeing from one country and arriving in another?

As a visual artist and designer who had to flee his home for another, I wanted to encapsulate my journey in my work. While experimenting with different methods to employ for this project, I realized that I wanted to abide by a framework that places importance on individual, subjective interpretation and creative self-expression because I wanted to focus on elaborating on ideas and unique experiences that are particularly significant to me without having to rely on fitting them in the context of other existing, established works on the topic.

I knew early in the planning stage that I wanted this project to be heavily based on an autobiographical account of my displacement and resettlement. I use objects and images that embody my memories as emotional materials or data to express my identity as a refugee and facilitate deeper introspection. Along with these objects (such as clothing, accessories, tools, documents) that serve to concretize my experience and memories of the journey, an autobiographical story is also told in the medium of three experimental multimedia books. Each book represents a stage of this personal journey. To effectively bring the story to life, I explore and

tackle details and themes that have emerged in my writing, drawing, photography, calligraphy, typography; which I cover in more detail in the section entitled “Creation for Research Process”.

Finally, this fragmented approach leaves space for viewers to imagine the details of the refugee’s account in their own way, making the exhibit more personal. I yearn for the homeland, and make use of artifacts and documents from my past to bring memories into the present. Conversely, with my relocation to Canada, I strive to continue strengthening my newfound Syrian-Canadian identity with hopes to rediscover myself in a new homeland, Canada. Some themes and ideas that these objects inspire are homesickness, loneliness, nostalgia, belonging, geography, and identity (Said, 2001, 17). For example, in the third chapter of the book, I focus on objects. I curated a set of objects that are important to my story. I elevate their importance to my life by assigning meaning to them in the way that I lay them out and capture them through photography. These items also reveal more details about that time in my life. These objects, in turn, I placed in my old suitcase, which I took on my journey to Canada. This suitcase, with the items in it, are an important part of the exhibit. Another example is in one of the multimedia books I created, *Fear of the Unknown*, in which I tried to capture the motion of my hands to represent my feeling of fear and cold on the night I left my home. In that book, I experimented with taking pictures with long exposure times and drawing on translucent paper prints to show motion. The goal of my project is to validate and share the often unacknowledged experiences of refugees.



Figure 1: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the contents of my suitcase.

Methodology

I chose autoethnography and research-creation as a dual research method because they complement each other in the way that they rely on the artist's process of self-reflection on personal experiences to inform both their scholarly and creative work. The visual part of my project, consisting of images in various media, reflects this dual method in which I, as an artist and designer, reflects on his past in order to recollect information that then informs his project. This mixed method is suitable to my work because my experience fleeing Syria as a refugee now living in Canada has informed both the research and the creation of my project.

This hybrid method benefits my work more other strategies because, as a refugee, I have an insider's perspective on this topic. As a first-generation refugee who recently arrived in Canada who trying to make sense of living in a new country, I have a privileged perspective

on certain issues that second-generation Canadians do not have, and this differing perspective, in turn, can facilitate the creation of original content that offers new ideas to the discourse, which can inspire other creators to tell their own story through their artwork. The knowledge that I have gained through my experience as a refugee was only available to me after having lived through the experience, not before. Although one can conceptualize the ideas I express in my work, nothing replaces the authenticity and emotional depth of the data and material I gained from experiencing something such as being forced my country first-hand. In this way, autoethnography and research creation are two methods that helped me recognize the importance of the process of reflecting on my own experiences to generate new material.

While working on this project, one of the first components I worked on was the story: a written account of my journey from Syria to Canada. During the early stages of my process, I started to incorporate autoethnography as a framework upon which to base the rest of my project. The reason autoethnography was an ideal methodology for me is because it is an approach that requires the individual to focus their attention on the process of reflecting on their personal experience and encourages them to juxtapose these personal experiences with objects, images, and other documents that concretize the memories that serve as the main source of data informing the autoethnographic work.

Later on, I integrated research-creation as a second method to take the material that I gathered (memories, writing, image work, and objects) through autoethnography by exploring and converting the knowledge and the data into something more concrete. This process, in turn, helped me find new meanings nested within my own work that were previously unaccounted for. I used this approach to shape my thinking during the process of writing about the visual portion of my work, and I made several interesting connections that were not initially clear to me. To summarize, the extensive body of knowledge that was generated from my process of self-reflection while employing this hybrid method is data that facilitated the structuring of my

work. Moving forward, works following methods such as autoethnography and research-creation that rely heavily on the elaboration and re-contextualization of one's personal experience are crucial to scholarly discourse as they offer unique perspectives that do not currently exist in the established body of work on a given topic.

This mixed method has been a very effective means to guide and organize my ideas, both written and visual, in a coherent manner. Finally, both research-as-creation and autoethnography are well-suited to design-based work because they are unconventional academic methods that encourage the researcher to draw on their *own* experience of the topic at hand to lead the discourse. Instead of the objectivity that traditional scholarship strives for, these methods encourage the researcher to reflect on ideas that are often deeply personal and to use them in conjunction with scholarly work that can help them elaborate on their own feelings. In research-as-creation and autoethnography, one of the main goals is learning from the data created through one's self-expression, whereas this is not always the case when following other frameworks.

Autoethnography is related to traditional ethnographic research methods. The difference between ethnography and autoethnography is that in ethnography, attention is focused on groups of people that are in some way foreign to the researcher (Eriksson, 2010). In other words, to conduct ethnography, one must “break *into* a group of people” (p. 92) and study their practices. In autoethnography, however, I turn my study *towards myself* as a member of a group; in this case, Syrian refugees. Informed by my experience as a Syrian refugee, I can gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Syrian refugee and what it means to leave a homeland.

Applying the framework of autoethnography and research-as-creation to my design work required self-observation and introspection on my personal experience. I asked myself an important question: what were the key moments of my journey in surviving my transition in

moving from Syria to a foreign country? The key moments in my experience that define my auto-ethnographic accounts are the ones that shaped and reshaped my sense of identity. These key moments are thoughts and emotional experiences that I focus on during my creative design processes. My experiences of fear and stress while leaving Syria, my memories of the friends and family I had to leave behind, the visual impressions of the Syrian border at night, the bus ride, the sea; all of these formed the sequences and narratives that inspired my creative works.

The process of autoethnography itself generates knowledge. Thus, regarding the acquisition of knowledge, situating my work in an academic context is of secondary importance to the process of creation itself. Mariza G. Mendez argues that an advantage of writing autoethnographically is that it allows the researcher to write first personal accounts which enable his or her voice to be heard, and thus, provide them with a transition from being an outsider to an insider in the research (Mendez, 2013, p. 282). He proposes that autoethnography is an emancipatory discourse since “...those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected to their agendas or relegated to the role of second-class citizens.” (p. 282). Thus, autoethnography “represents for many the right to tell their truth as experience without waiting for others to express what they really want to be known and understood” (p. 282). In short, the process of autoethnography allows me to employ my insider-knowledge as research data to be used in my design work. Through autoethnography, then, I reflect on emotions and memories associated with significant events of my past that define my identity. Finally, by capturing these thoughts and feelings in my work, I hope to connect with others who relate to these experiences. Ultimately, my work is a means of sharing my inside knowledge with others and connecting over experiential overlaps.

Moreover, in *Politics of Diaspora*, Marlon Simmons (2012) explains that “writing through autoethnography means writing through deep concerns, deep emotions of pain, suffering, melancholy, loss, rage, anger, joy, happiness, disappointment and sorrow” (p. 29). Indeed,

this is precisely what I wish to do: to employ my personal experiences and to draw out answers to the bigger questions that I tackle in this project, opening an opportunity for intellectual discourse on the topic. Through autoethnography, then, creators have the ability to express empathy towards those who come from a similar personal background but who are unable to make their struggle seen or heard. Thus it can sensitize readers to identity politics in a meaningful and personal way.

According to Carolyn Ellis, autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). While doing the research for this project, I was reminded of an ancient Syrian tradition that is still observed to this day: *حكواتي* (*Hakawati*). This word translates to “storyteller”. Hakawati is the gathering of an audience, typically in cafés, parks, or someone’s home. Everyone sits down and listens to a storyteller. The storyteller usually sits on a higher chair than the audience and reads stories both real and fictional about universal human experiences: happiness, pain, growing up, leaving home and travelling, love, freedom, family, and more. He reads these stories from large books with pictures to illustrate his stories to the audience while they listen, and he encourages participation.

While reflecting on this old tradition, I realized that the well-known stories a society repeats over generations reveals a lot about its culture. Thus, storytelling, like art (storytelling is an art form in its own right) is a part of a society’s cultural heritage. For instance, when he reads parables to his audience, the Hakawati draws on centuries of Syrian history and culture. Likewise, there are often moral messages or universal wisdom in oral history that, over time, create a sense of community and like-mindedness in a society. Thus, I realized that autoethnography, a form of research in which one explores their personal experience and connects it

to their cultural and social landscape, is similar to the Hakawati tradition of storytelling, because both aim to connect individuals to their community by encouraging individuals to project their personal experience onto their social and cultural notions and understandings. Autoethnography, then, like Hakawati, creates social bonds and a stronger sense of community for individuals who can relate on the basis of these shared stories.

When refugees leave their homeland for another country, they leave these familiar cultural knowledges and experiences behind; they become aliens. Their new environment is foreign to them. They are confronted with a language that is not their own and a different culture. These things are obstacles for refugees trying to adapt to this new environment they must now live in for the foreseeable future, if not, for the rest of their lives, since it is common that refugees never return to their homeland for various reasons. A refugee who has left their homeland becomes an outsider in another country; they become ‘the other.’

Research-creation is “an emergent category within the social sciences and humanities that speaks to contemporary media experiences and modes of knowing” (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 5). I employ research-creation within my own design practice while also engaging with theory. This method came with its set of challenges and required creativity, experimentation and adjustments. However, it was ultimately invaluable for me while producing meaningful creative work in conjunction with academic research.

Chapman and Sawchuk (2015) outline four different ways in which research and creation is employed in academic work (p. 49): research-for-creation, research-from-creation, creative presentations of research, and creation-as-research. The following section describes how these ways of research-creation can serve as a framework for my own paper. They describe “research-for-creation” as the process of gathering materials, narratives, and theoretical frames (p.49). Research-for-creation is a process of brainstorming by drawing on sources such as one’s

personal experience as inspiration in order to apply the significance of one's thoughts and feelings to an artistic medium such as design. This research-for-creation stage of my work drew principally on autoethnography. According to Carolyn Ellis (2011), autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (p. 1). The material I drew on initially was my personal experience of leaving my homeland, Syria, as a refugee and arriving in another country.

I explored my personal experience in conjunction with theoretical insights, drawing on the work of theorists such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon on the alienated consciousness in a post-colonial framework to explore my experiences. This merging of the personal and the theoretical spheres served not only to bolster my understanding of my experiences but also to locate them within the context of existing intellectual discourse.

Likewise, the visual-creative portion of my project serves to share the insight I produced through research and to concretize the experience of having to leave behind objects and relationships that my work seeks to convey to the public. The fourth modality, "creation-as-research", draws from the previously discussed categories. It concerns itself with the scope of research. In other words, what does research consist of? I follow in these authors' footsteps and forego the limitations of conventional modes of research in academia, including design research approaches that are based on sociological models. Employed more often by scholars in the fine and creative arts, and in the arts and humanities, creation-as-research is not centered on setting a research question as a hypothesis and compiling data to prove or disprove this hypothesis. For academics or artists adhering to this modality, they operate with the premise that their work is valid without having to frame and prove a research question because a research-creation framework prioritizes the process of creation, experimentation, and exploration as both a method and an outcome. I choose to apply this framework to my own project because,

like autoethnography, it places an emphasis on the individual's process of self-reflection in which they can draw on their own experience and connect this autobiographical material to wider meanings and understandings. Thus, it prioritizes the creator's subjective approach to exploring various ideas in their field of study. In fact, the creation-as-research modality is more effective than other, more conventional modes of research when the creator can rely on elements of their own personal experience or cultural identity to offer original insight that would otherwise be absent or diminished in the existing discourse on the given topic.

As I was focused on highlighting and expressing my personal experience while working on this project, I came to realize a similarity between the research-creation method and autoethnography. Both research and creation and autoethnography give storytellers (whether they are artists, designers, or other creators) an opportunity to express humanitarian meanings and with a means to express their message in a creative, compelling manner. Drawing on their personal experience, those working through these methods can leave a positive impact on others because their work sheds light on groups whose struggles are not adequately represented, and it brings these struggles to the forefront of discourse. To conclude this section, by prioritizing the personal sphere as a source of information that, accompanied with further research, can be a valid point of reference from which to elaborate and make more general claims about the individual's culture, research as creation and autoethnography allow for the inclusion of new perspectives and the diversity of viewpoints.

Theoretical Framework

Orientalism and the Refugee

I arrived in Canada in February 2016. When I arrived at the airport in Toronto, I felt the weight of what it means to be a refugee. The fear of the unknown was overwhelming. I felt, as Edward Said (2002) writes, "cut off from [my] roots" (p. 179). And I felt guilty that I had to

leave my family in a war-stricken country, especially with my father having passed away. The feeling that defined my first few weeks in Canada was anxiety due to a lack of self-worth. While I was confident in my abilities as a designer, I was worried that because I was not fluent in English, I would not be recognized for my talents as an artist and designer. I was coming from a country with a lower standard of life, and I was insecure that even Canadians without Orientalist beliefs would still view me as less competent than them because I was new to the Canadian way of life. Also, I was homesick. The cliché that “you don’t know what you have until it’s gone” had never resonated with me so much in those days.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) states that ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely, without their configurations of power, also being studied” (p. 5). Cultural identity, for Said, is inseparable from hegemony. Said discusses how, through colonization, the West (non-colonized countries) has had a significant amount more power in dictating global culture than “the East” (generally, countries subject to colonialism). As a result of this, the West’s conception of the East dominated representation.

In fact, Said proposes that much of the Western study of Islamic civilization was a psychological exercise in the self-affirmation of “European identity” rather than an earnest objective inquiry into Eastern culture (1979, p. 2-3): “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged” (p. 8). For instance, the West’s depiction of the Orient as illogical, mysterious, strange, and driven by base human desires serves as a contrast to the rational and cultured image the West has of itself. The Orientalist, then, claims to know more about the Orient than do the Orientals themselves (p. 34-5). Thus, Orientalism is a function of European imperial domination.

According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998), “Said's book was not a study of marginality, nor even of marginalization. It was the study of the construction of an object, for investigation and control” (p. 56). She claims that through the West’s representing and defining the East, the West constitutes the colonial subject as Other. The idea here is that both our notions of “East” and “West” are social constructions and form a false binary.

Social constructions are used to conceptualize certain things and ideas. A concept or an idea that is socially constructed is contingent on a certain ideology or frame of thinking that is employed when thinking or communicating about the concept. For instance, money is a social construction. The concept of money greatly surpasses the concept we have of physical currency such as bills or coins. Money is an abstract concept; a social construction that is used as a point of reference to give an economic value to a good or service.

Likewise, our notions of “East” and “West”, the same terms that Said uses, are social constructions as well. East and West are terms that refer to physical geographical regions. But the socially constructed notions of East and West are cultural. Said, for instance, uses colonization as a point of reference to conceptualize the East-West dichotomy.

However, the term “otherness” has a double meaning. Refugees are not other-ed because of their cultural differences. It is in fact the Western world that otherizes refugees. Said uses the term “Orientalism” to show how the West’s existing notions of the non-Western world (largely perpetuated by the media and stereotypes) cause a misrepresentation of the “Orient”, perpetuating conflict between cultures and “culture shock” in refugees. These cultural barriers in turn create further problems and divide the West and the non-Western world because refugees are misrecognized and misunderstood when they try to acclimatize to their new home.

Said (2002) characterizes the condition of exile lived by refugees as “like death but without death’s ultimate mercy” (p. 174). Furthermore, he describes this exile as an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and native place”, and he adds that the “sadness”

that exiles feel “can never be surmounted” (p. 174). Refugees, then, who are separated from their homeland must live with the everyday struggle of exile and they are left with “an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives” (p. 177) to cope with their loss.

Likewise, Said’s words on exile harken to fellow Palestinian poet and refugee Mahmoud Darwish’s work. Darwish defines the word “refugee” as “one who is uprooted from his homeland” (2010, p. 38). In his poem, Darwish writes: “You ask: What is the meaning of ‘refugee’? They will say: One who is uprooted from his homeland. You ask: What is the meaning of ‘homeland’? They will say: The house, the mulberry tree, the chicken coop, the beehive, the smell of bread, and the first sky” (2006, p. 38). My experience resonates with Darwish’s definition of “refugee”. As someone who had to leave their homeland, I feel as if I have been plucked from my roots. These examples, “the house”, “the first sky”, these are things that, as a refugee who had to flee their country, I may never experience again. I agree with Darwish that for someone who is forced to leave their home, their memories of these primordial experiences root them in their homeland. I think back to my own memories, those memories that define my life back in Syria: my apartment, spending time with my friends and family, the streets, the shops, the church, the parks. Although Canada is a multicultural country with many Syrian communities that help newcomers and refugees such as myself adapt to an environment that is alien to them, nothing can replace the homeland to those who miss it dearly. I am Syrian. In fact, one item that never left my side throughout my whole trip from Syria to Canada is a small book of Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry on the homeland, which kept me company and gave me solace during that anxious, defining period of my life.

In another poem, he writes: “[t]he past is a place of exile” (2013, p. 43). I read this verse through the perspective of an exile, Darwish, yearning for his past. The past, for him, symbolizes exile because he can never go back to the time before he was cut off from his homeland. Darwish’s experience mirrors my own as I had to leave my homeland.

Likewise, according to Salman Rushdie (1991) the exile's condition is "made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere'" (p. 12). This "physical fact of discontinuity" is the same as the "exile" that Said and Darwish describe: it is the feeling of being separated from your home, it is being out-of-place.

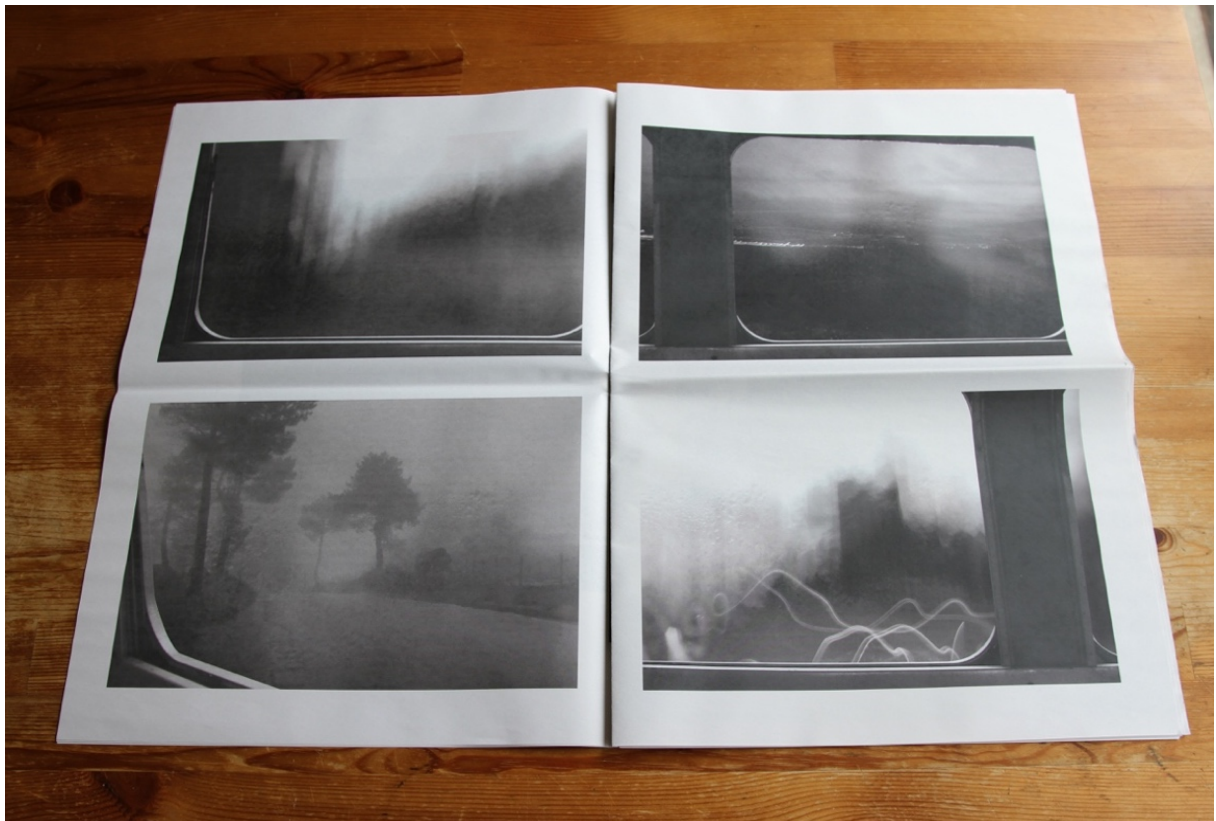


Figure 2: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, outside Damascus, dawn.

