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Here in the Big Unknown, After All the Deaths and Departures: Exploring Place Attachment and Memory

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Here in the Big Unknown, After All the Deaths and Departures: Exploring Place
Attachment and Memory

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

By applying a research-creation methodology, this paper contextualizes the experiences of disconnection and relocation of a newcomer immigrant artist who attempts to build a connection to their new living place of Calgary by referring to the past. In this investigation I explore the influence of place in shaping emotions, experiences, a sense of belonging, and social identity. This paper highlights how I am informed by theories of place and memory within my autoethnographic artistic practice. I discuss how I use printmaking and painting to incorporate archival and contemporary photos within this work. My paintings, *Here in the big unknown*, use the specific characteristics of a place to generate and revive memories and investigate a sense of belonging and identity. My prints, *After all the deaths and departures*, show how family photographs assist us in anchoring our memories by acting as a reminder to bring the past into the present, in order to tie us to our social groups and to the places we have left. I indicate how social relationships and interaction with places contribute to a sense of connection and belonging to a place by bringing together individual and shared memories of a community.

Keywords: Place attachment, memory, painting, printmaking, family photographs, archive, belonging

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, S.M. Forouzan Pour.

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Dedication

To all those who have no choice other than departure.

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CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Leaving my hometown Tehran and residing in another country made me think more about the influence of place in shaping my emotions, experiences, and my existence. Places are reminders of our former life, the people that we know and our memories. As a newcomer immigrant artist, my strange experiences of encountering new places in the city of Calgary, of which I have no memory, made me go back in time and refer to my roots. I have been exploring why I am attached to specific places. Every day I ask myself, "Do I belong here? Can this place be my home? How can I build a sense of belonging?" These are the challenging and important questions that every immigrant deals with daily. Immigration is like being born again, rebuilding all relationships, gaining new experiences, learning to speak a new language, and making a new life in a new place. The most prominent difference is that you also remember the world you came from.

Remembering past experiences while walking down different streets in the new living space of Calgary and visualizing lost moments and lost people due to the process of relocation, prompted me to investigate the notion of place attachment and memory through a process of research-creation. In fact, research-creation is a way to look at the phenomena of place attachment and memory by generating questions and finding answers. It is also a way to heal the sense of loss, to make connections to places with the passage of time. My thesis show consists of two projects: a hybrid collection of four large paintings titled, *Here in the big unknown*, based on the interpretation of experiences of new place; and *After all the deaths and departures* which consists of four large hanging prints of people, detached from their surrounding environment, taken from old family photographs. The prints cling to the past, a remote past that I have never lived, that is

very far removed; a craving for “old good days”. The paintings struggle to break away from the past and its memories while simultaneously, helping me shape new memories, finding a spot in the present. This is a duality that always remains within those who experience the process of relocation and disconnection. Both series are based on the concept of place attachment and memory which is activated retrospectively by the sense of loss and the subsequent reminiscing (Figure 1).



Figure 1- Here in the big unknown, after all the deaths and departures, 2022.

I apply a research-creation methodology, by utilizing printmaking and painting through the approach of autoethnography. This paper highlights theories of place studies, based on the phenomenology of place attachment and memory that have informed my art production, which incorporates archival photos and contemporary images of places.

In this body of work, I engage with the notion of place attachment because it is key in shaping collective memory,¹ and a sense of belonging. Belonging is about emotional attachment, feeling safe and at home.² Place attachment helps provide an understanding of how places can create social identity by developing the tangible and intangible connections between past and present, people and places.³

Although theories of place attachment have been rooted in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, I focus on the social aspects of place attachment and memory by referring to photo diaries and memories embodied in places.

In addition to articulating my research and engaging with others' theories to contextualize my research-creation project, I introduce related art projects and describe how they are connected to existing theories of place and memory. The result of my research is a series of prints and paintings that explores how social relationships and interactive behaviours with places contribute

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, "Space and the Collective Memory," in *Memory*, ed. Ian Farr (Whitechapel Gallery ; MIT Press, 2012), 48.

² Nira Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the politics of belonging," *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3(2006), 2.

³ Julia Bennett, "Gifted Places: The Inalienable Nature of Belonging in Place," *Environment and Planning. D, Society & Space* 32, no. 4 (2014): 658; Hidalgo and Hernández, "Place attachments: Conceptual and empirical questions," 658-671.

to a sense of connection and belonging to a place by bringing together individual and shared memories of a community.

CHAPTER 2- THE REFLECTION OF PLACE ATTACHMENT IN MY ART- CREATION

2.1 Methods

My research-creation consists of two connected projects. The first is, a series of oil paintings in which I investigate how I am/am not attached to new places and the ways in which memory affects my spatial experiences. The time-consuming technique of oil painting provides me with an opportunity to create paintings layer by layer and allows me to change them according to how my experiences of and feelings about a place are altered through the passage of time. The second is a series of hanging prints of archival family photographs on translucent fabric. The technique of screen-printing allowed me to transfer archival photographs onto large scale fabrics while preserving the aesthetic quality of old photographs.

I apply research-creation as my methodology through the approach of creation as research. This approach involves the elaboration of projects where creation is required for research to emerge, and a result is a creative production in which knowledge can be extracted from the process.⁴ I use narratives of archival photos and contemporary images of places based on the phenomena of place attachment and memory. Attempting to depict and convey the sense of isolation, disconnection and relocation in my paintings and prints made me focus on my relations and emotions in new places to find the reasons and roots of these experiences. Through the physical and embodied processes of painting and print, I physically manipulate materials to reveal the

⁴ Owen Chapman & Kim Sawchuk. "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances"." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 1 (2012): 19.

intangible images and experiences associated with dislocation. This process for me is both materially engaged, meditative, and responsive. For me, this cannot be as readily described within writing. Painting and printmaking allow me to explore the use of realism, expressive qualities, and minimalism at once, and in response to one another, which is akin to my experience of navigating reality, memory, and emotion simultaneously.

Investigation into place attachment and memory theories helped me to explore these experiences and find the reasons for the feeling of alienation and detachment I was experiencing. By applying place attachment theories to my painting and printmaking practices through the selection of pictorial elements and colour pallet, I intend to communicate these feelings and experiences of immigration to the viewer.

In addition to the methods of painting and printmaking, I also make use of autoethnographic methods to understand the phenomena of place attachment and memory. “Autoethnography relies on the subjective verbal and written expressions of meaning given by the individuals being studied, these expressions being windows into the inner life of the person.”⁵ My project has been created through self-reflection on my lived experiences of the new city of Calgary and disconnection from my hometown and people.

