



Talking Past Each Other: Politics of Knowledge Production in Transnational Power Relations

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ARTICLE**

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ABSTRACT

This article is an autoethnographic reflection on the complexities of transnational power relations involved in knowledge production on migration. It is based on the author's experiences in German academia between 2015 and 2022 as a first-generation migrant from the Middle East. The article engages with the complexity of transnational spaces and the consequences of this complexity for conceptualisation, categorisation and problematisation in migration studies. Tracing such complexities is followed by a discussion on colonial legacies in academic discourses in Germany, on the one hand, and oppressive regimes' appropriation of anti-colonial efforts in the Middle East, on the other. By drawing on examples from teaching, research and public discussions, the article demarcates a 'reorientalist' tendency in migration studies, which renders Middle Eastern people mere victims of colonial intervention, casting them as passive subaltern subjects, and reproducing a Eurocentric gaze with a decolonial façade. Lastly, it discusses the researchers' multiple and shifting positionalities from the viewpoint of a migrant researcher conducting research on migration. The article calls for consistent mapping of studies through inclusive partnerships spanning diverse geographies to explore multifaceted perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION: THERE IS ONLY TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION RESEARCH

As a migrant, I have personally witnessed how complex migration processes and imaginaries formed in different parts of the migration itinerary influence the subsequent lives of immigrants. Thus, as a migration researcher, I find it intuitive to adopt a transnational approach in my studies. Transnationality means extending or going beyond national boundaries to understand social processes, actions and discourses better (Pries 2022; Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992). The transnational approach has challenged methodological nationalism, the assumption that nation-states are the natural units of analysis. It has also questioned related epistemic biases such as the 'territorial limitation' of analysis, i.e., that everything that exceeds the national borders is left out or ignored and considered irrelevant in the analysis (Wimmer & Schiller 2003).

Migration studies have long recognised complex and multidirectional interactions between multiple geographies and temporalities (Amelina & Faist 2012). However, despite critique against it, methodological nationalism is still mostly reflected in transnational migration studies. Expanding data sources, for example, by incorporating multiple geographies and/or including the lived experiences of migrants is considered a valuable strategy. At the same time, they may still fail to fully capture the complexities of transnational migration research and fully move beyond methodological nationalism. This raises crucial questions: How do complex transnational power dynamics shape academic knowledge production on migration? And, what remains obscured when we overlook these complexities in transnational migration research? To answer these questions, we need to understand the persisting conditions that enable the neglect of the intricate power relations shaping migration research.

To address these questions, I reflect¹ on my personal academic experiences in Germany since 2015 as a first-generation migrant from the Middle East. This comprises lengthy discussions with refugees and students in my classes while teaching at university, challenges in researching dynamics between migrants and long conversations with colleagues on topics of postcolonial relevance such as hijab, racism and decolonisation. During my presentations at conferences and workshops and discussions that followed them, I often noticed what can be categorised as awkward silences, which were excused by statements such as 'it is complicated' and expressions of apparently contradictory worries. In a few cases, I also experienced heated arguments. Overall, I have encountered obstacles in constructive discussions about the aforementioned topics (hijab, decolonisation and racism) with my colleagues not only due to differing perspectives but also a reluctance to engage in these difficult and complex debates. While some, including myself, approached them mainly from a Middle Eastern context/concern, such as Iran, many others were more focused on Germany or European geography. This difference in geographical perspective resulted in misunderstandings and miscommunications: We found ourselves talking past one another.

Building on these reflections, I argue the following: (1) Despite the growing interest in transnationalism, migration research often falls short in addressing the complexities

¹ What I am presenting here is based on my own experiences in German academia and discussions with colleagues whose works are not limited to sociology or migration studies. They have been involved in one way or another in transnational knowledge production and at the same time are committed to fighting against colonialities of knowledge production in academia and beyond.

of transnational spaces and the power matrices that shape academic knowledge production. Thus, a nuanced approach is needed – one that critically examines the asymmetrical power relations, influencing how knowledge is produced and interpreted. (2) These power dynamics are deeply intertwined with issues such as the shifting positionalities of the researcher, the enduring legacies of colonialism and the risk of research being co-opted by authoritarian regimes or dominant hegemonic groups. (3) If these complexities are overlooked, researchers will risk perpetuating oppressive power structures, marginalising the subjectivities of those involved and reinforcing the hierarchical categorisation of geographies that Positions non-European spaces as inferior to Europe.

