

## Article

# Re-Search on the Hyphen: (Re)writing the Fragmented Self within Contexts of Displacement

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**Abstract:** In responding to the call for exploring and explicating aspects of the research process that remain unspoken about in most social science fields, this narrative asks deceptively simple questions: what does it mean to carry out research as an academic with a lived experience of displacement, loss and pain? What are the methodological choices available to me as a migrant scholar? What does it really mean to write (about) the displaced-turned-emplaced self from the margin—myself being a case in point—within contexts of loss and displacement? My aim is to present a personal narrative that is uniquely mine, a story that may work with or against what is thought to be the official story. I defend the use of fragments, theoretically and methodologically, to avoid the homogenisation of narratives and assumptions about how research is carried out, how knowledge(s) are produced and reproduced, and who has the power to produce them. Thus, building on established scholarship cutting across various fields and guided by postcolonial and postmodernist theories, I hope to unpack the tensions and possibilities inherent in thinking about borders and positionality in academia (when the researcher dwells at the margins), identity, its fragmentation, and its entanglement with questions of decoloniality, narrative and voice.

**Keywords:** narrative; migration; fragments; postmodernism; decoloniality; autoethnography; identity

“Today we are more fragmented than ever, which is terrible, which is beautiful.”—Ruben Martínez (2013, p. 88).

*Write  
or be written.  
There is no other option.*



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## 1. Introductory Notes

*This is not a paper—I am not sure what to call it. At this stage, I do not believe it is. I blame it on epistemological uncertainty. I urge my reader to keep an open mind as I work on piecing my fragments together into a whole. A paper.*

*So, this is a fragmented paper: a part-paper coming-into-being, residing in between and beyond categories, resembling me in many ways. As I start writing this, my reader is on my mind. I worry a little—would my academic reader take me seriously when what I deliver is not in keeping with academic conventions of how knowledge should be created? Could knowledge be created this way, through experimenting with form, through fragmentation and structural uncertainty? Where does knowledge begin and end? And who makes those decisions? Does knowledge mean ‘I know’?*

Methodologically speaking, this is an autoethnography building on the fragments and shards of my lived experience and multitudes of self (and non-self), using my migrant’s voice, my academic’s voice and my poet’s voice. The narrative I present here is an active pursuit of identity and a wrestling with its fluidity and shifting consciousness within a context of displacement. Contrary to what it may seem, this narrative is not about home-making, or belonging, or displacement per se, despite the evident fascination—perhaps even the obsession—with these concepts throughout the next pages. This narrative is,

first and foremost, about writing, the act and experience of writing, as a site of contestation, resistance and growth, and a space that bears witness to the dialectics of the self, its struggle(s) and its becoming.

In the next sections, I present an autoethnographic account of some of the many difficulties and challenges of writing the self and about the self; more precisely in this instant, it is an account of writing the fragmented self of a hybrid (Syrian–British) woman, a displaced-turned-emplaced academic, within contexts of displacement. In writing this piece, I renounce using ‘displaced’ to describe myself. I have done so on several occasions before (Fadel 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) and, upon reflection, I do not see myself as such any longer. In reframing my personal narrative, I acknowledge the fluidity of my own identity—a fluidity that seeps into my writing and materialises on these pages in fragmented form. This fluidity is additionally evident in the relationships that I have with my two place-homes, Syria and Scotland; a micro-home space: academia; and a macro-home space: literature. I am a resident of all these worlds. I must hasten to add, however, that this should not be (mis)construed to mean that I always fit in or feel a sense of belonging to these worlds.

These worlds, micro- and macrocosms, combined, are my *El Mundo Zurdo*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) vision of a world where our difference, alienation and contradiction—as individuals, in this context, rather than cultures or communities—are tools that we can use in our favour, and against restrictive cultural, social and political agendas. Such spaces allow us to defiantly speak out against the restrictive norms, and challenge old categories by demonstrating the labels’ limitations to bring about radical transformations. This particular notion, the ensuing discussion in the next sections will reveal, is particularly relevant, and perhaps, if I am to be uncompromisingly forthright, a true reflection of the university—and broadly, academia—as a site of ontological oppression.

In view of this, I will refer to myself as an emplaced writer, thereby consciously placing myself within an empowered space in which new, hybrid, fragmented and fluid reflections replace the old linear, structurally rigid and reductionist colonial categories that seek to narrowly define me. By so doing, I declare incontrovertibly my commitment to the postcolonial cause in overcoming ‘a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world’ (Dirlik 1994, p. 353).