My research-creation project started six years ago by seeing and searching through family photos of an era of which I had no lived experiences. I found myself immersed in a world of gatherings, lives, houses, and streets I had never experienced before, while I was thinking about the destiny of the people in the photographs. What I was seeing in those photographs connected to

⁵ Norman K Denzin, “Assumptions of the method,” In *Interpretive Autoethnography*, (Sage Publications, 2013), 2.

an ongoing wave of migration that has been increasing as the living situation in my country worsened.

Communication with acquaintances and friends in my country of Iran, and sharing our thoughts and emotions about immigration, informed me about the common concern of the feeling of strangeness and loneliness in another country. The feelings of detachment and yearning for lost people and places was also common among most of the Iranians I have met after immigration to Calgary. My project has been developed through daily conversations with other immigrants and my friends who are scattered all around the globe. We are connected by collective memories and places we all have experienced.

The methods of painting and printmaking are ways in which I focus more on my daily experiences and feelings to record how my perception of new places and memories change with the passage of time. The sequence of paintings is based on my evolving emotions and experiences toward new places and helped me to be aware of these changes. In my first painting which is an isolated building, there is only one light on, which alludes to the sense of solitude and disconnection in the new living environment of Calgary. Moreover there is no sign of past life (Figure 7). In my last painting; a building with a playground, there are more lights on in neighbors' windows to represent expanding connections with people through the passage of time. By bringing the items from past life like an abandoned swing and a carousel, I attempt to make a connection between past and present in the new living environment (Figure 8). As a newcomer international student in Calgary, I refer to my personal memories and collective memories of Iran, the society I came from.

I apply the notion of place attachment and memory because memory and storytelling about the past is a way to articulate the relationship between places and individuals. Although memory

belongs to the past, the present exists in “memory talk”⁶ as it infuses the present with the past to affect our experiences.

I apply printmaking techniques because of the aesthetic quality. Some processes provide a similar aesthetic to the old nature of the old family photographs I am using. Moreover, these processes allow me to manipulate the photographs without disturbing reality and photographic nature of the images. Therefore, the prints provide the fantasy of painting and the reality of photography simultaneously to create new meanings and concepts. I detached the people pictured in the photographs and print only parts of their bodies onto translucent fabric. By hanging the prints within the exhibition space, I bring these individuals into the new place, offering viewers an opportunity to experience the place through these metaphorical memories. By printing these figures in fragments I refer to Halbwachs’ theory of the incompleteness and partial renewal of remembering.⁷ When we recall someone or somewhere, we do not remember it completely. Rather, we remember the part which remains in our minds clearly, while the other parts are vague and unreachable (Figure 2).

⁶ Annette Kuhn, “Photography and Cultural Memory: a Methodological Exploration,” *Visual studies (Abingdon, England)* 22, no. 3 (2007): 286.

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, “Introduction: Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945)” in *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A Coser (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5.



Figure 2- The process of image making for screen print

2.2 The Use of Archive

In referring to archival photos I consider two types of archives, one is the family photos of Iranians who were forced to leave the country after Iran's revolution. All their documents and personal photos were confiscated and kept in the official historical archive of Iran. I spent about six months in that archive doing research for an article about the impact of family photographs and personal narratives in shaping social history. Throughout that time, I saw about 2000 family photographs that had been detached from their original contexts in family albums. Although I was in the archive for a different purpose, the lack of proper storage for this archive and the governing regime's desire to destroy them prompted me to save some of the images by scanning them.

The other photo archive I am using in my project is my personal family photos. By presenting my family photos and archival photos together I am referring to an experience of relocation that is continuous over time from generation to generation. This hybrid project refers to the collective memory of generations of Iranians who take memories of their past to new, alienated living environments and experience living as in-between.

“Immigrants invariably straddle multiple worlds, places, and identities. They experience first of all, a rupture with their old home. Whether fleeing something or moving towards something hypothetically better, or some combination of both, immigrants find themselves in new, alien places. They must then set out to make these new worlds their home. In the process, the experience of place becomes transformative.”⁸

⁸ Steven M. Schnell. “Exploring place attachment and the immigrant experience in comics and graphic novels” in *Explorations in Place Attachment*, ed. Jeffrey S Smith (London & New York : Routledge; 2017), 97.

2.3 Family Photographs

Our family narratives and personal memories are part of a wider memory of the society in which we live. Therefore, the personal memories of these photos have some references to collective memory. Family photographs play a key role in memory-based practices. People usually take photographs of significant moments of life to create and preserve memories for the future. These events and memories have taken place somewhere. “Incident places are where significant and memorable life events have occurred in the locale and which in turn help bond people to place. Such incident places incrementally accrue over time, becoming part of each individual’s autobiography.”⁹ Family photographs are repositories of memories, they act as reminders of people, places and events in the past, and they have been used as prompts for performances of memory in private, collective and public context.¹⁰ (Figure 3 & 4)



Figure 3 & 4- Iranian family photos with the handwriting in the back “Do you remember?”

From Iran’s contemporary history archive.¹¹

⁹ Cathrine Degnen, “Socialising Place Attachment: Place, Social Memory and Embodied Affordances”, 1660.

¹⁰ Annette Kuhn, “Memory texts and memory work: Performances of Memory in and with Visual Media,” *Memory Studies*, Vol.3, No. 4 (2010): 303.

¹¹ Photos from “Iran’s contemporary history archive”

Family photographs act as proof of a happy family life and a family's property (Figure 5 & 6). These photographs are passed on from one generation to the next. Therefore, they tie people to each other and to places and create a sense of belonging. "Family photographs are never just records of the moment, whether anecdotal or formal or anywhere in between. They form part of larger interpersonal, sociological, and ideological networks that are always historically and culturally specific."¹² Viewers see photographs in the context of their social and cultural knowledge.



Figure 5 & 6- Iranian family photograph, Israel, 1951.

Handwriting on the back "Mr. Yousef and Ms. farhang close to their home in Israel, dedicated to dear uncle's wife 25/2/51"

Photographs have a particular indexical connection to what has been captured on the photograph and reality. Therefore, they have an evidential power with the individual object and the sense of memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign that generates a space in which

¹² Joan Gibbons, "Traces: Memory and Indexicality," in *Contemporary Art and Memory : Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 44.

new meanings and relationships can be produced.¹³ “A photograph or an album can be approached in various ways: at one extreme, it can be treated simply as ‘evidence’; at the other, it can be interrogated for non-overt/non-obvious meanings, producing ‘counter-memories’: *memory work*.”¹⁴

2.4 Here in the big unknown, after all the deaths and departures

My paintings reflect my firsthand experiences of uncertainty and disconnection during a one year stay in Canada. I create my paintings by manipulating and combining the photos I take through my daily commute in Calgary. I selected real elements from my present life and surrounding environment and combine them with my imagination to express my emotions and lived experiences more clearly. In some paintings I removed elements to communicate a sense of isolation. In the painting of an isolated building, I removed all the other buildings to share the sense of solitude and detachment (Figure 7). In another painting which shows a playground, I painted an abandoned swing and carousel borrowed from my childhood next to a slide taken from present life to create a sense of strangeness and of living between two places and eras (Figure 8). I choose the oil colour technique of painting because it requires time and patience to complete a work, unlike photography or other painting mediums that seems to capture moments. Oil colour painting is developed layer by layer throughout time which requires patience to be complete, as my lived experiences of places need the passage of time to be shaped, detailed, and complicated. Therefore, time and patience are part of this process they are part of every immigrant’s lived experiences. My emotions and experiences are always changing and the flexible nature of oil

¹³ Joan Gibbons, “Traces: Memory and Indexicality,” 34.