To further expand on these ideas, in the following sections, first, I explore the complexities of transnational spaces in the context of globalisation and their impact on how academic knowledge production is problematised. Drawing from discussions on the politics of scale and power relations between different geographies, next, I examine the colonial legacies, illustrating their discursive and institutional manifestations in Germany. Building on this theoretical exploration and the institutional and discursive context of migration studies in Germany, I then incorporate my personal experiences to discuss the practical complexities of applying a transnational approach. Lastly, by reflecting on my positionalities, as a migrant from Iran doing research in Germany, I trace the impact of transnational dynamics on researchers' shifting positionalities. Through this critical engagement with the complexities of transnational power dynamics, this article contributes to the reflexive turn in migration studies (Amelina 2021; Nieswand & Drotbohm 2014), which seeks to address 'the risk of reproducing hegemonic structures and problem definitions to develop alternatives in theory, empirical research and science-society dialogues' (Acosta & Freier 2023).

METHOD AND ETHICS

I adopt an (auto)ethnographic² approach in writing this paper, drawing on my position as a migrant scholar in Germany doing transnational research on migration with a focus on the Middle East. In autoethnographic research, scholars reflectively and selectively document insights gained from their involvement in a culture or through their specific cultural identity (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Instead of striving for objectivity, this approach embraces the researcher's positionality as a starting point for 'situated knowledge' production (Haraway 1988). In particular, as the researcher, I am located within the power relations that form the context of knowledge production on migration, specifically in German academia. Thus, this article reflects on the asymmetrical power relation across borders that form the context of academic knowledge production on migration, which is mainly from the gaze of migration governance in the 'Global North(s)' (Amelina 2022). As such, it is a critical inquiry that transcends my experiences as a researcher towards shedding light on the complexity of transnational power dynamics with an eye on the Middle East and its colonial legacies.

One critical ethical consideration regarding this study pertains to the power dynamics at play in Europe, particularly in Germany, where there is a growing anti-migrant sentiment, particularly towards those from the Middle East. Thus, while I critique the

² No ethical approval was required for this research.

persistence of the Eurocentric gaze in (transnational) migration studies, it is not an invitation to ignore the current critical conjuncture in Europe. This article thus seeks to delve into the intricacies involved in navigating between two extremes, where the unequal power context in Europe or the Middle East is not seriously taken into account by academics. In doing so, it is crucial to think about transnational spaces to understand the complex context involved in a transnational approach to migration research.

CONCEPTUALISATION AND PROBLEMATISATION OF TRANSNATIONAL SPACES

To reflect on the complexities of transnational matrices of power, I start by elaborating on the various conceptualisations of transnational spaces influencing academic knowledge production on migration. Transnational spaces are not merely a flat amalgamation of multiple places. Instead, they are interwoven spaces shaped by dynamic power relations and the legacies of colonialism, impacting knowledge production in migration studies. Thus, a multi-sited data collection does not automatically address the involved spatial complexity. Methodological nationalism, apart from the fetishisation of the national scale, assumes a separation among the national units. To understand the complexity of transnational spaces and, in particular, their interconnections, we have to consider globalisation, which, following Jessop (2002), I understand in two senses: structural (greater global interdependence) and strategic (increasing global coordination). Thus, the importance of a transnational perspective is a result of not just mobility in terms of 'absolute space' going from point A to B but also the shortening of 'relative spaces' (cheaper and faster travel) and, perhaps more importantly, 'relational spaces' such as cyberspace in which the new social space has been produced (Harvey 2006). One can trace this in how social media influences migration aspiration and transnational emotions (Dekker and Engbersen 2014). Along the same line, a transnational approach is also an answer to transformations of state spaces (Brenner et al. 2003), with increasing supranational and subnational governance influencing states in their capacities for crisis management on a national level. This is evident in the case of migration management by the EU beyond its borders, including the externalisation of bordering regimes to neighbouring countries (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019).

That said, one should not dismiss national states, national boundaries and various forms of exclusion in nation-building processes as irrelevant because they continue to shape the practices and forms of transnational migration (Scheel & Tazzioli 2022). Not to take categories of practice as categories of analysis (Brubaker 1996), national states play an important role in mobility (Jessop 2016).