I shall return to this seductive notion in a moment. But let me pause to quote further, again this time from the words of Anzaldúa (1987), whose unapologetically politicised post-modernist agenda and ensuing epistemological and critical literary vision in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* has provided much inspiration for my writing here:

Don’t give me your tenets and your laws. Don’t give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 22)

Anzaldúa’s words resonate with my emerging inclination to circle back-and-forth between knowledge gained through my lived experiences and reflections as a migrant, and my professional experiences as an academic working, against the odds, to establish myself in British academia. They also resonate with the forces that shaped my writing and practice, both in academia and beyond.

This narrative is therefore a reflection that provides a dialectical space for confronting intricate pasts and presents and making sense of loss as experienced, not only on a socio-political level but also, and more importantly, on a professional level. Its rigour does not derive from adherence to a scientific method but from a commitment to authenticity and verisimilitude. The arguments I make in the following sections revolve around two central themes: (1) the first is theoretical and concerned with ways that theory can help researchers determine, and possibly understand, the intricate interconnections between

their identity and lived experience and their scholarly work, as they partake in knowledge production. In this case, the focus is on myself, the migrant academic with a lived experience of displacement and loss, operating from the margins of academia. (2) The second is methodological and looks to unearth the methodological and philosophical implications of these intricate theoretical interconnections. In other words, I am interested in how the intersections between our life trajectories and research interests influence and shape, perhaps to the point of necessitating, our methodological approaches.

In responding to the call for exploring and explicating aspects of the research process that remain unspoken about in most social science fields, this narrative asks deceptively simple questions: what does it mean to carry out research as an academic with a lived experience of displacement, loss and pain? What are the methodological choices available to me as a migrant scholar? What does it really mean to write (about) the displaced-turned-emplaced self from the margin—myself being a case in point—within contexts of loss and displacement?

To be clear, my aim is to present a personal narrative that is uniquely mine, a story that may work with or against what is thought to be the official story. I defend the use of fragments (Pandey 1992) to avoid the homogenisation of narratives and assumptions about how research is carried out, how knowledge(s) are produced and reproduced, and who has the power to produce them. Thus, building on established scholarship cutting across various fields and guided by postcolonial and postmodernist theories, I hope to unpack the tensions and possibilities inherent in thinking about borders and positionality in academia (when the researcher dwells at the margins), identity, its fragmentation, and its entanglement with questions of decoloniality, narrative and voice.

## 2. Borderlands and Border-Culture

*A border woman,  
The border lives within me.  
The border lives despite me.  
I am with borders,  
Without borders.  
I am a whole country and none.  
My limbs, my skin, my sprouting fingers  
Reaching out  
To where water ends  
and body begins.*

*I was Syrian once—or was I always?  
I do not have a mother to answer me anymore.  
She eloped with the earth.  
I write this language,  
Its sounds muffled,  
against the screams in my head  
I search for a verb to accompany my 'I' . . .  
I  
I  
This bastard language  
I  
Write.  
Or does it write me?*

*A gentle prodding. A pressure. A manifestation. A border to cross—or is it borders (plural)? The Arabic word [Huduud] is, for some reason, kinder, perhaps because it lies close to that homeland, where mum's bones bleed into the earth. Language. The institution. Even the self becomes a border to navigate in this new land. On which side of the border, these borders, am I? Where do I belong in their narratives? And who owns the*

*narrative? There are so many unknowns, but one thing is certain: I want to write. It is the only way I am able to cope with all the uncertainty.*

Academia may be a different kind of border; it is a border, nonetheless. Universities have been critiqued for being spaces of otherness and sites of resistance and contention. The literature base establishes universities as places for self-doubt and anxiety and the ‘imposter syndrome’ (Abdelaal 2020; Breeze 2018; Bothello and Roulet 2019; Wilkinson 2020) where individuals question their legitimacy and their position. Academic life has reflected my migrant existence in many ways and felt like a liminal space where I find myself repeatedly having to navigate different types of boundaries. French postmodernist scholar, Michel Foucault, comes to mind; academia becomes a “heterotopia”:

I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. (Foucault 1986, p. 26)

Universities, in the Foucauldian sense, become places where “the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (Foucault 1986, p. 26); “to get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures” for what “seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into these heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded.” (Foucault 1986, p. 26).

