

Depression Behind the Agreeable Silence  
Women, Migration and Self-Censorship

by Lida Shanehchiyan

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

OCAD University Graduate Gallery, April 9-12, 2019  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, April 2019

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*Depression Behind the Agreeable Silence: Women, Migration and Self-Censorship*

Lida SHanehchiyan

Master of Fine Arts

Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

OCAD University

2019

**ABSTRACT**

Fear of not integrating into the new society causes many immigrant women to conceal important aspects of their selves. Silence is one of the most common practices of self-censorship among these women; they remain silent in order to protect themselves from any risk of social harm and to avoid being misunderstood by others. This form of self-censorship paradoxically enables these individuals to integrate or to remain integrated into the adopted society.

I wrote this paper in parallel to my text-based sculptural works showcased in my MFA thesis exhibition *Agreeable Silence* to reflect my personal experience, as well as my theoretical and visual investigation. I argue that while multilayered intrapsychological issues that immigrant women face when they practice self-censorship may seem a mundane and a harmless means of adaptation, it can cause lingering psychological effects such as depression on them. I believe that receiving country's sociocultural norm can play an important role in the aggravation of this phenomenon, so through this visual and textual project my aim is to encourage my audience to think about the issue of immigrant women's self-censorship and its relationship to depression.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I am grateful to all of those with whom I have had the pleasure to work during this project.

I would especially like to thank Dr. Linda Carreiro, my primary advisor. As my teacher and mentor, she has taught me more than I could ever give her credit for here. She has shown me, by her example, what a good artist (and person) should be.

I would also like to thank my secondary advisor Dr. Kathy Kiloh for her generosity in sharing her profound philosophical view and knowledge with me.

Each of the members of my Advisory Committee has provided me extensive guidance and motivation in this trajectory.

Nobody has spent more time with me from the beginning of this program than Prof. Jessica Wyman, I really appreciate her patience during the last two years and her professional guidance.

Special thanks to Dr. Andrea Fatona, Prof. Michelle Gay, Dr. Jan Hadlaw, Dr. Martha Ladly, and Dr. Barbara Rauch for sharing their knowledge and supporting me.

Many thanks to my IAMD cohort for sharing their constructive comments and their inspiring art/design ideas with me.

And finally, I am thankful for the help of my amazing friends and family, particularly my life-partner, Arash, and my little puppy, Pablo, who have been paving my life's path with their unending love.

To Baba,

and to Arash

your love and support have given me the strength to follow my dreams.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHOR’S DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
DEDICATION	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: MIGRATION AND SELF-CENSORSHIP</b>	<b>9</b>
Migration and Self-identity Complex	9
Self-Censorship: The Definition	15
<i>My Untold Words</i>	18
Migrants’ Self-Censorship: The Underlying Motivations	22
<i>Morality</i>	24
<b>CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN, DEPRESSION AND SILENCE</b>	<b>30</b>
Depression: Gendered Phenomenon	30
Depression: Loss of a Loved “Thing”	33
Silence: The Language of Depressed Migrants	35
<i>Lake of Silence</i>	38
<b>CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIONING</b>	<b>42</b>
Material, Process and Engagement	42
Dialogue rather than monologue	45
<i>Your Reflection in My Life</i>	46
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION</b>	<b>61</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS\*

Figure 1: <i>My Calling (Card) #1</i> Double Meta-Performance by Adrian Piper	12
Figure 2: Screenshot of <i>Scent of Geranium</i> by Naghmeh Farzaneh	14
Figure 3: <i>The Geometry of Conscience</i> by Alfredo Jaar	21
Figure 4: <i>My Untold Words</i> , work in progress	21
Figure 5: <i>My Untold Words</i>	22
Figure 6: Collected fragments of the mesh	27
Figure 7: <i>Morality</i> , work details	28
Figure 8: <i>Morality</i>	29
Figure 9: Percentage of emotional problems among recent immigrants by gender	31
Figure 10: Factors related to migration that affect mental health	33
Figure 11: The process of decision making for self-censorship	37
Figure 12: <i>Lake of Silence</i> , prototype for video installation	41
Figure 13: <i>VB45</i> by Vanessa Beecroft	44
Figure 14: <i>Mallas (Nets)</i> by Elizabet Cerviño	48
Figure 15: Title Unknown, Anish Kapoor	48
Figure 16: <i>Your Reflection in my Life</i> work details	51
Figure 17: <i>Your Reflection in my Life</i>	52
Figure 18: <i>Your Reflection in my Life reflected on Morality</i>	53
Figure 19 to 24: Exhibition documentation	61

\*all images in this paper are photographed and/or created by Lida Shanehchiyan unless otherwise mentioned.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is in support of my thesis exhibition *Agreeable Silence*, which comprises a series of multi-media artworks, including *My Untold Words* (2018), *Morality* (2018), *Lake of Silence* (2018), *Your Reflection in my Life* (2018). I use my visual project as a discourse that contributes to a societal understanding related to the issues of self-censorship and depression among migrant women, particularly women from patriarchal countries. As an immigrant woman who was raised under the harsh censorship rules of Islamic regime of Iran<sup>1</sup>, and who currently lives in Canada, I still experience suppression caused by withholding my ideas and thoughts in many social formations. Therefore, based on my own experience of immigration, self-censorship, and depression, and many similar stories other immigrant women have told me, I felt an urgency to use my words to talk about self-censorship as a barrier that prevents immigrant women from having a voice in the society.

Working on the issue of self-censorship came to my mind a couple of years after I migrated from Iran to Canada in 2006. I moved to Canada to go to school. At the time, I was very excited that I was finally able to work on the issue of political censorship of images of women in contemporary Iran, which was one of my main concerns as a woman raised under the harsh misogynist Islamic regime's rules. Since talking about such

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<sup>1</sup> I have discussed this issue in detail in my MDes thesis "Contradiction and Paradoxes: Political Censorship and Visual Representation of Images of Women in Contemporary Iran", York University: Toronto: June 2009.



subjects in Iran is taboo and against the regime's law, moving to Canada opened a new door for me to express my views about the issue of political censorship in my homeland. However, while I was working on that issue for my MDes thesis<sup>2</sup> I noticed that self-censorship was something that I had been subconsciously practicing since I moved to Canada. I was shocked and disturbed by the fact that I still practiced another level of censorship on an everyday basis despite living in a country where freedom of expression is protected by law. I was also disappointed because one of the main factors for which I (and I assume many other immigrants) moved to a democratic country was to be able to freely express myself. When I brought up the issue with some other immigrant women, I realized many of them are affected by the same problem. Therefore, when I began my MFA degree at OCAD University, I decided to work on the issue of self-censorship among women who emigrate from authoritarian and patriarchal societies to democratic societies in North America.

In a study by Kenneth Dion, Karen Kisel Dion and Rupa Banerjee, "Discrimination, Ethnic Group Belonging, and Well-Being", the authors argue that social cohesion results in well-being; at the same time, well-being may lead to greater social cohesion. Understanding that the relation between these two constructs may be bi-directional, it is important to examine how experiences of discrimination and prejudice affect well-being.<sup>3</sup> During my own process of acculturation, fear of not integrating into

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<sup>2</sup> Lida Shanechiyan, "Contradiction and Paradoxes: Political Censorship and Visual Representation of Images of Women in Contemporary Iran", York University: Toronto: June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Dion, Karen Kisel Dion, and Rupa Banerjee, "Discrimination, Ethnic Group Belonging, and Well-Being" in *Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion: Potentials and Challenges of Diversity*, (Toronto: Springer, 2009), 70.

the new society caused me to conceal important aspects of my 'self' which has affected my social life and general well-being. Speaking with other "non-white"<sup>4</sup> migrant women who've had similar experiences, I realize this concealment is a shared experience for us, one which also paradoxically enables us to integrate or to remain integrated into the adopted society. Throughout this MFA thesis, self-reflection and auto-ethnography are the main methods used in the creation of the artworks. Drawing specifically from theorists and scholars such as Daniel Bar-Tal, Julia Kristeva, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Irit Rogoff, and Christine Ross, my research methods also include a review of critical texts, which contribute to my understanding of the notion of self-censorship and its relationship to migration and depression. My limited knowledge of some of the research fields I refer to (such as psychoanalysis, geo-cultural studies, sociocultural studies) prevents me from participating as a professional in those areas. Therefore, this thesis by no means provides a scientific or psychological analysis of the notion of self-censorship, nor do I attempt to draw a sociocultural theoretical framework of the subject matter; rather, the aim is to visually express my ongoing personal issues of post-migration self-censorship. Through examples from some works of contemporary artists I explore the ways in which visual language can be used to express concepts related to migration and depression and how the symbolic use of specific materials can stand as metaphors to express various issues in an artwork.

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<sup>4</sup> This term is used by Himani Bannerji in *The Dark Side of the Nation* as a critique to the negative connotation that the term 'women of color' is used in North America. She claims: "I found woman of colour to be both a coy and an offensive notion and, like many others, thought of the expression 'coloured.'" I did not want to call myself this." Himani Bannerji, "The dark side of the nation: essays on multiculturalism, nationalism and gender", Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000, 29.

While my goal is to create provocative artworks that raise questions about the psychological conditions of migrant women, this project does not intend to propose solutions to these problems; rather, its purpose is to encourage the audience to think about the complex problems that many immigrant women face while they are in the process of adapting to the sociocultural norms of the receiving country. It acknowledges that experiences of migration are varied and equally, and the political contexts behind migration and freedom of expression are not interchangeable. The focus for this thesis will be on the intrapsychological affects that myself and other immigrant women have experienced during adaptation. My text-based sculptural works raise questions about how internal and external forces lead some migrant women to apply the practice of self-censorship on an everyday basis. For clarity and consistency, I have used the terms self-censorship and silence interchangeably in order to define the suppression of emotions, ideas, and self-expression in general that an immigrant woman, particularly, imposes on herself.

One of the most challenging processes that immigrants go through is adapting to the sociocultural values of the destination country. According to *Encyclopædia*

*Britannica*:

Migrations fall into several broad categories. First, internal and international migration may be distinguished. Within any country there are movements of individuals and families from one area to another (for example, from rural areas to the cities), and this is distinct from movements from one country to another. Second, migration may be voluntary or forced. Most voluntary migration, whether internal or external, is undertaken in search of better economic opportunities or housing. Forced migrations usually involve people who have been expelled by governments during war or other political upheavals or who have been forcibly

transported as slaves or prisoners. Intermediate between these two categories are the voluntary migrations of refugees fleeing war, famine, or natural disasters.<sup>5</sup>

While these broad categories are some factors that impact the process of acculturation, I acknowledge that other specific factors may additionally contribute to the process of adaptation. For instance, my situation as an international migrant who voluntarily decided to move to Canada on one hand and being an educated, middle class woman on the other hand provided me advantages over others who may have less options. However, while my migration was voluntary, there was an urgency to leave a highly repressive and patriarchal country in order to follow my dream of living in a society with freedom where there is not an extreme of gender inequality.

Ada C. Muí and Suk-Young Kang, social gerontologists, state, “The association between acculturation and depression is intriguing. The acculturation process is multidimensional, including physical, psychological, financial, spiritual, social, language, and family adjustments.”<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, migrants' patterns of behavior are different among various ethnicities, genders, races. Other factors such as social class, financial security, educational background, language fluency, age, marital status, and even the type of migration, would also influence migrants' ability to adapt, therefore contributing to their general well-being.<sup>7</sup> My particular position in this thesis is related to women, and more specifically women who are used to practicing self-censorship in their

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Augustyn. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 8th ed., s.v. “Human migration” Access: May 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-migration>.

<sup>6</sup> Ada C. Mui and Suk-Young Kang, “Acculturation Stress and Depression among Asian Immigrant Elders”, *Social Work*, 51, no. 3 (2006): 244, accessed Jan 3, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23721202>.