For example, individuals identified as Kurd or Baloch from Iran, who often face severe discrimination as minorities there, are still classified as Iranian migrants in Germany. This classification significantly influences their access to resources in Germany. To mention one, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) utilises a categorisation system, commonly referred to as *Gute Bleibeperspektive* (good prospects of staying), to assess asylum seekers from countries with a high acceptance rate. Recently, the country of Iran was removed from this list owing to a decrease in the acceptance rate of Iranian asylum seekers. As a result, Iranian asylum seekers in Germany are not eligible to participate in integration courses until their acceptance, unlike those from countries with a high probability of being granted

asylum. As one of my former Iranian students put it: 'I escaped the country, but it is like I cannot escape my nationality.'

In addition to the continuing relevance of the national state, and apart from the interconnectedness of different places, transnational spaces include scalar complexities, as multiple scales are involved. The concept of scale may initially seem straightforward and self-evident; however, arriving at a comprehensive and satisfactory definition proves to be quite challenging (Brenner 2001; Howitt 2003: 149–150). To think of the scalar complexities of transnational spaces, I follow Jessop (2009) in adopting a strategic-relational approach. He avoids a fixed perception of scale as external materiality or internal mental category. Rather, for him, scale is 'an emergent constraint that results from social action' (Jessop 2009: 94). Such an approach to scale helps to map knowledge production and its consequences in reproducing power relations in different geographies. In particular, it avoids taking the dominant scale of problematisation or evaluation of results for granted. Rather, it considers political struggles in making a specific scale hegemonic at the expense of others (Farvardin & Talebi 2024). This is particularly important for politics of transnational knowledge production on migration, as it deals with complex scalar frames and multiple players engaged on different scales.

The above simplifications result in not questioning categorisations, such as 'Muslim migrants' or, in a linguistic sense, 'Persianate society', in academic knowledge production. To elaborate on this, Foucault's (1988) account of 'problematisation' is inspirational. For him, problematisation is not about simply representing something that already exists. Nor is it about inventing an object through discourse. Instead, it includes both discursive and non-discursive practices in moral reflection, scientific inquiry, political analysis or other forms of understanding. These practices bring something into the realm of truth and falsity, making it an object of thought (Foucault 1988: 257).

Considering transnational power matrices, spaces of problematisation denote the scale and territories that determine the 'problem' and its involved power relations. However, to think about the (re)production of specific problematisations of mobility, one should not also forget the political economy of knowledge production. Relevant here for this article is the concentration of power/money in Europe and its impact on migration studies. Essentially, the prevalence of policy-relevant research aimed at 'improving' the situation in Europe influences practices of categorisation and problematisation in migration studies. A comprehensive discussion about the relevance of the political economy of knowledge production is out of the scope of this article. However, it is worth noting that, for example, this is manifested in the categorisation of Turkey and Iran primarily as 'transit' countries by migrant scholars in Europe, despite their hosting more refugees than Germany, which is categorised as a country of 'destination'.

In this section I briefly review the complexities of transnational spaces in terms of interconnectedness and multiple involved scales to shed light on the shortcomings of simplification of the transnational into a flat space larger than the national. Such simplifications have influenced the institutional/discursive setting of knowledge production on migration. To problematise such dominant categorisations, a researcher needs to also critically examine their historical and often colonial manifestations and challenges in combating them in the present moment.

(RE)PRODUCTION OF DISCURSIVE/INSTITUTIONAL COLONIAL LEGACIES

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Building on the critique against simplification of transnational spaces into flat geographies in the previous section, here I discuss the complexities of transnational power relations on a meso-level. In doing so, I trace how colonial legacies continue to inform and shape contemporary knowledge production on (migrants from) the Middle East with three examples: (1) reduction to religion, the usage of Islam as a conceptual and analytical category often grouping highly diverse people and societies under a single umbrella term; (2) reduction to language, the tendency to reduce the understanding of a particular society to mere language proficiency, which can be seen as a form of methodological language fetishism; and (3) the risk implicated by a Eurocentric approach to combat colonialities of knowledge that overlook how post- and decolonial arguments and postures can be appropriated by elites in the global Souths. Such appropriation serves to fend off critiques of inequalities and injustices implied by the hegemonic groups and economic exploitation of the majority of the population.