As a former refugee, now a migrant scholar, to be based at a neoliberal university is still not a notion with which I am fully comfortable. To confront this challenging reality, decolonial work had to be the answer. But can one be decolonial while actually and truly decolonising? While I cannot claim with certainty that I have the answer to that question, I do believe that intellectual decolonisation is a must (Moosavi 2020, p. 1) if we are to dismantle academia’s colonial structures and enduring legacies of inequality. Being a strong advocate of intellectual decolonisation and “critical intimacy<sup>1</sup>” (Paulson 2018) meant that I had to be introspective about my intellectual outputs. Over the years, however, I was confronted with a harsh reality: *if I am to succeed and earn my place in academia*, suggested a voice privileged by coloniality, *I “must have a certain permission and make certain gestures”* as Foucault (1986, p. 26) would instruct. At the time, I had worked in a business school, a historically male-dominated, objectivist and positivistic discipline (Al-Khaled 2016; Leitch et al. 2010) and its heterotopic laws forbode such transgressions.

I felt uneasy with my evolving research and research ambitions. Several conversations with colleagues implied a general sense of ‘ontological oppression’, evident in a things-have-to-be-done-a-certain-way approach to research and practice. This is unsurprising when we think of how “academia has almost exclusively been focusing on Western paradigms and approaches to research” (Held 2019, p. 1) and “has legitimized and perpetuated the dominance of the Eurocentric worldview” (Held 2019, p. 11). Held (2019, p. 2) coins this a “manifestation of ontological oppression” which is enabled by the colonial project in which academia plays a central role in legitimising the dominant group and disseminating its ideologies (Held 2019, p. 10).

With degrees in English literature, critical theory and languages, and qualitative experience, I thought, had hoped, idealistically, that my research interests and ambitions would bring in a new and fresh perspective. I was mistaken. Well-meaning colleagues in the business school were quick to suggest ways for me to ‘enter’ and fit in. The next thing I knew I was applying for a grant to conduct quantitative data analyses and looking to

collaborate with colleagues on researching topics using methodological approaches that were considered safe, ethically sound, credible and, therefore, acceptable, but to which I felt very little intellectual attachment. This was hardly surprising given the wide-spread acceptance of quantitative methods across the social sciences (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). It was well-known that many researchers, reviewers, and editors still favoured positivistic research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008; Pratt 2008). This reflects the fact that the traditional and still-dominant method of assessing quality in research is the theory-driven approach that is characterized by the traditional criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalisability and is central to the “scientific method” (Amis and Silk 2008). Reluctantly, I ‘played the game’ as other early career academics had done before me (Al-Khaled 2016).

The process of applying for a promotion a few years later involved a chat with a senior colleague, a decision maker, who made it clear that progression came at a price: going with the academic flow and the requirements of the academy. Not only was I confronted with a harsh reality of having to conform to rigid academic values, the rules of the game, but also with the futility of my own research interests at the time. Clearly, my interests in studying marginalised communities, decoloniality, narrative and ethnographic methods including autoethnography was not ‘it’ or what would bring in funding. My hybridity was questioned. If I wanted to progress, I would have to put my fragments back together and in the form of research that would be REF-able and is congruous with the school’s research strategy and objectives. My academic identity at the time was scaled down to and framed in rigidly defined notions. I was a border woman, a Syrian refugee and academic, sailing in chop: war back in my old country and academic conflict in a new country that I was trying to turn into a homeland.

Existing in this liminal space, a border state, was bound to seep into my academic practice, including how I write, and how I think about and do research. This border state had defined at the time, to a large extent, my existence in academia—I am aware of that now but I doubt I was at the time. To separate the two, the self in a social setting and the self in an academic setting—or assume that the researcher is immune to such liminal existence, a state of in-betweenness—is to separate the researcher from her ‘self’ and assume a certain socio-political order of things that involves the researcher in a series of lifeless decisions concerning their job, aspirations and practice. This certainly was not my experience—trying to separate my professional and migrant selves proved extremely difficult.

### 3. A Language I Call ‘Home’

*My old l-a-n-g-u-a-g-e silenced me,  
She despised the stories I told,  
And hyphenated my existence.  
But I have found a new language now,  
A language that can speak to me,  
A language that can narrativise me,  
A language I own,  
A language I can call ‘h-o-m-e’.*

Writing in a new language is about “overcoming the tradition of silence”, writes Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, p. 55) in *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. She proceeds to establish that what this entails, especially for people who have struggled to come to terms with the plurality of their identity and existence, is a language “they can connect their identity to” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 55). With such language, one is also “capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español* ni *inglés*, but both. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a homeland” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 55). In her writing, Anzaldúa switches “codes from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these”, arguing that this reflects her language, a new language which she coins “the language of the Borderlands”,



“a bastard language” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 55). She does not ask for permission; in fact, what she asks for is to be ‘met halfway’ (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 55).