In light of Said, I argue that border policies regarding refugees align with Orientalist ideologies. Likewise, according to Shahram Khosravi, borders are a social construction that needs to be deconstructed so that refugees can find a home (2010). He opposes certain border policies that make it difficult for refugees to find asylum in other countries because these cre-

ate dangerous conditions for them while travelling. Furthermore, the fact that refugees are “illegal” creates a stigma around refugees that makes it more difficult for refugees to adjust to their new environment.

Like Khosravi, researcher Mahmoud Keshavarz studies the West's domination of global discourse. He highlights the fact that design is a form of Western discourse and argues that “...the practices, performances and interfaces that shape passports, camps and borders should be understood in terms of how design and designing articulate and persuade them as normal, given and inevitable infrastructures, systems, services and products” (p. 360). Essentially, designers play an important role in the way societies conceptualize and normalize constructions such as passports. In that way then, design, as a form of Western discourse, is a function of Orientalist Western imperialism and serves to reinforce this ideology

For instance, both borders and passports are Western constructions that are used to control the entry of outsiders. These allow Western countries to be as selective as they wish concerning the plight of refugees in the form of having the “right” documentation. Finally, the role designers play in reinforcing borders and passports as conventions of border policies is that they use visual language to reify these conventions. Symbols such as clear and distinct lines on maps (to depict borders) and a country's flag and national symbols on its passports concretize these conventions and contrast the difference between legal and illegal travellers.

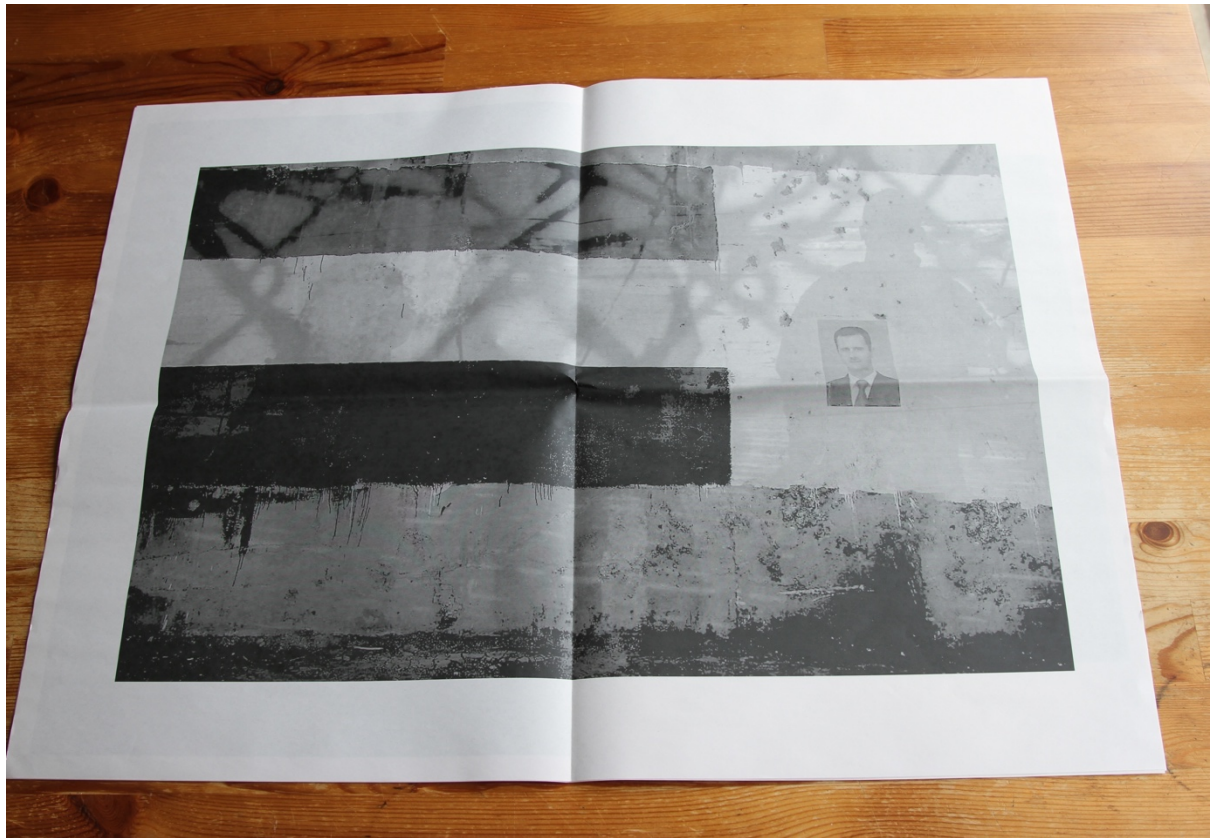


Figure 3: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, at the Syrian-Turkish border.

Recognition

As a refugee who arrived in Canada four years ago, misrecognition—due to a language barrier and lack of official status—was a crucial part of my experience as I faced the challenges of starting a new life in a country foreign to me. “Most theories of recognition assume that in order to develop a practical identity, persons fundamentally depend on the feedback of other subjects (and of society as a whole)” (Iser, 2019, n.p.). I resonate with this definition of recognition because of social differences in Canada: the social norms in Canada are often radically different than those in my home country. Because of these social differences, my identity and my actions are recognized differently by Canadians than they would be if I were still living in Syria. Frantz Fanon (2008) proposes that the processes of recognizing and being recognized are key, determining factors in the way individuals construct their notion of identity in relation to the social groups they belong to. Fanon believed that cultural assimilation (the

process whereby a group's language and culture comes to resemble that of another group) rewards colonial subjects who renounce their own culture and essentially take on a different identity: that of the colonizer. In diasporic groups, assimilation causes identity alienation and forces both the groups and individuals to re-evaluate their ideas and perceptions of identity by different, and often alien, standards. Thus, not only is their identity weakened, but they cannot fully integrate into the new culture either.

Likewise, Hegel, who informs Fanon's notion of identity, says that self-consciousness is not an individual achievement. Rather, it only arises through interaction, and how we see ourselves is mediated by how others see us: "it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized'" (1977, §178). Thus, because one's sense of self, their sense of who they are, is contingent on being affirmed by the recognition of others, recognition is regarded as a "vital human need" (Taylor 1989, p. 26). Conversely, an act of misrecognition, then, thereby hinders or destroys a person's relationship to their selves (Iser, 2019). From my own experience, the misrecognition I suffered led to a confused sense of identity because I felt as if parts of my identity (language, culture, etc.) did not belong in this new environment. Thus, I started to push these fundamental elements of myself aside to start learning the Canadian language and culture, which I knew would ultimately allow me to express myself and gain recognition from others in my milieu.

Similarly, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon poignantly describes how through misrecognition, "victims of racism and colonialism suffer severe psychological harm by being demeaned as inferior humans" (Iser, 2019). He studies how the colonial subject perceives themselves to be "a lesser creature in the White world they live in" and "how they navigate the world through a "performance of White-ness" (Gordon 1995, p. 26). By "performance of Whiteness", Fanon is referring to the colonial subject who must act in ways that allow them to fit in the colonizer's culture. In my case, I am the colonial subject because I am a first-generation immigrant and an outsider to Canadian culture. Furthermore, my country,

Syria, has been affected by Western colonization and Orientalism. The middle-eastern world is subject to several negative stereotypes, and these stereotypes have affected and continue to affect my day-to-day life when interacting with Canadians (faced with things such as anti-immigration attitudes and Islamophobia) who, whether unconsciously or not, think and behave according to these stereotypes.

Fanon's notion of "performance" (2008) was a starting point for my own reflections on how outsiders in a society must act in ways that are inauthentic or alienating to their conception of identity so that they can fit into that society. By neglecting their roots and assimilating to their new culture, these newcomers are "performing" the social role that is expected of them in order to gain the recognition they desire; to be recognized as legitimate, participating members of that society. Fanon argues that the outsider's quest for recognition leads to, in the individual, a sense of misrecognition and to some extent an identity crisis because the individual is struggling in between their root identity and the identity that they are trying to assume in society that is foreign to them.

Fanon is largely informed by his personal experience as a black man from the French colony of Martinique. Writing from his sociocultural perspective, he addresses the phenomenology of a black person's consciousness that suffered at the hands of White colonizers. However, many of his ideas are invaluable for scholarly work on post-colonialism outside the scope of a black person's perspective or the African diaspora. While I am informed by and cite Fanon's terminology pertaining specifically to the black experience, I am conscientious to elaborate and expand on this terminology and to make it clear how certain ideas inform my own perspective as a Syrian refugee whose autoethnographic account pertains to postcolonial theory.

In particular, the ideas that I apply to my own experience in this section are Fanon's notion of "performance" and the concept of "interrogative subjectivity". In *Black Skin, White*

Masks, Fanon uses the term “performance” in the context of “performing White-ness”. By “performing White-ness”, Fanon draws on his experience as an individual pertaining to the African diaspora who was forced to assimilate to a society and a culture that is not his own. In his book, Fanon gives an account of the psychic trauma colonial subjects endure when they are forced to act in inauthentic ways that do not reflect their identity in order to be a part of their new social setting. This “performance of Whiteness” causes, in short, an identity crisis in the subject. This identity crisis caused by the subject’s splitting of self, in turn, leads Fanon to question the notion of identity itself. For Fanon, one should practice “interrogative subjectivity” because identity is not determined by others. It is up to us to constantly re-evaluate our identity. I apply Fanon’s notion of “interrogative subjectivity” to my own experience as a Syrian refugee to discuss my hybrid identity as a Syrian-Canadian, and to argue that while I am Syrian and Canadian, these things do not limit the scope of my identity.

To continue, in his discussion of these “performances of White-ness”, Fanon focuses on language in particular: “[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is...” (2008, p. 25). In other words, the colonial subject who tries to learn the language of the colonizer is “performing” because they are acting in a way that they hope will allow them to gain recognition from the colonizer while disregarding their own cultural identity. Because the colonial subject must “perform” to integrate in their new environment, they often feel alienated, objectified, and frustrated due to being misunderstood.

In any case, the quest for recognition from others, even a superficial false form of recognition (misrecognition), can often override the desire to stay true to one’s identity. While these “performances of White-ness” may benefit the colonized subject in the short term, allowing them to gain a little recognition from the oppressor, “performing” is not in the subject’s best interests because it will, over time, cause in them an identity crisis when they

realize that they are neglecting their identity. Fanon (2008) remarks that “[t]he black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man...[t]hat this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question” (p. 8). Thus, in their quest to become more like the colonizer, by seeking recognition, the subject starts to loathe and reject the dimension of themselves that the colonizer oppresses, their Otherness, because they feel that this Otherness (language, culture, etc.) stands in the way of their social integration.

Fanon describes the process of assimilation: the colonial subject is forced to renounce their culture in favour of the colonizing culture and essentially takes on a false identity. When the black man tries to learn French “as the key that can open doors” for him in a white world, (2008, p. 25), he rejects his authentic self and tries to assimilate a European identity, creating a “self-division” (2008, p. 8). This identity crisis, in turn, causes him to feel “crippling self-hatred” (Taylor p. 26) because society does not perceive him the way he perceives himself. According to Iser, “those who fail to experience adequate recognition, i.e., those who are depicted by the surrounding others or the societal norms and values in a one-sided or negative way, will find it much harder to embrace themselves and their projects as valuable” (Iser, 2019). As a result of this misrecognition, the black man feels alienated from himself and others. He is not recognized as a black man nor as a white man. In my everyday life, I experience the kind of identity tension that Fanon discusses.

Being displaced to Canada, I had no choice but to learn its language, English, as a “key that can open doors” if I was meant to adapt to its culture. I was by no means a native English speaker, and I found it difficult to express myself at first. Expressing myself in a language that I did not identify with proved to be very frustrating and humiliating at first, and I had to practice alone everyday. Despite my practicing English, however, it was clear to everybody I talked to that I was a newcomer to the country, and some people were patronizing towards me because I was not able to express myself with ease. I learned that it is easy to take for granted the ability

to communicate with little effort, and not having this ability during most of my first year in Canada was an alienating experience because I could not express myself properly. I was thinking in Arabic, and when I could not translate, I remained silent. It was a whole dimension of day-to-day experience that I only started to gain back after daily practice and getting more exposure to the English language. Like Fanon, I think that language is a key element of “performing White-ness” because it makes the foreign speaker feel like they are in-between identities.

Using Fanon’s notion of “interrogative subjectivity” (2008) and drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre’s arguments on consciousness and identity, I propose that identity is not as clear-cut and unambiguous as it may seem. While processes of recognition can shape and reshape the identities of individuals, the fact that identity is a social construct means that ultimately, it is up to the individual to determine their own identity through mindful strategies and reflexive self-inquiry. Finally, I draw on the Marxist theories of Louis Althusser, who emphasizes the importance of ideology and recognition on identity formation. The above theorists I engage with in this section on recognition support my autoethnographic work because they provide me with a theoretical framework that allowed me to expand and elaborate the personal experiences that inform my project.

According to Drabinski, “subjectivity in the interrogative is Fanon’s solution to the problem of racial entrapment, the opening motif of how white people are trapped in whiteness, black people trapped in blackness. The man who questions has broken out of that trap” (Drabinski, 2019, n.p.). I interpret Fanon’s solution of “subjectivity in the interrogative” as a form of introspection on one’s identity. It is the question: who am I? Reflecting on my experience as a Syrian refugee living in Canada, I acknowledge that I often reflect on my own identity, several times a day. This state of constant self-interrogation is a universal experience for those who have been displaced like myself. Any individual forced to live outside their culture

in a different society will feel, at first, alienated from the foreign world they face. Thus, they begin their journey of adaptation: learning the new language, habitualizing themselves with new systems, and adjusting themselves to new forms of social life. Eventually, they will start to feel more at ease and socially adjusted in their new environment. Despite their progress, however, they will suffer from perpetual “reality checks” reminding them of their status as outsiders, highlighting their differences from the majority. These reality checks, caused by various factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, and differences in value systems; further alienate the subject and create in them a deeper sense of misrecognition. In other words, the more alienated the subject feels from their society, the more misrecognized they feel. As previously discussed, misrecognition is harmful not only because it creates antisocial feelings in the subject, but because it creates a sense of self-hatred and split sense of identity. Personally, I have experienced these “reality checks” firsthand when trying to form meaningful connections and friendships with others. However, I agree with Fanon that an attitude of “interrogative subjectivity” can help ease feelings of alienation and anxiety when faced with these reality checks, which are an inevitable part of any newcomer’s experience.

For existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, recognition objectifies individuals and limits their freedom because he argues that consciousness cannot be defined. For Sartre, we are the sum of our actions, not of categories or attributes we give ourselves, or allow others to give us. So, when we say that we are “this thing”, we are in bad faith. Bad faith, in turn, is not accepting the fact that we can do anything we want: “individuals are reified by every kind of recognition because even the affirmation of others freezes the subjects in their present state, hereby denying their potential for change, i.e., their freedom” (Iser, 2019). Sartre is arguing that instead of trying to identify oneself as belonging to clear-cut identities (e.g. Syrian or Canadian, for instance) one should consider that identity itself is multifaceted and mutable. Refusing to conflate

one's identity with categories such as Syrian, male, refugee, etc. helps quell feelings of misrecognition because these attributes are factual aspects that do not necessarily constitute your whole identity. In other words, if one adopts a different view on identity, that one is not merely the product of factual characteristics that can be used to describe them, but rather an individual with a unique life experience; when one's differences are not recognized by others, one does not focus on the feeling of misrecognition as much as the other party's failure to acknowledge superficial differences or see their worth. For instance, imagine a scenario when one is being met with indifference when speaking up in a group. If the person who spoke up interprets the act of misrecognition as a failure and narrow-mindedness on the group's part to sincerely acknowledge their contribution to the discussion, instead of a failure on the person's part to adapt to the social group, they can reduce the effects of the misrecognition they suffered because they can remind themselves they are not inferior to the majority.

Furthermore, like Fanon, Louis Althusser opposes essentialist views of cultural identity such as being white or being black. Essentialism is the view that every entity has a set of attributes that are necessary to its identity and function (Cartwright, 1968). He regards recognition as the central ideological mechanism by which the state confronts its citizens with the choice between obedience and the loss of social existence (Althusser, 1971, p. 172-174). In his work, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser explores the way in which ideology pervades social consciousness. Some examples of ideological state apparatuses he lists are institutions such as the Church, the media (television and radio), the education system, the family, and the cultural sphere (literature, art, sports, etc.) (Felluga, 2015, p. 144). These ideological state apparatuses promote essentialist views of cultural identity because they portray the world in a fallacious, compartmentalized, and schematic way presenting it to the in clear-cut categories that are easy for most people to cognize. According to Althusser, these ideological state apparatuses operate in insidious ways to control the ways people think and act, to

secure people's submission to the established order. In society, these ideological state apparatuses are sources of belief systems that embed ideology in the people through a subliminal process of indoctrination. In other words, when a child is born, it tends to adopt the world view of its parents. The parents, in turn, are indoctrinated by the Church, the media (Hollywood or advertising, for instance) and other cultural institutions and, unwarily or not, transmit these ideologies, values, or belief systems to their child. When they become of age, the child is also exposed to ideology through the education system (school), and shortly afterwards, the other ideological state apparatuses Althusser lists.

Because of its insidious nature, ideology is dangerous because it is subliminally embedded into the collective consciousness of a society. This "invisibility" of ideology often results in people acting against their interests because, in general, people are not constantly mindful of which belief system (or systems) govern their decision-making, and even why they adopt these belief systems that they do. Even thinking critically about one's belief systems is not a guaranteed solution because ideology is also embedded in the base (the economy) of a society, which has coercive repercussions. For instance, in a moment's clarity, an individual may realize that they are alienated from their labour at work and are exploited, but because they have crippling debt, they feel compelled to continue living a vicious cycle of overworking. Thus, because we are often compelled to think and act in certain ways in order to adjust and conform to society's demands (one must follow the rules or is met with a punishment), ideology holds us captive within a specific pattern of socially mandated recognition (Iser, 2019). In other words, recognition affects every individual living in a society. In this system of socially mandated recognition, people believe that it is in their best interests and in their free will to follow the status quo to benefit from the rewards of doing so (for instance, overworking means receiving a bigger paycheque). Essentially, what Althusser wants to convey in his work is that the quest for recognition is not merely an issue affecting individuals of "out-groups". In fact, his

theory of ideology provides an explanation for the phenomenon of misrecognition in society as a whole.