To explore colonial legacies in the case of the Middle East, I am inspired by Edward Said's famous definition of 'Orientalism' as 'the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (Said 2003: 42). This does not suggest there is one form of Orientalism. For example, Said (2003) mentions the distinction between British and French Orientalisms versus the German version, for the latter developed initially while there was no national interest as a coloniser at stake. Perhaps this partially explains why legacies of Orientalism in knowledge production on the Middle East are less problematised in Germany. For example, looking at subjects and foci of knowledge production in the academic institutes in Germany reveals a strong tendency to study, e.g., Iran as an object of the past or often a matter of religious study. The former is institutionally manifested in the departments of Iranistik/Iranian Studies, and the latter in the departments of Islamic Studies/Religious Studies. Apart from the case of Iran, the institutional categories also interestingly tend to show great persistence in classic Orientalism. For example, the main research programme titles such as *Perspectives from Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, which groups different geographies on the basis of having a majority Muslim population, are not strange even in an institute founded in the 1990s:

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) is the only research institution in Germany that deals with the Middle East, Africa, Eurasia, South and Southeast Asia in an interdisciplinary and historically comparative perspective. *The focus of research is the interaction of predominantly Muslim societies and their relationships with non-Muslim neighbouring regions.* ('about us' page on ZMO's official website, emphasis added)³

As it is evident from the text, Islam is uncritically considered a relevant category or the only one to group several geographies with vastly different histories and diverse experiences of being (semi-)colonised into a unit of study. Such categorisation reduces all complexities in several different societies to reproduce a particular dominant scale through the ongoing production of knowledge. As much as I searched for an equivalent case, there is no similar categorisation of 'predominantly Christian

3 For more information: <<https://www.zmo.de/en/about-us>>, accessed 10 June 2023.

societies and their relationships with non-Christian neighbouring regions' as the basis for a research institute.

This brings me to the second example of colonial legacies and related simplification of transnational spaces, which reduces the complexities of societies to their languages. For sure knowing local languages in any research study is an extremely important facilitator, particularly in cultural aspects of society. However, there is a tendency to equate language skills with expertise about certain societies. In this sense, this simplification falsely suggests that a Syrian researcher would be replaceable with a 'Syrian' or even an 'Arab' with similar knowledge of Arabic. I personally experienced the reduction of complexities to language when I requested the opportunity to provide critical feedback on a multilingual questionnaire about discrimination as a researcher and sociologist, only to be told, 'we have already had someone who knows Persian checking it.' This reduced my contribution to simply providing language skills, which anyone could have done with the same knowledge of Persian.

Apart from simplification of complexities of societies to religion and language, there are two relatively new forms of Orientalism that are influential in knowledge production on migration in my experience with German academia. The first one is what Bayat (2015) describes a neo-Orientalist imagination getting momentum in the post-9/11 attacks in the USA. He argued that, in this form of Orientalism, Muslims are seen as trapped in outdated traditions and 'irrational behaviours'. They are perceived not as exotic or harmless, but mainly as dangerous (Bayat 2015). The second new form has appeared in response to the rise in racist anti-Muslim sentiment in Western Europe and North America (hereafter WENA). What I call reorientalist approaches put an emphasis on Middle Eastern peoples as victims of the 'West'. This well-intended response to new forms of racist othering in WENA has been influencing knowledge production on the Middle East and its diasporas, too (Fekete 2004; Lewicki & Shoorman 2020).

Reorientalism, despite its good intention to combat the othering of migrants in Europe, reproduces the superiority of the WENA geography in relation to the other geographies, for it does not take the subjectivity of peoples from the Middle East into account. Moreover, it imposes a frame formulated here in Europe to understand the Middle East. In other words, this problematisation focuses on migration and integration in the WENA, with an eye on migrant Muslim minorities, to make sense of the Middle East. In doing so, again, power matrices geographically embedded in Europe form the main context for evaluating political/ethical aspects of knowledge production on another geography. It centres on the consequences for the subaltern population in Europe as the primary and sometimes the sole relevant question. Not that it is not an important question, but the problem is its centrality and singularity. For example, in the next section I discuss how both neo-orientalist and reorientalist approaches have influenced our findings regarding inter-migrant dynamics and discussions on hijab.