Anzaldúa’s (1987) work serves as a needed reminder of the intricacies inherited in conducting research and how this necessitates moving away from conventional ways of doing it and thinking about it. She contends that

It is not enough to stand on the opposite riverbank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs and, for this, it is proudly defiant. (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 78)

Anzaldúa’s answer is a deviance and disengagement from dominant culture because the alternative is to simply hold concepts and ideas in rigid boundaries. She was hardly the only one to promote such thinking and practice; the notion of the centrality of questions of narrative and the imaginary is also a major theme in other postmodernist literary critics’ oeuvres (See, for example, Hall 1992, 1996, 2019; Grossberg 1986; Said 1979, 1990, 1993). Violence has also been at the centre of literary and sociological work. Fanon ([1963] 2001), for example, ferociously champions violence as a precondition to liberation, not only socio-culturally speaking, but also in relation to research methodology and praxis. Violence for Fanon may be central to any decolonial endeavour and the formation of social, cultural and political identities, but it is more concerned with the elimination of colonial life and structures at the level of literary imagination<sup>2</sup>. What this underlines is a preoccupation with how superior–inferior relationships between the coloniser and the colonised are internalised, naturalised and expressed in colonial systems. Fanon’s call to decolonise is a call for “a programme of complete disorder” (Fanon [1963] 2001, p. 27) and an invitation to centre marginalised voices. To him, however, this is not possible without “a complete calling in question of the colonial situation” and bringing into existence “a natural rhythm [...] introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity” (Fanon [1963] 2001, p. 28).

Decolonial elevation of academic voices from the Global South is advocated by Anzaldúa (1987) and scholars who share Anzaldúa’s vision, including Thiong’o (1998) and Anzaldúa and Keating (2002) who called for intellectual decolonisation through dismantling linguistic hierarchies. What these scholars did was noteworthy. In seeking to decolonise, they enacted intellectual decolonisation in practical terms by reverting to native languages in their writing and intellectual outputs. The search for a new language was also a call for subversion and deconstruction (Derrida 2020) and considering writing (and writers themselves) as sites for inevitable contradictions, fragmentation and frustration. Annie Ernaux calls it ‘revenge’: “I write to avenge my people” (Ernaux 2022, p. 1). In writing, Ernaux endeavours to establish a new form. Writing, for her, “was a matter of delving into the unspeakable in repressed memory, and bringing light to bear on how my people lived. Of writing to understand the reasons, inside and outside of myself, which had caused me to be distanced from my origins” (Ernaux 2022, p. 2). Ernaux speaks of emancipation and how individual emancipation is the road to collective emancipation, a view widely shared by postmodernists<sup>3</sup> (Adonis [1973] 2011, 1978, 1995, 2002; Bhabha 1992, 1994; Hall 1992, 1996; Said 1979, 1990).

Within academia, there is this constant pressure manifested in the need to assert professionalism. While professionalism is necessary, not only in academia but in every other profession, academia uses professionalism more profusely, more rigidly. There is, for example, the unrelentless reminder that research that fulfils scholarly obligations and solves a problem is more methodologically mainstream and regarded as more robust and credible, making the researcher astute, trustworthy and, therefore, more professional. In this respect, doing such ‘methodologically sound’ research is key to getting promoted, to building scholarly collaborations, especially in academic settings and disciplines that expect and promote conformity.

To put it simply—it never was simple—my decision to experiment with autoethnographic writing was how I navigated and responded to structural constraints within contexts of liminality. Experimenting with autoethnographic methods enables me to maintain control of my sense of self and keep intact my shifting and plural identity. This came with its challenges and doubts, however. I concur with Anzaldúa, “it’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions” (Anzaldúa 1987, Preface); doing this type of research was therefore determined, first and foremost, by lived experience and personal struggles. Research was finally something not owned by the institution—not completely anyway. Like writing poetry, research became therapeutic and a tool for understanding the trajectory of the self, which, as Fanon ([1963] 2001) contends, ambitiously moved from political agitation to philosophical re-orientation.