¹⁴ Annette Kuhn, “Memory texts and memory work: Performances of Memory in and with Visual Media,” 303.

painting provides me the opportunity to alter the work by adding more layers or changing the colour pallet, as I have changed my paintings several times throughout the process of creation.



Figure 7- Here in the big unknown, 2021.



Figure 8- Here in the big unknown, 2022.

In the first months of my residence, there was no place in Calgary that I could connect to, except the building in which I first lived. It brought me a sense of security, like home; my first home in an unknown city. As a result of a lack of opportunities for communication and memory making, my attachment to these present places was hindered by reviewing the memories of past

places and people.¹⁵ I felt a sense of alienation as I could not relocate myself in a new social environment or identify communities within which to socialize and spend time. My experiences of places, and therefore my paintings, evolved over time as I started interacting with new places. My connection to people in Calgary deepened through memory making in place, turning them into a more meaningful space.

Jeffrey Smith in his book *Exploration Place Attachment* elaborates six places to which individual attach. One such place, “transformative” places are where important personal growth and achievements take place, these places support our goals and provide a sense of security.¹⁶ The opportunity to continue my education and follow my goals in the more stable and secure environment of Calgary opened a transformative place wherein the unfamiliar becomes familiar and old memories merge with the new with the passage of time. I become attached to this new living place. Therefore, my painting project and place attachment take place simultaneously through a process of evolving experiences.

The juxtaposition of these projects is a way to walk the path between past and present, personal memories and collective memories, people, and places, to make a bridge between two different worlds that are connected and present in the experience of every immigrant. My print and painting projects complete each other while they are in contrast; the contradiction of places without people and people without places. Notions of distance, coldness, loneliness and detachment connect these two projects.

The form of installation I chose to use to present these two projects emphasizes their intertwined concepts. The four paintings are facing each other on two walls, surrounding the

¹⁵ Jeffrey S. Smith, “Putting place back in place attachment research” 21.

¹⁶ Jeffrey S. Smith, 21.

hanging prints in the middle of the space. The installation of four large hanging prints in the middle of the gallery creates a hallway for the viewers to walk through and see the paintings through the translucent texture of fabrics. There is also space between the hanging prints and paintings to take distance from paintings and see the paintings independently. The sequence of four paintings is my evolving visual experience of living in a new environment. By printing photographs on transparent fabrics, I wanted to have the ghost like figures of my people in the gallery to convey what I am experiencing while walking in Calgary and imagining my memories and feeling the presence or absence of my people in new places.

Matching the colour of the prints and the paintings' colour pallet strengthens a sense of disconnection and loneliness. Although a larger space could have provided more free movement between the works for the viewers, the existing spaces between prints and prints and prints and paintings create pathways for viewers to walk between the art pieces and experience a place in which memories and imagining are embodied (Figure 9 & 10). The hanging photographic prints are attempts to bring personal and collective memory in one's new home, as a means to compensate for the alienation of displacement, which the paintings capture; the paintings remain desolate and disturbing, while the prints are ghostly and translucent.



Figure 9 & 10- Display of the artworks in the gallery space, 2022.

CHAPTER 3- PLACE ATTACHMENT, MEMORY, AND SENSE OF BELONGING

3.1 Place Attachment Theories

Marc Fried, the pioneer theorist in the field of place attachment, explores the meanings and functions of residential areas to working-class people. He analyzes the psychological effects of forced relocation that the majority of people who have gone through this experience exhibit. Leaving their residential environment results in a sense of grief and loss.¹⁷ Gitterman and Knight broaden the concept of grief by talking about two types of non-death loss, one of which is the loss of familial places. Attachment to places develops a sense of identity, well-being, and belonging to places that are significant to us due to interaction and identification.¹⁸ The notion of belonging is constructed on three analytical levels, the first level is social locations which is related to the differences of particular historical moments, social groups, and context that people identify with. The second level is emotional attachment and identification. Identification is stories people tell themselves and others about who they are. These narratives which can be individual or collective, reflect emotional desire for attachment. The third level is ethical and political contexts in which individuals judge themselves and others, the attitudes and ideologies that specify the identity and the categorical boundaries.¹⁹

¹⁷ Marc Fried, "Grieving for a lost home," in *The Urban Condition: People and Policy in the Metropolis*, ed Leonard. J. Duhl (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963): 151-171.

¹⁸ Alex Gitterman, and Carolyn Knight, "Non-Death Loss: Grieving for the Loss of Familiar Place and for Precious Time and Associated Opportunities." *Clinical Social Work Journal* 47, no. 2 (2018): 148.

¹⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the politics of belonging", 199.

3.2 Place and Identity

Our physical environment is an affective world in which we play out our social roles and make connections to others. Our affective bonds with places have an important role in qualifying our existence, not only as individuals but also as social groups. Every aspect of our social networks, whether personal or institutional, our cognitions and feelings are infused with our experience of our places and territories.²⁰

Our self-identity is defined not only by our relationship to others but by our connections to our physical environments that identify our daily lives and existence as human beings.²¹ The term “place identity”, a sub-structure of the self-identity is the perception of the physical world in which individuals live and play out their social role. These cognitions present memories, feelings, beliefs, meanings, and conceptions of behaviour that define the existence of every human being. The places of our past, and properties that satisfy individuals and provide them with satisfaction in their needs are at the centre of this perception.²²

The concept of “spatial identity” introduced by Fried is an attempt to allude to the importance of physical environment on self-identity, he says:

It represents a phenomenal or ideational integration of important experiences concerning environmental arrangements and contacts in relation to the individual's conception of his own body in space. It is based on spatial memories, spatial

²⁰ M.V Giuliani, “Theory of attachment and Place attachment,” in *Psychological theories for environmental issues*, ed. M. Bonnes, T. Lee, and M. Bonaiuto (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 137.

²¹ Harold M Proshansky, Abbe K Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, “Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, no. 1 (1983): 58.