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Human Migration”, <https://academic-eb-com.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/human-migration/41473>.

homelands; those who might over-control their behavior, emotions, or thoughts upon migration in accordance with the expectations of the new society. Little attention has been devoted to the unconscious discrimination toward these immigrant women and its potential effect upon self-censorship. In her Master of Arts in Librarianship Dissertation, “Looking for Freedom: An Exploration of the Iranian Blogosphere”, Alexis Rigby states, “The notion of self-censorship functions to oppress and undermine the soul and the reality of the existence of a person.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, I believe that while the moments of self-censorship may be small or mundane in the moment, they never leave the women who practice it, and their affects can be profound.

Daniel Bar-Tal, socio-psychologist, asserts self-censorship serves as a block for information circulation in society<sup>9</sup>. I also suggest the effects of this suppression not only negatively influence migrants’ lives, but further limit the benefits to the adopted societies by the absence of these voices. I chose text-based sculptural work as a medium to invite my audience to consider the experience of self-censorship, in order to understand the suppressive and nuanced aspect of the issue. Through my process and the use of metaphorical objects, such as mirrors and mesh, I express different aspects of the effects of self-censorship on both individuals and society. Text is an essential part of my artwork; it becomes an element that not only communicates important written messages related to the theme, but through my physicalized inscription processes, also symbolizes the difficult challenge of my settlement. Text becomes a tool through which I express the

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<sup>8</sup> Rigby, Alexis. “Looking for Freedom: An Exploration of the Iranian Blogosphere”, Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 2007), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, “Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research,” *Advances in Political Psychology* 38, no. 1 (2017): 38.

words I withhold; I ‘silently’ connect and talk to my audience through both English and Farsi text. I use Farsi in a way that is not readable to my audience, in fact, I use Farsi to express the interconnection between my personal experience of self-censorship, migration and depression. On the other hand, I use English words in a way that coerces my audience to actively connect with the works in order to read the written messages. This approach of using text metaphorically stands in for the effort the adopted society needs to make to understand the issues of self-censorship and depression for immigrant women. While I use Farsi text as a visual signifier of language difference and personal issues (that each immigrant can experience differently), the English text talks about the issue of self-censorship, immigration and depression in a larger context. Using both Farsi and English demonstrates my duality of living between the two cultures; while my personal language is Farsi (such as my mental conversation in a *Lake of Silence*), my formal language that connects me to the society is English.

There are some fundamental questions I explore as the core premise of my thesis, including: Is depression generally a more common issue among women and particularly among immigrant women? What are the relationships between self-censorship, silence, and depression? What does self-censorship mean and how do I define it? What is the difference between choosing to be silent in order to try to ‘fit in’, and being forced to suppress self-expression? What is the effect of migration on self-identity? Is the practice of self-censorship a subconscious way of eliminating ‘self’ from the society for migrant women? Or it is the result of feeling that they are already eliminated from the society?

Through theoretical research borrowed from various academic fields, this paper investigates the above questions. In addition to the theoretical research, my personal life experience is also reflected in the artworks discussed throughout the paper. Chapter One starts with a discussion about the connection between migration and self-identity. I define the meaning of self-censorship, and convey how fear of not integrating into the adopted society prevents some migrant women from expressing themselves. I also suggest that through this practice, women are further isolated from being integrated into their new society. Later, I explore the underlying motivations behind the practice of self-censorship for migrants, including a discussion on my works, *My Untold Words*, and *Morality*.

Chapter Two brings up the issue of depression, and its relationship to self-censorship. I discuss depression as a gendered phenomenon and its relationship to the process of settlement for many migrants. I then outline how migration affects women with an increased possibility of depression, the results of which can lead to silence. My artwork, *Lake of Silence*, conveys my personal anxiety of the everyday practice of self-censorship, and reveals to the viewer the internal challenge I go through when I choose to stay silent.

The final chapter, Chapter Three, is about the importance of society's implication into encouraging or discouraging 'agreeable' silence, and how the resulting artworks invite contemplation and response to multi-layered issues of migrants' feeling of in-betweenness, silence and alienation. Through the materials used in the artwork, *My Untold Words*, and the way they engage with reading the words, I ask the audience to consider positionality and perspective.

All citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging<sup>10</sup>

Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Migration, Identity and Self-Censorship**

Migration has an influential role in the formation and transformation of identity. In many cases, this transformation alters and shapes new characteristics and behaviors distinct from the existing identity. In my own experience—an experience reflected in many critical texts—immigrants are constantly preoccupied with trying to find the connection between who they used to be in their homeland, who they are at the moment, and who they aspire to be in their adopted country. Trinh Minh-ha, feminist scholar, composer and filmmaker, describes “...the self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere.”<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Parveen Nangia, “Discrimination Experienced by Landed Immigrants in Canada” *Ryerson Center for Immigration and Settlement*, no. 7 (2013): 4.

<sup>11</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 27.



person who lives in this “elsewhere” is, in fact, a stranger to herself who struggles to link her former and her later self.

Some immigrants choose to build their self-definition in redefining the same personal and social status they were identified with in their homeland; some others aim to assume a new person and remove many aspects of their past lives. There is also another group that doesn't already have a strong idea of what the outcome will be. Regardless of what a person attempts to achieve in their new living situation, this back and forth thinking about who one was, is, or maybe will be, can create a constant rethinking of their self-definition. In any of these cases, immigrants struggle not only to define their identity for themselves but also for other members of society; as Trinh states: “I become me via an other.”<sup>12</sup> Terms such as *women of color and/or visible minority* puts ‘non-white’ migrant women in the position of ‘otherness’ upon landing in their the adopted country. Sociologist Himani Bannerji argues that the term ‘women of color’ provides “the political culture for accepting, using and naturalizing a colour-based notion of subjectivity and agency, which in continuity with Canada's colonial formation came to dominate the cultural politics of Canada's other women.”<sup>13</sup> Bannerji continues, “This discourse of diversity is a fusion of a cultural classification, or an empirical/descriptive gesture, with politics. That is, our empirically being from various countries, with our particular looks, languages and cultures, has become an occasion for interpreting, constructing and ascribing differences with connotations of power relations.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>13</sup> Himani Bannerji, “The dark side of the nation: essays on multiculturalism, nationalism and gender”, Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000,30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 35.

in writing about the experiences of the African Americans, William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois pointed to the difficulties of simultaneously maintaining an American identity with a 'black' identity. For Du Bois this difficulty was rooted in the combined "sense of looking at one's self through" one's own experience as a racial minority as well as "the eyes of others".<sup>15</sup> While I acknowledge that du Bois is very specifically talking about the position of Black Americans in a racist post-slavery America, I would argue that myself and other immigrant women from Islamic countries trying to adapt to Western societies censor our 'selves' not only from the perspective of women; we also engage in a form of self-concealment as Muslim women under the gaze of what historian Paul Gilroy terms 'double consciousness'.<sup>16</sup>

In her performance piece, *Calling Card #1* (1986-1990), Adrian Piper, visual artist and philosopher, explores identity as a woman who identifies as black, but who is viewed as white to others. She questions the socially constructed assumptions and discrimination against women of color, by 'calling out' racist remarks. This series of performances happened at dinner and cocktail parties, where individuals, not realizing that Piper is African American, freely expressed racist remarks in front of her. In reaction to the comments, Piper gave them a printed card with a note mentioning that as a black woman she was offended by their comments (Image 1). In an interview with Maurice Berger (1998), Piper describes her the relationship between identity and otherness:

My work challenges the white viewer to transcend that deeply entrenched, carefully concealed sense of privilege, specialness, and personal superiority that comes from identifying oneself with society's most privileged group. If we are

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<sup>15</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York.: Oxford University Press, 2007, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

ever going to move toward a resolution of the problem of racism, not only in this country but internationally, we've got to overcome the divisive illusion of otherness, the illusion that each of us is defined not just by our individual uniqueness but by our racial uniqueness.”<sup>17</sup>

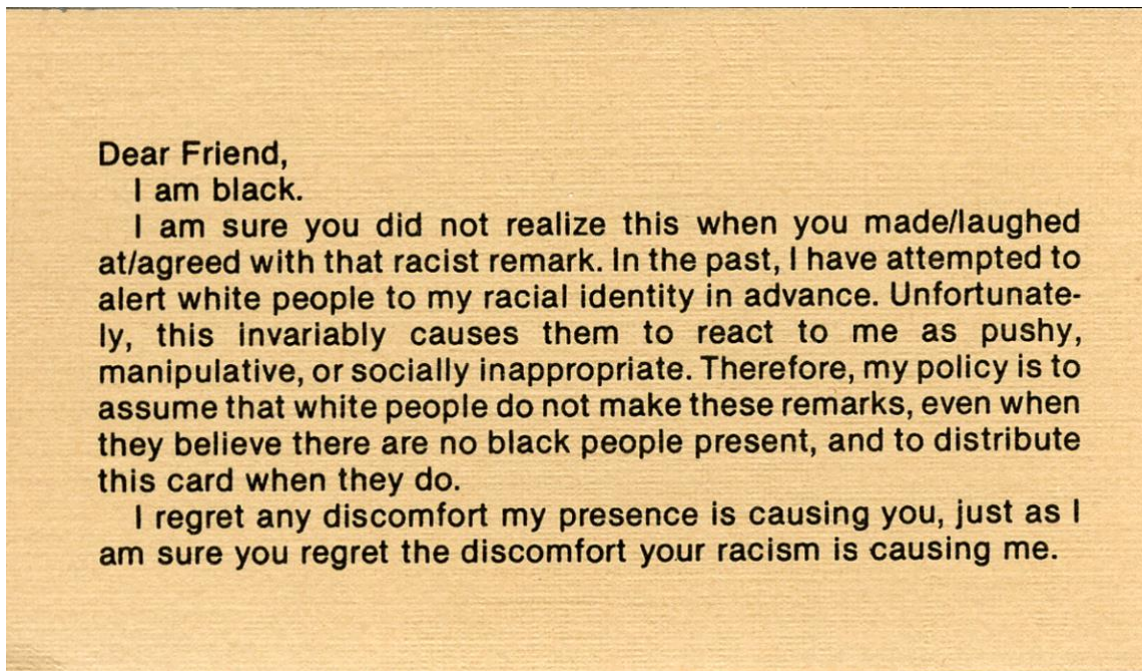


Figure 1: Adrian Piper, My Calling (Card) #1 Double Meta-Performance, 1987-88, video, 58 mins

Piper's performative work uncovers how oppressive social remarks in everyday interactions can emotionally effect 'others'. Similarly, I have also used text in my artworks to communicate to my audience things that I have not been able to verbally talk about in social groups. The artworks in my thesis, *Agreeable Silence*, are a call to action about the painful encounters many immigrant women experience, feeling alienated from the society as a result of "the divisive illusion of otherness".

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<sup>17</sup> Adrian Piper, "Adrian Piper and Identity", Accessed May , 2019, <https://adrianpiper.weebly.com/adrian-piper.html>.

While Piper's work highlights the issue of overt racism she witnesses because of her skin tone (which allows her to "pass" as a white woman) and it is not necessarily the same issue immigrants women like me experience; the commonality between her work and mine is that we both talk about being silenced. Piper is being silenced by individuals who perceive her critical speech as aggressive, so she has resorted to using calling cards – "I call racism." However, my work expresses the experience of being silenced that results from stereotypes forced upon some immigrant women based on their traditional, cultural and social behavior differences from the ones of the adopted.