Research in this sense has become a tool for my emancipation, a way out of a liminal state, this stage of “transition” (Van Genneep [1909] 1960), the “no man’s land” (Dale and Burrell 2008, p. 239), which was characterised by loss, “submissiveness and silence” towards the ontologically oppressive authority of the institution (Turner 1969, p. 103—also see Turner 1982). Doing research while being true to myself and her contradictions was my way to deconstruct and, slowly, reconstruct my liminal state, my *nepantla*, the Aztec word Anzaldúa (1987) uses to speak of being “torn between ways”, or what we call in Arabic *nisfu haalah*, meaning ‘halfness’, a concept that characterises the Arab nation’s consciousness in much of the literature on displacement, exile and alienation (See, for example, Darwish 2003). This was my ‘violence’, a saying of *no* to colonial expectations and, concurrently, a saying of *yes* to the possibilities of a postcolonial research life.

#### 4. Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?

Despite my earlier declared commitment to the postcolonial, I am aware of some of the theoretical and political shortcomings of postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism has been critiqued for its “multiplicity of positionalities” (Shohat 1992, p. 99); however, it is this multiplicity, I believe, that makes postcolonial theory timeless and relevant. I might add, however, that I am marginally distrustful of the ‘post’ in postcolonial—I would not if the ‘post-’ in postcolonial has always been used by scholars to mean ‘anti-’—mainly due to its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism (McClintock 1993; Shohat 1992). Given my doubts, I argue that the narrative I present here can most usefully be performed by also engaging with the case for the ‘postmodernist’, reassured by the view that “the prefix “post” in both the postmodern and the postcolonial implies a challenge to the past and an invocation of the notion of history” (Salhi 2020, p. 2).

The postmodernist has been criticised for being politically ambivalent while the postcolonial is less preoccupied with aesthetics (Shohat 1992; Hall 1996). Given my devotion to the politically aesthetic (and the aesthetically political)—and in viewing the aesthetic as “more concerned with the senses” than simply “focused on beauty” (Salhi 2020, p. 9), my narrative can be more easily and practically actualised at the intersection of the postcolonial and the postmodern.

When discussing postmodern postcolonial philosophy and thought, it is difficult to not wish to dwell on the lack of clarity around how these terms have been defined in the literature and how they have been conflated (Salhi 2020). This, however, is a discussion for another day. For now, I will seek comfort in the fact that postcolonial and postmodern phenomena are closely aligned with emerging modes of intellectual and artistic expression and that “the two movements apply several theories of innovation, renovation, or change that allow them to go beyond the static conservatism characteristic of imperialist culture and its totalizing systems of representation” (Salhi 2020, p. 1). I return to Anzaldúa’s ground-breaking work for support in presenting my postmodernist postcolonial case. Although Anzaldúa does not categorise her work as such, the interdisciplinary and critical value of her work is evidently anchored in postmodern and postcolonial values: pluralism, fragmentation, cultural schizophrenia, experimentation, frustration and an all-encompassing unapologetic ideological ambivalence, while concurrently, transcendently,

being politically charged (see also Said 1979, 1990; Spivak 1988, 1990; Bhabha 1994; Hall 1996, for rich and divergent critical views on the postcolonial condition).

Despite its two decades of dominance in the 1980s and 1990s and a subsequent dwindling scholarly interest in mainstream academia, postmodernism is still significantly relevant today and remains a source of fascination, evident in having seeped into the methodological groundwater of various disciplines, including the social sciences. While postmodernist thought has been critiqued for its idealist ways, it certainly still provides conceptual tools for explaining the heterogeneity of knowledge. The postmodernist turn necessitates a level of disruption and embracing new forms of knowledge and reproducing knowledge. For the postmodern to live up to its potential of centring marginalised knowledge, it must meaningfully engage with the political. This, according to Abu-Lughod (1996), in her seminal work “Writing against Culture”, takes the form of producing and engaging with new forms of ethnographic writing, or what she precisely calls ‘ethnographies of the particular’ (Abu-Lughod 1996, p. 475). Abu-Lughod stresses the particularity of experience in her work by calling for new forms of ethnographic writing. These new forms call for a refusal of generalisation and typicality of knowledge that is “regularly produced in conventional social scientific accounts” (Abu-Lughod 1996, p. 475). In her work, she is not shy to centre “actual circumstances and detailed histories of individuals” which is enabled through “textual means of representation” (Abu-Lughod 1996, p. 476). Such a subversion, however, can only be achieved by “writing against culture”—culture in its ontologically and epistemologically homogenising coherent sense—and “by focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships” (Abu-Lughod 1996, p. 476). Abu-Lughod is also acutely aware of the implications that her argument has for research methodology:

Organic metaphors of wholeness and the methodology of holism that characterizes anthropology both favour coherence, which in turn contributes to the perception of communities as bounded and discrete. Certainly discreteness does not have to imply value; the hallmark of twentieth-century anthropology has been its promotion of cultural relativism over evaluation and judgment. (Abu-Lughod 1996, p. 471)

## 5. The Migrant Experience

*The airport is both full and empty.  
Resembling me,  
The roaring stillness within.  
My suitcase lies helpless on the belt,  
I let it glut on my memories.  
She motions ‘let’s go’  
I stand still,  
Held down by a delicious sense of ambivalence.*

Only a relational epistemology can provide the necessary scaffolding for my narrative then. This is not only because knowledge is contextual but also, and more importantly in the context of this narrative, because relational epistemologies are often at the core of decolonial research methodologies (Gerlach 2018; Mutua and Swadener 2004; Rix et al. 2018). Moreover, a relational epistemology is able to account for the complexity of experience and transactional nature of knowing (Gerlach 2018). And if we agree with Sara Ahmed’s contention that “migrant bodies hence cannot be understood as simply on one side of identity or the other, or on one side of the community or the other” (Ahmed 1999, p. 345), then it is easier to accept, even argue with confidence, that migration provides unique contexts for the study of individual experiences and that these experiences can only be produced and re-produced using research processes that are integrally unique to the migrant experience within the decolonial paradigm.

It is reasonable to argue that this is not only a question of migrant experience and power but also, and more significantly, a question of agency and representation, a question



of identity work, “the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self” (Alvesson et al. 2008, p. 14). This is a question of ending my liminality at will by constructing an understanding of [my]self and reconnecting with new “ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world” and embracing a new system of order (Smith 2012, p. 28). Such an understanding, however, would not have materialised had it not been for a series of misunderstandings and making the wrong assumptions about the role of research, my unique role as a researcher, my positionality and, most significantly, my understanding of ‘empowerment’.

## 6. The Paradox of Empowerment: What Positions Me

*Who am I in all of this?  
And who are you?  
What difference does it make.  
Can I answer with: I don't know?  
I only write me.  
I cannot claim anything else about anyone else.  
But I can claim me.  
That is all that matters.*

We are institutionalised to think of academics and researchers as superheroes that have the superpower to ‘empower’ others by giving them a ‘voice’. Rushing (2016, p. 1) argues that “the ‘paradox of empowerment’ after neoliberalism, namely that discourses of empowerment sound liberatory, but have the potential to affect the opposite of what they promise by legitimating the offloading of responsibilities to vulnerable and dependent citizens in the name of self-determination”. This prompts the question: what makes researchers capable of empowering others? What positions me, the researcher, as capable of empowering others, my participants, if I am as broken as they are? I think back to one project, in particular, for which a colleague and I collected data several years ago and out of which no tangible research outputs have yet materialised. The participants were highly skilled Syrians, a group to which I belonged; I was an *insider*. Three days of intensive back-to-back interviews had left me feeling emotionally drained. The data, too, were emotionally charged, a large volume of information with which I had, at the time, identified as a Syrian woman. I was a member of the research team and had gone into the process thinking that my mission was to empower this group and elevate their voices. Little did I know that I needed to feel empowered myself, that by conducting those interviews without a clear understanding of my role, my positionality, I was only becoming part of the problem in actively contributing to a “code of imperialism” (Smith 2012, p. 28) and a colonial culture of ‘empowerment’.

Reading through the collected material proved challenging. In other, unembellished words, it was an emotional rollercoaster. As a researcher, there was this expectation of upholding objectivity and establishing a sense of healthy detachment from the situation. This was not about reflexivity, transparency or credibility any longer. The boundaries between me, the researcher, and my participants, were suddenly blurred. I was no god, and they were no people in distress. I was broken and waiting; I had no power in me to empower anyone. If anything, they empowered me. They taught me to embrace a “reflexivity of discomfort” (Pillow 2003), be humble and “test [my] own taken-for-granted views about [my] community” (Smith 2012, p. 139). They taught me to accept that the research I want to do comes with messiness and significant discomfort.

My participant group and I shared a ‘common wound’. Empathy was not what I felt during those interviews; rather, shame and a sense of pity for myself were indispensable ingredients in perceiving the lived experience of this group. My participants’ lived experience was similar to mine and a reminder of all that from which I had been trying to escape. I was no wounded healer (Gair 2012). I was simply and, in the rawest of ways, wounded.

