Navigating identities and building support community through art: A beyond-academia journey in Brussels

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Summary In this paper, I embark on a personal journey as an African woman and migrant researcher residing in Brussels, delving into the intersection of identity, academia, and solidarity. Beyond traditional academic confines, I navigate intricate power dynamics and uncover the significance of community and art. I acknowledge the challenges African researchers face in global academia, emphasising the need for solidarity and support within the academic community. Reflecting on my experiences as a researcher affiliated with an engineering institution, I discuss the reluctance in the engineering community to embrace decolonial methodologies and the tension between traditional academic expectations and unconventional approaches. Additionally, I delve into my identity as an African woman and migrant, highlighting challenges faced both in Tunisia and Brussels. This paper underscores the vital role of art and creative expression in fostering solidarity amongst marginalised communities and concludes by emphasising the importance of working from the margins to challenge power imbalances in academia and society.

Introduction

In this paper, I share my personal journey as an African woman and a migrant researcher.[1] I go beyond the academic boundaries and explore my life in Brussels. As I navigate through the complexities of power dynamics, where my identities are positioned towards the lower rungs of the hierarchy, I find instances of support that have been essential to experiencing a sense of community and art.

I align with the perspective of Conceição Evaristo, who introduces the concept of *escrivência*. This notion, as elucidated by the brilliant Black Brazilian writer, delves into the intricate interplay between racism, gender, and class. Rather than constructing rudimentary and abstract enumerations of oppressions akin to a mere tally of points, Evaristo's concept of escrevivência propounds a more pro

found theoretical exploration. This tool, originating from Evaristo's own lived experiences, serves to contemplate and foster narratives that collectively reflect women's shared encounters, particularly within the backdrop of colonialism and racism. By embracing escrevivência, the fixed and essentialised associations between racial, gender, and class positions are thoughtfully deconstructed, allowing for a richer and more nuanced understanding of their complex interrelations.[2]

In this paper, I will explore the concept of writing from a position of solidarity in academia, then delve into autoethnography's application in engineering school. Next, I will examine the journey of being and becoming beyond academia and discuss the role of solidarity and support communities. Finally, I will conclude with reflections on margins and the concept of a 'good researcher'.

The context: Writing from a position of solidarity in academia

While researchers in Global North universities can publish their research in journals and proceedings relatively 'smoothly', their African counterparts face more challenges. According to Asante and Abubakari, African researchers often face disproportionately high rejection rates when submitting their work to international journals compared to scholars from other regions.[3] Despite the existence of dedicated journals for Africa, a significant portion of knowledge production is still conducted by non-Africans, resulting in only 2 per cent of global research output being produced by African researchers. This slow pace of knowledge production has hindered the socio-economic progress of many African countries, as there is a direct link between knowledge production and economic growth, as noted by Asante and Abubakari.

Hence, writing from the position of solidarity towards and with other researchers, such as African researchers, but not only, involves acknowledging and actively working to challenge systemic barriers and inequalities within the academic community. It entails creating content that actively supports and aligns with the interests, challenges, and aspirations of the academic and research community. It goes beyond a surface-level understanding of their work and seeks to engage in a meaningful exchange that contributes to the advancement of knowledge and the betterment of the research ecosystem. There are a variety of tools to write from a position of solidarity that, besides content creation, aim to value the work of underrepresented scholars: citing, co-authoring, publishing, and inviting these scholars to lectures, as well as using inclusive language and perspectives in one's writing. It also involves reminding scholars that the obstacles Global South

researchers in general, and African researchers in specific, face exist because of structural discrimination in academia. Writing from a position of solidarity towards sother researchers involves recognising that the advancement of knowledge and understanding is a collective endeavour that requires the active participation and support of all members of the academic community, and not only the privileged ones. This can include addressing issues related to race, gender, sexuality, class, and other forms of marginalisation that may affect researchers' access to resources and opportunities.

In this paper, I practise solidarity by telling my personal narratives that I share with many whom academia has not given fair opportunities. I believe that telling the personal narrative transforms into an act of solidarity when it transcends the boundaries of a mere biographical exercise and becomes a means to connect with and support others who share similar experiences or face comparable challenges. Instead of solely recounting events and facts, a narrative of solidarity involves weaving together personal anecdotes, emotions, and insights in a way that resonates with a broader collective. Solidarity based on sharing personal narratives acknowledges the collective nature of human experiences, especially those of less privileged individuals, and emphasises their interconnectedness. It aims to dismantle isolation by creating a sense of unity and shared understanding.