²² Harold M Proshansky, Abbe K Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, “Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self,” 59.

imagery, the spatial framework of current activity, and the implicit spatial components of ideals and aspirations.²³

The material reality of places becomes part of our subjectivity. Places are intertwined with our emotional registers and daily experiences. They are experienced in dynamic interactions with material objects, individual, social and biographical meanings, and everyday practices.²⁴

Our memories are shaped by spatial references that assist us to anchor and organize our memories. Any alteration in the material aspects of places lead to modification or disappearance of our memories.²⁵ I create a sense of strangeness in my paintings by removing spatial references to reflect the strangeness, alienation and disconnection I feel in an unknown city, in which I cannot locate my memories by referring to familial places.

3.3 Disciplines and Functions of Place Attachment

Scholars have studied place attachment in various disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, geography, art, cultural studies and philosophy. In 2010 Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford published *Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizational Framework*. The article synthesized the existing literature on place attachment into three-dimensional framework of persons, psychological process, and place dimensions (Figure 11). Moreover, they elaborate

²³ Fried, 156.

²⁴ Cathrine Degnen, "Socialising Place Attachment: Place, Social Memory and Embodied Affordances," *Ageing and Society* 36, no. 8 (2016): 1650.

²⁵ Gérôme Truc, "Memory of Places and Places of Memory: For a Halbwachsian Socio-Ethnography of Collective Memory," *International Social Science Journal* 62, no. 203-204 (2011): 148.

the functions of place attachment as the sense of security and belonging, goal support and continuity (Figure 12).²⁶

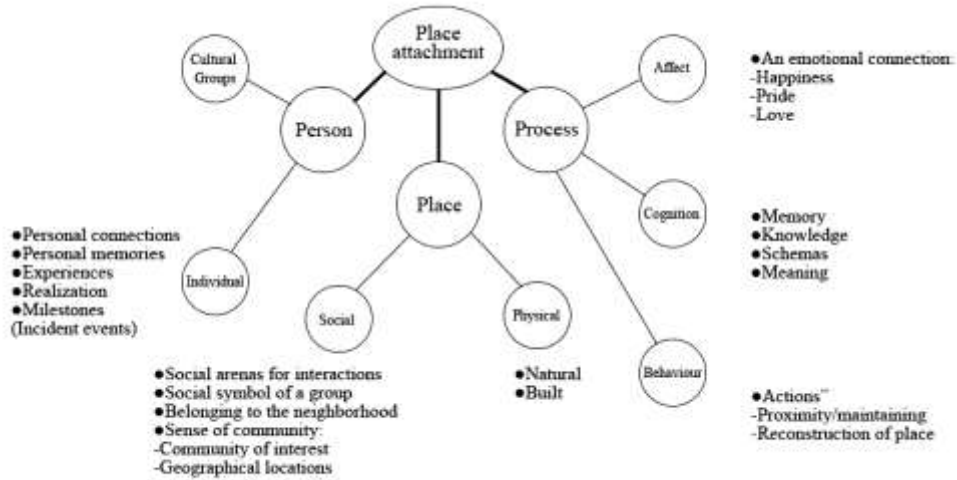


Figure 11- The triple model of place attachment²⁷

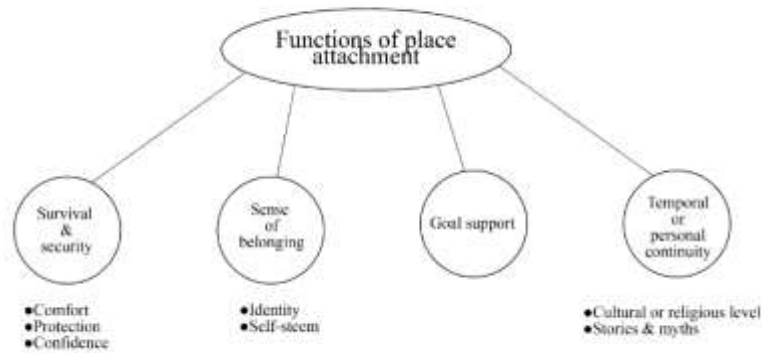


Figure 12- Functions of place attachment²⁸

²⁶ Leila Scannell, and Robert Gifford. “Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework”, 2.

²⁷ Scannell, and Gifford, 2.

²⁸ Scannell, and Gifford, 5-6.

3.4 Related to My Work

Leaving my city and its people behind provoked an intense emotional reaction that immersed me in the recollection of memories to maintain connection with what had been lost. My paintings are a visual interpretation of the sense of solitude and detachment that I felt during my early months in Calgary. Therefore, the process of art-creation is a way for me to express my feelings and thoughts, to share a sense of loss.

After all the deaths and departures is a projection of my sense of belonging to past places and social groups (Figure 13 & 14). I use the narrative of family archives to share my attachment to specific groups and places. The act of seeing and flipping through the family album is always accompanied by remembering memories and telling stories about family events and people. Therefore, family photographs can create a sense of belonging by identification and emotional attachments. Identities are stories people tell to others about who they are or they are not. Identity narratives can be individual or collective, produced from generation to generation in a selective way. They can relate to the past, help to understand the present, or be used as a projection for future trajectories.²⁹

²⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis, 202.





Figure 13 & 14- After all the deaths and departures, 2022.

My paintings and my prints can be seen as a visual story about places that I have experienced. They are memory practices that shuttle between present and past, individual, and collective. Detachment from my familiar places makes me aware of the intense and deep yearning for belonging, and an emotional attachment caused by longing for the places that are lost. “For most people life takes on more meaning and individuals feel more content when they develop connections to a place; *place matters* [author’s emphasis].”³⁰ I attempt is to connect to new places through the lens of art to create the sense of comfort and continuity that I lost by detachment. “Attached individuals experience a heightened sense of safety, even when their place is situated in a war zone.”³¹ Leaving our familiar and residential environment interrupts our social networks and sense of belonging. As Fried says: “The loss of an important place represents a change in a potentially significant component of the experience of continuity.”³²

Throughout this research, I have experienced how the lack of memories in a new living environment of Calgary detach me from this place and how my memories of past places, relationships with friends and family connect me to my past living space.

The functions of place attachment, such as sense of security and supporting goals in the new environment of Calgary, assist me to build connection to this new place and expand my relationships through socializing and being in a community. These experiences affect my emotions and shape my memories to connect me to Calgary and provide a sense of belonging through the passage of time.

³⁰ Jeffrey S. Smith, “Putting place back in place attachment research” in *Explorations in Place Attachment*, (London : Routledge; First edition. 2018), 1.

³¹Leila Scannell, and Robert Gifford. “Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2010): 1.