I may have had insider insight and shared ‘common wounds’ with this group I was researching; perhaps we were viewed as a nation—my co-investigator certainly viewed

us as such: ‘*you Syrians*’, she would say. They, too, certainly did, and there was the occasional ‘*you know, we* (as in ‘you and me’) *Syrians do things this way or believe in this or that...*’. It was clear that my participants viewed me as part of their community by virtue of the language we spoke and the food we ate and the culture-specific references we all understood. To me, however, we were one community, one nation, only by virtue of contrast to my non-Arab co-investigator who was present during those interviews. Little did my Syrian participants know that ‘this fellow citizen’s’ views on religion could shock and shake them, that my *inshallah* (god-willing) was a marker of sincerity and cultural habituality rather than religiosity. As a Syrian woman, I felt that I had flouted many of our cultural and religious norms and rules—perhaps some of them did too. *I was not as Syrian as they were, nor were they as Syrian as I was.*

The war in Syria reinforced my agreement with Ben Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson [1983] 1991, p. 6). The Syria in/of my imagination and national consciousness with its one homogeneous community prior to the war was different from the Syria and its warring ‘communities’ that I had encountered following the war. Like Yuval-Davis, I needed a “notion of the nation” which, she argues, “can be constructed in many different ways—before we can determine if the people we meet belong to it or not” (Yuval-Davis 2013, p. 5). I also needed a notion of the border and a more profound and nuanced understanding of bordering practices, actual and symbolic, that determine who belongs to nations and communities and who does not (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

My epistemological awakening necessitated a fresh outlook and a cautious treading of my positionality. The established insider–outsider label used abundantly and uncritically by many qualitative researchers did not explain my positionality during that research experience. I felt like a “researcher in the middle” (Breen and O’Connor 2007, p. 163). Like Breen and O’Connor (2007) who researched loss and trauma and deemed the insider/outsider dichotomy simplistic, I felt that such methodological labelling was reductive. How could I not? I was an insider but not because I was a Syrian studying other, heterogeneously unique, Syrians, but because I was a human studying other humans. Similarly, I was an outsider, not because I was the researcher and they were the research participants but simply because despite the similarity, there was difference evident in our varied lived experiences and our place in the world. In my ontological and epistemological musings, I was both selfhood and otherness, similarity and difference, and a Syrian and a non-Syrian. One thing of which I was certain is that I did not want to be perceived as a culture, a whole, an essentialist entity: Syria, refugees, migrants, academia.

My postmodernist postcolonial inquiry found answers in autoethnographic writing. As a new form of ethnographic inquiry, autoethnography enabled my use of small amounts of agency and representation (Ellis et al. 2011) to help me narratively construct my way out of my *nisfu haalah*, my ‘halfness’. Writing in this way helped me marry up the two women, or perhaps half-women, I had been over the years in this new land, my new home, the migrant woman who experienced loss and the academic who was lost for words until they found their way to me. To borrow Anzaldúa’s beautiful words, ‘writing [the self] allowed me to grow roots that anchored me to the earth’ (Anzaldúa 1987, Preface). This was now my life, my home, and I was determined to turn my fragments into a whole<sup>4</sup>. I use ‘fragment’ in the symbolic sense, borrowing Pandey’s vision of the fragment whose potential “lies in that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization [...] of [...] the future political community” (Pandey 1992, pp. 28–29). These fragments, Pandey argues, can have immense political power and can be utilised to reflect, critique and disrupt. A fragment, however, is versatile and has theoretical and methodological value. It can be used theoretically to challenge sanitised narratives (Pandey 1992, p. 41) and methodologically to establish alternative ways of being and knowing (Pandey 1992, p. 47). A fragment’s beauty and relevancy lie in the fact that it does not have to act as methodological evidence.

Following on from this, a decolonial autoethnography of displacement is, thus, fragmented; it must acknowledge displaced selfhoods as chaotic, divergent and fragmented ‘wholes’ that can, and must, be thought of beyond a European intellectual lineage. This