Autoethnography and engineering school

So far, my work has been predominantly focused on my doctoral research carried out at the Ecole Polytechnique de Bruxelles, an engineering institution. Yet it is within this distinctive role of writing beyond *my* academia that I navigate the exploration of ethnographic and decolonial methods. As this research follows an autoethnograhpic approach, I integrate my individual background into the research process. Autoethnography involves a researcher delving into their personal experiences and reflections to gain a deeper understanding of a particular context. In my case, walks and photography played a significant role in shaping my autoethnographic exploration, allowing me to connect with the urban environment on a more intimate level.

Yet I find it essential to address a specific hesitance I observed within the engineering community to embrace decolonial methodologies. As an illustration, I encountered the concept of decolonial computing during my research on software development, which immediately captured my scientific and personal

interest.[4] This concept holds the potential to offer fresh perspectives and critical insights within the context of my work on colonial heritage in Tunisia. However, I've received cautionary advice, with the words 'you will shoot yourself in the foot' resonating strongly.

While the perception of decolonial concepts by some engineering institutions is viewed as lacking objectivity and being more prone to subjectivity and bias, a reluctance to embrace them within engineering may stem from a combination of factors, including a lack of familiarity, a resistance to departing from established methodologies, and the influence of historical biases.

In this regard of 'the lack of objectivity' as a scientific concern, I have found resonance in Donna Haraway's concept of objectivity, whose paradigm-shifting ideas challenge the very notions of objectivity and situated research.[5] She asserts that objectivity emerges from acknowledging the partial and subjective perspectives that arise from one's unique positions and experiences. Haraway's compelling perspective echoes the idea that a comprehensive and authentic understanding of reality emerges from embracing the partiality embedded within individual viewpoints. However, while intrigued by the possibilities that decolonial computing could bring to my thesis, I felt obligated to navigate my research within the boundaries and expectations of my academic framework.

Moreover, given that my primary research was not directly related to the subject matter of this paper, I undertook the task of constructing a theoretical framework to accommodate a method that was previously unfamiliar to me. Engineering, within its disciplinary boundaries, appeared to impose limitations on my exploration of these methods, such as autoethnography. Autoethnography involves a researcher studying their own experiences within a specific cultural context and then using those experiences to generate insights into broader cultural phenomena. This approach acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and positionality and recognises that their experiences are shaped by their social, cultural, and historical contexts. In autoethnography, the researcher uses personal narratives, such as journal entries, stories, and interviews, to explore and analyse their experiences. The researcher may also use existing literature and cultural theories to contextualise their experiences and make connections to broader cultural patterns and practices.

Autoethnography, as defined by Ellis and Bochner, is an autobiographical writing and research genre that highlights multiple layers of consciousness, connecting personal experiences to cultural contexts.[6] The rationale behind using autoethnography is its capacity to provide access to the dimension of everyday interactions, which is significant in addressing the daily situations faced by indi-

Figure 1 A feminist collage in Ecole Polytechnique
photographed during a walk, 'Committee
member, reconsider your actions', 30 April 2021

viduals and related to their identities. However, autoethnography poses risks for the researcher. By publicly sharing personal stories without anonymity, autoethnographic researchers may face various risks, such as stigmatisation, negative judgements from colleagues, and unwanted career consequences.[7]

Autoethnography, tied to identity, connects closely with solidarity. Sharing personal stories helps build strong bonds amongst peers who might have similar experiences but never talked about them. It also brings underrepresented voices into focus, making the research community more diverse. These stories may spark empathy, encouraging us to understand each other's challenges. They also push

for change by showing where things need improvement, inspiring everyone to make engineering fairer. Autoethnography bridges different areas of study, helping people from engineering and social sciences understand each other better and work together to solve real-world problems.

Being and becoming: What to do beyond academia, and who is offering their solidarity?

The being and the becoming

Being and *becoming* are two concepts that are often discussed in philosophy and other areas of study. While they are related, there are some key differences between the two concepts.

Being refers to the state of existing in the present moment. It is often associated with stasis, permanence, and unchanging qualities. Being is sometimes used to refer to the essential nature of something, such as its intrinsic properties or characteristics that define it. Becoming, on the other hand, refers to the process of changing and developing over time. It is often associated with growth, transformation, and movement towards a new state. Becoming is sometimes used to refer to the dynamic, evolving nature of something, as it is influenced by various factors such as environment, culture, and individual experiences. In essence, being is about what something is in the present moment, while becoming is about what something is evolving into over time. It is important to note that being and becoming are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. Many things can be both in a state of being and in the process of becoming at the same time.