Cultural Identity and “third space”

Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “Third Space” helps explain cultural identity and the diasporic experience. He emphasizes that multiculturalism is not merely the co-existence of diasporic groups in a society. Rather, these cultural groups must let go of essentialist notions of cultural identity and develop an open attitude in which their cultural identity is defined in relation to other diasporic or cultural groups. For instance, in Toronto, one of the most multicultural cities in the world, there are over 100 ethnic groups and several established ethnic neighbourhoods such as Chinatown, Little India, Greektown, Koreatown, and Little Portugal. Because of this ethnic diversity, living in Toronto is a culturally fluid experience, as 51.5% of the city’s residents belong to a visible minority group (Statistics Canada, 2017). Visiting these ethnic neighbourhoods gives one a sense that flourishing ethnic communities exist in Toronto. This pervasive sense of cultural fluidity, in turn, promotes true multicultural identity in which the city’s residents feel connected to its various cultures and less likely to adopt essentialist views on their own cultural identity.

These ethnic communities allowing for multicultural exchanges Bhabha calls third spaces. In fact, Toronto’s multiculturalism helped me adjust to the city when I moved there because wherever I went, I saw Middle Eastern people, shops, and restaurants. Finally, this multiculturalism gave me a sense that I would find Syrian communities while living in Toronto, and this helped feelings of homesickness and alienation.

According to Homi K. Bhabha, third space theory explains the uniqueness of each person, actor or context as a “hybrid” (2004, p. 55). Bhabha states that the identity of individuals and cultural groups is not homogenous. Rather, cultural identity, whether individual or plural, is composed

of a collection of defining experiences of various natures that often overlap with the experiences of other individuals or groups. Thus, instead of focusing on cultural differences, cultural identities should focus on their hybridity, a common element all cultural identities share, and celebrate their resemblances and differences.

In fact, “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford, 1990). If we adopt his theory of hybridity, then, our notion of cultural identity is broadened because diversity becomes a defining feature of cultural identity. New meanings and understandings are created through this definition of cultural identity because it promotes deep understanding and empathy for those belonging to other cultures or groups. It is not simply enough to respect each other’s cultural differences. Individuals belonging to different cultures or social groups should practice open communication and open-mindedness with each other in order to participate in cultivating a more diverse multicultural community and even a sense of family between cultures.

According to Moje et al., what we need to do, then, is merge the first space of people’s home, community, and peer networks with the second space of the discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 41), to create an alternative third space. An example of a third space is a multicultural community center with activities promoting cultural diversity such as language exchanges, daytime or night classes, potlucks, and poetry readings. Another example of a third space (applying to Syrian culture in particular) is a café that invites Syrians and others to partake in activities customary to Syrian culture such as backgammon, Hakawati, and a traditional breakfast with Turkish coffee; *ful* (steamed fava beans); *hommos*; *labneh* (a sour yogurt-like cheese); *zaatar* (thyme, sesame seeds, and olive oil); and other customs. Public spaces like this serve as a third space or community for Syrians and those who want to learn about their culture and experience it first-

hand. Finally, third spaces facilitate the social integration of newcomers by providing them with a hub to meet empathetic people and others from their cultural background.

In the section titled “Orientalism and the Refugee”, I discussed, through Edward Said’s work, how our notions of “West” and “East” are socially constructed. Our bifurcated conception of global culture is a result of imperialism, of the West exerting its dominance over colonized countries. In turn, Orientalism has created tension between those who come from colonized countries and those who come from imperialist countries because it results in cultural obstacles refugees must face when they leave their home for another country, such as dealing with being represented in the media, negative stereotypes, and stigma against refugees and immigrants resulting, in turn, in border policies that make it difficult for refugees to find asylum in other countries.

I also touched on feelings of exile, the identity crisis that refugees feel when they are displaced from their homeland, and the importance of the homeland on one’s identity. The significance of the homeland can be found in the exile’s memories of important events, places, and objects that remind them of their homeland. In my work, I draw on my personal experience and on my memories, and capture them through autoethnography and research as creation as a means of storytelling to express my identity. I convey these ideas by juxtaposing written stories and sequenced visuals to create a narrative.

Also discussed was the problem of misrecognition. Having established that the recognition process is a determining factor in the way individuals construct their notion of identity, cultural differences posing obstacles to refugees as they try to adjust to their new environment, such as language barriers and lacking an official status, lead to feelings of a split sense of self or identity crises. When newcomers “perform” the social role that is expected of them in order to gain the recognition they desire to be recognized as legitimate, participating members of that society, they act in inauthentic ways that cause them to neglect their original cultural identity

for another. This has been shown in my discussion of “performance”. For instance, we have seen how frustrating and humiliating speaking a foreign language is for refugees trying to integrate themselves into their new social environment.

Drawing on Fanon’s idea of interrogative subjectivity, the fact that identity is a social construct means that, ultimately, it is up to the individual to determine their own identity through mindful strategies and reflexive self-inquiry. The benefit of interrogative subjectivity is that adopting a social constructionist point of view on identity helps ease feelings of alienation, which are an inevitable part of any newcomer’s experience. Interrogative subjectivity, in short, gives the individual the active ability to constantly reshape who they are. For instance, as a Syrian-Canadian, my past in Syria is a fundamental part of who I am, but as I learn and experience more in Canada, my identity is also ever-changing. Throughout the visual project and the written story, a big theme is this exploration of my ever-changing identity. Finally, in the section where I focus on Homi K. Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and third space, I have found that the identity of individuals and cultural groups is not homogenous. Rather, identity, both for individuals and groups, is a composite, heterogenous notion composed of several social factors. Like Fanon and Said, Bhabha has a view of identity that aligns with the social constructionism approach. Identity is not a fixed, concrete thing. It is contingent on social encounters, and it is ever-transforming. Having an essentialist view of identity can limit one’s introspection on their identity because it limits them to employing clear-cut categories when conceptualizing who they are and how they fit into society. However, if one takes a social constructionist approach, one can achieve deeper introspection and arrive at more profound conclusions on questions concerning their identity and their cultural identity because social constructionism does not adhere to essentialist categories. Social constructionism holds that one’s notion of identity is a product of their experiences and of the ideologies that they are

exposed to in their social milieu. Changing one's perception to be attuned to the socially constructed, ambiguous nature of identity yields fruitful results because there is a lot to uncover and unpack behind the illusory veil of essentialism. Employing this approach, then, was ideal during my explorations into identity while following autoethnography because it guided my thinking away from essentialist interpretations of cultural identity. For instance, while I am a Syrian-Canadian, this category does not limit the scope of my identity. Rather, it is just an attribute that I accept as describing me as an individual since my displacement. Likewise, the places and objects that I capture in my visual work are associated with my life back home, but these defining, personal things are not limited by what it means to be Syrian. When taken as concepts that define my identity, memories and personal experiences transcend all essentialist categories. Autoethnography is principally a process of self-reflection to reframe one's notion of who they are, and only secondly an investigation on one's cultural identity. Instead of applying one's personal experiences to a fixed idea of a certain cultural identity to draw conclusions, autoethnography eschews this conventional framework to explore the limits of essentialist definitions of cultural identity by drawing on personal experiences as a primary source of data, and only then, established meanings around a specific cultural identity. Finally, this theoretical framework that has shaped my thinking, has greatly facilitated my process through the research-as-creation method as well, because research-as-creation also relies on self-reflection as a primary source of data to create something that is both a manifestation of self-expression as well as a unique piece of scholarship and academic work.

Design Work

In the beginning stages of my work on this project, I wanted to learn more about the role cultural identity plays in the experience of refugees. When I felt inspired, I started the process of writing the story. I started by recounting the events from the day I got the call from

Ahmad, my next-door neighbour, when I was living in Damascus, who warned me that the military would soon force me to serve my country. Recalling these memories and sequences resulted in an abundance of powerful emotions: joy, sadness, nostalgia. Sometimes, I would remember a funny memory of my youth and start laughing to myself. However, I tried to focus my introspection on the beginning of the story I wanted to tell. Whenever a sequence or detail would come to my mind, I would quickly write it down in a small notebook I had. This notebook, later, would greatly help me write the polished version of the story.

When I was writing my autoethnographic account of my journey, I spent a lot of time in my room, and I felt homesick and alone. One day, I found the small suitcase that I brought with me from Syria in which I carried a few of my belongings on my journey to Canada. It was there, in a dusty corner, forgotten. I put it aside. However, at some point, I decided to take note of the suitcase's contents because I thought that there were sure to be some interesting memories for me to revisit.

During these days, I would often call my grandmother, Marlene. Having grown up next door to her for 24 years, she knew me since I was born. When I was younger and my parents were away, I would spend time at her house. She was a kind spirit and a very good storyteller. Having lived in Damascus her entire life, she loved to tell stories of her past. Of her childhood, her adolescence, and of the places she visited and the people she met. Because of her infallible memory, when I would talk to her about the days before I left, she would remember the smallest details. I could tell that she really enjoyed our conversations because she loved to remember these stories as well. After she passed away, my heart was filled with grief as I told her I would dedicate my work to her. I know she is now watching over me from the place beyond, happy with my progress. I remember her proverbs often.



Figure 4: Bashar Kalash, sketch of my grandmother

In those days of recollection, I followed the same routine every day. In my spare time during the day, I liked to sit by the river with my notebook and write and walk to the library and spend a couple hours reading books. At home, I liked to turn on the radio and listen to Fairuz. I liked to start writing closer to midnight because it was silent, and I was able to focus and recollect my memories better at night. Sometimes, I wrote until dawn, restless.

One day, I collected my scattered documents from four and a half years ago. I tried to rearrange them since my departure from Damascus. I feel lucky to be in Canada, narrating in hindsight, away from the war. After I finished writing the first page of my story, I found that the words were leaking from my pen automatically. In the corner of my room, there is a window overlooking my desk. Looking out, I see the rain over the river. The smell of rain and a gentle breeze; a pleasant view I enjoyed for four years.

After this process of self-reflection, I started to get the sense that an individual's identity is not set in stone. While I will always be a Syrian at my roots, that is not the only thing all I will ever be. People have the ability to adapt to foreign environments, and although I was afraid, I was confident that, despite the struggles that I would inevitably face, I would eventually adapt to a new country and a new culture. When one is forced to adapt to a new environment, their sense of who they are inevitably changes because they must behave in different ways if they are to be recognized as a member of a society different from the one they are used to. Over time, as they acclimatize to this society, certain parts of their "root identity" may diminish because, due to one's search for recognition, one's identity is shaped by how they interact with others. As a Syrian-Canadian, my past in Syria is a fundamental part of who I am, but as I learn and experience more in Canada, my identity is also ever-changing. However, I am not simply a Syrian-Canadian, but, ultimately, an individual that can introspect on and constantly question my identity; a person with the ability to evaluate his past and his memories that is aware he is constantly reshaping who he is.

I present selected artistic influences that were an inspiration for my own visual work. To begin, French artist Laurence Aëgerter influenced my approach in presenting my photography in the context of design. A technique she uses to reframe images is to photograph them. This "recapturing" allows her to experiment with variables such as lighting and exposure, which alter the appearance of the image to the viewer. For instance, she photographed an image every minute for two hours until everything vanished in the dark.

The viewer can observe in these images the passage of time, which is conveyed through the gradual absence of light from frame to frame. Aëgerter's work inspired me to think about photography as a means to capture the passing of time, and I employed a similar technique in my capturing of the photos in my books.

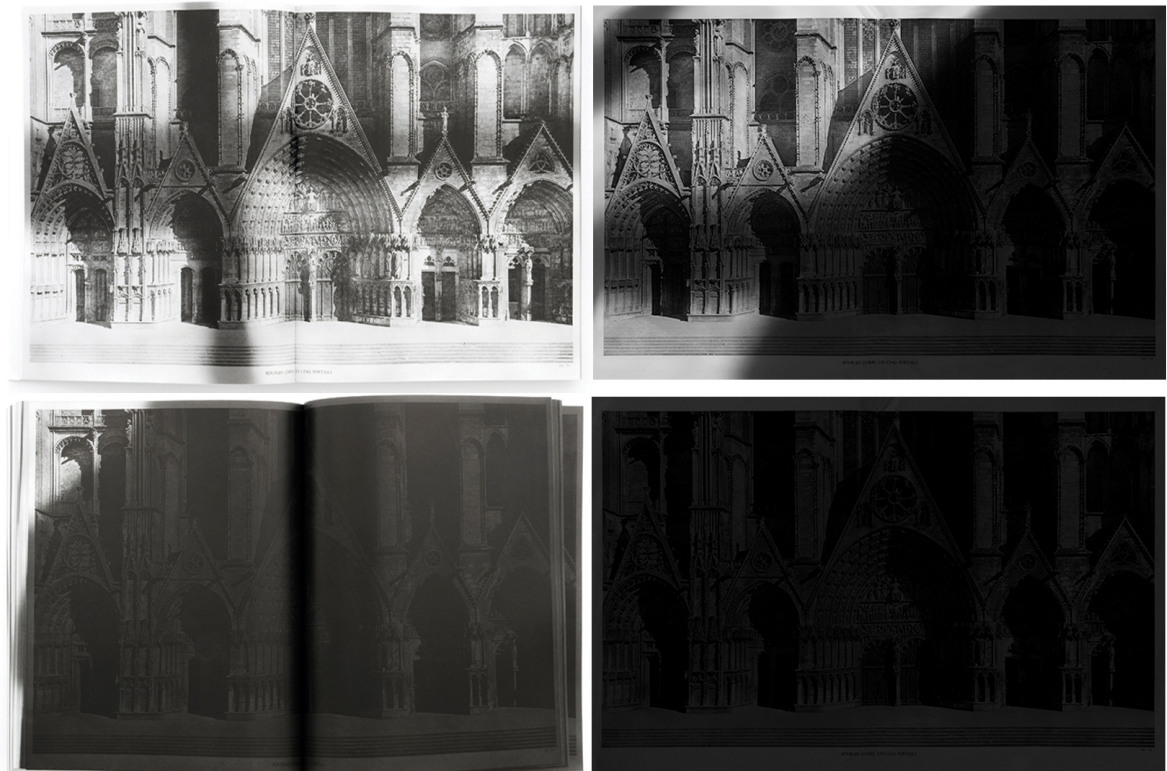


Figure 4: from *Cathédrales*, 2014. An example of Aëgerter's experimental photography.

Idris Khan, a contemporary British artist, also experiments with images to reframe them in new contexts. One technique he uses is layering multiple images. By doing so, he captures a period of time into a single moment. Here, the viewer can observe how the layering of several images creates scenes that capture motion. Khan's unique approach to photography and design inspired me to employ a similar strategy in my own work when demonstrating narratives with the use of sequenced images.



Figure 5: An example of Idris Khan's experimental work in design and photography.

Similarly, American designer Duane Michals also conveys narrative through images. As seen in the sequence of photographs above, Michals is able to create in the viewer's mind a story of a "Chance Meeting" in which two men walk past each other in an alley. However, unlike Khan's "stacked" images, Michals presents events occurring by presenting them as a series of images.



Figure 6: Michal's photography demonstrates sequence and narrative.

Additionally, central to designer Jan van Toorn's approach is the application of content-based strategies, resulting in a design practice as a form of visual journalism. Van Toorn's juxtaposition of text and images in a journalistic newspaper or magazine format can re-contextualize the content within. Thus, his approach inspired me, in the vein of autoethnography and research-as-creation, to present deeply personal, subjective experiences in a format typically associated with objectivity, factual news, and truth.

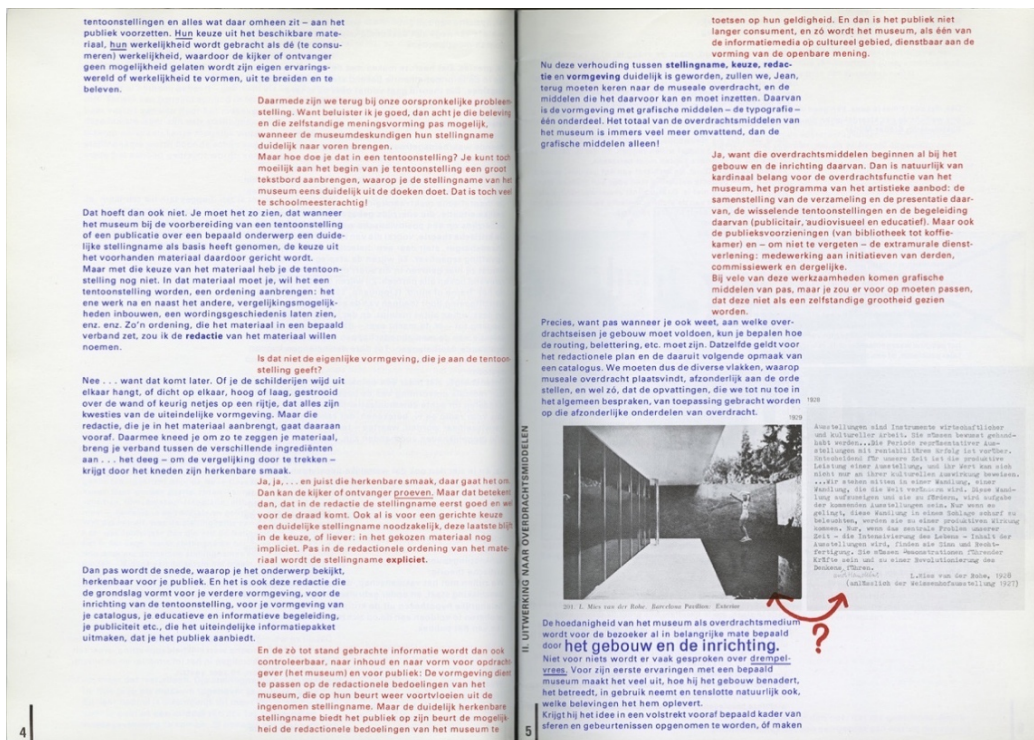


Figure 7: Van Toorn juxtaposes text and images to create a “visual journalism” effect, presenting events to the reader.

Lebanese graphic designer Wael Morcos develops identities, bilingual typographic solutions and works in print and exhibition design. His design work, consisting in part of creative implementations of bilingualism into typography and calligraphy, inspired me to consider the

importance of language in discourses on identity. Like Morcos, I conjoin English and Arabic in my own typography and calligraphy work to highlight the cultural hybridity of diasporic identities.



Figure 8: Wael Marcos demonstrates cultural hybridity with his use of bilingualism in his posters.

After having completed the story describing my journey from Syria to Canada, I started to reflect on conveying this story in visual media. After experimenting with different ideas, I finally settled on the idea of using books to convey my ideas visually because it is a native way to present narrative and sequence, unlike posters, for instance.



Figure 9: My books alongside my passport and suitcase.

Thus, I decided that my visual project would be expressed in three experimental multimedia books. Each book represents a stage of this personal journey. To effectively bring the story to life, I explore and tackle details and themes that have emerged in my writing, drawing, photography, calligraphy, typography. Finally, this fragmented approach leaves space for viewers to imagine the details of the refugee's account in their own way, making the exhibit more personal. Inspired by the effectiveness of the photo essay format, a medium that uses photos sequenced in a particular order to convey a message, to create a narrative in the mind of the viewer; I decided to rely, to a significant extent, on series of photos for storytelling while following the autoethnographic and research-as-creation frameworks.

In addition, the reason I chose photography as a medium for storytelling is because “the photograph can depict a moment within a larger story” that the reader can construct in their mind through association. Thus, the photo “becomes a blank canvas” upon which the viewer can build a narrative (Martinique, 2016, n.p.). Additionally, long exposure times show the passing of time/movement. Photos of objects in the suitcase tell a story. Photography can be used to

tell a story that documents the process of an individual going through different stages in their life. This can be seen when we look at photo albums and see ourselves or others growing older. As we look at the photos, we associate the images with events in our memory that happened around that time. Much like the autoethnographic and research-as-creation approaches, building narratives piece-by-piece using photos relies on introspection and self-reflection on one's memories.