The third example of how colonial legacies continue to affect knowledge production in transnational migration studies and other fields relates to the Eurocentric approach to decolonisation. This perspective risks neglecting the fact that authoritarian regimes in the region have appropriated the concept of decolonisation for their own purposes. This appropriation presents a significant challenge for transnational migration studies, as it necessitates a nuanced understanding of the political landscape in the Middle East and a consideration of how research agendas might be strategically deployed by oppressive state actors. In particular, this is because there has been an ongoing

hype about decolonisation also in migration studies in recent years (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu 2018; Mayblin & Turner 2021). To understand such appropriations and the complexities they introduce to academic knowledge production, the case of Iran is interesting. In Iran the decolonisation terminology has been adopted by the state and its propaganda machine to advocate for an Islamist alternative. To mention one example, the Islamic regime in Iran introduced a brutal ‘Cultural Revolution’ right after the 1979 Revolution in the name of fighting with the influence of both the ‘West’ and the ‘East’ with an anti-colonial Islamist tune (Mojab 1991). Thus, ‘decolonising your mind’ is claimed by officials who push for a return to the ‘authentic’ Islamic self (Farvardin & Talebi 2024). They are also careful not to use colonial concepts such as the ‘Middle East’. After all, Khamenei, the supreme leader, himself, in several cases, has stressed that the Middle East is a Eurocentric concept and that Iranians should use West Asia instead.⁴ It is noteworthy that such appropriations are not unique to Iran, or contradictory to the global shift towards neoliberalism (on Turkey, for example, see Çapan & Zarakol 2017).

Thus, knowledge production on the Middle East is still suffering from explicit/implicit colonial legacies that influence academic categorisations and simplify the complexities of societies on the basis of, among other things, their religions or languages. Further complexities arise from the appropriation of anti-colonial efforts by the oppressive apparatus of the states in the Middle East or elsewhere (Farvardin & Talebi 2024). In this context, researchers have an added responsibility to adopt an ‘anti-authoritarian’ approach that is sensitive to potential oppressive appropriations in addressing the transnational power dynamics present in their research (Hanafi 2020). Addressing these challenges requires us to take into account the lived experiences of researchers.

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TRANSNATIONAL POWER DYNAMICS

In this section, I discuss the complexities of power dynamics involved in transnational migration research as manifested in researchers’ lived experiences. Despite my relatively privileged and supportive academic environment, I have been facing several challenges in transnational migration studies within German academia. I explore these challenges here using examples from my teaching, research and other academic experiences and discussions.

IN CLASSROOMS WITH CHANGING BOUNDARIES

I left Iran for the first time as a migrant to the UK in late 2012 and started my PhD there. Later, I arrived to live in Berlin in 2015, coinciding with the migration of many newcomers from the Middle East,⁵ which brought back the interconnected topics of

⁴ Source <<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/video-content?id=51486>>, accessed 13 February 2023.

⁵ I personally use the term ‘Middle East’ instead of the more recent politically correct term ‘West Asia-North Africa’. However, I am mindful of the word’s colonial origins, as it was first coined by the British India Office in the 1850s, as noted by Bayat and Herrera (2021). Since the post-World War II era, the Middle East has been a subject of policy-making, study and popular imagination in everyday discussions and popular culture. Although its formation was colonial, it has since evolved and taken on a different meaning over time.

migration and ‘integration’, particularly in Germany (Hamann & Karakayali 2016). As soon as I arrived in Berlin, as part of a university seminar, I had the opportunity to co-teach bilingual academic courses in English and Persian/Dari, intended to serve as an entry point for newly arrived asylum seekers to join the university later as students. The course proved insightful as we delved into the daily experiences of newcomers and discovered Berlin’s multiple social spaces. Gathering narratives through collective mapping of different locations in Berlin and subsequent discussions during the course enabled us to explore blurred boundaries (Wimmer 2008, 2013) that divide and connect various groups of residents in the city including migrants.