The gap between understanding of Iranian and what non-Iranian people see of that country/culture is very well expressed in the *Scent of Geranium*, an autobiographical animated film created by Iranian-American artist Naghmeh Farzaneh, expressing the struggle of self-identity of immigrants more as a 'self-proof'.<sup>18</sup> Although her hopeful tone during the film indicates that migration is a process of struggle towards a better life, the dark metamorphosis of the scenes expresses how each step of moving towards a better life can be emotionally painful and protractive for migrants. Figure 2 is a screenshot from Farzaneh's animation illustrating her post-migration challenge and failure in representing "real Persian culture" to her new friends. In a way, she wants the new society to get to know her better by apprising them about positive points of her homeland which seems

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<sup>18</sup> Here is part of *Scent of Geranium*'s script that expresses Farzaneh's struggle in proofing her cultural background as a positive aspect of her identity to her new social surroundings: "I tried to use every opportunity to be a representative of real Persian culture. I had statements and arguments ready, I was reading the news every day, I was trying to keep up with everything that was happening around the world, just in case someone asked me something, I knew enough.", Naghmeh Farzaneh, "Scent of Geranium" Rochester Institute of Technology, New York: 2016, 25.

like an impossible task for her to do when the ‘empire’ of Iran is transformed into the stereotyped symbol of the Persian cat.



Figure 2: Naghmeh Farzaneh, Screenshot of *Scent of Geranium* (1:18 min), Animation (4:41 min), 2017, <https://vimeo.com/148927657>

There are many connotations to the word ‘otherness’ including but not limited to gender, race, nationality, religion, and other forms of marginalization. In the adopted society, migrants are generally asked to identify themselves by one or a combination of words that connotes otherness. Maria Caterina La Barbera, a gender studies and human rights scholar, states, “patterns of identification among migrants vary greatly, ranging from identification with one’s country of origin, religion or mother tongue to receiving country, neither or both.”<sup>19</sup> Migrants, like me, who identify themselves by a term such as Iranian-Canadian don’t feel they belong to either of the two nations they are defined by. The emotional challenge of not being ‘purely’ related to any of the nations, has a sense of

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<sup>19</sup> MariaCaterina La Barbera, “Identity and Migration in Europe: Multidisciplinary Perspectives”, *International Perspectives on Migration 13*, Springer International Publishing Switzerland: 2015, 3, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-10127-9\_1.

belonging and not belonging to members of the two societies and the immigrant herself.

As La Barbera suggests, “migrants explicitly perceive identity as fluid and multiple.”<sup>20</sup>

A limited survey of the literature on migration and depression reveals the existence of a vicious cycle of depression and damaged self-worth as a result of the questions around identity. Daniel Bar-Tal states that, for migrants, “personal identity is partly based on their social identity which also impinges on their self-worth.”<sup>21</sup> Stress resulting from living in an unknown culture can contribute to feelings of not belonging to the society in which one resides, which can also fuel this identity complex.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, while voluntary migration is generally viewed as a positive step taken in order to live a better life, feeling alienated can create a challenge for immigrants to define their position in the new society.

### **Self-Censorship: The Definition**

Self-censorship is a broad concept. It is generally received as a practice that results from pressure forced by a specific party or institution over individuals. It is a phrase most often applied by film producers, film directors, publishers, news anchors, journalists, musicians, and other kinds of authors including individuals who use social media.<sup>23</sup>

However, I argue that self-censorship is an intrapsychological<sup>24</sup> phenomenon that can be

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>21</sup> Bar-Tal, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Dinesh Bhugra, “Migration, distress and cultural identity”, *Section of Cultural Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry*, London, UK, *British Medical Bulletin*: 2004, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia contributors, *Self-censorship*, Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia., 26 February 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Self-censorship&oldid=885134194>.

<sup>24</sup> A psychological state exists within the mind of an individual which can affect the emotional feeling, or even the mental health of the person.

practiced by anyone in any social formation.<sup>25</sup> This practice is not only a response to outside forces, such as authoritarian states, it also results from internal, emotional, and psychological forces that individuals impose on themselves. Jonathan Parkin in his essay “Thomas Hobbes and Problem of Self-censorship” describes how the early modern philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, elevated the act of self-censorship as “an essential condition of civil peace”<sup>26</sup> in that, the practice of refraining from conflictual opinion allows individuals to function peacefully in a society. In contrast to this view (quite common in modern Western political theory), Daniel Bar-Tal states that self-censorship—or a refraining from expression of opinion and ideas—not only affects an individual’s psychological health but also disturbs society’s function: “self-censorship serves as a barrier, blocking information that could potentially facilitate various constructive and functional processes of improving the society.”<sup>27</sup> I propose self-censorship as a multilayered process that an individual imposes on herself in order to conceal her interpersonal emotions, ideas, beliefs and thoughts, actively working against her desire to share them. In this situation, the ‘actor’<sup>28</sup> chooses to be silent in spite of her inner tendency for self-expression, and this silence, I argue, following Bar-Tal, contributes to the stagnation of society.

One of the most important points raised in *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes*, a collection of essays edited by Han Baltussen

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<sup>25</sup> It means that we, along with others, are all authors of our selves.

<sup>26</sup> Han Baltussen and Peter J. Davis (Eds), *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 294.

<sup>27</sup> Bar-Tal, 38.

<sup>28</sup> I have used the term ‘actor’ to emphasis that staying silent is also an ‘act’ that (in some cases) takes more effort than self-expression.

and Peter J. Davis, is that in spite of the general perception that censorship is ‘top-down’ in the modern era, in the ancient world of Athens and Rome people were self-obligated to limit their freedom of expression. Baltussen and Davis claim, “This is why we can speak of self-regulation or self-censorship. It is a core component of human behavior playing a role in the private and public spheres, and expanding in ever widening circles of human interaction.”<sup>29</sup> While I agree that self-regulation is “a core component of human behavior”, it is important to clarify the difference between self-censorship and self-regulation. The first one is applied out of unwanted internal or/and external forces while the second one is practiced out of choices; self-regulation is an essential act that promotes individual’s function in the society; it provides safety and peace without any (or minimal) emotional and psychological pressure. On the other hand, self-censorship is a deeper level of self-regulation in which this “core component” can become self-destructive. In the case of migrants, and particularly migrant women from patriarchal societies trying to function in a new country—that is still a patriarchal society, but perhaps less overtly—this self-censorship is no longer a healthy tool of integrating into the new society. I suggest self-censorship contributes to migrants’ alienation and becomes a means of self-suppression that limits individual’s ‘frank’<sup>30</sup> representation in the society, and therefore impedes both the individual’s self-worth, and the potential societal contributions they can make through their full participation.

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<sup>29</sup> Baltussen and Davis (Eds), 7.

<sup>30</sup> This term is used and defined by Baltussen and Davis as “speaking without reservations”: *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes*, eds. Han Baltussen, and Peter J. Davis, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 7.



### ***My Untold Words***

*My Untold Words* was an initial point in the trajectory of artmaking exploring my practice of self-censorship. In the process of creating this project, I re-viewed the moments of unwanted silence that were significant throughout my life. A few years after my migration to Canada, an inevitable incident happened that made me become aware of how much pressure I exerted on myself in order to settle down in my new home. At the time, I was a full-time student working two part-time jobs, and I frequently pushed myself to attend as many social and cultural events as I could. I did all of this in order to find the same social status and professional position that I had back home. Although there was a lot of pressure on me, I never realized how tiring the process of forgetting my pre-migration life was. More importantly, I did not realize how much it put my mental health at risk.

One day a small accident forced me to realize what had happened to me in the process of acculturation. A goldfish is one of the few symbolic items that Persians put on their traditional and ornamental new year's table (called Haft Seen—هفت سین): its fast movement and bright color is a symbol of a vibrant and active life in the upcoming year. In 2009, three years after my migration, I found my goldfish dead one night before the Persian new year. It suddenly reminded me of all the dear family and friends who passed away since I moved to Canada. I had a tough time dealing with the fact that I tried to suppress my feelings about missing my family, friends, job and many more aspects of my pre-migration life in order to settle in Canada. It was a bitter moment, and at the same time, an awakening reminder about how much I miss due to migration. I took a photo of

the dead goldfish, framed it, and put it in my bedroom as a symbol of all the people I missed. Since then the image of a goldfish has become the symbol of post-migration emotional break-down for me. In my work *My Untold Words*, the goldfish appears as the same visual signifier of loss of a loved “thing” which I will describe in detail in the next chapter.

Having that memory in my mind, I decided to dig deeper and remember moments of self-censorship and their effects through the different stages of my life. Going through family photos, I carefully chose images that I could emotionally connect with or those portraying events that I thought had an important emotional effect on me. Then, I cut my face out of each picture and put them all beside each other as if making a series of self-portraits for myself that only I could see; what was untold about me at that moment. I tried to remember what was going on in that specific stage of my life, and if there was anything that I wanted to tell someone but didn’t. The first memory I recalled was from the age of 4 or 5. I was surprised that I had so many memories of holding in my ideas and feelings that I could still unpleasantly remember. I decided to write letters to different people and express my ‘untold words’ that I wished to tell them at the time. It was a tough and challenging process. Next, I cut up the letters, written in Farsi, in such a way that they were no longer distinct or legible, but became instead the distillation of the feelings about unsaid words. All of these components were mounted in long lines on top of a large mirror.

Besides the goldfish image, the self-portraits and the letters, other materials had particular meanings including the mirror, pins, and corkboard. I used a mirror for the

background and pinned the images of my self-portraits, the goldfish, and the letters on pieces of cut corkboards and glued them on top of the mirror. Corkboards are usually used for everyday notes, therefore, I used them to represent the daily practice of self-censorship and to emphasize that even if one removes that from her life the traces will still be there (similar to the traces of the pins after removing them from the corkboards). Seeing my reflection in between all the fragments of my self-portraits and letters reminds me of the trace of the moments of self-censorship on my current life. After this project, the mirror has been a consistent object in most of my artworks about self-censorship. The gridded format of the *My Untold Words* is inspired by Alfredo Jaar's *The Geometry of Conscience* (2010). It is reminder of the repetitive ongoing practice of the moments of self-censorship and the fact that even if I forget those memories, their suppressive effect will still be a part of my life. This project opened the door for me to start thinking about the relationship between migration and self-censorship and how the two combined can lead to depression.

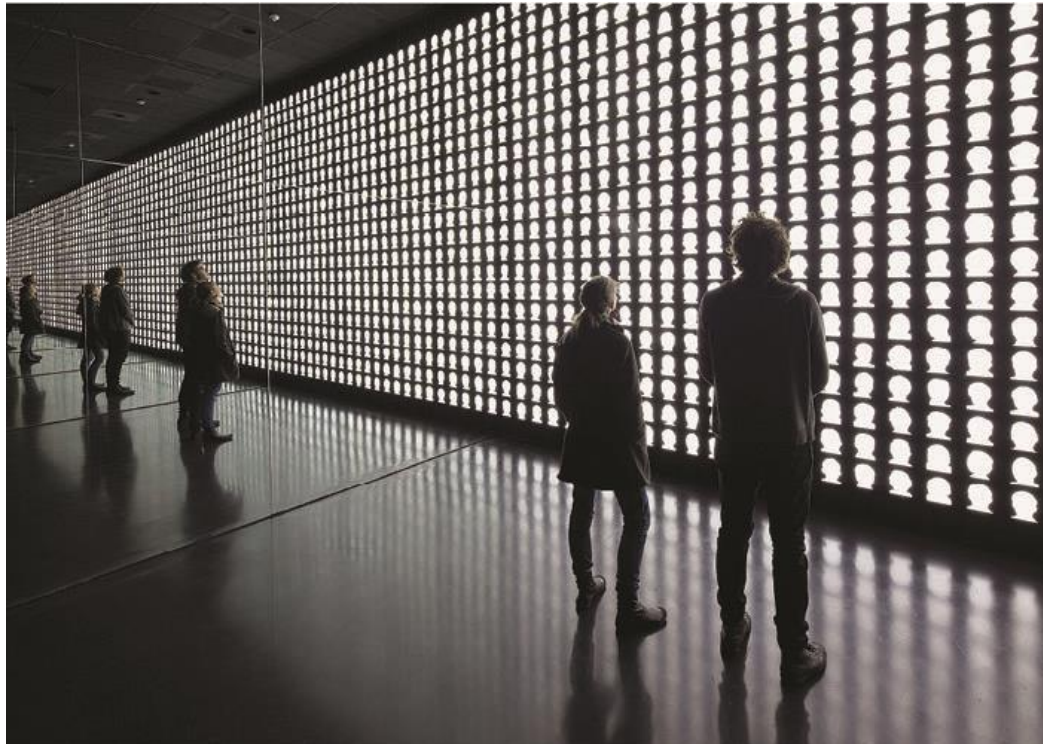


Figure 3: Alfredo Jaar, *The Geometry of Conscience*, 2010. Santiago de Chile, The Museum of Memory and Human Rights. Photo: Cristobal Palma. Image courtesy the artist, New York.