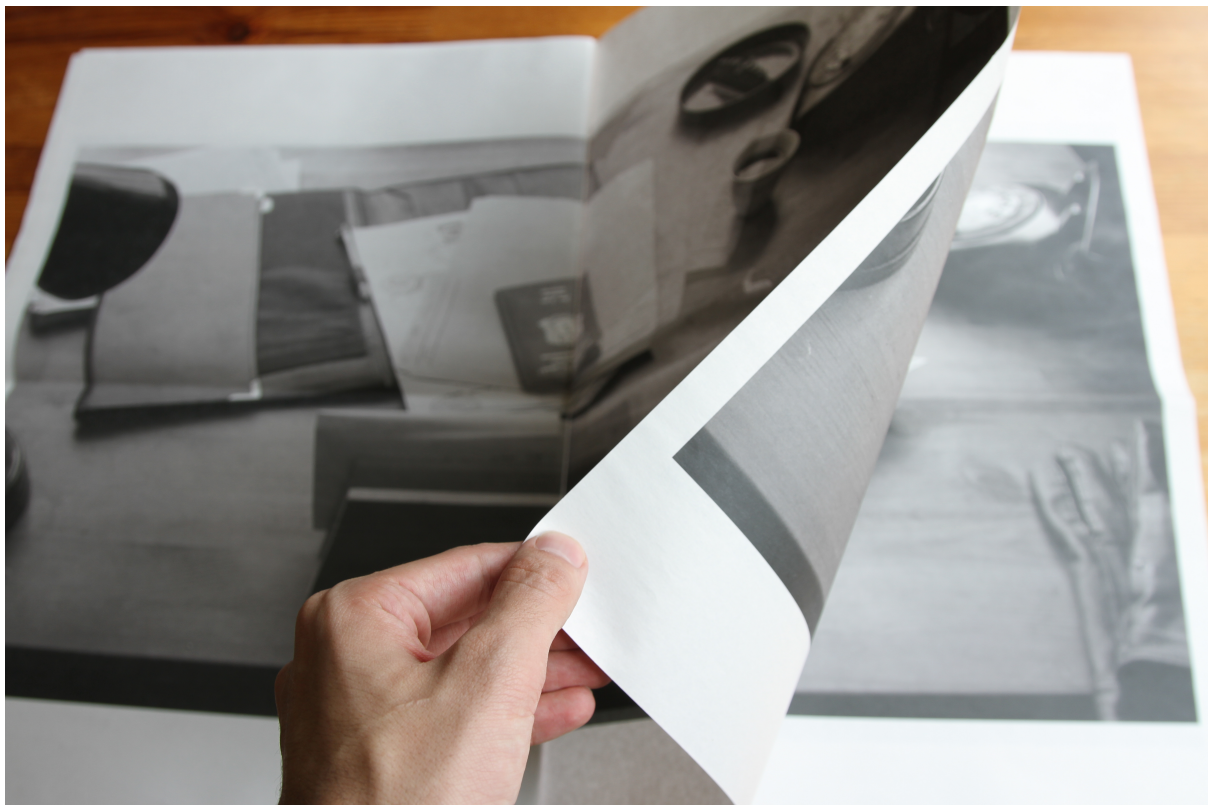


Figure 10: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, flipping the pages in my book to show sequence and narrative; the passage of time.

In my first book, *In Search of a New Homeland*, I use photography to convey a sequence that narrates my escape from Syria into Turkey via bus. In the first image of that sequence, there is a photo capturing my point of view as I look out of a window on the bus transporting me away from Turkish border. In my field of view, I see signs near the border indicating to me that Syria is in the opposite direction, and that the road I am on is in Turkey, where I continue my journey by bus to my next destination. The next photo captures my view, again, looking

outside the window. The road borders the Mediterranean Sea, and I watch the waves roll. In this photo, the vast sea symbolizes the unknown, and the crashing waves symbolize the dangerous waters I had to traverse to reach Greece.

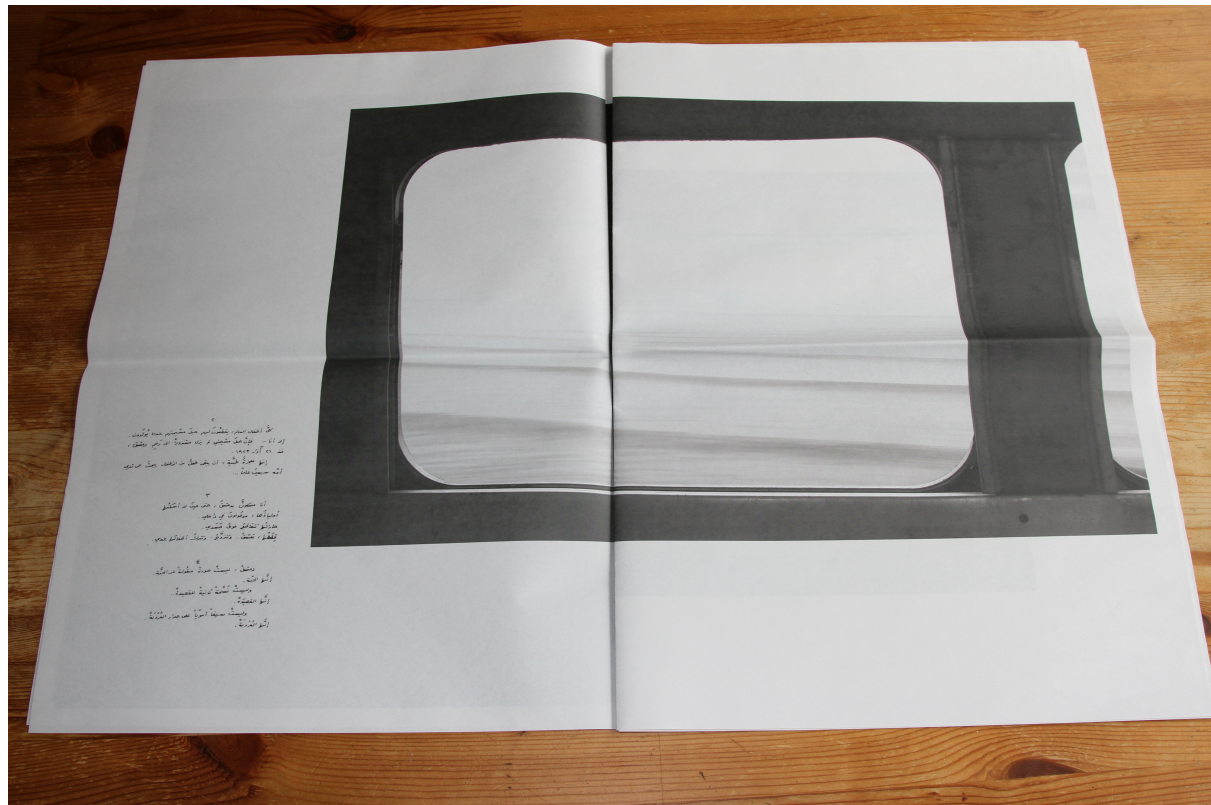


Figure 11: Bashar Kalash, 2019. from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the sea seen from the bus window.

The third photo in the sequence depicts me reading. The book I am reading in the photo is a book of Mahmoud Darwish's poems entitled *شيء عن الوطن* (*Something about the Homeland*). This photo conveys to the viewer of my book that Mahmoud Darwish's poetry on one's homeland brought me comfort during that difficult time, and that I was self-reflecting.

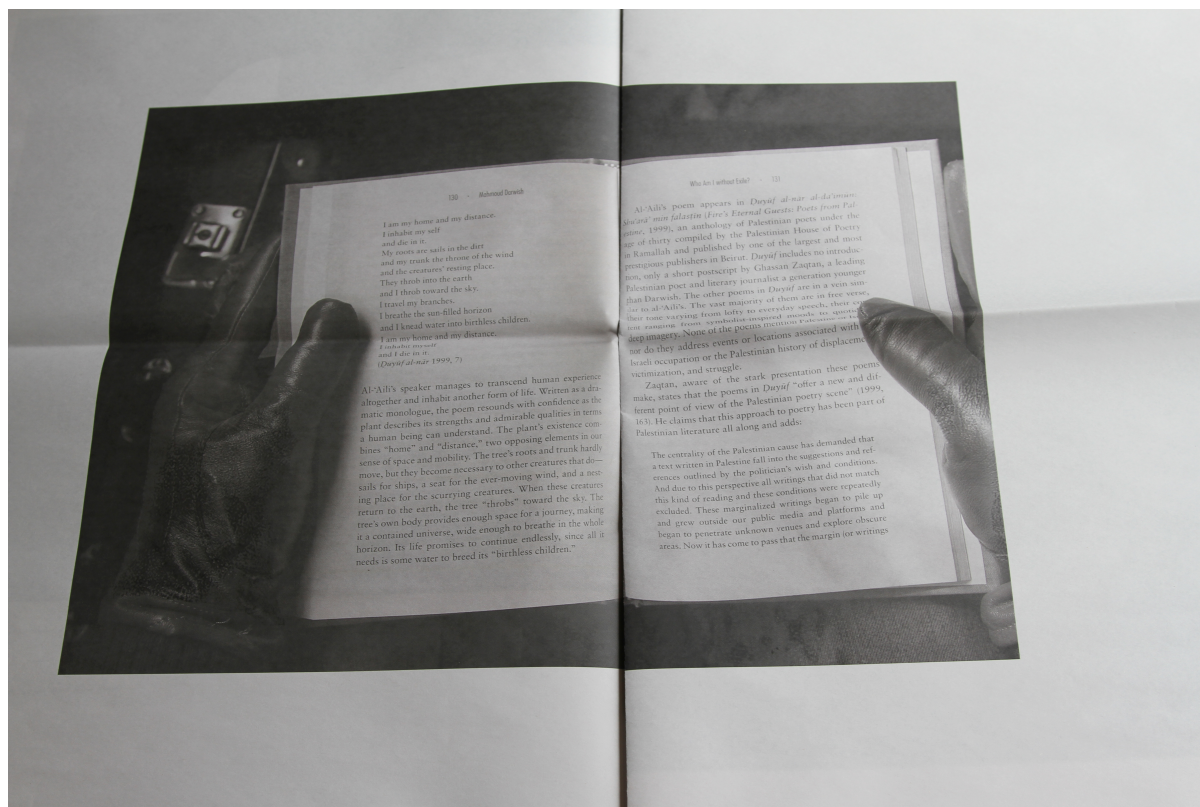


Figure 12: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a new homeland*, reading a book of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry on the homeland on the bus.

Finally, in the fourth image of the sequence, my perspective switches back to the sea. I overexposed the image to emphasize the light in the sky. The white in this image captures the overwhelming sense of apprehensiveness I felt towards the uncertainty of what was to come.

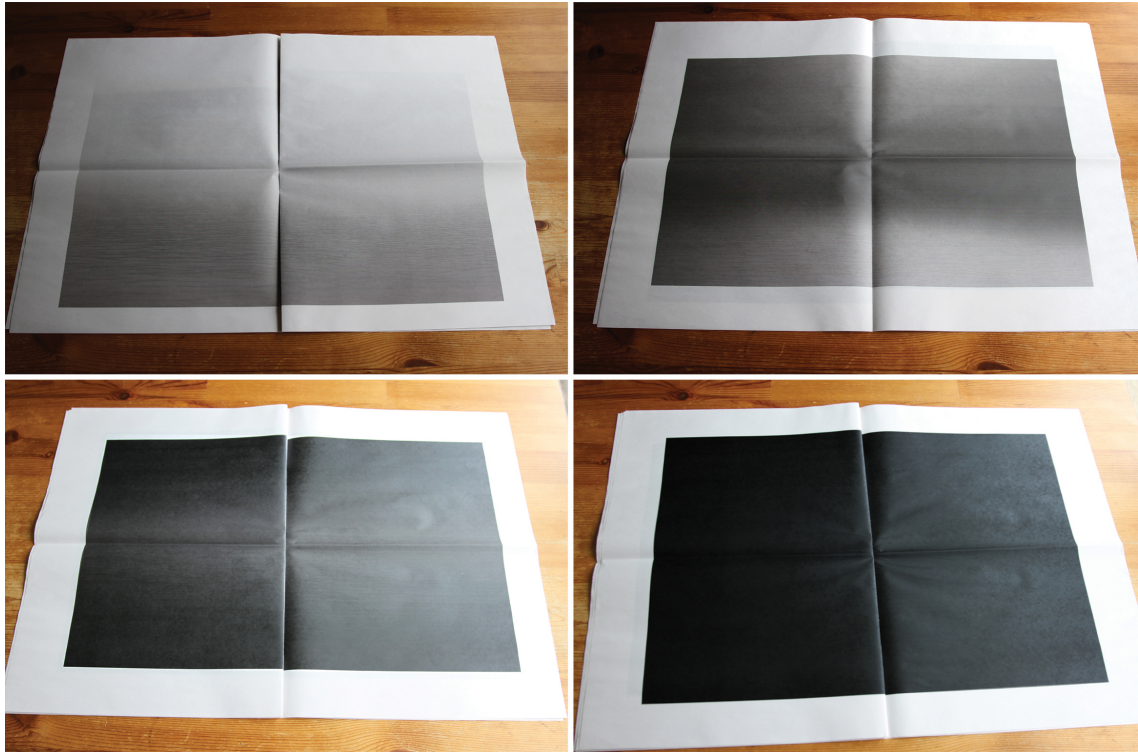


Figure 13: from *In Search of a new homeland*, my view of the vast Mediterranean Sea.



Figure 14: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, details of images.

I chose the newspaper medium for the first book because it aligns with autoethnography, research-as-creation, and the notion of social constructionism. McLuhan's idea, that "the

medium is the message”, applies to my decision to employ newspapers because I draw on subjective key moments from my past and I present them in a way that is usually associated with objective, factual realities (i.e. the content in newspapers). This is the goal of autoethnography and research as creation: to prioritize subjective experience as a source of information that can be used to create bodies of work that can be inserted in intellectual discourse; work that deserves academic consideration. Newspapers are also a form of storytelling, and autoethnography relies on the sharing of personal narratives; of one offering insight on their own experience as a member of a certain social group (such as refugees).

Another technique I employed in my work was experimenting with calligraphy and typography. Calligraphy and typography share characteristics from both written and visual languages. While they are rooted in text, there is lots of room to experiment with the appearance of words and letters to join the words themselves with associated symbols and connotative meanings. An example of my experimentation into calligraphy and typography can be seen on the cover of the editorial book that contains my account of my journey from Syria to Canada. While using translation, I juxtapose English and Arabic characters to personalize the title “In Search of a New Homeland”. By doing this, I merge my native culture with a foreign culture I am trying to embrace. This title, then, is a testament of my hybrid identity as a Syrian refugee. Finally, bridging language barriers, I want my message to reach both Syrians and Canadians alike.

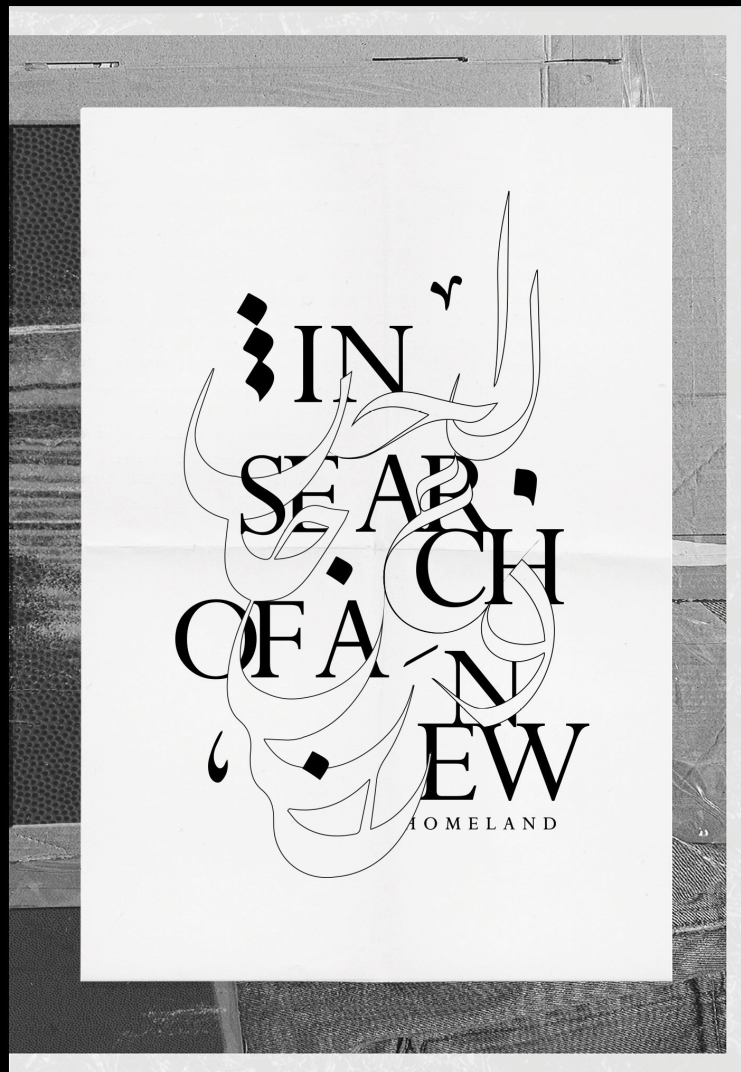


Figure 15: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the cover of my auto-ethnographic account of my journey as a Syrian refugee.

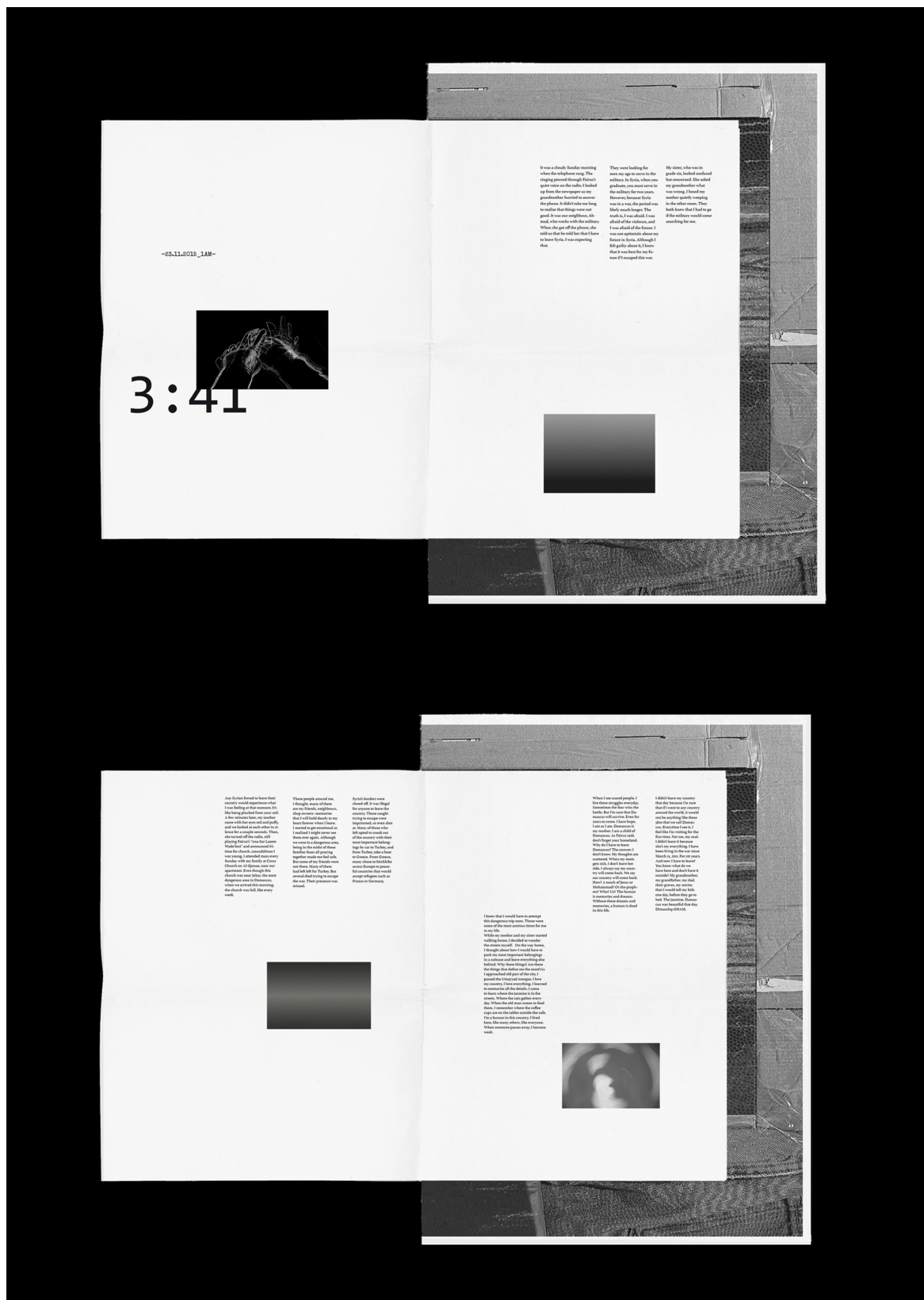


Figure 16: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a new homeland*, the opening pages (English Version)



Figure 17: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the Arabic edition of *In Search of a New Homeland*.