The being: African woman

Being a womxn and an African were the first two identities I was aware of growing up. And, unfortunately, the first experiences of these two identities didn't come from pleasant situations, but from violent ones in the context of where I grew up. Tunisia is a predominantly Muslim country, and gender roles are often defined by traditional values. Gender inequality and discrimination are still present in Tunisian society. Women are often underrepresented in political and leadership positions and face challenges in accessing certain professions or industries. Traditional gender roles and expectations may also limit women's freedom and autonomy in certain areas of life. I grew up in the 90s and 00s in the north-western region of

Tunisia. My teenage years were marked by violent events related to my identity as a womxn. I – like millions of other teenage girls living in similar social contexts – was a victim of street harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, and even physical aggression in the streets or even in school. Parents did not defend their daughters but rather believed aggressors and silenced their daughters because it was believed that these experiences could bring shame on the family. I witnessed parents beat their daughters for having a boyfriend and even walking with a male friend was sometimes deemed suspicious.

As per my African identity, I consider that where I grew up didn't allow me to embrace this identity fully. In Tunisia, the Arab and the Muslim identity is prioritised over African identity due to historical and linguistic factors. This prioritisation is even present in the first article of the Tunisian Constitution of 2014: 'its [Tunisia's] religion is Islam, its language Arabic'.[8] While the Arabic identity is referred to seven times in the constitution, the African identity is only referred to once, in the preamble.

In society, a significant amount of discrimination and prejudice based on race and skin colour can still be felt every day. Black Tunisians and those of sub-Saharan African descent, for example, often face discrimination and marginalisation in both social and economic contexts.[9] While I was preparing for this paper in February 2023, there were reports in Tunisia of violence and mistreatment towards sub-Saharan migrants. According to various human rights organisations, including Amnesty International[10] and Human Rights Watch,[11] many migrants have been subjected to abuse, including beatings, robbery, and sexual violence by smugglers, security forces, and other criminal groups. Many of these migrants are seeking to make their way to Europe, but are often stranded in Tunisia, where they face a lack of resources, limited access to legal protection, and discrimination. The situation remains challenging, and the ongoing conflict and instability in the region continue to make it difficult for migrants to find safe passage to Europe or to return to their home countries.

Another associated identity to my African identity is the Amazigh identity. The Amazigh people have a long and complex history in Tunisia. They are Indigenous groups that have inhabited North Africa for thousands of years and have their own distinct culture, language, and traditions. Both my paternal and maternal ancestors are Amazigh, yet I don't know a lot about the Amazigh language since the Amazigh people of Tunisia faced varying degrees of marginalisation and oppression under different ruling powers. During the colonial period, the French authorities sought to suppress the Amazigh identity and language, which led to a decline in the use of the Amazigh language and cultural practices. Following

Tunisia's independence in 1956, policies came into effect that were aimed at promoting Arabisation and language standardisation, which further marginalised the Amazigh people. However, in recent years, there have been efforts to recognise and promote the Amazigh language and culture in Tunisia.[12] These efforts, however, still don't address the injustice and displacement that Amazigh people endured for decades.

The becoming: Migrant researcher

I became a migrant when I moved to Brussels on 18 October 2019. I was 27 years old at that time. I obtained my architecture degree in 2016 and gained mental and financial autonomy as I worked as an architect in different organisations for three years before starting my doctoral research. The early months of moving to Brussels were extremely challenging. Complicated administrative procedures were required, and there was not enough time to do research while handling all the bureaucratic demands. The Covid-19 pandemic amplified the heavy weight of these procedures, as well as the lack of response from some Belgian administrations towards non-EU migrants.

During the initial weeks of the pandemic lockdown, my funding in Belgium was suspended due to what my funding institution called 'an administrative error'. They stated that they required time to rectify the issue. As a result of the lack of funding, I had to take a repatriation flight back to Tunisia on 11 April 2020, leaving all my belongings behind in Brussels. The sudden loss of funding caused me financial strain and uncertainty, leading to anxiety and stress. Besides, being forced to leave belongings behind in a foreign country was emotionally distressing and disruptive. The pandemic lockdown and the need to travel during this time created a lot of health and safety concerns, especially when I arrived in Tunisia, where I was quarantined in a hotel paid for by the government for 14 days before being able to see my family.

These connected experiences to my identity as a migrant have affected my academic trajectory, as the suspension of funding interrupted my research. This resulted in delays in achieving the academic goals I set for myself. My doctoral research was delayed for a year because of the migration, the pandemic, and the repatriation procedures I went through. I was able to start working on my PhD only in September 2020.