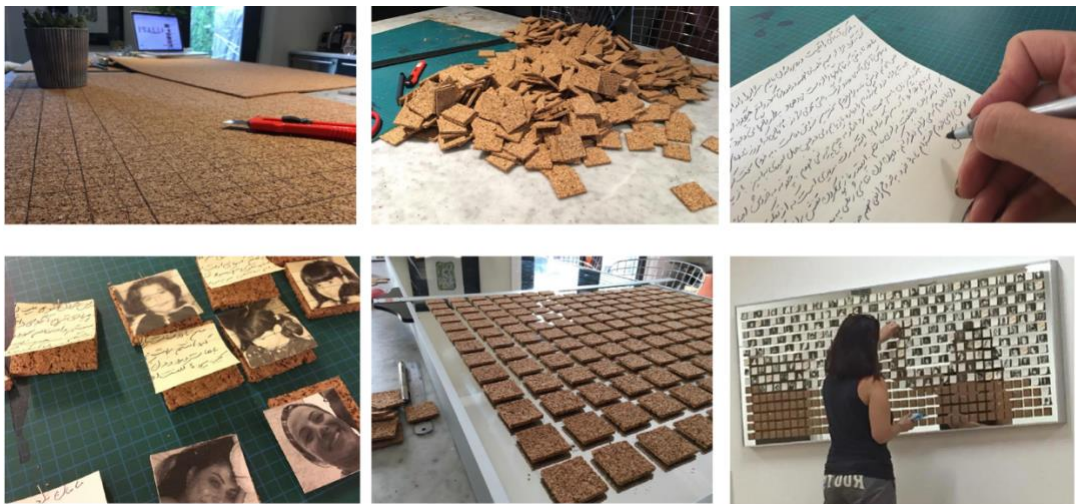


Figure 4: *My Untold Words*, Work in progress, 2018



Figure 5: My Untold Words, 2018, 77" X 31"

### **Self-Censorship: The Underlying Motivations**

It is important to understand why in the absence of legal compulsion many migrants might still practice self-censorship. I believe many of us do so in order to live in a peaceful society; to protect ourselves from any risk of social harm; and to avoid being misunderstood by others. Basically, fear of the unpredictable result of speaking out loud is the underlying motivation for immigrants' self-censorship. In his essay, "Thomas Hobbes and the problem of self-censorship", historian Jonathan Parkin states that "Hobbes's ambition was to go beyond this Machiavellian tradition in a way that he

thought would ultimately remove the need for self-censorship altogether.”<sup>31</sup> This can also be relevant with the case of many migrants who adopt self-censorship. A fundamental motivation for migrants’ self-censorship is often that they need to wait until they get familiar with the new sociocultural norms, so they can express themselves effectively; this does not account for migrants in situations where they are simply unable to speak under threat of potential loss of livelihood or even life. For the former, two complex social and psychological needs must be balanced: on the one hand, migrants’ need for self-censorship in order to function well in the new society; and, on the other hand (when settled in the new surroundings), they need to get over the habit of self-censorship. In both of these phases, there are psychological challenges for the migrants, the risks of which I argue can be depression.

Upon arrival in their new country, many migrants may decide to establish a personal code of behavior in order to function within the normative codes of the host society. Effectively, they put limits on their behavior in order to minimize their own ‘disruptive’ presence. These undeclared limits inherently create a power differential between migrants and those born or raised in that society. While by law<sup>32</sup> migrants have equal rights to the natives of the adopted country, in reality, 20% of migrants experience some level discrimination in the first five years of their migration.<sup>33</sup> Since discrimination

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<sup>31</sup> Baltussen and Davis, 301.

<sup>32</sup> “The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) prohibits discrimination based on a person’s race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability, or conviction for which a pardon has been granted (Section 3(1)).”: Parveen Nangia, “Discrimination Experienced by Landed Immigrants in Canada” Ryerson Center for Immigration and Settlement, no. 7 (2013), 7, ISSN: 1929-9915.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 5.

is often unpredictable and uncontrollable<sup>34</sup> immigrants are often at risk of facing it, which adds to their hesitation in expressing their needs. Therefore, the more the adopted country is open to diversity, the more immigrants feel at 'home' in their new home. Through my piece, *Morality*, I have expressed how this feeling of not belonging can lead to migrants' questioning their position in the new country.

### ***Morality***

Coming across a quote from Theodor Adorno, "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home"<sup>35</sup> provoked a question I repeatedly ask myself after migration: is it really moral to feel like one is at home in one's home? In my artwork *Morality*, I bring up this question to remind the audience of the migrants' challenge of feeling at home in their new home. The original quote is taken from Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* which is fundamentally Adorno's meditations on how to live a better life (a central theme of both the Greek and Hebrew sources of Western philosophy). Adorno argues that the negative effects of capitalism and industrialism on many aspects of everyday life have dehumanized Western individuals. While his book mainly critiques the existing bias of national identity of the time (WWII), what connects Adorno's idea to my idea of self-censorship is the impact of being open to diversity.<sup>36</sup> He states, "An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be a unitary state, but the realization of

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth L. Dion, Karen Kisiel Dion, and Rupa Banerjee, "Discrimination, Ethnic Group Belonging, and Well-Being" in *Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion: Potentials and Challenges of Diversity*, (Toronto: Springer, 2009), 71.

<sup>35</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno had to live in exile the United States as a result of fascism regime against Jews.

universality in the reconciliation of differences.”<sup>37</sup> Adorno wrote this book in exile (1944-1949), and his experience fostered an assertion that it is not a ‘morality’ to feel at home; that refugees and immigrants are all in a position to challenge this idea. The experience of feeling pushed to live in a place that we might not culturally ‘fit in’ is a shared experience for many, including myself. Neither identifying with the old “home” nor the “new” highlights the (difficult) possibility of moving beyond the need to belong to some kind of national identity. As Trinh T. Minh-ha stats, “Home is nowhere else but right here, at the edge of this body of mine.”<sup>38</sup>

While I wrote my question in a literal form the essence of language is placed in doubt by using material in particular way. I used bits of the sharp wires to write ‘is it part of morality not to be at home in one’s home?’. The fragments of silvery wires look shiny and beautiful (like jewelry) when seen at a distance, but when the viewer gets close they see that if the touch these words they can cut their finger. In the process of making *Morality* these shiny bits went under my skin and caused pain, reminiscent of the painful moments of ‘not feeling at home’ in my new home. Writing Adorno’s words as a question on a large-scale mirror, I asked my audiences to stand in front of the work and think about the phrase “Is it part of morality not to be at home in one’s home?” I twisted Adorno’s word into a question as a way to provoke viewers to think about the notion of belonging in one’s adopted country. Looking at the piece from a distance, the viewer sees their reflection more than they see the words. From this distance, viewers have to scan

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<sup>37</sup> Adorno, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 12.



the text, moving from left to right, at the level of their eyes. This makes it difficult to avoid reading the words, even though the text is subtle. When one gets very close, they see the harsh, needle-like shapes of wire fragments that comprise the words. Up close, the harshness of these words is apparent; they can hurt you if you touch them. The experience and process of looking at this work symbolizes the challenge for migrants: to want to feel at home in the adopted country, but not always feeling as if you fit in; as if your presence to others is painful.

The materials for *Morality* came from working on the project, *Your Reflection in my Life*. I kept collecting the extra wires that remained from perforated pieces of mesh (Figure 6). I was not sure why I was keeping them, but I was attached to them and unable to throw them away. One day, I found a heart-shape that had been accidentally formed from the pile of these little mesh fragments, and the idea for writing with these pieces I had collected so faithfully came to mind. It took me a lot of prototypes to figure out how to use the bits of wires and shape them as a script, then glue them on top of a mirror. As soon as I figured out the technical aspect, I wrote my long-time question inspired by Adorno's quote. The process of gluing the fragments of the mesh on the mirror was very time consuming, labor intensive and repetitive, similar to the process that it takes to feel at "home" in "one's home". As Irit Rogoff, visual culture theorist, states, "It seems increasingly clear to me that one cannot have a culture of belonging without maintaining a consciousness of 'not belonging' against which it exists in a permanent state of defense

and self-definition.”<sup>39</sup> Through *Morality* I expressed my experience of not feeling I belong to my new home after emigration.



Figure 6: Collected fragments of the mesh

A viewer came and looked at the work during a test installation. He refused to look in the mirror, not wanting to see his reflection. As a result, he was also unable to engage with the words. This conveys how some members of society will choose to engage with the painful experience and words of others; others may not. Only at a distance will the viewer see their reflection and their surroundings. When you're close, the mirror doesn't act like a mirror; it's only the words you see. Through this experience, the mirror provides a means to convey how viewers will choose to become involved in the ethical question, or opt to stay at a safer distance, and not consider situations that

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<sup>39</sup> Rogoff, 150.

cause many migrants to feel inferior and alienated in the society. My turning of Adorno's phrase into a question challenges the viewer to consider what makes someone feel at home. Words operate here as both tool and weapon—people can choose how they interpret the phrase, but need to consider it and their position. The text is written in English—which has become my post-migration formal language—which becomes a challenging question to my audience, while helping to connect me to the 'others'. As Trinh describes, "For memory and language are places both of shamelessness and otherness, dwelling and traveling. Here language is the site of return, the warm fabric of the memory, and the insisting call from after, back home. But here also, there, and everywhere, language is a site of change, and ever-shifting ground."<sup>40</sup> For me, using the text in this particular way destabilizes the formality of the language, proposing this work as a site of change both for myself and for the viewers.

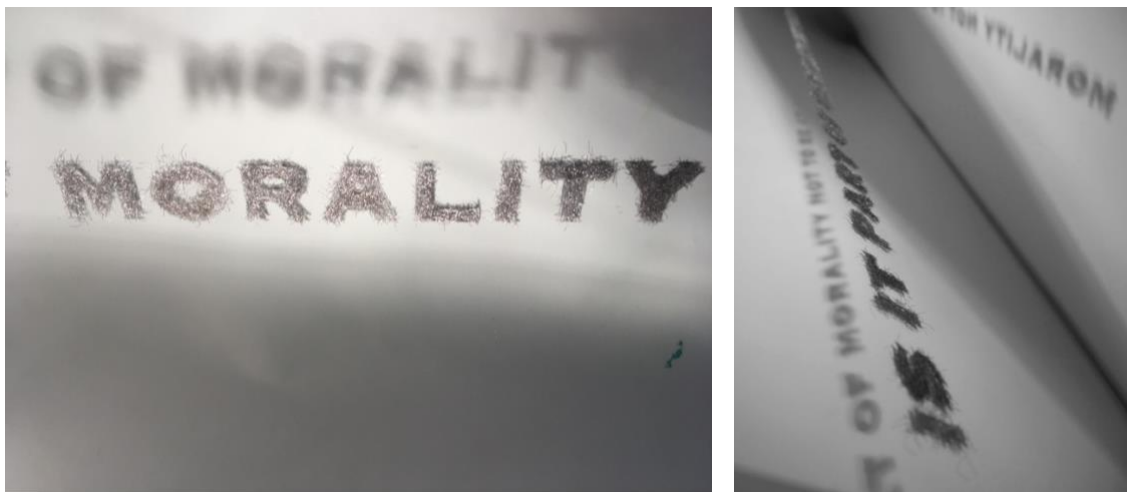


Figure 7: *Morality*, Work Details, 2018, 77" X 31"

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<sup>40</sup> Trinh, 28.