In particular, expressions of solidarity as refugees/migrants and/or emphasis on differences among migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iran were noteworthy. In my interaction with participants of the course, I encountered different dynamics between Iranians and Afghans who used to live or were born in Iran compared with those who grew up in Afghanistan. Later in my research, I realised that the main difference comes from exposure to the conditions of refugee life in Iran and certain forms of racism against Afghans embedded in Iranian nationalism (Olszewska 2010). Moreover, more complex power relations appear when considering different ethnicised hierarchies within a country, namely Kurds in Iran or Hazaras in Afghanistan. This experience was the starting point for me to think about the complexity of transnational spaces considering shifting power dynamics and ethnic hierarchies (Hagendoorn 1995) among various groups of migrants, each with unique experiences of exclusion/inclusion and mobility. In short, transnational spaces are also spaces of intersectional power dynamics.

IN RESEARCH ON INTER-MIGRANT DYNAMICS

Apart from teaching at the university, since 2016, I have started working as a researcher on topics related to migration/integration. I was fortunate to begin at a very inclusive corner of academia in Germany as a ‘post-migrant’ society, in which migration is considered inevitable (Foroutan 2021). In 2020, I was part of a research team working on a project on inter-migrant dynamics among Middle Eastern migrants residing in Germany. Our objective was to address the issue of inter-migrant racism, an important topic that has received limited attention. We sought to create a framework that would deepen our understanding of the intricate dynamics of inter-migrant relationships, their evolution and their association with racism in Germany. We leveraged our expertise as migrant scholars and activists who have previously worked on the issue of migration in Iran and anti-migrant racism towards Afghans. Our insights were informed by 28 interviews: 14 interviews conducted by scholar-activists in Turkey (as a country of ‘transit’) with migrants and civil society actors, as well as 14 semi-structured interviews by our team in Germany (as a ‘destination’ country) with migrants, activists and civil society actors who support newcomers from the Middle East, namely Iran, Afghanistan and Syria.

The starting point for our investigation in the project was the significance of histories of racism, their transformations and the involved power relations in different localities. Racism is rooted in hierarchies and uneven power relations, played out on a transnational scale. Similar to other ideas, racial categorisation may travel with people (Said 1984). Hence, migrants face racism not only from the host society but also from other migrant groups. We adopted an intersectionally sensitive transnational perspective to advance the concept of travelling racism for empirically examining

inter-migrant dynamics. Intersectionality explores how different forms of inequality (e.g. based on class, gender and ethnicity) intersect (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 2017). In the context of transnational migration research, intersectionality is both a theoretical and a methodological tool to detect and make visible different forms of power relations, e.g., class, gender, ethnicity and generation, that cross the borders, social boundaries and fixed identities of (non-)migrants in different spatial scales from local to transnational.

In the project, we emphasised the significance of migration routes and the past experiences of Middle Eastern migrants in both their countries of origin and transit nations. We examined the impact of nationalism and various forms of exclusion, alongside the prevalent racist narratives surrounding immigration in the destination country, Germany. This includes ideologies such as Aryanism and the good migrant versus bad migrant discourse, as well as how opportunities for participation are distributed according to migrant nationalities. These factors play a crucial role in shaping migrant conflicts and may contribute to racism among different migrant groups. For example, the Aryan myth, a racist classification that differentiates most Europeans (but also includes Persians and Indians) from other world populations, originated in Europe and was subsequently disseminated worldwide (Zia-Ebrahimi 2011). The Aryan myth also has influenced Iranian nationalism and justified its hostility towards Arabs and Turks as ‘the Iranians’ racial “Other” (Zia-Ebrahimi 2014). In this sense, Iranian nationalism glorifies the pre-Islamic history of Iran and explains its decay by referring to ‘invasions’ by Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Afghans and so on. While Aryanism is less relevant in Europe now, Zia-Ebrahimi (2011) elaborates on how, in the process of ‘self-orientalism’, ‘the so-called “racial” kinship of Iranians with their fellow Aryans of Europe still permeates parts of popular, cultural, political and historical discourses of identity,’ among Iranians. I encountered newcomers originally from Iran arguing that they have a better chance for integration into German society because they are ‘Aryan’. The imaginary connection justifies the ways they distinguish themselves from other newcomers. Thus, conflicts – whether political, religious or ethnic – along with ‘us’ versus ‘them’ ideas and biases from origin, transit and destination societies, affect how migrants navigate socio-political tensions in their new country. These influences play a major role in how migrants experience and respond to racism from both other migrants and the majority society.