³² Fried, “Grieving for a lost home,” 153.

CHAPTER 4- COUNTER MEMORY AND POST MEMORY IN ART

4.1 Collective Memory and Place

The interaction between memory and place occurs within two different frameworks. One framework is associated with the material aspects of the place which consist of buildings, buildings, objects, and familiar locations that are extremely vulnerable to change and can vanish. Therefore, “Memories of places”, that are the memories supported by material aspects of these places, are prone to modification and disappearance. Another framework of memory is “places of memory” that is the symbolic presentation in which memories remain in the ideas and collective thinking of people who believe in that event.³³

Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist analyzed the process of memory. The term “collective memory” was introduced by him in 1925. According to Halbwachs’ theories people participate in two types of memory, individual and collective. Individual memory is the act of remembering within the framework of personality and personal life. This type of memory is not completely isolated and sealed off as individuals need to rely on others’ remembrances to evoke their past. On the other hand, individuals act as a member of a group, helping to recall impersonal remembrances of the group. To cover the gaps in remembrances, individual memory relocates within and trusts in collective memory. These two types of memory are linked and merge together while remaining distinctive and have their own spatial and temporal boundaries.³⁴

The storytelling characteristics of family photographs in *After all the deaths and departures* evokes dialectical relations between collective and individual, public, and private as well as past

³³ Truc, “Memory of Places and Places of Memory: For a Halbwachsian Socio-Ethnography of Collective Memory”, 149.

³⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, “Historical Memory and Collective Memory” in *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A Coser (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 50.

and present to show how individual memories are linked to the social memories of the group. Social memories and places are united through the act of memory practice, belonging and social identity. Using family photographs in my prints can trigger memories for the viewers of their own family photos and personal stories that might be common between a social group living in the same environment and era.

Halbwachs emphasizes the importance of spatial images' role in collective memory: "The reason members of a group remain unified, even after scattering and finding nothing in their new physical surroundings to recall the home they have left, is that they think of the old home and its layout."³⁵ In my research-creation, I allude to shared experiences among the immigrants who left their home and remember it through their mental images and memories. Moreover, Halbwachs talks about the period of uncertainty when individuals have not yet adjusted to a novel environment. In my first painting in the *Here in the big unknown* series, which is an isolated building, I refer to the sense of tension and uncertainty that comes with the experience of immigration and detachment from familiar places (Figure 7).

Our physical surrounding bears the impact of us and others. Each object in the whole is reminiscent of a form of life that is common between social groups.³⁶ As Halbwachs says:

Place and group have each received the imprint of the other. Therefore, every phase of the group can be translated into spatial terms, and its residence is but the juncture of all these terms. Each aspect, each detail, of this place has a meaning intelligent

³⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, "Space and the Collective Memory" in *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A Coser (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 130.

³⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, "Space and the Collective Memory", 128-129.

only to members of the group, for each portion of its space corresponds to various and different aspects of the structure and life of their society, at least of what is most stable in it.³⁷

The feeling of strangeness in my paintings is due to the lack of familiar references in my new surrounding place, in which I find no sign of the social groups to which I belong. I felt this sense of strangeness and absence mostly during Christmas time, when I had no one to socialize with or enjoy the celebration of Christmas and New Year. This experience was reflected in my second painting of *Here in the big unknown* series (Figure 15).

³⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, 130.



Figure 15- Here in the big unknown, 2022.

4.2 Memory, Place, and Art

The fictional and narrative nature of memory and its capacity to transfer knowledge from past and present to the future has led contemporary artists to present their art in various forms of memory practice. In addition to those who present personal histories in

their artworks, many artists work in the field of counter-memory and post-memory to address broader social and political concerns to connect events and peoples to places.

In this context, counter-memory aims to interrupt official narratives and present an alternative in contrast to traditional memorials.³⁸ Post-memory is a social memory of experiences and events that are still being worked through. Post-memory is the secondary memory constructed by secondary witnesses who are better able to do critical work on primary memories.³⁹ Collective memory is a flux of continuous thoughts in the consciousness of the groups who keep the memory alive while history divides the current of time into separate periods. There is often only one history that is documented which consists of the most notable events of the nation which provides an external viewpoint of the living group. However, collective memory is a self-portrait of each social group restricted in temporal and spatial boundaries. The function of collective memory is to develop several aspects of a single event according to the characteristics of each group.⁴⁰

The impact of post-memory can be seen in Holocaust-related art. Truc, a French sociologist who investigates the reactions to terrorism and the relationship between emotion, memory, and collective identity says:

People arrive with a mental “picture” of the place they have come to, even when they have never yet seen it with their own eyes. But because this mental representation is fixed and linked to the memory of a particular event, it cannot coincide with the material reality of the place, which has changed since then. So,

³⁸ Margaret Ewing, “The Unexpected Encounter: Confronting Holocaust Memory in the Streets of Post-Wall Berlin,” in *Rhetoric, Remembrance, and Visual Form : Sighting Memory*, Ed. Anne Teresa Demo and Vivian Bradford (New York : Routledge, 2012), 34.

³⁹ Joan Gibbons, “Postmemory: ‘The Ones Born Afterwards,’” in *Contemporary Art and Memory : Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 73.

⁴⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, “Historical Memory and Collective Memory”, 80.

because these people want to attest to the veracity of their memory, they force themselves to make the images they have in their memory match those they have before their eyes. This schema seems to apply to most places associated with events that have left their mark on minds. Furthermore, the more media coverage an event has had and the more different social groups it affects, the more the place where it occurred is likely to exert a strong attraction.⁴¹

Joan Gibbons in her book *Contemporary Art and Memory* discusses what Hal Foster calls “an archive impulse”, a series of artists who create art, based on the found documents, texts, images, and data.⁴² Referring to archives is a way to enter the past. Archival artists turn distracted viewers into engaged participants by providing historical information that is scattered or lost. Most archival art calls out for human interpretation and relational ends. Unlike data based art that deals with mechanic reprocessing, the content of archival art remains indefinite which is concerned with obscure traces. Archival projects are incomplete that seek to future departure and elaboration.⁴³

In *After all the deaths and departures*, I bring attention to archival photos to revive those memories which might have been forgotten over time. I do not refer to a specific historical event to invite viewers to have their own interpretation of immigration and a sense of strangeness. The familial features of family photos in the prints and overall atmosphere of the works can act as a reminder to viewers of their own memories and experiences.