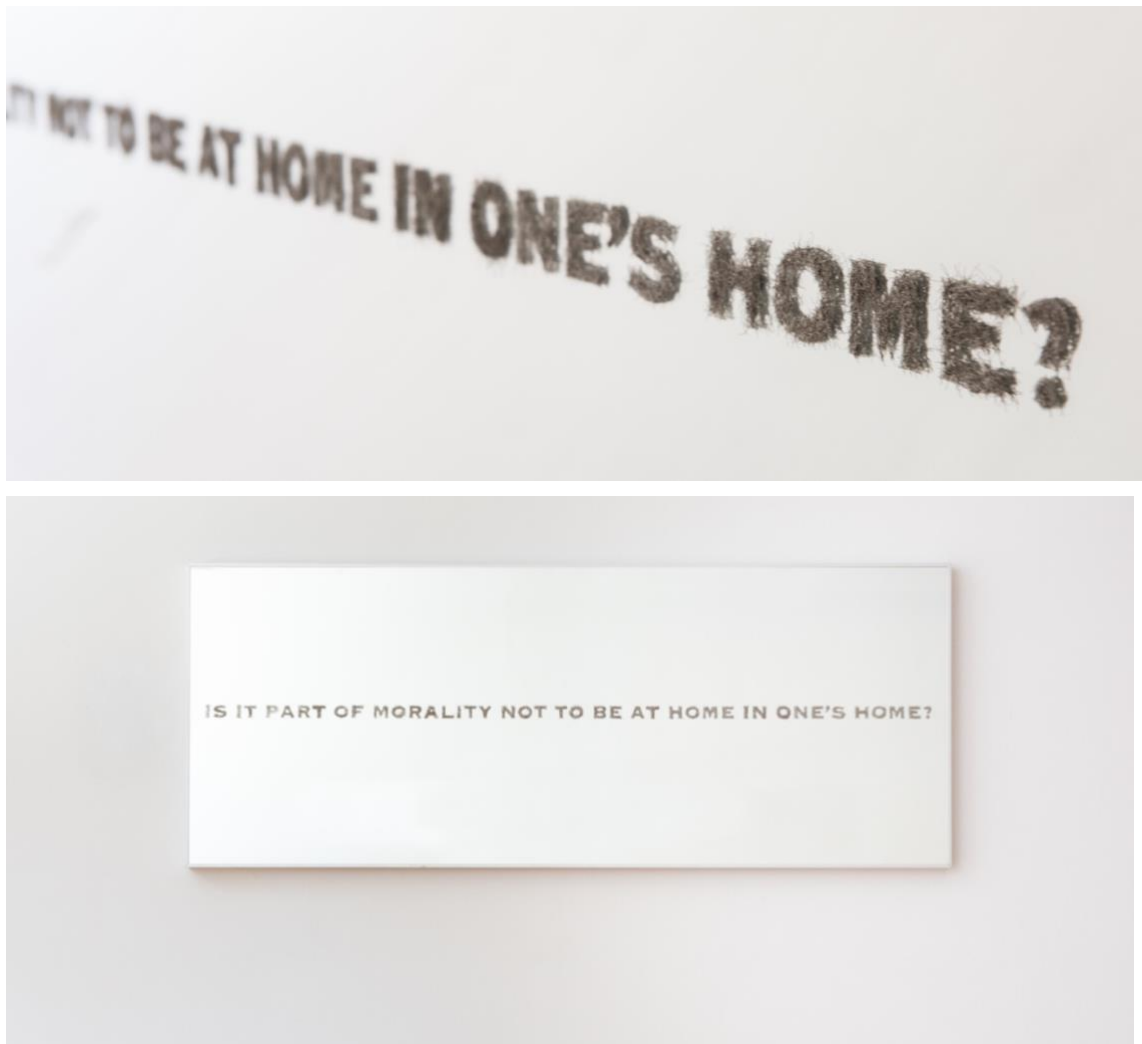


Figure 8: *Morality*, 2018, 77" X 31" Photo by Kristy Boyce

When all escape routes are blocked, animals as well as men learn to withdraw rather than flee or flight.<sup>41</sup>

Julia Kristeva

## CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN, DEPRESSION AND SILENCE

### Depression: Gendered Phenomenon

Depression is one of the most common mental health problems of the twenty-first century. Epidemiologist T. Bedirhan Üstün predicts that by 2020 depression will be the main cause of disability.<sup>42</sup> According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), more than half of the world's population will have a depressive disorder at some point in their lifetimes. Reports have also shown that depression is a 'gendered phenomenon' with a female to male ratio of 2 or 3 to 1.<sup>43</sup> Figure 8 shows the data from *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC)* comparing emotional problems among recent immigrants by gender. This data is collected from two sets of interviews of groups of migrants: the first set was approximately two years after landing (Wave 2) and the second set of interviews (Wave 3) at approximately 4 years after their landing. In Wave 2, approximately 27% of males and 33% of females reported experiencing emotional

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41 Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 34.

42 Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 67.

43 Ross, xvi.

problems such as persistent feelings of sadness, depression or loneliness. This gap increases slightly to 24% of males, compared to 33% of females in Wave 3. Such data shows that not only is depression more common among women in general, but it is more common among migrant women in comparison with migrant men.

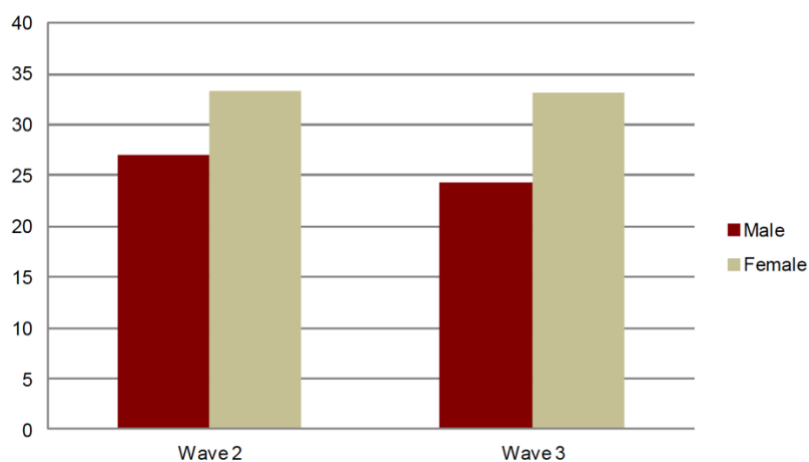


Figure 9: Percentage of emotional problems among recent immigrants by gender<sup>44</sup>

There are many theories about the reasons why women are more often diagnosed with depression in comparison with men. One possibility is that women are more open to discussing their problems and getting professional help when it comes to depression, so there are more records of women's referral to professionals. Another hypothesis is that women's hormonal changes such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause might have a negative effect (at least periodically) on their mental health. Another issue discussed,

<sup>44</sup> Laurence J. Kirmayer and Lavanya Narasiah, "Common Mental Health problems in Immigrants and Refugees: General Approach in Primary Care", *Canadian Guidelines for Immigrant Health, CMAJ*, September 2011, 183(12), 661.

which I believe is a very important factor, is the constant failure to meet the “predominant norms of femininity”.<sup>45</sup> The ‘norm of femininity’ is different from one culture to another. As a result, migrant women who were socially, culturally and traditionally enforced to meet the “norm of femininity” of their motherland, after migration are forced to face another, potentially contrasting, socially constructed “norm of femininity”. For example, migrant Muslim women carry the form of self-censorship which was developed in relation to their contradictory conflictual position in post-colonial societies. In addition to that, Muslim women in Western societies begin to conceal even more aspects of their ‘selves’ in order to integrate into societies where Islamophobia is dominant. This form of self-censorship is reminiscent of the following quotation which Franz Fanon borrows from Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “They [the Jews] have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in the fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype... We may say that their conduct is perpetually overdetermined from the inside.”<sup>46</sup> It could be equally said that Muslim women in the West are ‘slaves of the idea others have of them’ in the homeland as well as the host country.

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<sup>45</sup> Ross, xxviii.

<sup>46</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 2008.

### Depression: Loss of a Loved “Thing”

There are many factors that put migrants’ lives at risk of depression; these factors are different within varying age groups, ethnic groups, and genders. Figure 9, provided by CMAJ, shows some of the factors that affect adult migrants’ mental health. As illustrated in the table, “loss” is one of the main factors for depression, as migrants have to leave behind many beloved attachments, including belongings, family, friends and community. Additionally, often a migrant’s previous social status gained over time would change in the process of resettlement, creating an emotional loss and a repositioning of their self-identity.

Premigration	Migration	Postmigration
<b>Adult</b>		
Economic, educational and occupational status in country of origin	Trajectory (route, duration)	Uncertainty about immigration or refugee status
Disruption of social support, roles and network	Exposure to harsh living conditions (e.g., refugee camps)	Unemployment or underemployment
Trauma (type, severity, perceived level of threat, number of episodes)	Exposure to violence	Loss of social status
Political involvement (commitment to a cause)	Disruption of family and community networks	Loss of family and community social supports
	Uncertainty about outcome of migration	Concern about family members left behind and possibility for reunification
		Difficulties in language learning, acculturation and adaptation (e.g., change in sex roles)

Figure 10: Factors related to migration that affect mental health<sup>47</sup>

In coping with the loss of so many things at once, many migrants can undergo a lot of stress, which adversely affects their well-being, turning into depression. Julia Kristeva states that depression is the “awaken[ed] echoes of old traumas”<sup>48</sup> that the

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47 Kirmayer and Narasiah, 961.

48 Kristeva, 4.



person has never been able to overcome. Further she adds, “if temporary sadness and mourning on one hand, and melancholy stupor on the other are clinically and nosologically different, they are nevertheless supported *by intolerance for object loss and signifier’s failure* to insure the compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide.”<sup>49</sup> Self-censorship is a way of withdrawal from society; a sense of feeling so disconnected to ‘others’ that self-expression seems a pointless tool of communication. As Kristeva claims, “When all escape routes are blocked, animals as well as men learn to withdraw rather than flee or flight.”<sup>50</sup>

Building upon and departing from the insights of Freud, Kristeva also describes depression as a regression to the original trauma of separation from the mother, which is the moment the child starts to speak. In that sense, using language for the first time means separating from the loved “thing” (mother). I argue, in the case of migrants, stepping out into a new society and trying to express themselves in a language they are often not fluent in is similar to the experience of a child separation described by Kristeva. Whether migrants left their homeland by force or by choice the alteration and loss that they undergo in order to ‘fit in’ may become so tiring that they lose interests in words, action, and even life.

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49 Kristeva, 10.

50 Kristeva, 34.

## Silence: The Language of Depressed Migrants

There is a saying in Farsi that silence is the sign of agreement — *sokoot neshaneye rezayat ast* (سکوت نشانه رضایت است) —; this expression is traditionally used when a man proposes to a woman in an arranged marriage. The woman must stay silent in reply. They say this silence, which is out of modesty or shyness, is a sign of ‘agreement’. In contrast to the fact that this silence is traditionally attributed as a positive response, I suggest the silence can be the result of a learned behavior of compliance, resulting from social, cultural, and traditional pressures on the woman. This situation is very similar to that of migrants; although in some occasions migrants’ silence might be a sign of agreement, the fact is that most of the time the silence is rooted in fear of the unpredictable consequences of speaking out loud. Sara Ahmed states, “The more we don’t know what or who it is we fear the more the world becomes fearsome.”<sup>51</sup> Additionally, fear of not being integrated into the new society, of being misunderstood, and of being negatively judged are among the motivational reinforcements of many migrants’ silence.