During researching inter-migrant dynamics and the publication of our results, we faced several interwoven power matrices that form the context and influence how our results may be interpreted. On the one hand, we have to deal with neo-Orientalist discourses such as ‘imported conflict’ (Féron 2021; Féron & Lefort 2019) and, more recently, ‘imported antisemitism’ that portray Middle Eastern migrants in Germany as a threat to peace and stability. In brief, they are accused of bringing their ‘problems’ with them to Europe. On the other hand, we encountered what I called above ‘reorientalist’ approaches that render Middle Eastern people as mere victims of colonial interventions, denying their subjectivity and reproducing a Euro-centric gaze with a postcolonial façade.⁶ For those who emphasise ‘imported conflict’, racism in Germany is a foreign element that has nothing to do with German history. In contrast, in reorientalist approaches, racism is an inherently ‘white’ issue, and migrants from the Middle East cannot possibly be categorised as racist, as was stated in the feedback

⁶ For an interesting account of subjectivity of the elite migrants and their discursive influences, see Mustonen’s (2024) contribution in this special issue.

we got regarding our result. Beyond navigating between these extremes, we also had to address the specific histories of racism, nation-building projects and migration in both the Middle East and Germany. In doing so, we adopted an intersectional and transnational approach to explore migrants' boundary-makings in response to the exclusions they face along their journeys.

When we attempted to publish part of our results in a non-journal format, interestingly, we received feedback suggesting that we were stereotyping Iranians by talking as experts about Iranian nationalism and its anti-Arab features. Comments such as this publication 'can feed a certain perspective/stigma', 'invites misunderstandings and stereotyping/generalisations [about Iranian migrants]' and 'provides a basis for undesirable arguments' reveal a deep concern about the misuse of talking about 'negative' aspects of migrants' life that contrast portraying them as mere victims. One should not dismiss such a valid concern, particularly in the current political atmosphere with the rise of right-wing parties and anti-migrant sentiments in Europe. However, we faced overlooking some consequences of such concerns, which may bring obstacles to knowledge production in an emancipatory and anti-authoritarian direction considering another geography, for example, the Middle East.

For example, by limiting racism to the majority society in Germany, even from a pro-migrant and sympathetic viewpoint, researchers may neglect to account for the racism present within Middle Eastern communities. This oversight can lead to a failure to understand the complex power dynamics and hierarchies that emerge from the intersection of racialisation and exclusion practices across various regions, including the Middle East and Europe. In this sense, theorising that only 'white' individuals can be racist may obscure the ongoing struggles in places such as Iran, where the central state and segments of society engage in discriminatory practices against Afghan refugees and marginal ethnic groups. Furthermore, this perspective fails to address the historical anti-Arab sentiment that is embedded in Iranian nationalism. In short, our study of anti-migrant dynamics reveals how a flat generalisation about all Muslim, or (migrants from) the Middle Eastern, fails to address transnational and intersectional power relations influencing migrant lives in Germany.

IN PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS ON HIJAB

Dealing with complex transnational power matrices is not an exception for inter-migrant dynamics. To allude to another important and challenging topic, consider the obligatory hijab in Iran and discrimination against Muslim women in Europe. Here, the challenge is coming from opposing situations: on one side, there exists strong anti-Muslim racism against veiled women in Europe (Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio & Veit 2022; Foner & Alba 2008). On the other side, in another place in the world, there are Islamists in power running a gender apartheid regime in Iran with, among others, mandatory hijab law for all individuals marked as female with its gender segregation and associate governance of bodies (Farvardin 2021). So, the poles arise from a racist take on Muslim 'integration' with a specific focus on hijab (see, for example, Kelek 2005; Kelek 2012; Schwarzer 2010) towards 'femonationalism' that marks Muslims as inferior 'other' (Farris 2017), to its justified critique, which somehow ignores political Islam and its consequences for women in other geographies (see, for example, Dietze 2010; Shooman 2014). Thus, a transnational approach to studying hijab, in particular concerning the Iranian migrants, needs to navigate between right-wing Islamophobia and their feminist allies, ready to jump on the topic and victimise Muslim women, and