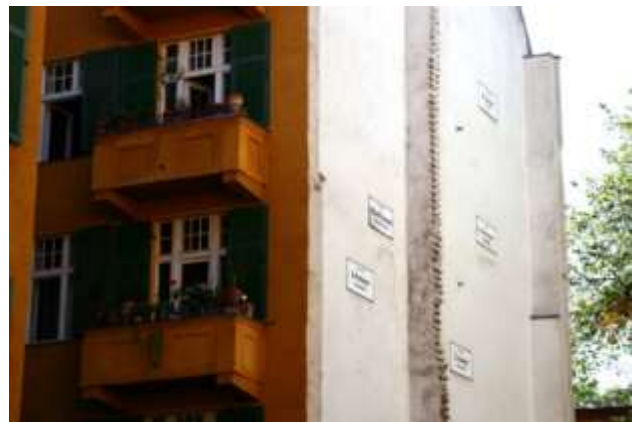
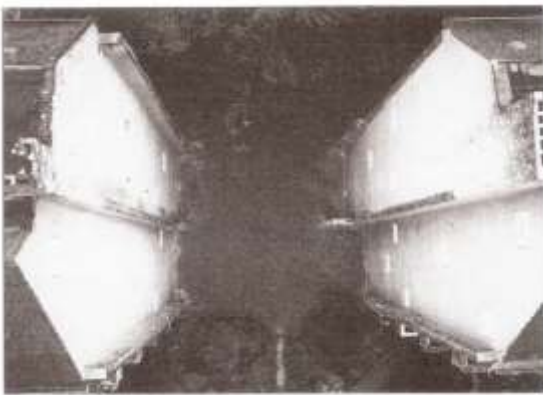
⁴¹ Truc, 151.

⁴² Joan Gibbons, “The Ordering of Knowledge: Museums and Archives,” in *Contemporary Art and Memory : Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 119.

⁴³ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse.” *October* 110 (2004): 5-6.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397555>.

4.3 Christian Boltanski

Christian Boltanski is a French artist who is well-known for his installation and site-specific projects based on the concept of memory, death, and absence. *The missing house*, 1990 (Figure 16 & 17) is a site-specific installation by Boltanski which was created in an empty space between two buildings where the house was destroyed by bombing in 1945. Boltanski installed placards with the names, occupations, and dates of residence of the previous inhabitants in 1945 to connect the place with the memory of people who once lived there. “Boltanski transforms this otherwise forgettable site into a mnemonic space where private histories re-emerge within the local landscape.”⁴⁴



*Figure 16 & 17 - The Missing House, Christian Boltanski, 1990.*⁴⁵

In contrast to Boltanski, I do not refer to a specific historical event in my project. I use the fictional feature of painting along with photo archives to share my own lived experiences and emotions, I talk about my own memories as much as collective memory of my people which is still ongoing, while Boltanski reflects on a historical event from the past. Therefore, a historical

⁴⁴ Ewing, 42.

⁴⁵ <https://creativecloudfix.wordpress.com/2012/10/28/artemis-alcalay-the-remembrance-exhibition/>

archive has been created and many verbal and visual interpretations have been made of that event. My project is an immigration narrative for future artists and researchers to reflect on and understand these social and personal experiences, providing a broader viewpoint of immigration and displacement.

4.4 Against the Odds

Since 1980s a great deal of art exhibitions based on the concept of historical consciousness have appeared. Such art is not solely creative or fictional but refers to the shared experiences of historically consciousness viewers. These exhibitions were shaped based on the performance of history in museums and the interactions between past and present, public and private, memory and history.⁴⁶ *Against the Odds*, an exhibition on the impossibility of immigration held in the Museum of Jewish Heritage was one of the most influential exhibition design projects of the 21st century.⁴⁷ Through the personal and memory-based reflections on history, this exhibition documented the story of European Jews saved by the help of American Jews between 1933 and 1941 (Figure 18, 19 & 20). It was an interactive exhibition to encourage visitors to engage in personal storytelling. The exhibition was designed by archival immigration documents and papers to show the bureaucratic barriers of immigration for Jews.⁴⁸ This exhibition was created based on the concept

⁴⁶ Susan A Crane. "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum." *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 52.

⁴⁷ "Against the Odds," cgpartnersllc, accessed March 8, 2022, <https://www.cgpartnersllc.com/projects/museum-of-jewish-heritage-against-the-odds/>

⁴⁸ "Against the odds exhibition," seged, Accessed March 8, 2022, <https://segd.org/against-odds-exhibition-0>.

of collective memory and it shows how different social groups guard their personal narratives of individual events as a living trust to shape their own history.



Figure 18, 19 & 20- Against the Odds, Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2015.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ <https://www.cgpartnersllc.com/projects/museum-of-jewish-heritage-against-the-odds/>

Besides the concept behind *Against the odds*, which related to my work in terms of collective memory and the use of archive, the installation of this exhibition inspired the juxtaposition of *Here in the big unknown* and *After all the deaths and departures*. My exhibition attempts to create a space for viewers to experience a feeling of tension and isolation by walking through the hanging prints and seeing the paintings of places through the memory of people. The large scale of the paintings and prints and the dominant blue colour aims to surround viewers and create the atmosphere of disconnection and uncertainty (Figure 21).



Figure 21- Display of the artworks in the gallery space, 2022.

4.5 Shimon Attie

Pierre Nora in his paper *Les Lieux de Mémoire* talks about the sites of memory, but in contrast to Halbwachs' theory, he does not refer to actual places. For Nora archives, museums, objects, or memorial events are sites of memory.⁵⁰ In this context artworks serve as sites of memory in which knowledge is stored.

Local archives are an integral part of *Writing on the wall*, 1991-93 (Figure 22 & 23) which is another Holocaust-related art project by Shimon Attie. It is a projection of a private collection of photographs documenting a pre-war community on pre-war and post-war locations in East Berlin where many buildings had been destroyed and replaced by new ones.⁵¹ The projection of photos in the dark and quiet neighbourhoods brings people with their traumas in these places from the past to the present streets of Berlin.⁵² Ewing says:

These projects challenge Nora's assertion that sites of memory are now external to any instinctive relationship to the past. By situating the viewer in the very sites where these lives were lived, the installations trigger memorial operations in the mind, thereby facilitating a personal assimilation of history.⁵³

⁵⁰ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* (Berkeley, Calif.) 26, no. 26 (1989): 12.

⁵¹ Margaret Ewing, "The Unexpected Encounter: Confronting Holocaust Memory in the Streets of Post-Wall Berlin," 36.

⁵² Margaret Ewing, 37.

⁵³ Margaret Ewing, 34.



Figure 22 & 23- Writing on the Wall, Shimon Attie, 1991-93⁵⁴

⁵⁴ <https://artsandplace.org/case-studies/shimon-attie/>

My research-creation project differs from Attie's installation as he brought the memory of lost people to the places in which they used to live. He created art in the original sites of memory to link the memory of people to their living environment. In *After all the deaths and departures*, I detached people from their living environment and bring them to my new living place to show the presence of lost memories in my new environment (Figure 24).