The societal response to the immigrant’s self-censorship has an important effect in promoting or discouraging their behavior. In some cases, the society might receive immigrants’ silence as a behavior rooted in cultural difference. In another case, it could be received as a personal characteristic, such as being an introvert. However, while either of the two points can be a possibility, in some other cases, the natives of the adopted country may be aware of migrants’ withholding expression of their ideas, but they choose to accept migrants’ silence. Isn’t it always easier to have people in agreement? To accept

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51 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 69.

migrants' silence can result in potentially less friction from varying viewpoints. In this regard, a kind of 'agreement' is formed between immigrants and the natives of the adopted country and the language of silence becomes the official language of migrants (at least for a certain period); or, as Trinh express it, silence becomes the language of the "stranger" in the "strange lands".<sup>52</sup> Migrants' self-censorship can effectively promote a dissimulative behavior, keeping them from fully integrating into their new home. Consequently, migrants' self-censorship sets up and maintains a power dynamic in which natives of a country have more access to linguistic representation of migrants than the migrants themselves have.

According to Bar-Tal, human natural need for communication is not only based on a tendency to share information, it is also a desire to relieve themselves emotionally.<sup>53</sup> I also suggest that women who withhold self-expression suppress their emotional need to share feelings with others. If one's existence is defined in relation to the existence of others, and if language is the main tool of self-expression, it can be said that those who choose to be silent repudiate their existence. Not only suppressing the emotional need of self-expression can lead to depression, equally depression can increase the risk of withholding self-expression. Kristeva claims that individuals who suffer from depression generally avoid self-expression as they find it pointless, in fact; silence becomes the way of "withdrawal" for a depressed person.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, withholding self-expression and

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<sup>52</sup> Trinh 34.

<sup>53</sup> "Kubey and Peluso (1990) suggested that people pass on major news stories not out of an altruistic desire to inform others but simply to relieve their own feelings (see also Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992).", Bar-Tal, 44.

<sup>54</sup> Kristeva, 34.

depression can both lead to and reinforce each other. Additionally, withdrawal (not participating in social groups) can have a negative effect on the person's sense of self-worth; if individuals feel they are not contributing to the society, they can feel inferior to others. Through avoiding self-expression, many migrant women eliminate their voices from the society, and as a result, the society continues its pattern of excluding their voices. In other words, the process of migrant women's 'agreeable silence' is a continuous process of cause and effect that will not stop unless one party or the other puts an end to it.

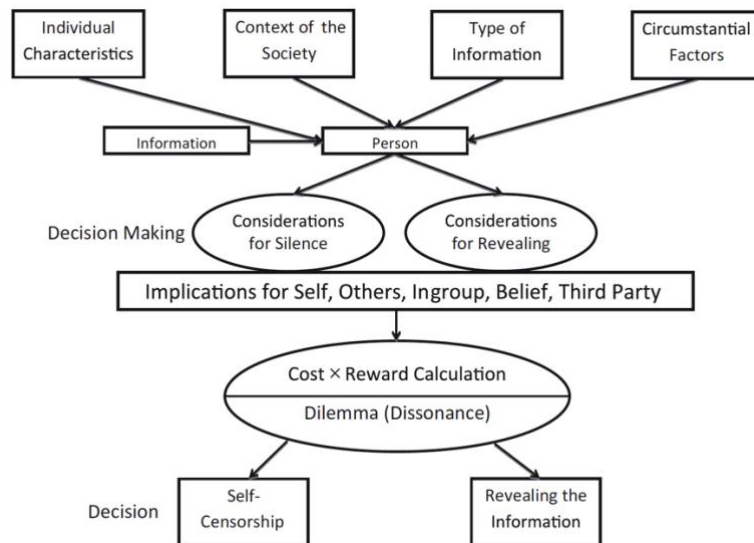


Figure 11: The process of decision making for self-censorship <sup>55</sup>

Kristeva describes “language retardation” as one of the most common characteristics of depression. She states that the sign of a depressed person is one who

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<sup>55</sup> Bar-Tal, 56.

speaks in a monotonous tone and eventually goes silent.<sup>56</sup> Trinh's view, however, is that there is no speech for the depressed person; that the usual language of immigrants going through the transition of relocation is silence. Each individual's coping mechanism is a unique process, however, and I believe most migrants share the experience of silence at least for a short period of time (in some cases their entire lifetime). The interrelationship between self-censorship, silence, and depression is a common concern that I've discussed with other migrant women. In order to visually express my personal experience of post-migration moments of silence, I created a video installation called *Lake of Silence*.

### **Lake of Silence**

One day I saw a reflection from a bowl of water on my kitchen's wall. The reflection's blurry shapes and fast movements reminded me of the anxiety I feel when I want to express myself among a group of native English speakers. This feeling is similar to what is expressed as a 'butterfly in the stomach' in English, but in Farsi this anxiety is called '*Tooye Delam Ashoob Mishe* (توی دلم آشوب می میشه)', literally meaning "There is a hurricane in my stomach." The blurry, rapidly moving shapes reminded me of the uncomfortable feeling in reaction to moments of anxiety and hesitation. The constantly changing direction of the shapes resembled the dilemma of whether to express myself in social situations or not, where the decision-making process causes extreme amounts of dread for me. *Lake of Silence* is derived from an Iranian expression that when one is sad, they 'sink into a lake of silence.' *Lake of Silence* explores the momentum of anxiety

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<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, 43.

migrants might go through in public situations; the anguish over whether it is alright to say something or not. As mentioned, migrants might avoid talking in groups because of the fear of being misunderstood or judged as a result of the cultural gap. Language barriers cause insecurity and anxiety, which lead to withholding speech, as many immigrants can be concerned about making mistakes, sounding ridiculous, or expressing socially ‘unacceptable’ ideas.<sup>57</sup>

*Lake of Silence* includes a projected video, a sound recording of my voice, and a metal screen with the phrase ‘Look Beyond’ suspended in front of the screen. The piece is shown in a dark room (OCADU Grad Gallery Media Room) across the gallery from the rest of my exhibition. The audience encounters the constantly changing black and white motion (from the reflections of the bowl) on the screen. The image movement and its speed are not consistent: sometimes it slows down and then suddenly speeds up while the image rotates in one direction and suddenly change its direction. Along with changing the speed and direction of the moving shapes, viewers hear my voice in Farsi—*Begaam*, *Nagaam* (بگم، نگم)—meaning “Should I talk?” or “Should I stay silent?” The anxious tone of my voice changes according to the shift of the images in order to communicate my nervousness when I decide to talk out loud, and getting less anxious when I decide to stay silent. Although my (mostly) English speaker audience would not understand what I am saying, they will get a sense of anxiety through the rising urgency and falling tone of my

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<sup>57</sup> I need to explain that there is a difference between fear and anxiety that is beyond the scope of this paper. For example, Sara Ahmed refers to Rachman, describing this difference as following: “The difference between fear and anxiety is most often represented in terms of the status of the object. Indeed, fear has often been contrasted with anxiety insofar as fear has an object. For example, Rachman argues that anxiety can be described as the ‘tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event’, or a feeling of ‘uneasy suspense’, while fear is described as an emotional reaction ‘to a threat that is identifiable’.”, Ahmed, 64.

voice. The metal screen with the word ‘Look Beyond’ is situated between viewers and the projected visuals. The blue light from the projector on the metal screen creates a beautiful shiny effect on the mesh. This might speak to the seemingly calm and pleasant surface of the silent person, who is actually struggling inside. On the other hand, if the viewers look ‘beyond the screen’ they will see another level to the silence. There is a gap between these two people—artist and viewer—and because the mesh is transparent, the viewer can look through to the agitated shapes behind. The text on the mesh is small, with the projected version slightly larger. The projected words are also the only thing that’s opaque in the work. The mesh can be seen as both transparent and a barrier, depending on how one wants to receive those behind it. These words—look beyond—then become a plea for viewers to look past the shiny blue surface into the tumultuous shapes behind: if one doesn’t look beyond the surface, one will never see the other side. I’m hoping that this can be a request for them to consider *why* someone might be silent, instead of receiving the silence as agreement. The metal screen represents the gap between the audience and the person who experiences the anxiety expressed in the video, which will never go away unless the migrant becomes transparent about their situation and non-migrants are willing to acknowledge and be open to listen to the migrant’s voice beyond their silence.

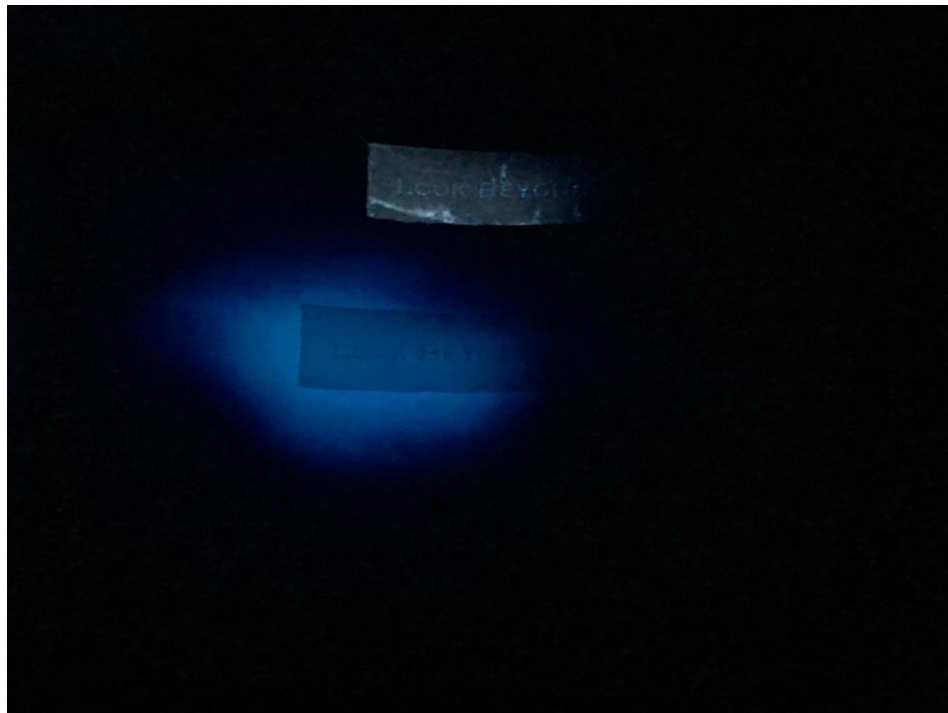
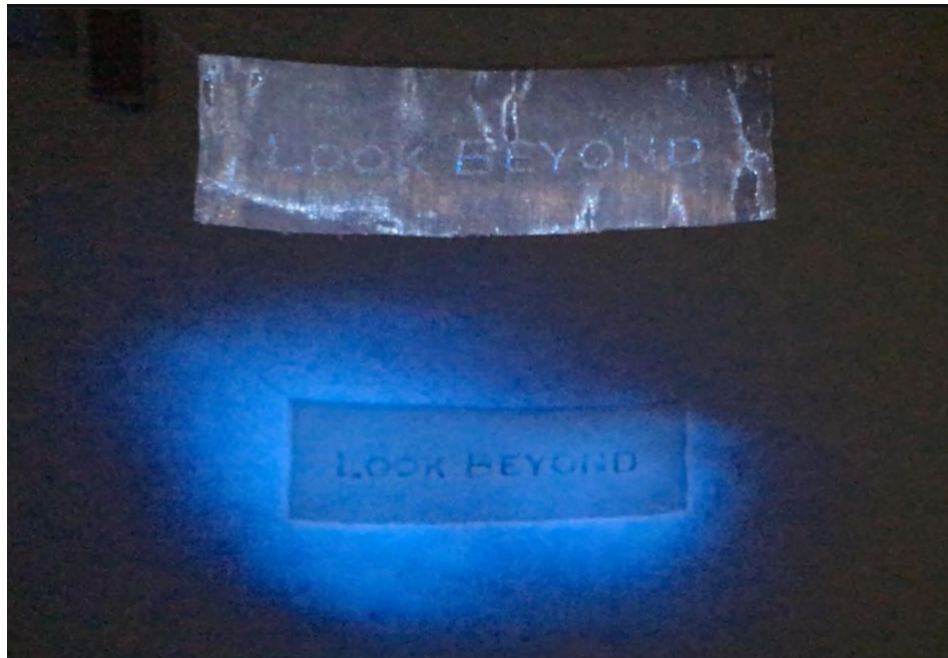