Figure 18: Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, excerpt from the story in Arabic.

In my second book, *Fear of the Unknown*, I used long exposure times when shooting the fidgeting or rubbing of my hands together. This technique is used to capture movement at a given point in time. I used this technique to emphasize this movement of my hands to show how afraid and uneasy I was near the Syrian border. Drawing on translucent paper prints to show motion. These images in sequence narrate my anxious, introspective state of mind on the bus ride. The anxiety I felt was, to an extent, stemming from the onset of an identity crisis. I was forced to leave my country; “exile”, in Darwish’s words. I was plagued with the reality of the possibility of not being able to return, and my heart was already aching for my homeland. However, with the possibility of starting a new life in another country, I had to be optimistic about the future to get me through this perilous journey.



Figure 19: My process while creating *the Fear of the Unknown* book, printing on translucent paper.



Figure 20: My process while creating *the Fear of the Unknown* book. Printing on translucent paper.



Figure 21: Bashar Kalash, cover of the book *Fear of the Unknown*, printed on 8"x8" translucent paper.

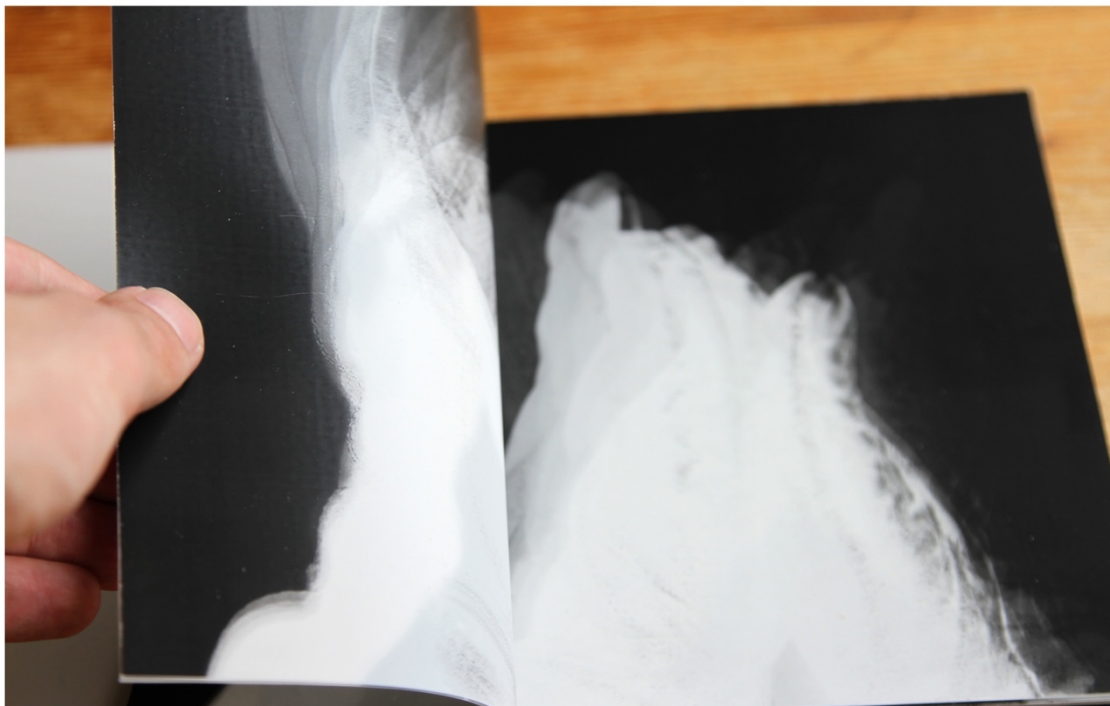


Figure 22: Bashar Kalash, *Fear of the Unknown*, anxiety in Turkey, fidgeting hands



Figure 23: Bashar Kalash, *Fear of the Unknown*, anxiety in Turkey, fidgeting hands.



Figure 24: Bashar Kalash, *Fear of the Unknown*, anxiety in Turkey, fidgeting hands.

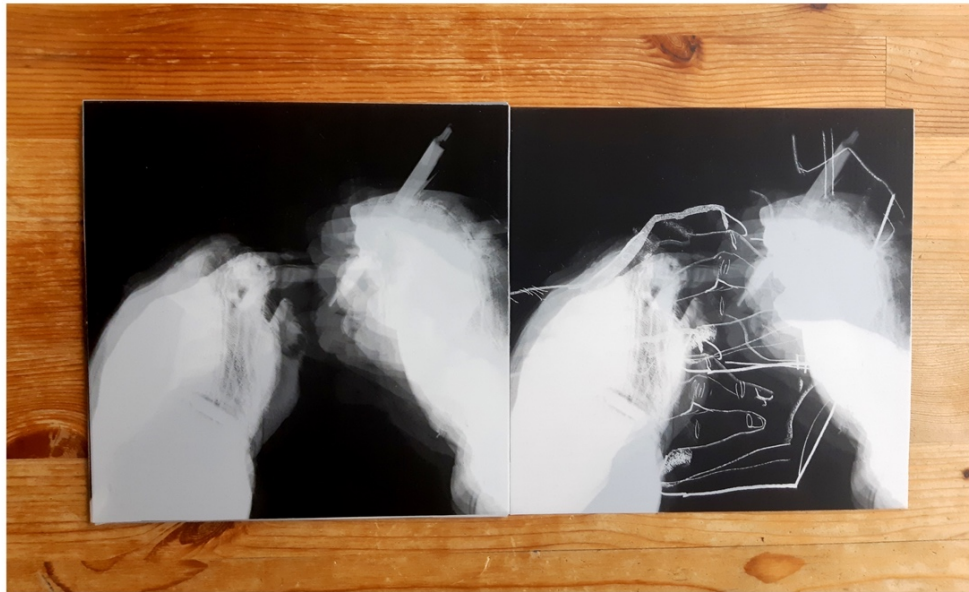


Figure 25: Back cover of *Fear of the Unknown*.

Finally, for my third book, *The Story of #9331*, I focus on objects. I curated a set of objects that are important to my story. I elevate their importance to my life by assigning meaning to them in the way that I lay them out and capture them through photography. These items also reveal more details about that time in my life. These objects, in turn, I placed in my old suitcase, which I took on my journey to Canada. This suitcase, with the items in it, are an important part of the exhibit.



Figure 26: The objects I discuss in my book, *The Story of #9331*.

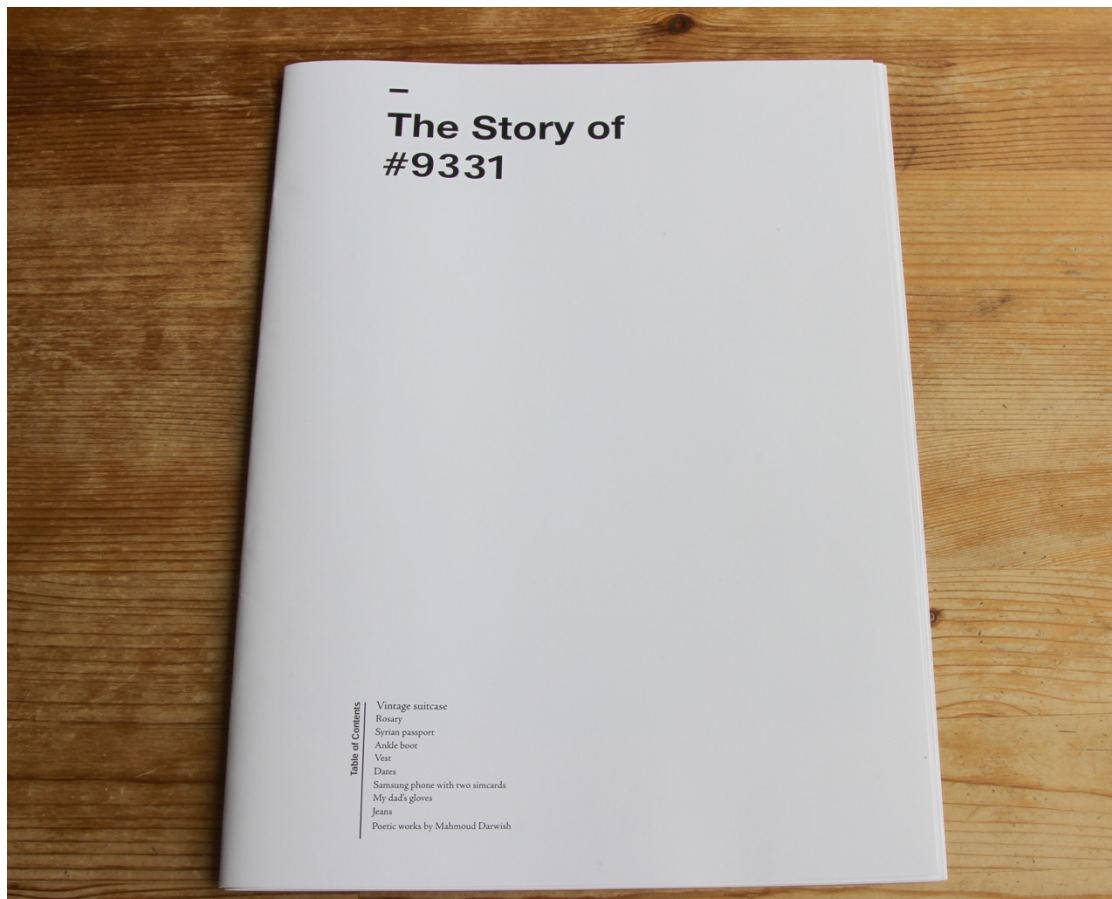


Figure 29: Bashar Kalash, cover of *The Story of #9331*, printed on 12"x18" paper.



Figure 27: Details.



Figure 28: Left: Vest purchased from local bazaar in Bab Touma. Right: The cell phone I carried during my journey.

Some of these objects were the Darwish book, my father's gloves, my vest, my ticket for the border, and a rosary which I received when I was a boy scout in Damascus (these objects are all photographed with the suitcase in the book. It was these objects that sent me back into my memories, recollecting scenes vividly. At that moment, I was reminded of the special power that objects have to tell a story, of how the mind constructs a narrative around an object or a collection of objects based on one's personal experience of these objects. Objects, then, have the ability to recall in people certain memories associated with them, and this act of recalling is a form of self-reflection. As I was interested in expressing my identity through my work, I realized that this suitcase containing these personal belongings could convey, accompanied with a written narrative, the story of my journey and how I underwent a radical change when I left my home as a refugee.



Figure 29: My suitcase, open to show its contents.

Conclusion

When I first moved to Canada, I was apprehensive of the fact that I would have to put aside parts of my Syrian culture that I felt constituted my identity. Canada is the most multicultural country in the world, but I was still leaving my homeland for a foreign country with different cultural norms and people who spoke a language that was mostly foreign to me. While “performing” in order to fit in (in Fanon’s terms) is an inevitable part of any refugee or newcomer’s initial experience in their new social milieu, I generally did not feel misrecognized as a Syrian refugee, for who I really was, by Toronto locals because I got the sense that being an “outsider” to Toronto was not unusual; for the most part, I was not treated with disrespect because of my outsider status. Thus, after acclimatizing to my new environment and getting accustomed to my new life, I noticed that living in Canada had changed some aspects of my identity. I learned from reading Darwish’s writings on the importance of one’s homeland and

on displacement and exile that one's "place" or milieu is a key factor that shapes one's identity. Because identity is a social construction, the culture, customs, and languages one has experienced or currently experiences largely shape one's sense of identity. So over time, I started to integrate my Canadian lifestyle into my sense of identity, of who I am (although to re-emphasize the theme of social constructionism, being a Syrian-Canadian does not limit the scope of what I am and what I can be in the future).

Likewise, just as identity is ambiguous and not something that can be defined by using clear-cut categories, we have also established, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's work, that the cultural identity of individuals and groups is not homogenous. Rather, cultural identity is composite. Cultural identities (for instance, Syrian, Canadian, etc.) do not exist independently from other cultural identities. Rather, cultural identities overlap with each other, and the lines that distinguish one cultural identity from others are not as clear-cut as they are often conceptualized because cultural identities often share defining cultural norms. Bhabha's ideas on culture greatly contributed to my deepened understanding of cultural identity while I was writing this paper because I learned from his notion of hybridity that cultural identity is fluid and, by nature, changes over time as societies change.

Finally, the method I chose in conjunction with the theoretical frameworks were ideal for my shaping of the written story, the paper, and the three multimedia books. These methods encourage one to reflect on their memories of experiences that define their sense of identity. When individuals reflect on their sense of identity, they think about the experiences that they value to be the most important to them. This process of self-reflection entails that the individual recalls the memories associated with these experiences. Thus, when individuals try to get a sense for who they are in the present, they sequence a series of memories in chronological order to create a narrative for themselves that explains to them the changes that I in their lives. These narratives, in turn, reveal to them how their lives have changed since a certain moment in the

past until the present moment. Thus, these chronological narratives that people construct for themselves are crucial to identity formation.

For instance, images, which I use throughout all three books are also blank canvases upon which the viewer can draw associated meanings that can help them interpret my intentions as an artist and designer. Likewise, images in sequence prompt the viewer to construct a narrative that attempts to explain the interrelationships between the images and better understand the significance of the sequenced images as a whole.

The value, then, of the methods I employed to complete this project is that I now have a better understanding of the creative process of the designer. Completing this project taught me the importance of self-reflection in the design process. I learned, from using autoethnography and research as a creation for this project, that drawing primarily on significant memories and experiences as a source of data to inform my work is often a more effective way to achieve meaningful results than drawing primarily on the work of others and then using what aligns with my experience and point of view.

Finally, in terms of building on this project in the future, I would like to incorporate the suitcase idea into the format of gallery exhibitions. A suitcase full of an individual's personal objects as a means to represent their identity is well-suited to installation because actual suitcases (as opposed to images) containing personal objects can be displayed for others to examine along with accompanying audio (field recordings, spoken word, etc.) to create an appropriate environment for the suitcase, effectively immersing the viewer into the individual's life. Additionally, several suitcases can comprise a single exhibit. For instance, other individuals who were displaced from their homes can volunteer to share their written or spoken stories with others and fill their suitcases with objects that are significant to their identity or objects that they had with them while leaving their homeland. This collaborative gallery exhibit, in turn,

would encourage others to share their stories in similar ways; ultimately, it is a means of storytelling that aims to raise awareness surrounding the plights of refugees, immigrants, and others.



Figure 30: Bashar Kalash, as of January 14th, 2020, I am now a Canadian citizen.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press.
- Bhabha, Homi K. (2004). *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chapman, O., & Sawchuk, K. (2012). * *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation, 5(26).
- Chapman, O., & Sawchuk, K. (2015). Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments. *RACAR : Revue d'art Canadienne*, 40(1), 49.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1032753ar>
- Cartwright, Richard L. (1968). "Some Remarks on Essentialism". *The Journal of Philosophy*. 65 (20): 615–626. Doi:10.2307/2024315. *JSTOR*.
- Darwish, M. (2006). *In the Presence of Absence*. Penguin.
- Darwish, M. (2013). *Unfortunately, it was paradise: selected poems*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Drabinski, John, "Frantz Fanon", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/frantz-fanon/>>.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1)
- Eriksson, T. (n.d.). *Being native – distance, closeness and doing auto/self-ethnography*.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press.
- Felluga, D. F. (2015). *Critical theory: The key concepts*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge
- Gordon, L. *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (1995), New York: Routledge.
- Hegel, G. W. F., Miller, A. V., & Findlay, J. N. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford:

- Clarendon Press.
- Hitchcock, G., & Hughes, D. (1995). *Research and the Teacher*. London: Routledge.
- Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019) Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>>.
- Keshavarz, M., Morrison, A. D., & Malmö högskola. (2016). *Design-Politics: An Inquiry into Passports, Camps and Borders*.
- Khosravi, S. (2010). *'Illegal' traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Martinique, E. (2016). "Reading the Narrative Photography".
- <https://www.widewalls.ch/narrative-photography/>
- Méndez, M. G. (2014). *Autoethnography as a research method: Advantages, limitations and criticisms*. Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, 15(2), 279.
- <https://doi.org/10.14483/udistrital.jour.calj.2013.2.a09>
- Moje, E. B., Ciechanowski, K. M., Kramer, K., Ellis, L., Carrillo, R., & Collazo, T. (2004). *Working toward third space in content area literacy: An examination of everyday funds of knowledge and Discourse*. Reading Research Quarterly, 39(1), 38-70.
- Doi:10.1598/RRQ.39.1.4
- Roswell & K. Pahl (Eds.), *The routledge handbook of literacy studies*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rutherford, J. (1990). "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London.
- Rushdie, S. (1991). *Imaginary homelands: essays and criticism, 1981-1991*. London: Granta
- Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism* (1st Vintage Books ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Said, E. W., & Mohr, J. (1999). *After the last sky: Palestinian lives*. New York: Columbia

University Press.

Said, E. (2002). *Reflections on exile and other essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Simmons, M. (2012). *Politics of Diaspora*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, OISE/University of Toronto.

Spivak, G. C. (2015). *Outside in the teaching machine*. New York: Routledge 2015.