implies that establishing a decolonial autoethnography starts with ‘centring the self’ not by facilitating the move from margin to centre but by allowing her to choose and celebrate her individual, and unique, ways of being, even at the margins. A decolonial autoethnography would cultivate safe spaces that allow for fragmentation and chaos. Only by normalising these experiences as unique expressions of the self that do not, and should not, conform to an institutionalised set of standards, autoethnographic research can enable the researcher to claim the margin as centre. There is undoubtedly a need to allow for a reckoning with the displaced self’s fragility and fragmentation and plurality (schizophrenia<sup>5</sup>) of the self, and push back against a Eurocentric obsession with order, rigour and credibility. Autoethnography cannot be postmodernist if autoethnographers continue to be obsessed with an institutional call to “ascertain the rigour and trustworthiness of this method” (Le Roux 2017, p. 196). It also cannot only be postmodernist; autoethnography must engage with the postcolonial and be politically charged. By providing alternative ways of knowing and understanding, and engaging with both the aesthetic and the political, autoethnography can contribute to the broader project of decolonisation and the dismantling of colonial legacies. Most importantly, a decolonial autoethnography that is able to decolonise must move away from declarations of false empowerment that are embedded within colonial structures of knowledge production and move closer to narratives that normalise the notion that to research is to be vulnerable (Anzaldúa 1987). Perhaps, what autoethnography needs is poetry (or more of it) for “poetry”, as African American novelist Alice Walker declares, “is the lifeblood of rebellion, revolution and the raising of consciousness”. I certainly would not be the first to call for such a union, nor would I be the last<sup>6</sup>.

Autoethnography does not only provide a unique opportunity for researchers to experiment with alternative and more individualistic ways of being and producing new forms of knowledge, but also offers a unique opportunity to document experiences of under-researched groups such as Syrian academics (McLaughlin et al. 2020). These personal and professional accounts help the researcher process loss and rupture and identify healthy forms of waiting that involve having agency and representation.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

This narrative set out to examine the complexities and fluidity of self as I negotiate my sense of identity and pursue a language of my understanding of my ‘self’. It looked into what it means to write and do research within contexts of displacement and loss, and how an understanding of the self and asking the right questions, both theoretical and methodological, could inform the relationship a researcher dwelling at the margins may have with their evolving research practice. Most importantly, my argument revolved around an existentialist question of whether to write or not and how meaning can be negotiated and found in the most unlikely of spaces, unscathed by the dominant narratives.

I choose ‘writing’ because, as Annie Ernaux declared in her Nobel Prize Lecture last year, “an experience is not lived until it is written”.

*This is now a paper. And I am now whole.*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this interview with Steve Paulson in 2018, Gayatri Spivak introduces the term “critical intimacy” in her call for more effective ways to understand and engage with “deconstruction”. To her, de-construction as a critique of Western thought and philosophy is “not just destruction. It’s also construction.” Deconstruction to Spivak is to speak from inside, to be critically intimate, not critically distant. In writing this piece, I fully embrace this notion of critical intimacy.
- <sup>2</sup> Despite my admiration for Fanon, I must concur with Māori scholar Linda T. Smith (2012, p. 29) who argues that “Frantz Fanon’s call for the indigenous intellectual and artist to create a new literature, to work in the cause of constructing a national culture after liberation still stands as a challenge. While this has been taken up by writers of fiction, many indigenous scholars who work in the social and other sciences struggle to write, theorize and research as indigenous scholars”.
- <sup>3</sup> Thinking about the coloniality of research necessitates a conscious consideration of alternative ways of knowing and doing and work in other languages and cultures from non-elite Global North institutions. Who I cite in my work is as important as who I choose not to cite. Here, the decision to not cite the usual ‘suspects’ or ‘white men’ is intentional. Adonis, for example, is a Syrian poet, philosopher, literary critic and artist. He is considered one of the most prominent figures of the postmodernist movement in the Arab World. Adonis, Said, Hall and Bhabha may have been based at elite Global North institutions; however, they are scholars of colour who had pioneered a postcolonial postmodernist tradition.
- <sup>4</sup> This is also in keeping with Smith’s (2012, p. 97) argument that “fragmentation is not an indigenous project, it is something we are recovering from”. However, while I acknowledge the value of the decolonial movement in helping indigenous and other marginalised groups recover from fragmentation, I am less inclined to embrace Smith’s dismissive treatment of fragmentation as a manifestation of inauthenticity. I endorse Pandey’s (1992) notion of the ‘fragment’ and Anzaldúa’s (1987) reflections on indigenous fragmentation which recognise fragmentation as a force to be reckoned with. “When fragmented pieces begin to fall together [...], we begin to get glimpses of what we might eventually become” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 63).
- <sup>5</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari ([1983] 2009) for a discussion on schizophrenia.
- <sup>6</sup> The question of how to write ethnographically is not new, nor is the notion of whether poetry can provide some answers. See Behar (2008) and Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010).

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