Figure 112: *Lake of Silence*, video installation, 2019



There is something about the performative in a work, where the work almost switches itself on as you enter its space.<sup>58</sup>

Anish Kapoor

## CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIONING

### Material, Process and Engagement

In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression*, Christine Ross examines the role of contemporary art as a discourse for bringing issues related to depression to the public's attention. She claims that lack of concrete scientific information about some aspects of depression such as precise causes, and effective cures, prevents clear understanding of the disorder. Conversely, depression has been described in blurry ranges from moments of sadness to impairing conditions that limit a person's physical and mental function.<sup>59</sup> Ross' study conveys that artistic expression can incorporate both scientific facts and personal experience in communicating the challenges that a depressed person faces in everyday life. Chapter Two of her book is an analysis of female depression and its relationship to feelings of inadequacy. For Ross, the notion of insufficiency is defined as "cognitive, behavioral, and neo-liberal inadequacy."<sup>60</sup> This claim is well-expressed through her analysis of Vanessa Beecroft's performance artwork

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<sup>58</sup> Elliat Albrecht. "Anish Kapoor in Conversation", *Ocula Conversation*. Last modified 9 September 2016, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/anish-kapoor/>.

<sup>59</sup> Ross, 66.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 147.

*VB46* (2001) which is a critical reaction to Helmut Newton's photographs of beautiful, sexy, and powerful women, the performers in Beecroft's work look 'perfectly' beautiful, confident, and strong at first glance. The performers are twenty-six hired professional models posing naked in high heels. The performers are all young, blond, tall women with proportioned bodies that symbolize society's idea of the 'ideal female'. During the three-hour performance, the posing models begin to feel tired and show signs of physical discomfort, such as lower back pain, eventually sitting and then lying down as they become more exhausted. The 'Newtonian beauty' starts to break as each model comes out of their initial pose and begins to differentiate herself from the rest of the group by showing signs of exhaustion ('imperfectness'). The performance symbolizes women's failure of being the 'social ideal of perfect' by showing their natural reaction to pain and tiredness. Ross argues, "As the models struggle with the feminine ideal, they paradoxically gain individuality."<sup>61</sup> Beecroft's notion of depressiveness is not loss of identity; in contrast, it is a failure to imitate the clichéd social model of ideal.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 83.



Figure 13: Vanessa Beecroft, *VB45, VB45.103.dr.*, 2001, Kunsthalle, Vienna, Photograph by Dusan Reljin.

What connects Beecroft's performance art to my project is that both express the tiring practice of being an ideal woman and its connection to depression. While Beecroft talks about the depressiveness behind aspiring to societal perceptions of beauty, I talk about the depression behind the challenge of trying to become a 'new' perfect woman. As discussed in Chapter One, meeting sociocultural standards is a depressing, socially enforced dimension of women's life in general; this can be a particularly impossible task for migrant women as they strive to adapt to the sociocultural norms of their adopted home. Through the artworks discussed in the previous chapters, I invite my audience to consider the experience of self-censorship, in order to understand the suppressive aspect

of the issue. I use a combination of objects such as mirror and metal screen in a way that involves the viewers to look at the issue differently. My purpose is to encourage audiences to become a part of the discourse, particularly through a work entitled, “*Your Reflection in my Life*”.

### **Dialogue rather than monologue**

The idea of involving the audience to consider more deeply some questions about the ways that some migrant women practice self-censorship and the issues associated with that practice came to mind when I presented my thesis proposal to a group of peers and professors in summer 2018. During the presentation, one of the audience members brought up the practice of self-censorship for women as a universal problem, suggesting that I need to talk about the issue in a more general form rather than limiting the issue to migrant women. Following that comment, another audience member brought up the example of the #metoo movement as evidence of the prevalence of women’s silence. While I also believe that self-censorship is a general issue for women even in democratic countries, I argue that the experience of forced or self-enforced censorship is not the same for all women; social and psychological forces on migrant women or racialized women impose more hesitation to freely participate in society. Even though there is no law or written rule that silences migrant women, discrimination, cultural differences and fear of not integrating into the adopted society are strong reasons why these women might avoid self-expression. Fear is the common element between the silencing raised in the #metoo movement and that of migrant women: for some migrants and for women

experiencing sexual harassment, their fear might be of losing a job after speaking out; for many migrant women, however, sometimes the fear comes out of unknown consequences for avoiding miscommunication, resulting from cultural dissimilarity and linguistic challenges. So, while certain types of self-censorship are common to women, the extreme hesitation or cultural disconnection that many migrant women feel sets their experience apart, adding a more acute level of self-censorship to what women-in-general experience.

### ***Your Reflection in My Life***

Through my piece, *Your Reflection in My Life*, I talk about the process of self-censorship experienced as a result of fear caused by cultural disconnection, including language use, customs, gender expectations and beliefs. This experience is described by scholar Edward Said as “never being ‘of’ anything”; by Paul Gilroy as “double consciousness”<sup>63</sup>; and by Homi Bhabha (as well as Trinh) as “inbetweenness.”<sup>64</sup> In line with these descriptions, I particularly share my experience of postmigration cultural hybridity; the constant comparison of life in my homeland and my current home has led me to live, mentally and emotionally, in-between the two countries for almost ten years. Trinh explores this stage of migrants’ experience: “... living in two dualistic worlds (here versus there) proves to be still acceptable to the rational mind, living in two and many non-opposing worlds—all located in the very same place as where one is—inevitably inscribes silence.”<sup>65</sup> Through *Your Reflection in my Life*, I expressed this psychological

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63 Paul Gilroy’s refers to W. E. B. Du Bois’ autoethnographic work *The Souls of Black Folk*.

64 Rogoff, 7.

65 Trinh T. Minh-ha, 2.

dilemma within a series of three art pieces using the words: I live in-between,<sup>66</sup>

“Elsewhere within here”<sup>67</sup>, and I speak silence. My aim is to encourage my audience to think about the ways in which cultural hybridity causes migrants to feel unconnected to both their past and current socio-cultural situation and how this feeling can lead them to silence.

Similar to the other artworks in this exhibition, the chosen material and process for “*Your Reflection in my Life*” play a crucial role in representing the idea. Inspired by a series of artwork by Elizabeth Cerviño, *Mallas (Nets)* made from aluminum nets and an installation work by Anish Kapoor made of small hexagonal mirrors, I wanted to combine the two materials together to explore both the idea of protection (nets) and self-reflection. While each element of the work metaphorically speaks to a particular dimension of the issue of relocation, acculturation and self-censorship, the combination of these elements along with the viewer’s involvement become visual signifiers for placement and positionality. The viewer initially confronts three horizontal concave mirrors each covered with the same size of mesh (32” x 8” each), and hung at eye-level. As the viewer gets closer to the works, they will see some vague text on the mesh, shimmering on the surface. The text is deliberately inscribed in such a way that it requires effort to read; in fact, it is created for the viewer who seeks to see a deeper layer than what is seen at first glance. The text is created by painstakingly pulling parts of letters from the metal mesh with small sharp scissors, a process that reminded me of the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>67</sup> Inspired by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s book title *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*.

pressure and effort of the practice and experience of self-censorship. The physical act of opening the nets by slowly expanding each space within the mesh reminded me of migrants' challenges in slowly pressing into a space of their adopted society. Standing out through breaking the idealism imposed by social standards is the common aspect of *Your Reflection in my Life* and Vanessa Beecroft's performance art *VB46* (2001). In *Your Reflection in my Life*, the net symbolizes the protective social network of people who are from the same cultural background and the letters become a new voice that stands out from within the net.

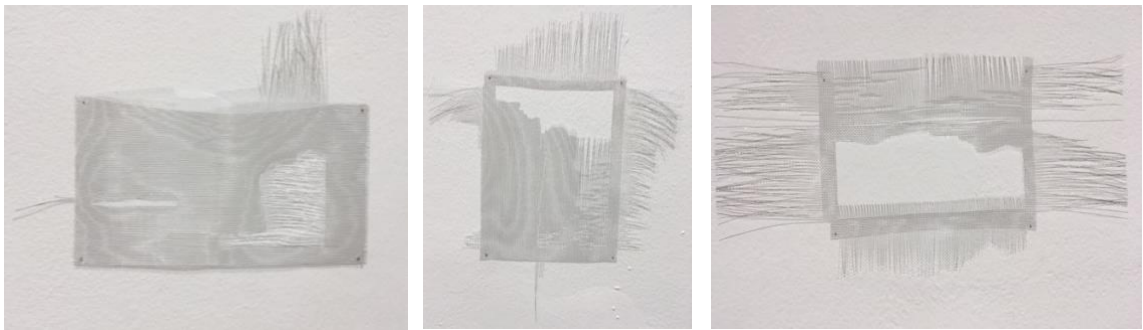


Figure 14: Elizabet Cerviño, *Mallas (Nets)*, 2017, aluminium net, 23 x 44 cm, San Gimignano, Galleria Continua, Mónadas

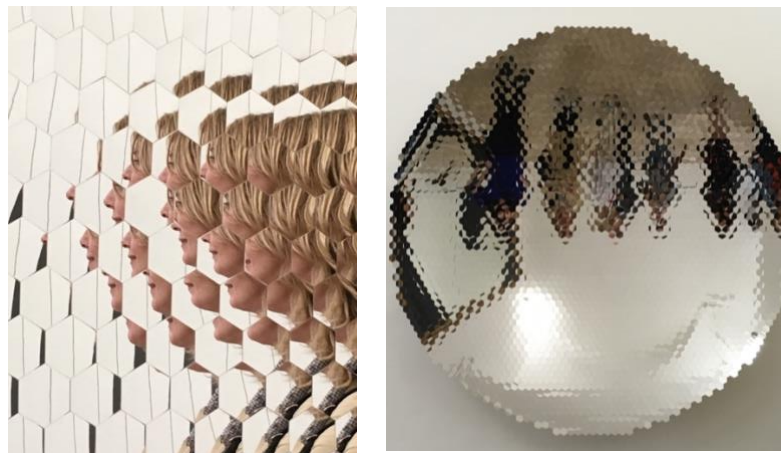


Figure 15: Anish Kapoor, San Gimignano, *Galleria Continua*

As viewers move closer to my work, they read from left to right the three phrases: “live in-between,” moving to “Elsewhere within here” and finishing with “I speak silence”. This summary conveys the journey a migrant may go through to practice self-censorship. Each phrase is written on a separate piece of aluminum mesh and installed on top of a concave Plexiglas sheet of the same size in such a way that there is a little gap between the screen and the mirror. As the audience moves towards the pieces, they see two symmetrical reflections of their face on each side of the mirror’s curve; with each step closer to the work, these two reflections migrate closer to the center of the piece until a point where they join and become one. The shape of the curve invites the viewer, beaconing them to explore. The more the reflection of their face is clear, the more difficult the text is to read; the reflection of the viewers distract the attention to the text on the mesh as well as the readability of the reflection of the text on the mirror. Hence, the viewer has to move to the sides of the work in order to avoid seeing their own reflection in the mirror. Only in this indirect position is the viewer able to read the text without the interruption of their own reflection. In other words, the viewer can only read the words when they avoid seeing their own image in the mirror. Losing sight of their own image as central, and moving in order to have the other presence, the elements here work together to address positionality. The reader must make decisions when engaging with this work, since when they relocate, their perspective changes: sometimes viewing words, sometimes two selves, sometimes one clear image of themselves in the centre. When they’re viewing centrally, they’re only looking at themselves; if they opt to look sideways, they can read the phrases of the migrants’ journey. This piece invites them to



change their location in order to see another perspective: the literal shift asks for shift of mindset or social perspective. The overall piece provides a metaphor for the reflection of others in migrants' lives. As a result, the audience contemplates the work by taking part in it.