Statistics Canada. (2017). Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census. *Statistics Canada*

Taylor, C., 1989, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Visual Influences References

Laurence Aëgeter :

<http://www.kimknoppers.nl/index.php/2014/04/introduction-exhibition-laurence-aegerter/>

Idris Khan:

<https://fraenkelgallery.com/idris-khan-and-nicholas-nixon>

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/idris-khan/>

Duane Michals :

<http://www.dcmooregallery.com/artists/duane-michals>

<https://www.popphoto.com/american-photo/interview-duane-michals-50-years-sequences-and-staging-photos/>

<https://artblart.com/tag/duane-michals-magritte-with-hat/>

Jan van Toorn :

<https://koenslothouber.com/Tetrahedron-menu-1>

<https://designobserver.com/feature/the-debate-part-2/38884>

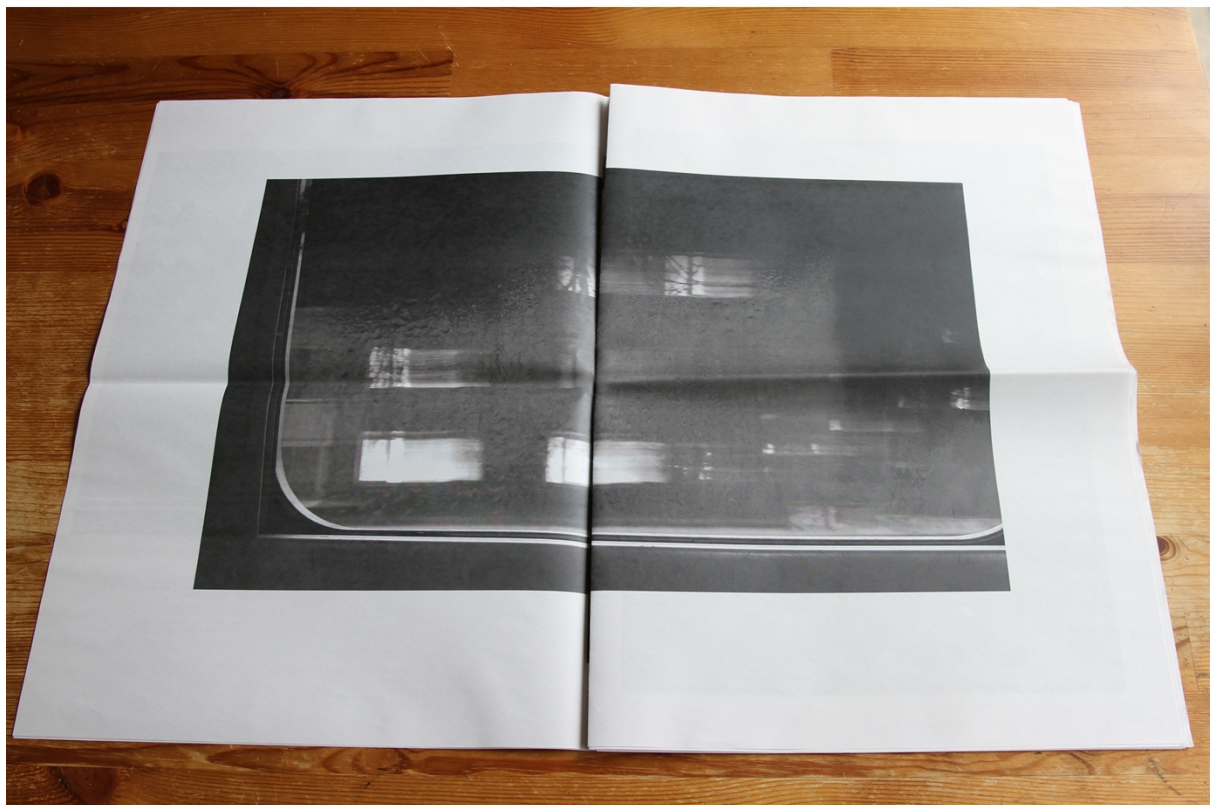
Wael Morcos:

<http://work.waelmorcos.com/About-Me>

Appendix I: *In Search of a New Homeland*



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, cover of the newspaper

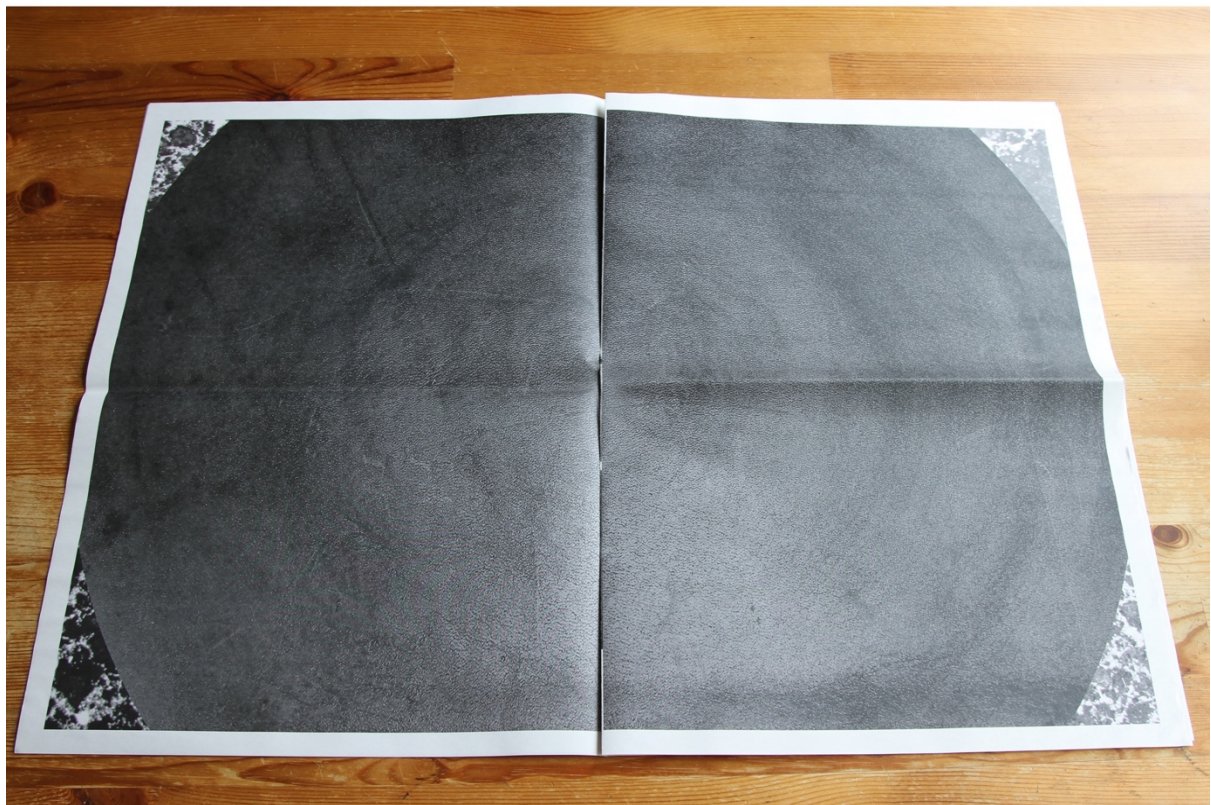


Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*. UP: Leaving Damascus by bus.



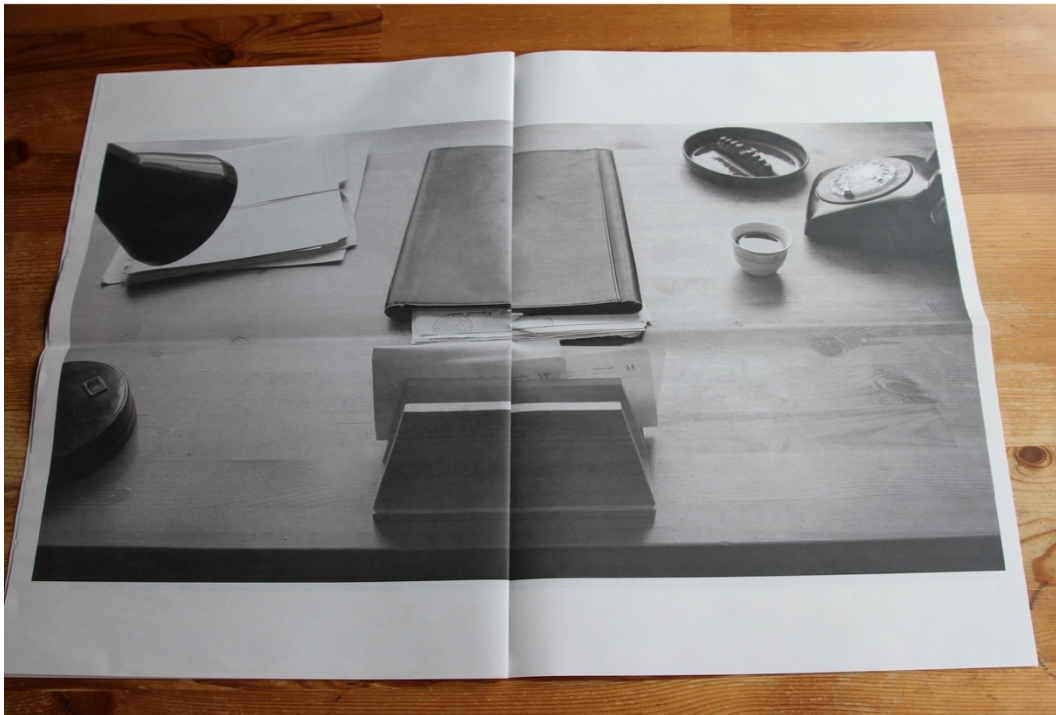
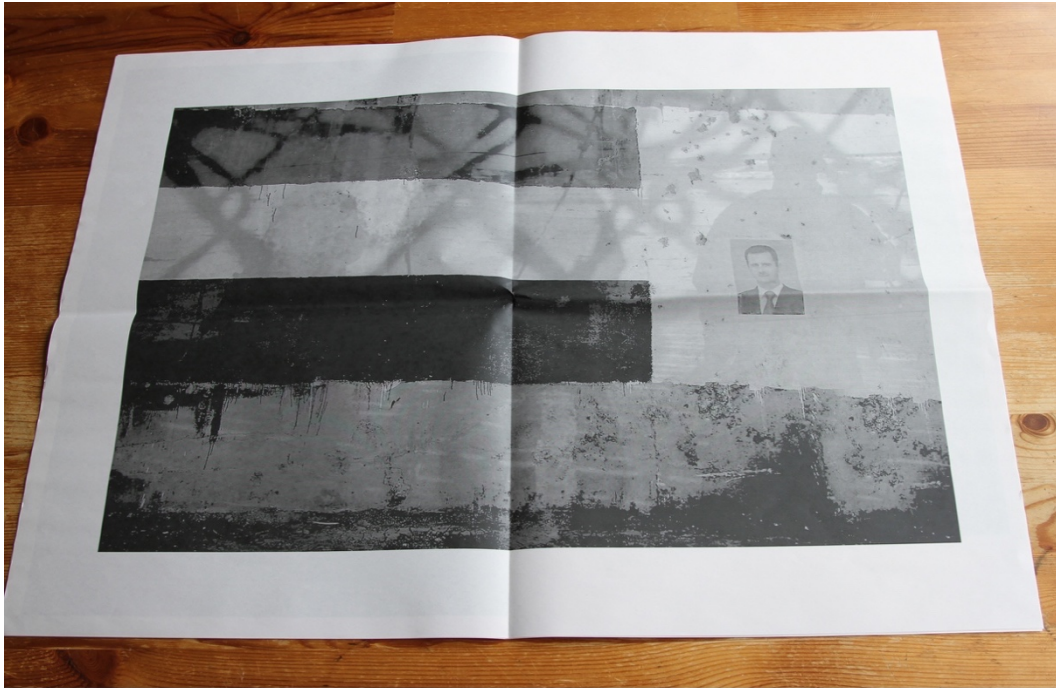
Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, outside Damascus, dawn. Close-up of checkpoint.

Down: Having arrived at the checkpoint.



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, close-up of checkpoint.

Down: Having arrived at the checkpoint.



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, at the Syrian-Turkish border.

Down: Waiting for the border officer while he reviews my documents.



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, waiting for the border officer while he reviews my documents. Down: Flipping the pages in my book to show sequence and narrative; the passage of time.



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*. waiting for the border officer while he reviews my documents. Down: Close-up shot of the border officer's desk.

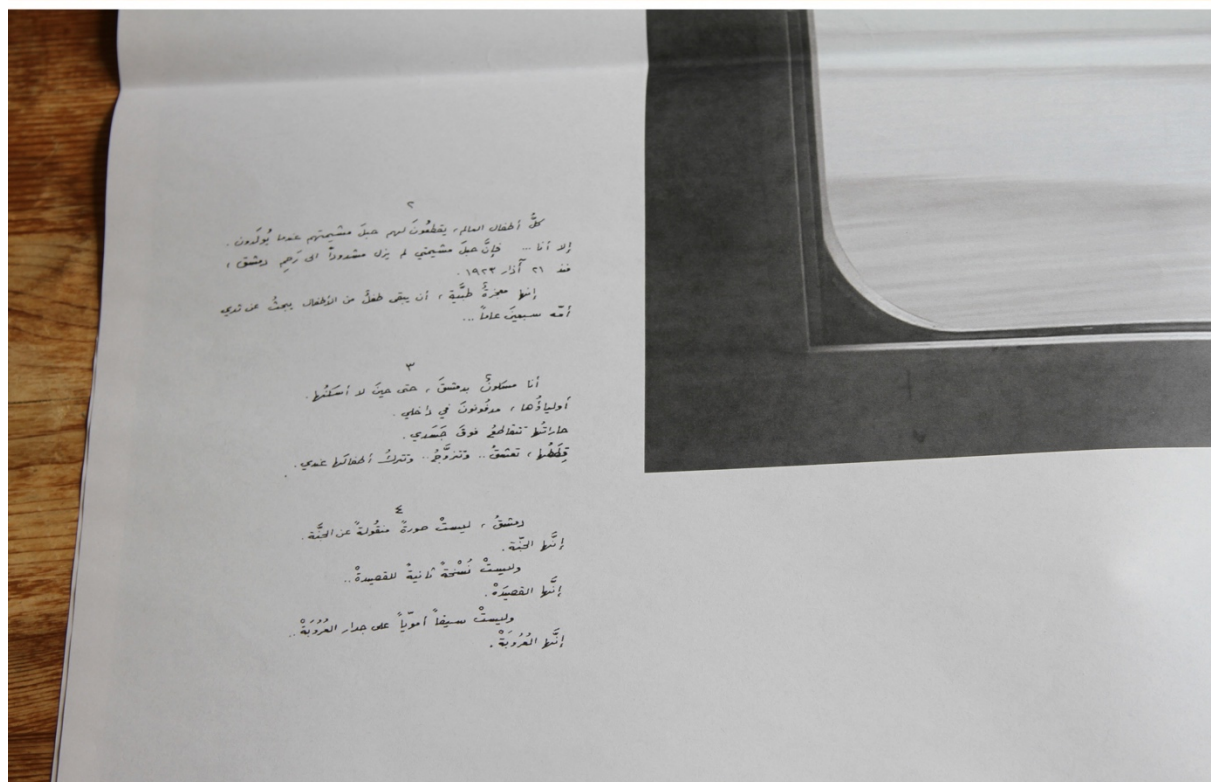
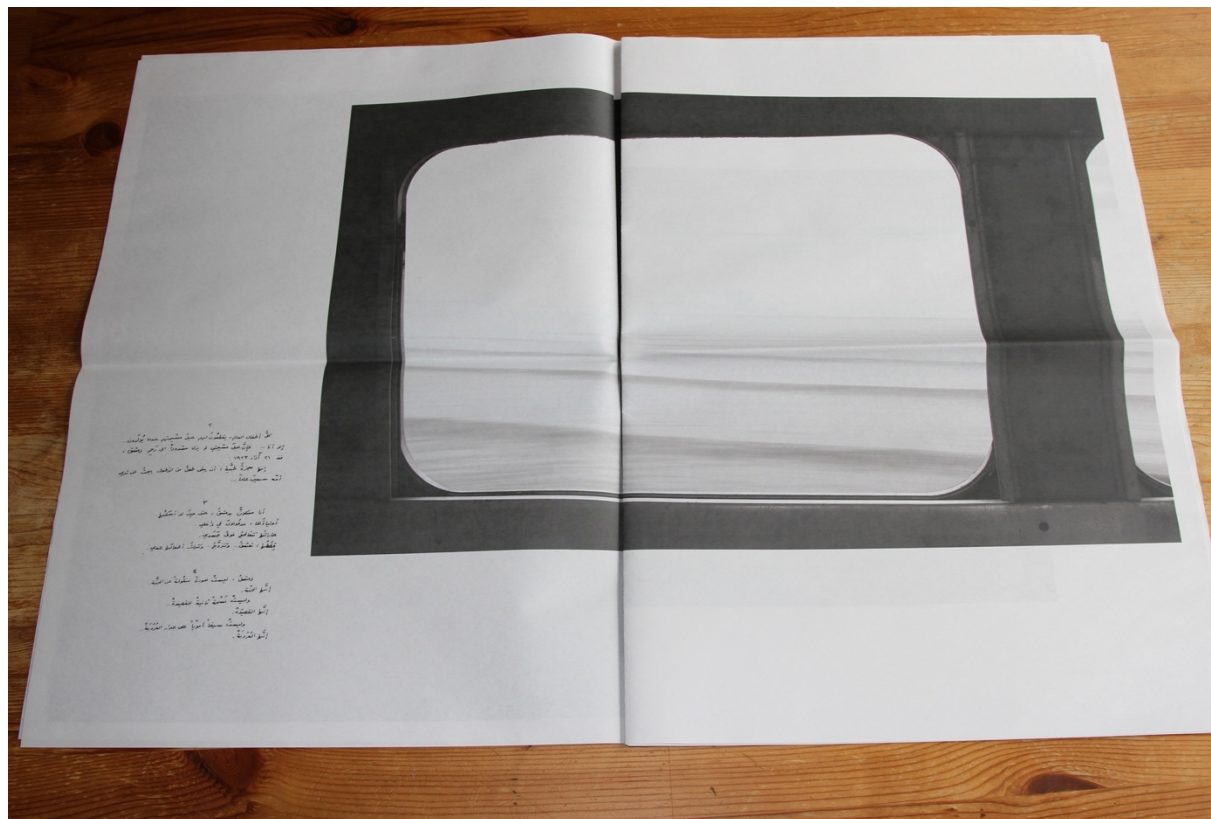


Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, waiting for the border officer while he reviews my documents. Down: The border guard placing a 24-hour pass outside of Syria on top of my passport.



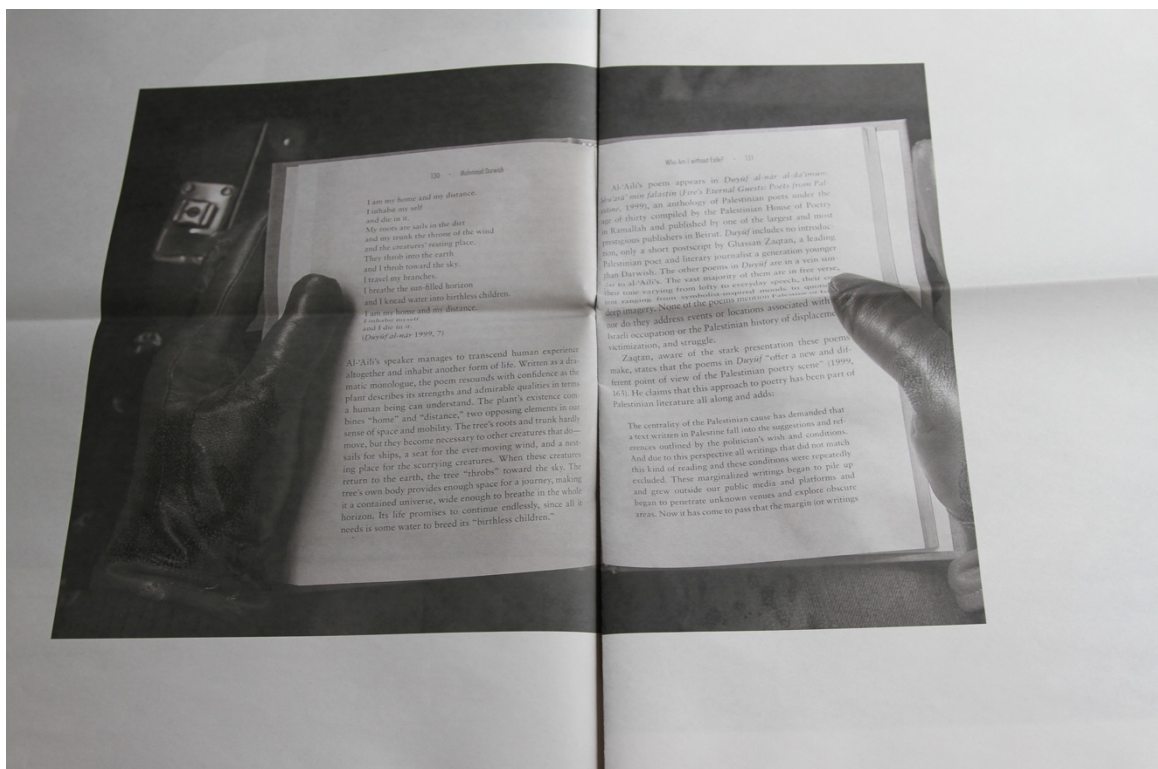
Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, leaving the Syrian-Turkish border checkpoint.