Figure 24- Here in the big unknown, after all the deaths and departures, 2022.

4.6 Anselm Kiefer

The German artist Anselm Kiefer who had no direct relationship with Holocaust victims also produces paintings that have references to the devastation of war and Holocaust. He deploys the motif of scorched earth in the paintings of the 1980s, *Margarete* and *Sulamith* (Figure 25 & 26).⁵⁵



*Figure 25- Margarete, Anselm Kiefer, 1981.*⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Joan Gibbons, "Postmemory 'The Ones Born Afterwards' ", 82.

⁵⁶ https://www.irequireart.com/galleries-vrut/artists/anselm_kiefer/margarethe-498.html



*Figure 26- Sulamith, Anselm Kiefer, 1983.*⁵⁷

One of aspects my paintings have in common with Kiefer is applying symbolic visual language to talk about social concepts. Like Kiefer who uses specific motifs to convey his thoughts, I reflect on my experiences through indirect references and visual elements to reflect on collective memories and social issues. In the third painting of the *Here in the big unknown* series, I painted the transitional place of a road to convey the sense of living in between places, and non-functioning traffic lights to show uncertainty and lack of clear signs to be followed (Figure 27).

⁵⁷ <https://www.altaonline.com/culture/art/a37417094/sulamith-anselm-kiefer-stuart-robinson/>



Figure 27- Here in the big unknown, 2022.

4.7 Binh Danh

Among the recent memory projects, is *Immortality, the remnants of the Vietnamese and American war, 2005-2008* (Figure 28 & 29) by Binh Danh, an American Vietnamese artist who explores his Vietnamese heritage and collective memory of war in his print series. He applies his inventive chlorophyll printing technique to transfer archival photos onto leaves to investigate

battlefield landscapes and contemporary memorials. He believes the memories of war are still part of the present landscapes that bring history to the present life.⁵⁸

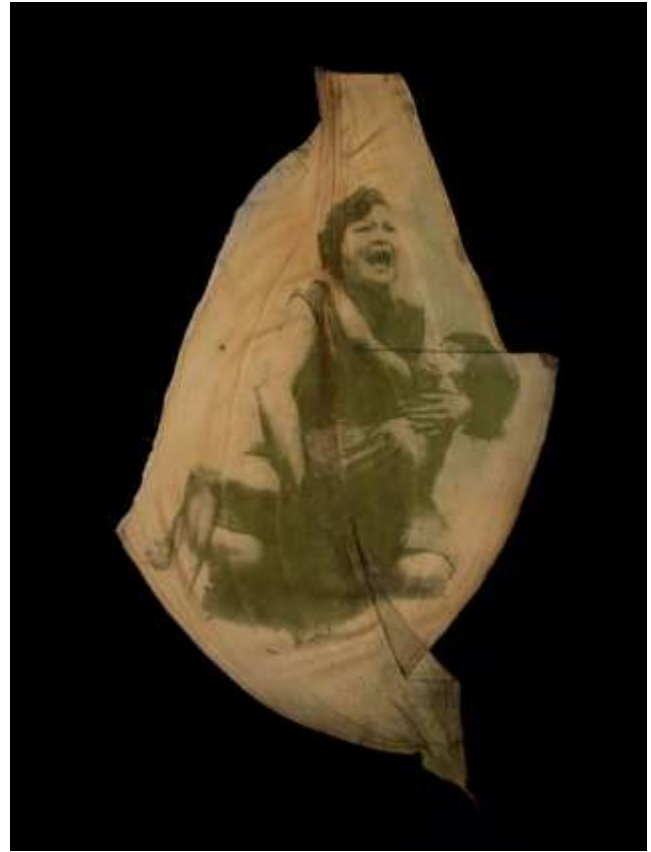


Figure 28 & 29- Collecting Memories, Binh Danh, 2005-2008.⁵⁹

Binh Danh's print project is based on the Halbwachs' theory that talks about leaving others' imprint on places. My art-creation project also attempts to bring the memory of past people to present living place to indicate the effect of memories in our present lives. I apply

⁵⁸ "Collecting Memories," binhdanh, Accessed November 30, 2021, <http://binhdanh.com/Projects/CMemories/CMemories.html>.

⁵⁹ <http://binhdanh.com/Projects/Immortality/Immortality.html>

printmaking on translucent fabric to allude to the presence and impact of past people and events in our lives and living places (Figure 30).



Figure 30- Here in the big unknown, after all the deaths and departures, 2022.

4.8 Emma Nishimura

An archive of rememory, 2018 (Figure 31 & 32) is an installation project by Emma Nishimura in which she is inspired by a traditional form of Japanese packaging for protection and caring known as Furoushiki. She uses the technique of photo-intaglio to print archival photographs and sculptural papermaking to make bundles that depict stories and memories. The focus of this project is on stories associated with Japanese interment that are passed on from past generations to generation. Nishimura explores how memories of Japanese Canadian internment have been stored and packed away.⁶⁰ Common to both my prints and this project is the goal to revive memories and narratives that might be lost over time or in the official histories of places. Like Nishimura, narratives hidden in my family photographs can bring personal narratives to the discussion which also relate to broader narratives of my society and share social memories which might be different from official histories.



⁶⁰ “An Archive of Rememory,” emmanishimura, Accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.emmanishimura.com/an-archive-of-rememory>.



Figure 31 & 32- An archive of memory, Emma Nishimura, 2018.⁶¹

4.9 Iranian Artists

Among the many Iranian artists who have worked with the concepts of migration, place, and living in between spaces, I want to talk about two Iranian artists: Anahita Norouzi, is working on an ongoing photography project about migration from outside of Iran; Behnam Sadighi, is talking about the lived experience of migration from inside of Iran.

Anahita Norouzi is an Iranian artist who left Iran in 2010 to pursue her education in Montreal. In her project *City as a Collective Memory* (2010), she uses photos taken in back alleys which have no name and are in-between spaces. Each art piece is a double exposure of photos

⁶¹ <https://www.emmanishimura.com/an-archive-of-rememory>

taken in Montreal on photography paper and the photos of her hometown Tehran on transparent plexiglass. She looks at the role of memory and imagination through the lens of the urban landscapes of Tehran which witnesses the struggle between history, politics, and place-making (Figure 33 & 34).⁶²



*Figure 33 & 34- City as a collective memory, Anahita Norouzi, 2010.*⁶³

The Last Day (2011- 2022) is an ongoing photo series by Behnam Sadighi which looks at Iranian youths who leave the country in search of a better life. These photos depict their last

⁶² “City as a Collective Memory,” anahitanorouzi, Accessed June 6, 2022, <http://www.anahitanorouzi.com/work/city-as-a-collective-memory-2/>.