*Your Reflection in my Life* is hung directly across the gallery from the piece, *Morality*, which is created out of the extra bits of wires pulled out from the mesh (as mentioned) in order to create negative spaces in the letters. By positioning the viewers 'in-between' the two artworks I ask them to connect the relationship between a migrant women's process of self-censorship and how 'not feeling at home' causes the practice of self-censorship. I also remind the audience of their position in this process. The reflection of the two works on each other not only reference the physical and material connection between the two artworks, but also implicates the viewer between the painful issue of not feeling at home in the adopted country and the emotional stage of feeling of in-betweenness and silence. It further acts as an entreaty for viewers to consider 'others' in the entire process of migration, and their own role and association within the agreeable silence.

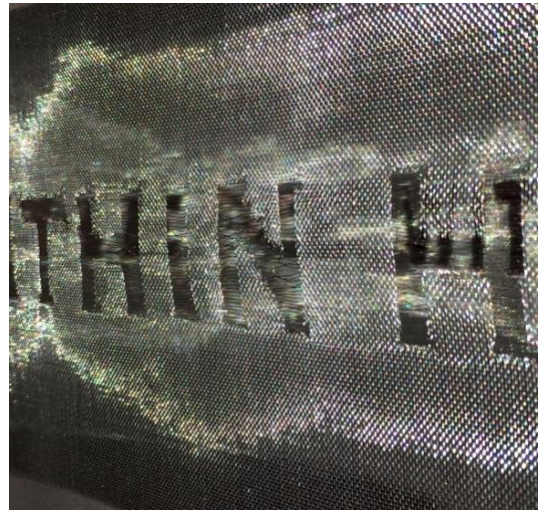
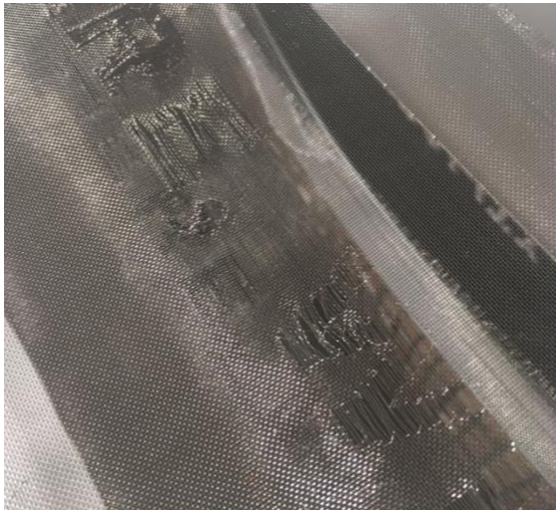


Figure 16: *Your Reflection in my Life*, Artworork Details, 2018



Figure 17: *Your Reflection in my Life, Mixed media*, Fall 2018, 32" x 8" each, Photo by Kristy Boyce



Figure 18: *Your Reflection in my Life reflected on Morality*, Photo by Kristy Boyce

In art, one is able to untangle complicated ideologies, demystify group and self-identity, observe humanity, and interpret memory. Issues that cannot be solved on the political stage might somehow find workable solutions when condensed into a work of art.<sup>68</sup>

Shirin Neshat

## CONCLUSION

Through the artworks in my thesis exhibition, *Agreeable Silence*, I raise questions about how internal and external forces might lead migrant women to apply the practice of self-censorship on an everyday basis. Within the metaphorical visual representations, each artwork discusses a different aspect of the complex, multilayered process of self-censorship for many migrant women, and the role that non-immigrants contribute to that practice. Altogether, this exhibition is a visual narrative that talks about my personal journey and the theoretical investigation I have conducted about the subject matter. As a part of my experimental and process-based practice, this project communicates the pressure and effort of the practice of self-censorship. The physical process of creating the work was a reminder of the practice of self-censorship: painful and repetitive. Therefore, the process became a part of my self-reflective research which helped me to contemplate my experience of post-migration silence.

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<sup>68</sup> Heidi Benson and Chronicle Staff, "Iranian-born artist Neshat wins Gish Prize", SFGATE: 4 September 2006, Accessed: 25 February 2019: <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Iranian-born-artist-Neshat-wins-Gish-Prize-2488269.php>

I began this project as an investigation of my personal practice of post-migration self-censorship. This journey started with my piece, *My Untold Words*, but in the process of creating this project, I realized, as a woman raised in a patriarchal society, my pre-migration practice of self-censorship was mainly rooted in traditional and cultural restrictions that existed in Iran. However, investigating my post-migration practice of self-censorship made me realize that fear of the unpredictable result of self-expression in the adopted society forced me to stay silent in many cases. I questioned whether it was my upbringing that compelled me to stay silent, or whether this was a common phenomenon shared by other migrants. Through discussions with other women who had relocated from other countries, I understood this as a shared experience. In order to unfold the multilayered interconnection between migration and self-censorship, I referred to psychoanalysis, feminist and geopolitical research that led me to connect the issue of self-identity, migration, and in-betweenness to the practice of self-censorship which was visually expressed in the installation work, *Morality*, in the first chapter of this paper.

In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I argue there is a connection between depression as a gendered phenomenon and silence. I put forward that while silence can cause depression, it can also be a sign of depression. The video installation, *Lake of Silence*, shows the complexity and temporality of the moments of self-censorship that many migrants might go through when they need to express themselves among a group of people in the adopted country.

The last chapter of this paper, Chapter Three, is about using art to communicate the complex socio-psychological issue of a migrant women's self-censorship. I make

reference to Vanessa Beecroft's performance artwork *VB46* as an example of artistic expression and the social issue of the 'perfect woman' cliché. Her artwork brings viewers' attention to the depressive aspect of women's challenge of 'being perfect'. Similarly, through my work, *Your Reflection in My Life*, I invite the viewer to think about the ways in which cultural hybridity causes migrants to feel unconnected to their current socio-cultural situation and how this feeling can lead them to silence. The physical position of the audience plays an essential part in the interpretation of the art-work, by enacting the 'reading' of migrant women's silence by people in the adopted society.

In researching this topic, it became clear to me that there is little existing literature on migrant women's self-censorship. Throughout the process of creating my project, I shared some of my thoughts with friends and family, which encouraged them to share their stories with me. It touched my heart how many much untold stories (similar to my stories) are out there about the everyday challenges for many migrant women, and why it is important to examine the issues behind resettlement. Having now completed this work helped me to realize the more migrants share their stories, the more society becomes open to diversity.

In Naghmeh Farzaneh's animation, *Scent of Geranium*, discussed in Chapter One, she quotes her mother as saying, "when you move a plant from one place to another you need to give it some time before it will grow new leaves."<sup>69</sup> My hope is that my project

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<sup>69</sup> Naghmeh Farzaneh, "Scent of Geranium" Rochester Institute of Technology, New York: 2016 25

raises awareness that indeed migrants can adapt to their new environments with time and care, and that they, like the plant, need nurturing during that process so that they may flourish.



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## APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION



Figure 19: *Agreeable Silence* exhibition OCAD U Graduate Gallery Apr 9-11, 2019 - #1  
Photo by Kristy Boyce



Figure 20: *Agreeable Silence* exhibition OCAD U Graduate Gallery Apr 9-11, 2019 - #2  
Photo by Kristy Boyce

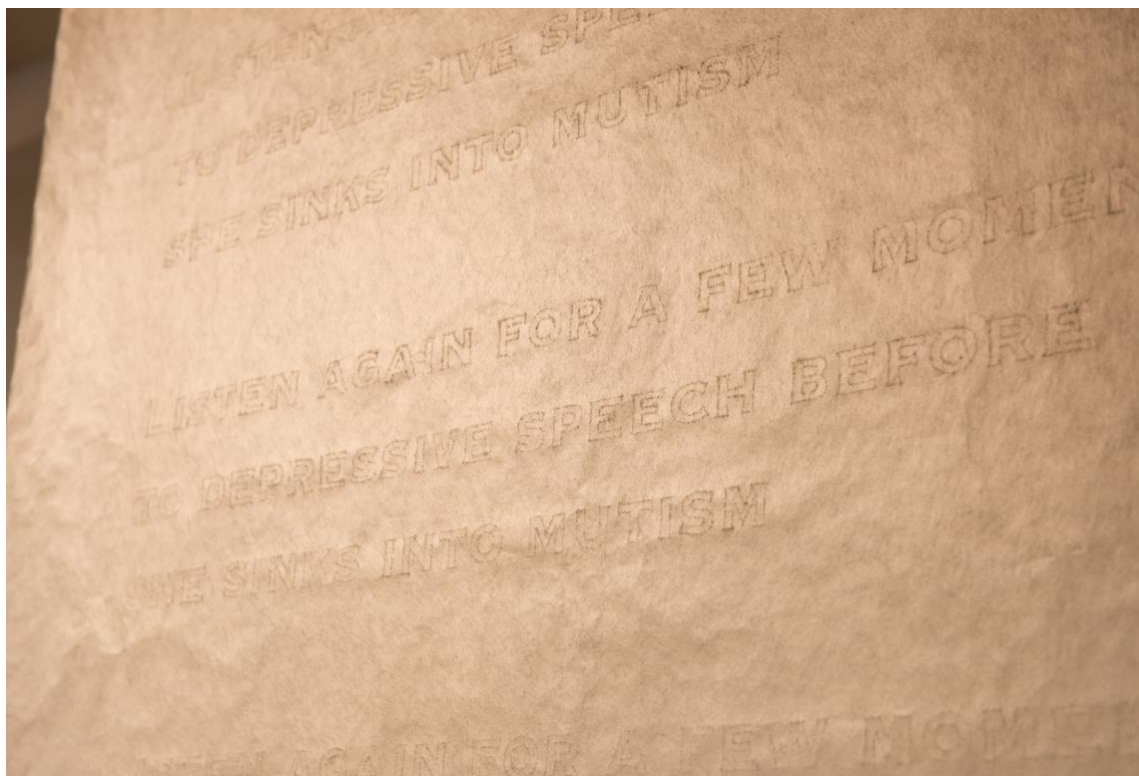


Figure 21: *Agreeable Silence* exhibition OCAD U Graduate Gallery Apr 9-11, 2019 - #3  
Photo by Kristy Boyce



Figure 22: *Agreeable Silence* exhibition OCAD U Graduate Gallery Apr 9-11, 2019 - #4  
Photo by Kristy Boyce



Figure 23: *Agreeable Silence* exhibition OCAD U Graduate Gallery Apr 9-11, 2019 - #5  
Photo by Kristy Boyce





Figure 24: *Agreeable Silence* exhibition OCAD U Graduate Gallery Apr 9-11, 2019 - #6  
Photo by Kristy Boyce