Down: Leaving Syria; entering Turkey.



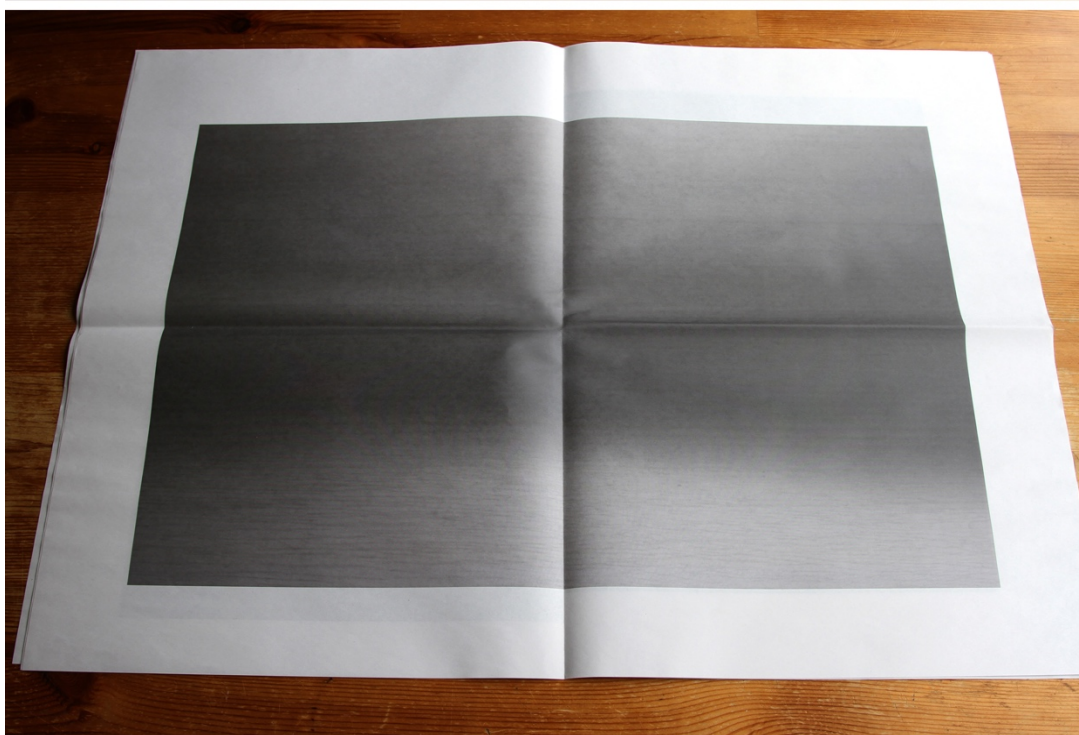
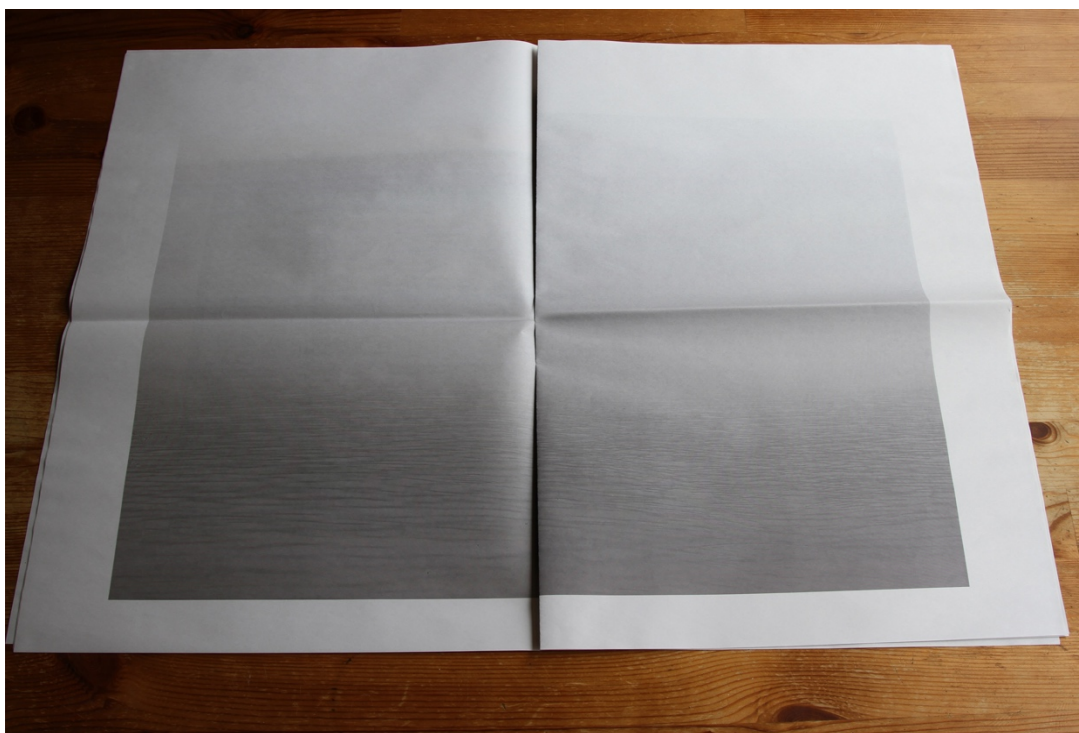
Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, the sea seen from the bus window.

Down: Ode to Damascus on the left.



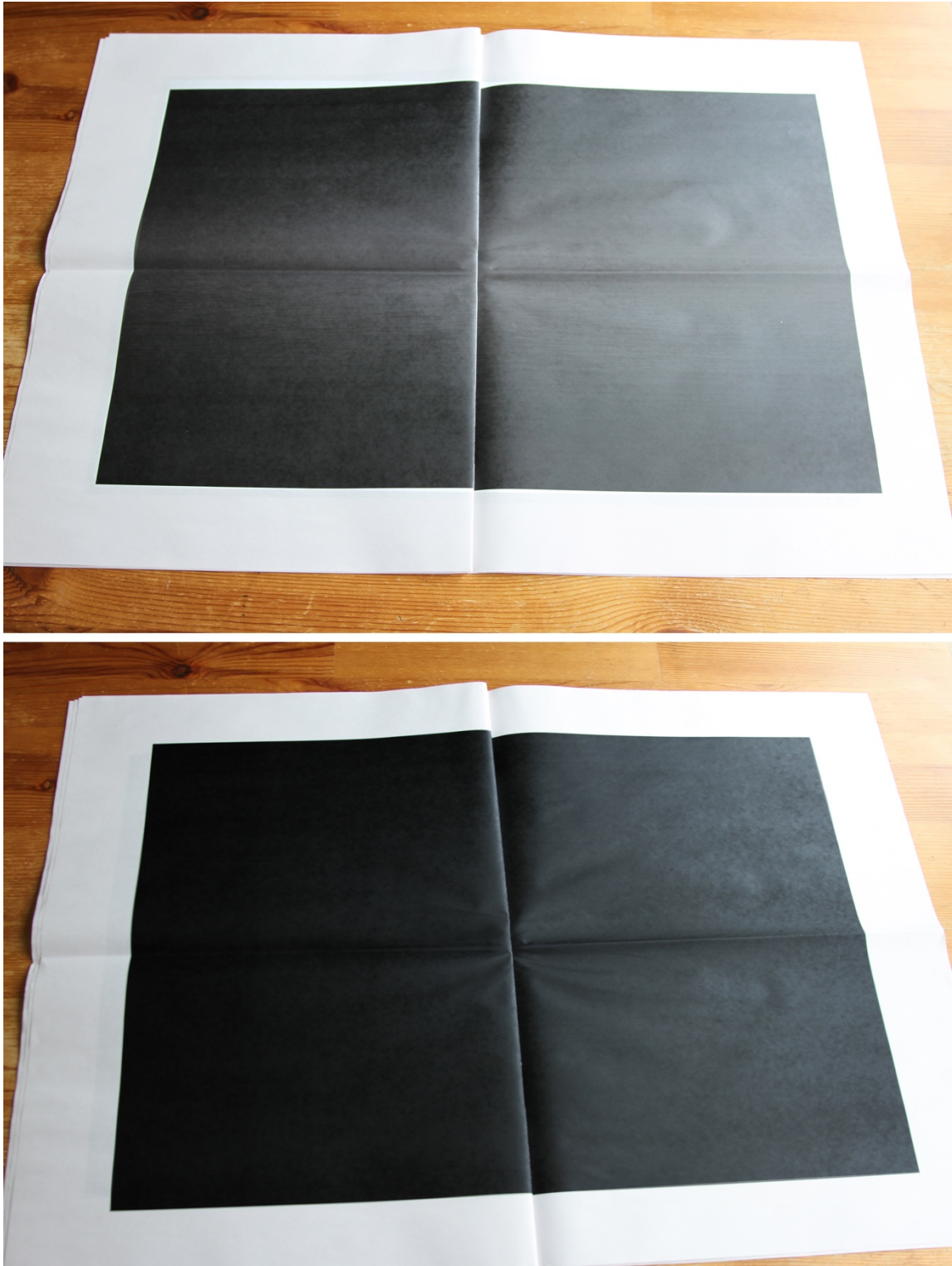
Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a new homeland*, reading a book of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry on the Homeland on the bus.

Down: Details of my view of the vast Mediterranean Sea.



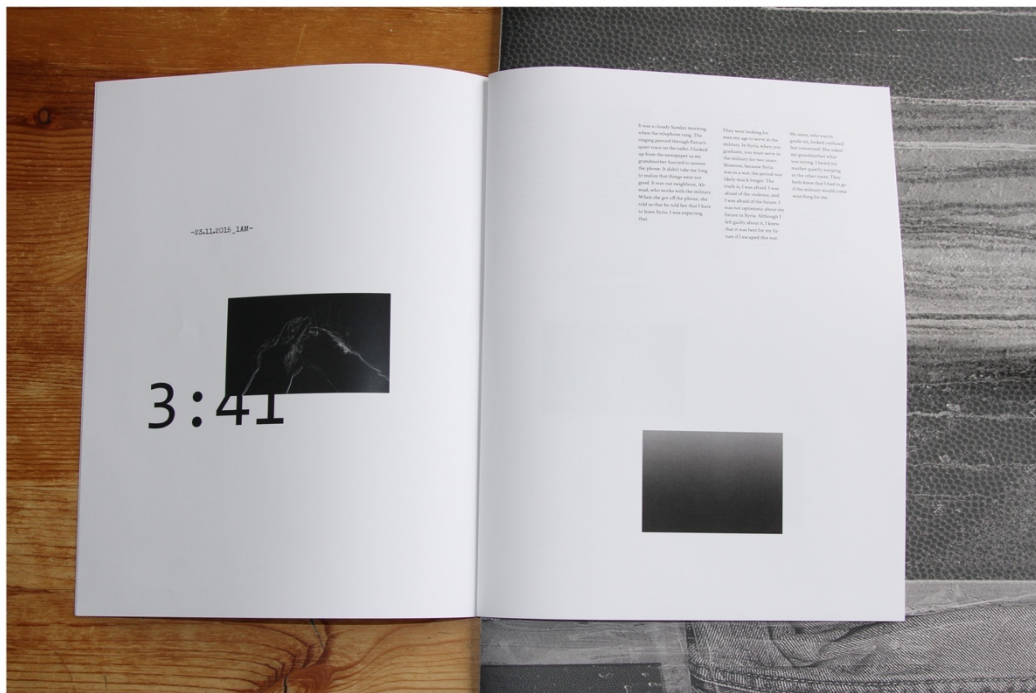
Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, my view of the vast Mediterranean Sea.

Down: My view of the vast Mediterranean Sea.



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, my view of the vast Mediterranean Sea.

Down: My view of the vast Mediterranean Sea.



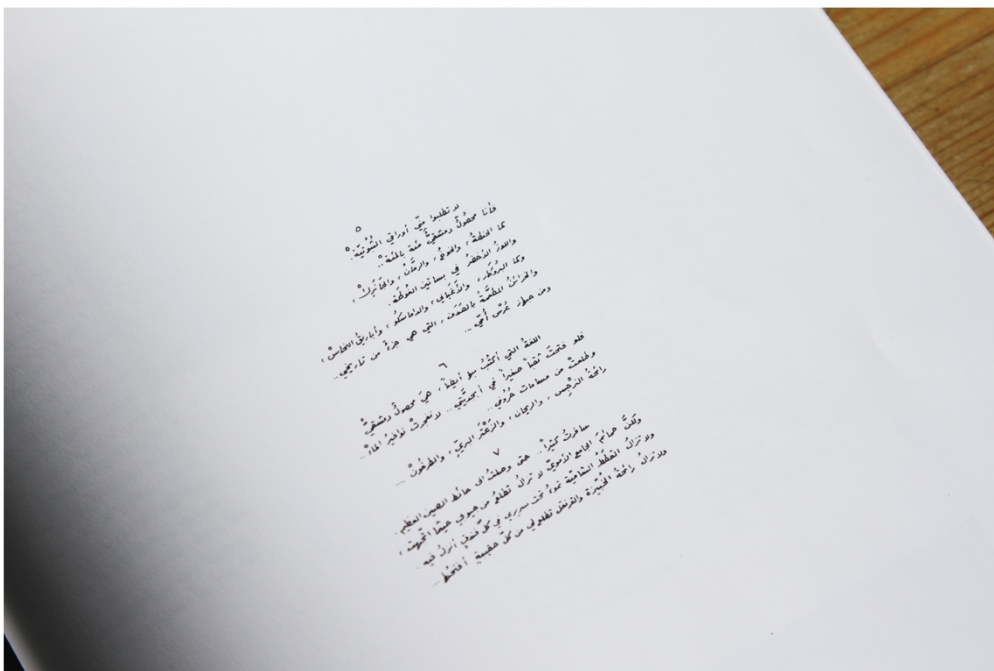
Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a New Homeland*, my auto-ethnographic account of my journey as a Syrian refugee, juxtaposed on the first photo book.



The opening pages of *In Search of a New Homeland*



The opening pages of *In Search of a New Homeland* followed by the Arabic edition of *In Search of a New Homeland*



Bashar Kalash, from *In Search of a new Homeland*.

Down: Quote about the struggles of refugees at the border.



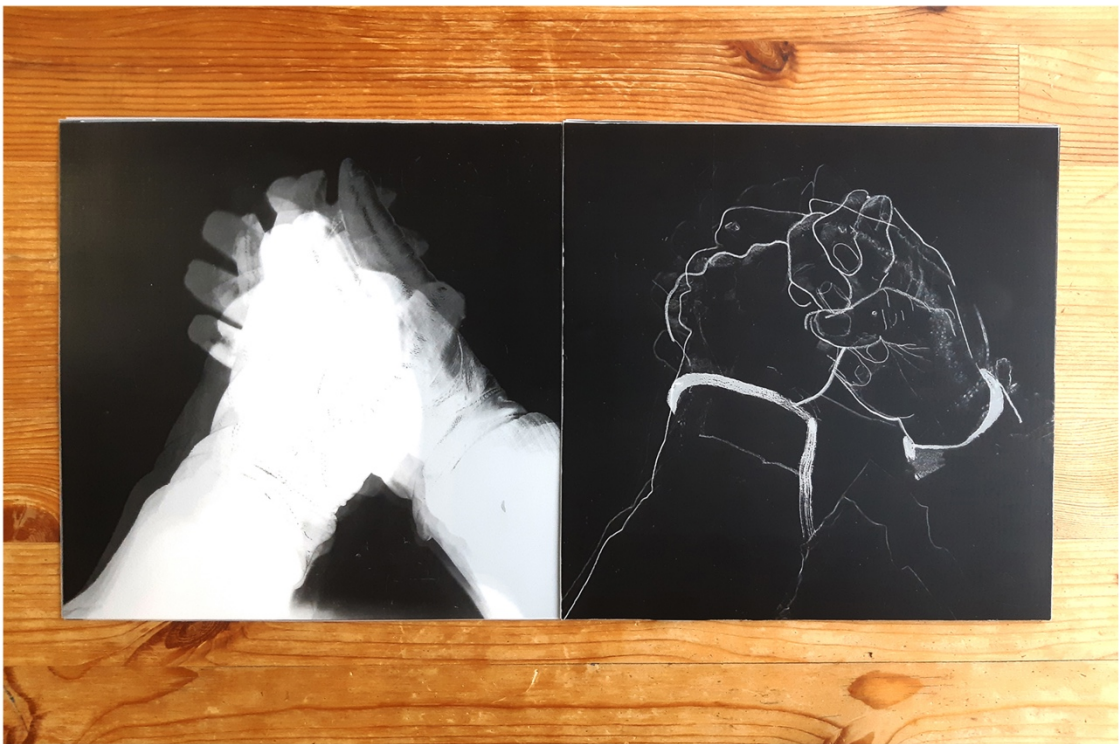
Opening pages in Arabic

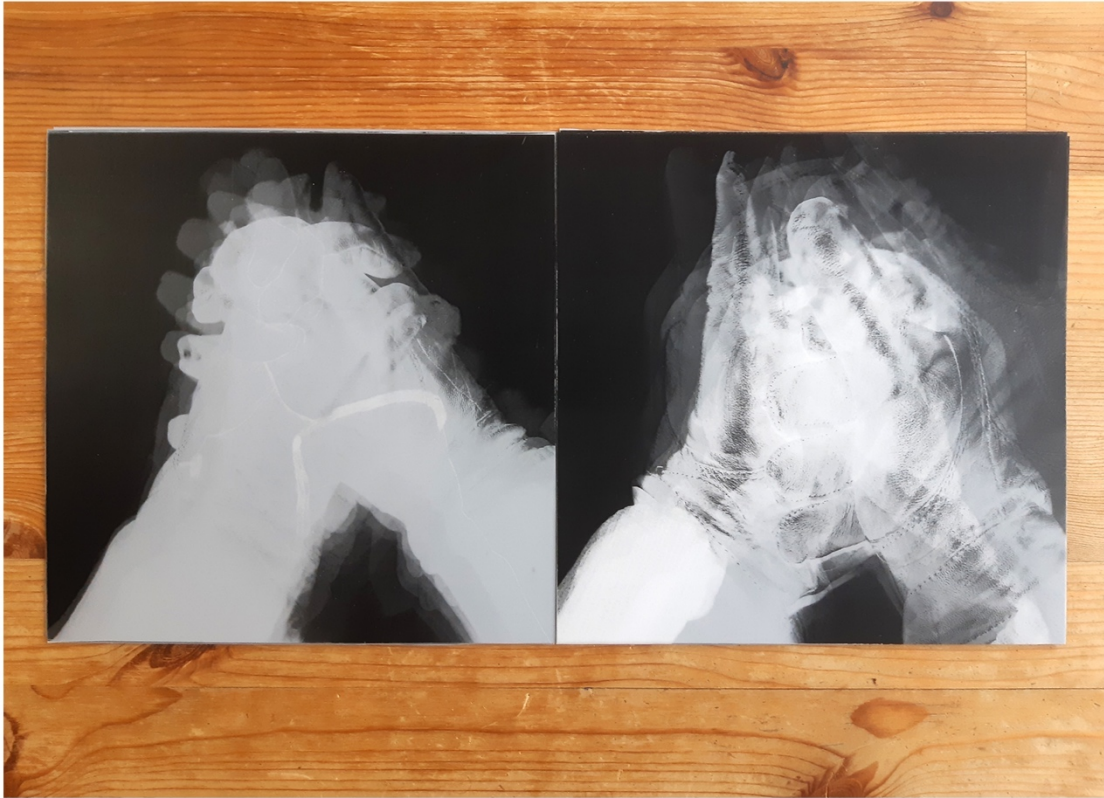
Appendix II: *Fear of the Unknown*

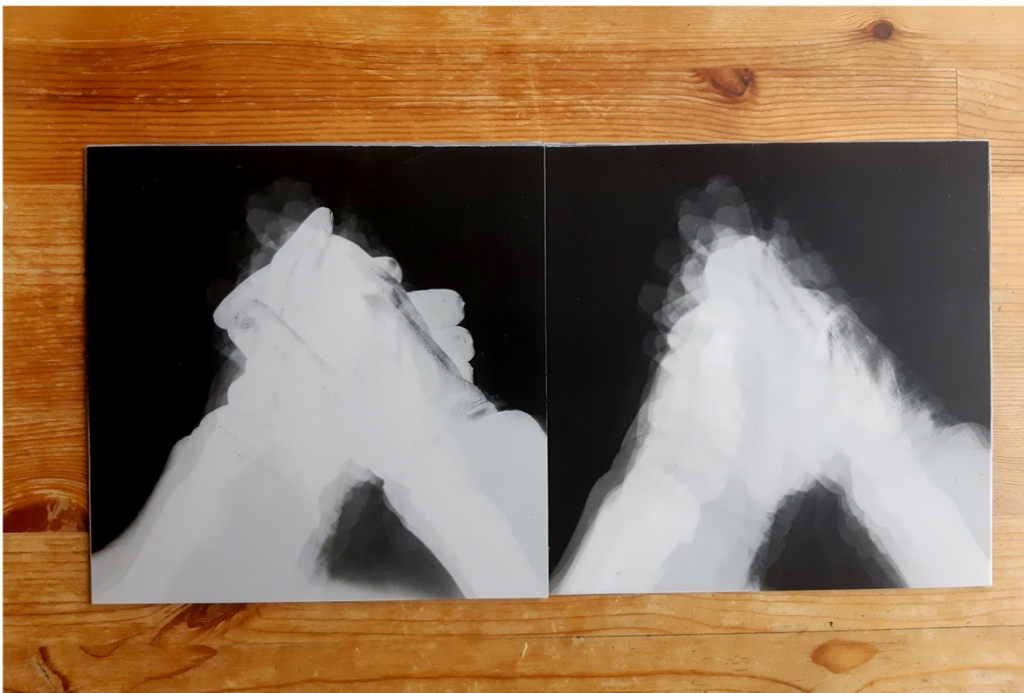


Bashar Kalash, cover of the book *Fear of the Unknown*, printed on 8"x8" translucent paper.