⁶³ <http://www.anahitanorouzi.com/work/city-as-a-collective-memory-2/>

portraits taken on the last day of their stay in their homeland city in Iran, a few hours before they leave the country (Figure 35 & 36).



Figure 35 & 36- The last day, Behnam Sadighi, 2011-2022.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ <https://www.behnamsadighi.com/site/articles.aspx?id=2014&galleryItem=2022>

Sadighi believes these people do not leave the country to gain new experiences. Rather, it is a compulsory evacuation for those that may never see their homeland again.⁶⁵ These art projects, along with my research-creation project, explore and reflect on the contemporary phenomenon of Iranian migration from different viewpoints. As I focus on the role of memory and place in shaping immigrants' experiences, these two artists create their art related to the importance of place, social issues, and memories in shaping our lives and emotions. My use of translucent fabric to demonstrate how memories layer our experiences functions similarly to the transparent plexiglass in Anahita's project. I do not depict specific social and political elements in my artwork, while Anahita applies elements that are familiar to Iranians to talk about her lived experiences. Our projects are connected using imagination and combined pictures to share our perception. In my last painting, to share the living-in-between experience, I painted playground equipment from my childhood, like an abandoned carousel and swing, next to a contemporary slide to depict how my memories and my present life are intertwined with each other to share the living in between experience (Figure 8).

⁶⁵ "The Last Day," behnamsadighi, Accessed June 8, 2022, <https://www.behnamsadighi.com/site/articles.aspx?id=2022>.

CHAPTER 5- CONCLUSION

Emotional, psychological, and social bonds connect people to their physical environments. Places play a crucial role in shaping peoples' experiences, subjectivity, and social networks. Moreover, places have the imprints of people and events that are left behind, to be passed on from generation to generation to tie past and present, people and places. Memories are constructed and embodied in places; therefore individuals remember their memories through spatial references. Even if people leave a place, the memories of that place remain in their mind and create a collective image among the community to connect them to each other and to their living environment. In this way, places create a sense of belonging and social identity to unify people as a group.

In my research, I am using the specific characteristics of a place to generate and revive memories to investigate a sense of belonging and identity. My print project shows how family photographs assist us to anchor our memories, by acting as a reminder to bring the past into the present to tie us to our social groups and places. By juxtaposing old and contemporary images, I intend to equalize the importance of places in shaping our memories and sense of belonging and attachment. The indexical nature of photographs provides my connection to places, people, and the existence of past experiences while the imaginary nature of painting helps me to explore my connection to new places by transferring my personal experiences and memories through pictorial signs. Exploring place attachment through art has allowed to build a sense of belonging in this new place, by sharing memories of home and exploring my connection to places. Moreover, by studying our connections to places we better understand our individual and social identity

and relocate ourselves in a society. The intersection of place and memories make places meaningful, tying us emotionally and socially to these places.

Here in the big unknown, after all the deaths and departures generates understanding about immigration experiences and the consequential feelings of disconnection and alienation that come with detachment from familiar living environments and social communities. My lived experience and subsequent creative practice reflects larger global issues such as forced displacement and cultural assimilation that many Iranian's and immigrants are subject to today. My project can generate understanding and validation about challenging experiences with immigration. Art practice is a unique way to generate understanding of what alienation and disconnection is like. Through visual language which is accessible for broader audiences of other geographical contexts, people can go through this path and resonate with those who have experienced immigration and disorientation.

My research creation project is the starting point in my journey and it can evolve with my experiences in the future. It can prompt other viewers to share their relevant experiences and demonstrate their own viewpoint of immigration. My project is a unique viewpoint of a bigger narrative that is shared among all the Iranian immigrants which can have implications for other social groups who try to call Canada home. It acts like a piece of puzzle to shape an overall image of immigration to find out what structures can be used to assist new immigrants achieve a sense of belonging.

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Appendix A

Artist Statement

I was born in Tehran, Iran in 1986. My artworks, which range from photography, painting and printmaking, are rooted in the concept of place attachment and memory. I contextualize my experiences of disconnection and relocation through the lens of art to explore my connection to current places by referring to past. I engage the notion of place attachment because it is a key in shaping collective memory,⁶⁶ and a sense of belonging. Place attachment helps provide an understanding of how places can create social identity by developing the tangible and intangible connections between past and present, people and places.⁶⁷ Familial spatial references assist us to organize and remember memories embodied in places that shape our existence. Therefore, any breakdown in habitual images of the external world can cause a period of uncertainty and discomfort⁶⁸. This the main theme of creating this body of work.

This exhibition consists of two connected projects:

*Here in the big unknown*⁶⁹ is a series of paintings that explore my connection to new places by referring to memories that engender feelings of solitude and detachment. Therefore, the overall atmosphere of the paintings creates a sense of duality between reality and fantasy, like scattered

⁶⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, "Space and the Collective Memory," in *Memory*, ed. Ian Farr (Whitechapel Gallery ; MIT Press, 2012), 48.

⁶⁷ Julia Bennett, "Gifted Places: The Inalienable Nature of Belonging in Place," *Environment and Planning. D, Society & Space* 32, no. 4 (2014): 658; Hidalgo and Hernández, "Place attachments: Conceptual and empirical questions," 658-671.

⁶⁸ Halbwachs, "Space and the Collective Memory," 128

images that come to mind when recalling memories. To emphasize the sense of loss and not belonging, there is no specific signs in these paintings to attach these places to our familiar environment. The large scale of the paintings cast a shadow over viewers to invite them to enter unknown places and share what I am experiencing in an unfamiliar city, my sense of detachment and relocation.

The emptiness, vastness and loneliness of these paintings allude to my lived experience of disconnection and uncertainty. All the elements depict unsettled positions, drowning in deep blue and purple, and the tension of living in between. I aim to show how our emotions shape our memories and experiences to attach us to places. My paintings reflect my personal experiences of uncertainty and disconnection during my one year stay in Canada.

After all the deaths and departures includes a series of hanging prints of my personal and archival family photographs on translucent fabrics. By presenting my family photographs and archival photos together I am referring to an experience of relocation that is continuous over time from generation to generation. This hybrid project refers to the collective memory of generations of Iranians who take memories of their past to new alienated environments and experience living as in between to share the feeling of detachment and yearning for lost people and places. I detached the people pictured in the photos and print only parts of their bodies onto translucent fabric. By hanging the prints within the exhibition space, I bring these individuals into the new place, offering viewers an opportunity to experience the place through these metaphorical memories.

The juxtaposition of these projects is a way to walk the path between past and present, personal memories and collective memories, people, and places, to make a bridge between two different worlds that are connected and present in the experience of every immigrant.