(Re)joining research after the pandemic was slightly easier since I started to learn how to navigate complex administration systems. Yet discovering that there is injustice amongst doctoral students in my university affected me.[13] In the

Figure 2 Photographed during a recreational night walk
during the Covid-19 pandemic – 25 October 2020, Brussels

absence of reactions from the university authorities to ensure more justice and the lack of interactions with other (well-paid) PhD students, I decided to build my support network outside the walls of academia, where art played an important role.

Beyond academia: Support through community and art

Art and creative expression play a crucial role in building connections between less privileged communities. They provide a platform for sharing stories, preserving traditions, and celebrating shared cultural heritage. Cultural events, festivals, and artistic collaborations can bring different communities together, fostering under-standing and appreciation for diverse perspectives. When migrants, womxn, and different underrepresented communities can share their stories, experiences, and perspectives through their art, it can help create a more accurate and inclusive portrayal of those communities in the wider culture. In Brussels, and especially in its less rich neighbourhoods, artists exhibit their works, allowing different com-munities to help them promote their work.

Figure 3 At the closing of the exhibition *PASSAGES!*
curated by Ichraf Nasri – 23 February 2023, Brussels

During my migration 'hard moments', art and community offered a great range of perspectives, experiences, and voices to be represented in the cultural landscape. Amongst the organisations that have provided me with such a sense of community, Xeno- stands out.[14] Xeno- is a mobile artistic platform and a research laboratory focusing on intersectional feminist issues, founded by my friend Ichraf Nasri. It brings together a community of gendered, queer, and racialised individuals who use art as a political tool to address systemic discrimination and social injustices. The primary activities of Xeno- include organising cultural and artistic events such as exhibitions, performances, conferences, workshops, and panel discussions, as well as publishing activist and artistic fanzines and journals. For the past two years, Xeno- have been focusing on advocating for the rights of

gendered individuals in the context of exile and immigration. In this process, they aim to include affected individuals who are not considered by artistic circuits or may even be excluded from them.

Another example of community is Shik Shak Shok, a vibrant party concept organised by Hishek Bishek Collective.[15] Shik Shak Shok is committed to creating intersectional safe spaces for people of colour (POC). Driven by compassion, Shik Shak Shok is a community that prioritises the well-being of women and queer individuals. Their aim is to ensure that those who struggle to find secure and enjoyable spaces elsewhere have ample room to revel in their space. The forefront and the DJ booth of Shik Shak Shok is reserved for BPOC Femmes and those whose voices are often marginalised in other settings. This community stands firm against all forms of discrimination. Their music presents a wide range of Middle Eastern and North African music, with a captivating blend of classic and kitsch melodies, contemporary influences, and innovative arrangements.

During the musical gatherings I attended, I developed a new-found appreciation for North African genres like Raï, Mezoued, and Chaabi. It's something I couldn't openly express when I lived in Tunis, and Brussels gave me the opportunity to enjoy this music openly. These genres have, for decades, grappled with the stigma of being labelled as bad music or populist fare. Once marginalised and dismissed, these genres are now at the forefront of a movement that is reshaping the cultural landscape of North Africa and extending its influence beyond regional boundaries. Chaabi, with its roots in Algeria, originally emerged as a form of popular music associated with working-class neighbourhoods.[16] Similarly, Raï, hailing from the Algerian West, was initially met with scepticism and disdain due to its associations with social taboos.[17] Mezoued, on the other hand, is deeply ingrained in Tunisian culture, yet it too faced being relegated to the periphery due to its informal nature.[18]

These genres have experienced a remarkable transformation. They have transcended their origins as 'bad music' to become powerful expressions of identity, resistance, and unity. Today, they serve as soundscapes that encapsulate the stories, struggles, and triumphs of communities that were once marginalised. Through their rhythms and lyrics, they weave narratives of resilience, addressing social issues, love, and cultural pride. What was once deemed music for the marginalised has now become a rallying cry for the empowered. More significantly, these genres have achieved a remarkable feat: they have united people across North Africa and beyond. Through the universality of music, they've bridged linguistic and geographical barriers, resonating with audiences far and wide. The once-divisive labels have been reclaimed, and these genres now evoke a sense

of belonging and nostalgia for home amongst the diasporas. No longer confined to certain demographics, they've permeated many echelons of society, uniting diverse individuals under a common sonic umbrella.