Down: Flipping the first page to show that the book is printed on translucent paper.

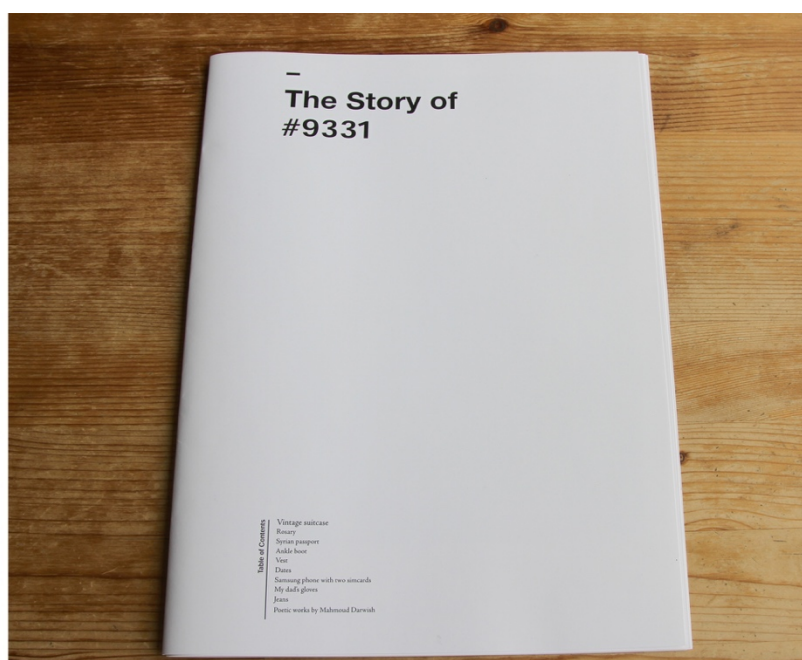








Appendix III: *The Story of #9331*



Bashar Kalash, cover of the book *The Story of #9331*, printed on 12"x18". Bottom: My objects.



Top: photo of suitcase in *The Story of #9331*. Bottom Left: Rosary I received as a scout. Bottom right: My passport.



Top: Boots I wore during my journey. A gift from my mother after I graduated from university. Bottom left: My vest, purchased from a bazaar in Bab Touma. It kept me warm during the cold nights of my journey. Bottom right: my cell phone.



Top left: Dates were known to have healing powers. Bashar Kalash, *The Story of #9331*. Top right: The gloves remind me of my father. He is in a better place. Bottom left: Mahmoud Darwish's book, *Something about the Homeland*.

IN SEARCH OF A NEW HOMELAND

It was a cloudy Sunday morning when the telephone rang. The ringing pierced through Fairuz's quiet voice on the radio. I looked up from the newspaper as my grandmother hurried to answer the phone. It didn't take me long to realize that things were not good. It was our neighbour, Ahmad, who works with the military. When she got off the phone, she told us that he told her that I have to leave Syria. I was expecting that. They were looking for men my age to serve in the military. In Syria, when you graduate, you must serve in the military for two years. However, because Syria was in a war, the period was likely much longer.

The truth is, I was afraid. I was afraid of the violence, and I was afraid of the future. I was not optimistic about my future in Syria. Although I felt guilty about it, I knew that it was best for my future if I escaped this war. My sister, who was in grade six, looked confused but concerned. She asked my grandmother what was wrong. I heard my mother quietly weeping in the other room. They both knew that I had to go if the military would come searching for me. Any Syrian forced to leave their country would experience what I was feeling at that moment. It's like being plucked from your soil.

A few minutes later, my mother came with her eyes red and puffy, and we looked at each other in silence for a couple seconds. Then, she turned off the radio, still playing Fairuz's *Ana Sar Lazem Wade'kon* and announced it's time for church.

Since I was young, I attended mass every Sunday with my family at Cross Church on Al-Qassaa, near our apartment. Even though this church was near Jobar, the most dangerous area in Damascus, the church was full when we arrived this morning. These people around me, I thought, many of them are my friends, neighbours, shop owners--memories that I will hold dearly to my heart forever when I leave. I started to get emotional as I realized I might never see them ever again. Although we were in a dangerous area, being in the midst of these familiar faces all praying together made me feel safe. But some of my friends were not there. Many of them had left for Turkey. And several died trying to escape the war.

Syria's borders were closed off. It was illegal for anyone to leave the country. Those caught trying to escape were imprisoned, or even shot at. Many of those who left opted to sneak out of the country with their most important belongings by car to Turkey, and from Turkey, take a boat to Greece. From Greece, many chose to hitchhike across Europe to peaceful countries that would accept refugees such as France or Germany. I knew that I would have to attempt this dangerous trip soon. Those were some of the most anxious times for me in my life.

While my mother and my sister started walking home, I decided to wander the streets myself. On the way home, I thought about how I would have to pack my most important belongings in a suitcase and leave everything else behind. Why these things? Are these the things that define me the most?

As I approached the old part of the city, I passed the Umayyad mosque. I love my country; I love everything about it. I learned to memorize all the details. I came to learn where the jasmine flowers are in the streets. Where the cats gather everyday. When the old man comes to feed them. The coffee cups on the tables outside the cafe.

As I walked, I thought about my friends who left Syria. Maybe some of them got married? Maybe one of them drowned in the sea? I hope some of them are living a normal life now, away from the troubles of war. After my walk, I came home, and I packed my suitcase. I will fly away, like the dusty doves around the mosque.

Still silent with disappointment, this magical expanse which was once the homeland will now be forever a source of bittersweet memories and loss.

When I returned to my apartment, I was feeling overwhelmed. I was trying to calm down. My eye kept wandering to the lone small suitcase in the corner of my room. The suitcase I was

dreading to dust off. I knew that I would leave the disappointment of doing so until the last minute.

The gloves my father gave me were the first thing that caught my eye in the suitcase. I hoped that they would bring me warmth in the cold times to come. I decided to pack lightly, bringing only the most necessary things that would help me to survive the upcoming hours. I then went to the bookshelf to get a photo album. I filled it with my favourite photos of my family and friends. Then, I started to look for the rest of my identification papers. I hoped that they would be sufficient to vouch for my identity after I became a source of concern even for neighbouring countries. It was my last night in Damascus. Tomorrow, I venture to leave. At last, I stretched on the bed. But I was restless. Tossing and turning.

It was 3:30AM. I didn't say goodbye to anyone. Not even a phone call. I was too weak and afraid. As Rumi once said, silence is a source of great strength. I stood up and I carried my small suitcase and put it at the door. I went back to my room and waited for the driver to come in the silence of the night. I didn't want my 13-year old sister to see me leaving. I didn't want to worry my mother. I thought it was better to go silently. I would call them from Greece...if I made it alive.

A few minutes later, I was on my way towards the dangerous crossing point in Turkey where I could be arrested. I was shaking in fear and reciting prayers. I was on Qasioun mountain overlooking Damascus. It was blind in darkness and full of echoes of incessant bombardments.

I left heartbroken. I never would have left if I was not forced to leave. At that moment, I would have cried out in the streets to say goodbye to Damascus. I would have visited every school where I studied. I would have wept in every courtyard, and basked myself in the words of its bookshelves, where I had spent hours reading in ancient libraries and cafes. I would have ran to Al-Mhajreen square, visited Hamidieh, walked on Sarouja, Muskia, Midan, Shaghour, Al- Qassaa, and every trail I loved to walk.

When I stopped at the Turkish border, I was pretending that I was not afraid. I tried to focus on the rush of blood through my veins at waterfall speed and on my heart celebrating the momentum. Yes, I was not afraid. But the risk was like threading a needle. I wanted to win the round, like a gambler. What a gamble! I may win or lose my life.

I walked into a name-checking room, with my small suitcase and my brightest smile. I handed the employee at the desk my travel permit that my neighbour Ahmad gave me. I didn't want him to open the black book which contained the list of names of the people wanted for military service. I bribed him with a pack of cigarettes that I had in my pocket. To be honest, I saw in a movie, and it seemed like a good idea because the hero survived. But real life is different. I am an idiot that will surely pay the price for taking films as reality. I prayed in my heart as he ignored me and the pack of cigarettes, and as he took the black notebook without even replying to me or raising his gaze to my face. Finally, he looked at me and quickly returned my papers. I was given a 24-hour permit. While I was heading out of the building, I heard the man's voice again: Hold on just a minute! My heart froze. I turned around, trying to appear calm. But I realized that he was talking to the other employee...

I ran to the car, fast as a Damascus haroun cat. I jumped and made my way to the next destination. There is no fear here. I am in Turkey without the sounds of war. I have never seen the moon so big. I decided to call my mother and tell her that I made it to Turkey, and that I would go by boat to Greece. In the van, I told the driver to speed up on the semi-empty road to take me to the harbor as agreed.

Finally, I arrived to Izmir. Because of the high tide, I was told that the trip can take twice as long as expected. Maybe more than an hour and a half depending on the height of the waves. I got on the boat already full of other refugees and waited. Suddenly, instructions started: "Once the boats arrive at the beach, men go out first to help women and children out.

The key to making it safely is travelling light.” We must leave some bags behind. Finally, wear a life jacket, and board the boat. Doctors, teachers, engineers, and housewives, and people from all walks of life undertook this perilous journey.

I was worried that the boat would sink. I was a good swimmer, but what about others? Who would I save in such a situation? These people, fellow Syrians, were a part of me, trying to make a better life for themselves.

I had some money in one pocket and a flashlight attached to a whistle in the other. In minutes, two people had arrived. They had the rugged, sullen look of criminals. Gaunt and grimy faces; muscular bodies. I would not think of wrestling with either of them! I became self-aware and avoided any uncalculated movement. After several others started lining up, the smuggler counted everyone’s money and gave everyone a yellow slip with a number on it. We were all numbers now. Before getting on the boat, I went back to the beach to arrange the luggage in my suitcase.

At the shore, I was watching the high waves splash against the rubber boat. My mind was occupied. I was anxious about mishaps that might occur on this trip, and I was thinking about my family that I had left behind. What surprises awaited me? Will I be food to the many mediterranean fish in the sea like the thousands who attempted this trip before me? Or will I be one of the “lucky” ones that gets their corpse recovered from the sea? My mind was restless from the worrying. I never thought about drowning before. But now that I was facing the risk, the reality of the danger loomed over me...

At last, at 4:00AM, they called us down. We had about 50 people in a six-meter long rubber boat! I was holding my breath in fear. Families were grouped together, and there were a few solo travellers like me. Each of us had a different story, but now we were all confronting our fate, fighting against the same demise.

Cut up jeans and various clothing items were sprawled on the boat’s floor to absorb the water, as if they were taken from a table at the Al-Hamidieh Souq. It was so cold. The smell of the rain mixing with the smell of the sea gave off a rancid odour. I felt a gust of wind chill my bones, and my arms and legs started to feel weak.

I reached into my suitcase and pulled out my father’s gloves. Hopefully, they would shield my hands from the cold wind. I also grabbed the little Mahmoud Darwish book I brought with me so I could stay awake. The tide was getting higher. The force of the waves was enough to push you into someone’s lap or push someone else into you, and because the boat was packed, there was not much anyone could do about this.

The crashing waves resonated in my head and soundtracked my anxiety. I felt overwhelmed with fear. And then for a moment, I realized that if I stayed on this rubber boat, I would probably die like the thousands that attempted this voyage before me. For a second, I saw the face of death before me. In the end, the boat was designed for only a few people...not 50 people with their luggage!

I went back to Damascus, disappointed in myself. I felt like a coward. I hated the fear that overwhelmed me. Now I was also afraid that my name was recorded at the border. Would I dare to risk this journey again?

I must admit that it was comforting relief to be walking on Al-Qassaa again; those familiar sights and smells enveloped me with their warmth. Having returned to Damascus, I had no choice but to escape to Lebanon for the time being. Either way, I could not stay here any longer. I found someone willing to drive me to Beirut in the dead of the night, and I stayed there for a few weeks under the UN guarantee waiting.

Finally, I got a phone call from my uncle, who had been living in Canada for many years. He told me that I would be accepted as a refugee because Canada opens its borders for refugees.

I felt like I was running towards the light at the end of the tunnel. Now it was time to meet the Canadian immigration organization and the medical examination team in Beirut. Finally, I got the UN guarantee.

I was at Rafic Al-Hariri International airport in Beirut waiting for the departure. It was six in the morning. An old man asked me where I was going. We started to chat. He nodded his head. He said: "In Canada, you will go downtown and see the big skyscrapers and wander the world's largest streets. Who knows? Perhaps you can travel to the United States to visit the White House, where decisions are made that govern the entire world. You can visit Hollywood and see the legends of American cinema and the celebrities that we all know about. I envy you for this opportunity." I pondered these words for a few moments and smiled at the old man.

My eyes were directed towards gate 21 through which I would take the plane to Canada for the first time in my life. I entered the checkpoint that separated me and the passport desk. It was now 8:00AM. An hour before taking off...I was staring at the gate of the unknown.

Conflicting feelings are not best described in words, but what I felt was a mix of fear and excitement in the face of this blank page that I will write on from a new bottle of ink. With my friends and family behind me, reflections on this glass wall, I arrived at the checkpoint and handed the employee the special paper that allowed me to cross. He asked me: where are you going? Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I felt as if it was a fact I had to recite and that this was the examination.

I went up to the plane with my small suitcase and a special paper with my name written in English. I walked to the seat and sat down. It was a special place because it was a window seat so I could watch the land from above.

While I was waiting for the pilot to announce that the plane was shortly taking off, I caught a whiff of jasmine. I quickly realized that the jasmine odour was coming from a nearby woman wearing the fragrance. It brought me relief in the face of the unknown, and pleasant memories came flooding back.

My daydreaming was interrupted by a crisp voice on the intercom. We are departing in 10 minutes. The aircraft doors will be closing soon. Please fasten your seatbelts and wait for further safety instructions.

I started getting anxious again. A stewardess opened the back door and walked to the middle of the walkway. She was holding an orange life jacket. I remembered the orange of the life jacket in Turkey. After these instructions. The stewardess walked away and finally; we took off.

I was feeling the turbulence shake me up. We were in the air now. I realized that for the next 13 hours, I would be locked to this chair. I was already getting uneasy thinking about the time. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. I left my home, my small family, my war-stricken homeland...

The small screen was in front of me, but I could not see through it. A young man who identified himself as Mounir began talking to me. He was asking me for details about Canadian life... as if I were the expert who was born there! I always answered him in the negative and justified to him that I, like him, was also going to an unknown place. I ignored him and closed my eyes and tried to relax. The trip ahead was still long.

Although it was only a short nap, I felt a little more rejuvenated from last night's lack of sleep. I took out my headphones from my small bag and started listening to Fairuz's *Khidni alaa' bladi* (take me back to my homeland). I also took my photo album and flipped through the pages, revisiting fond memories of the past.

When you take a tree that is rooted in the ground, and transfer it from one place to another, the tree will no longer bear fruit. And if it does, the fruit will not be as good as it was in its original place. This is a rule of nature. I feel like that tree.

Where am I going? Where will I sleep? Will I sleep alone? Will the walls be clean and modern? I thought of what the old man told me...skyscrapers. everything will be different. Electricity and music. No sounds of war. I will not find the spectre of war that accompanied me for the last six years. I'm free like the wind! I would sleep on a cloud. I'm relieved to be safe.

Mounir, the traveller next to me, asked me: "do you expect that Canadians will accept us for who we are despite the fact that we are different from them?" I asked him: "what do you mean?" He said: Because we are very different from each other, and I feel that they will not accept a young refugee from Damascus in a time of war. I can't even speak the same language as them.

I answered him: Are you willing to try a culture other than your own? If the answer is yes, you shouldn't be scared. Canada is a country of immigrants. It doesn't belong to one group of people or one culture. There are Europeans, Africans, Arabs, other races; all living in Canada.

My words had an impact on Mounir, and he began to reflect on my words. But now, I am afraid. To be honest, I shared Mounir's anxiety. Will I be rejected in this new society? As I contemplated these questions, I found myself drifting off to sleep.

When I woke up, only three hours remained. The stewardess started distributing blue papers. At first, I didn't know what she wanted from us. We were asked to fasten our seatbelts. I was about to step foot for the first time on this new land, Canada. The fear and enthusiasm kill me...people say there is heavy snow in Toronto now. Beautiful! This positive attitude comforted me. I decided to embrace the cold and snow as a welcome change. When the plane landed, I moved my head to try to get a better view of my surroundings out the window. Mounir told me that he wanted to accompany me to the airport. I realized that he was just as apprehensive of this foreign land as I was.

Those with special papers for refugees were asked to go to a specific queue, and immigrants to the other line. I arrived at the passport officer and felt ashamed, but I wasn't sure why. I tried to appear nonchalant and optimistic. I didn't want him to sense I felt that way. He spoke with respect and friendliness to me. He asked me if I could recite any Canadian facts and for a fingerprint. I was now at the Toronto airport. The applause from the Canadian army warmed my heart. They greeted me in Arabic, with "marhaba" and "ahlan". I took my bag and headed for the bus, which would take me to the hotel. It was now 11pm. I arrived at the hotel in Toronto, and after talking to my family over the phone, I went to bed. I woke up to the sound of the alarm clock and went to the window, watching the gentle flurries of white snow.

Bashar Kalash