Hence, in a more tangible sense, the presence of art and music in communities with shared identities give a profound sense of solidarity. It serves as a unifying force that transcends differences, binding us together through shared appreciation and understanding while fostering a sense of belonging and identity that might otherwise be fragmented by the challenges of migration. These artistic expressions serve as a language of emotion, one that resonates deeply with our experiences and allows us to communicate and connect on a level that transcends mere words.

Conclusion: Reflection on the margins and the good researcher

The good migrant

The concept of the *good migrant* pertains to an immigrant who effectively assimilates or adopts the social and linguistic norms of the dominant majority.[19] However, even if they accomplish this assimilation, they remain susceptible to exclusionary practices due to factors like disability, race, or immigrant status. Being a good migrant in terms of assimilation does not necessarily shield them from discrimination or exclusion based on other aspects of their identity.

While one might consider the good migrant concept to have both positive and negative implications – as it serves as a goal for migrants to strive towards in enhancing their integration prospects – its negative aspects often reinforce stereotypes, create unrealistic expectations, and contribute to social inequalities. This is because not all migrants can readily conform to these expectations owing to factors like systemic discrimination, limited resources, or personal circumstances.

In a manner similar to the construct of a good migrant, the idea of a good researcher is deeply ingrained within academic circles, embodying a set of criteria that shape perceptions of success and contribution. This concept, akin to the good migrant, is multifaceted and plays a significant role in shaping the culture of academia. It often revolves around a set of criteria that assesses the effectiveness and impact of researchers within their respective fields. These criteria include, but are not limited to, the quality and quantity of their research output.

While these benchmarks undoubtedly serve as concrete measures of academic achievement, they can also inadvertently foster undue pressures and limitations. Just as the expectations placed upon a good migrant can lead to the suppression of cultural diversity and personal identity, the pressure to conform to the standards of a good researcher can sometimes constrain the breadth of diverse contributions within academia. The relentless pursuit of high-impact publications and groundbreaking research can create an environment where unconventional or interdisciplinary approaches may be undervalued or marginalised.

Moreover, the relentless pursuit of these traditional markers of success can sometimes overshadow the importance of other essential aspects of academia, such as mentorship, collaboration, and the dissemination of knowledge to wider audiences. When it comes to migrant researchers, they often face expectations demanding them to work harder than their native counterparts, a manifestation of racial bias and discrimination. It perpetuates an unjust stereotype that presumes migrants are inherently less capable and must prove themselves through excessive effort, which is fundamentally racist and unfair.

The margins

In a broader definition, working from the margins means operating on the fringes of institutional spheres to foster solidarity within academia alongside those who are marginalised within institutional frameworks, as well as engaging with broader audiences and counter-publics outside these structures.[20]

Writing from the margins is a transformative act that reshapes the landscape of academia, challenging power imbalances and contributing to a more inclusive and socially conscious body of knowledge. Through the lens of transparent and critical scholarship, the voices and perspectives that emerge from the margins play a pivotal role in advancing academia's evolution towards a more equitable and enlightened future.

Through this paper, I practised writing from the margins in academia in the form of producing a scholarly work that can amplify voices of the migrant researchers. Through personal narratives and critical analysis, I aimed to contribute to a more inclusive and socially conscious body of knowledge, shedding light on the power of solidarity, community, and the transformative potential of working from the margins. As we continue to navigate the complexities of identity and academia, let us remember that true progress lies in embracing diversity, fostering solidarity, and challenging the status quo.

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Notes

1   As a doctoral researcher in the 'Architecture and Town and Country Planning' PhD programme of Ecole Polytechnique de Bruxelles.

2   Joy H. González-Güeto, 'Mujer "estándar" y racialización como sufrimiento generizado. La cuestión racial en discursos y prácticas contra la desigualdad de género', in *Cuidados y ecofeminismo*, ed. Cecilia Güemes and Francisco Cos Montiel (Madrid: Fundación Carolina, 2022).

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14 For more information about Xeno-: https://www.facebook.com/XenXenoXena.

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Khaoula Stiti is an architect who graduated from the National School of Architecture and Urban Planning in Tunis in 2016. With experience across diverse heritage agencies and organisations, she is currently preparing a doctoral thesis while based in Brussels, Belgium. Her focus revolves around the intersection of participatory praxis, digital mediums, and driving heritage awareness as a foundational stride in the heritagisation process. Her research specifically addresses the colonial heritage of the city centre of Tunis as an example of an endangered but contested heritage. In addition to her doctoral pursuits, Khaoula explores coloniality, migration, South-North correlations, and methodologies like autoethnography and photography.