an Islamic regime that justifies oppressive governance of bodies manifested primarily in mandatory hijab as the culture of that region. In short, a politicisation of a cultural issue in Europe versus a culturalisation of a political issue in parts of the Middle East such as Iran. It is clear that a discussion on hijab needs to consider these power matrices, particularly in light of the retaking of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 and the 2022 revolutionary momentum in Iran against the Islamic regime. The latter was triggered by the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman in Tehran, after her arrest by the Iranian hijab police for not properly wearing the Islamic hijab in public, while wearing a headscarf. To deal with these complex transnational power dynamics, the emerging 'other feminisms', a diverse array of movements challenging gendered oppression and advocating for a 'revolution for life', have contributed to bringing together the struggles and concerns for the right to the body (against both obligatory hijab and unveiling) across borders and avoiding a one-sided focus on the situation in one geography (Farvardin 2024).

The examples in this section highlight specific challenges for migration researchers, especially considering dominant categorisations and colonial legacies that shape academic knowledge production. They underscore the importance of a nuanced, transnationally intersectional approach in examining migration dynamics, particularly regarding interconnected power relations across multiple geographies.

PARTNERSHIP: BEYOND STATEMENTS OF POSITIONALITY

Transnational power dynamics also influence academic knowledge production by shaping the positionalities of the researchers. However, the complexity of transnational power relations involved in migration studies will not be addressed by mere self-reflection on researcher positionality, which is customary in academia. This is not against reflection on positionalities by the researcher but rather emphasises that limiting it to performances of privilege acknowledgement will not automatically result in situated knowledge. Instead, migration researchers need a transnational take on intersectionality sensitive to power relations beyond the national scale.

For example, during several presentations I attended in Germany, I noticed researchers acknowledging their privileges (such as being white and holding a European passport) while discussing their study on migration in the Middle East. As much as the acknowledgement is important, it is often a limited performance and/or disclaimer. Reflection on positionality as a mere formality can reinforce the gap between the researcher and their subjects. In this sense, acknowledging positionality often becomes a self-centred focus that does not necessarily promote an anti-racist perspective. Instead, it distances the writer from the very individuals whose conditions they seek to change (Kobayashi 2010).

To further elaborate, I reflect on my position as a first-generation migrant researcher in Germany with its 'in-betweenness' because of two contrasting sides: (1) marginal position as a migrant from the Middle East in Europe and (2) a relatively more privileged position as a Persian/Shi'a/man living in Europe (for example, when compared with that of a Kurdish/Sunni/woman living in Iran; Farvardin & Talebi 2024). While they are not mutually exclusive, only stressing the subaltern position will exclude certain forms of discrimination on a national scale. I often encounter one-sided emphasis on one geography of power relations that obscures a part of my positionality, for

example, the dominant position of the researcher in Iran that might influence the problematisation and implementation of the research on racism.

Moreover, in Germany, my status is based on insecurities concerning my job as a researcher, which is more privileged than those of the majority of co-national and co-ethnic migrants. However, my status is relatively lower than that of my white European colleagues (Khosravi 2024) and coloured by the assumption that my research on migration is determined by my position as an immigrant, and not by my academic merits. To mention this is not to suggest migration studies is an exiled space in knowledge production necessarily. However, it denotes the power relations affecting the subjectivity of migrant scholars, for example, from the Middle East. In this sense, the academic merits of migrant scholars are undermined, for at the same time, as a migrant scholar, pushed to study 'your people' and 'your geographical area', you are also rendered easily replaceable.

Undoubtedly, a transnationally intersectional lens is very fruitful in exploring diverse axes of power forming the research context, including migrant scholar positionalities. At the same time, it does not automatically provide a recipe for dealing with complex social dynamics involved in transnational research. Recognising privileges should be the starting point to explain how researchers, despite their positions, manage to map the research in the relevant power contexts. In this case, it means how our knowledge production on a particular topic/group would also influence and be influenced by the power relations in the Middle East. This consideration invites moving towards a truly 'decentralised' knowledge production (Said 2003), which is not just about having more data, or something from the 'other' spaces as a token of validity. Rather, it is to dissolve the power structure and the colonial relations between different geographies of knowledge production. Such colonialities are also represented in the dominant 'extractivist' approaches to margins that render the latter the space of raw data (Santos 2018). In doing so, as each researcher faces unique limitations within power structures, it is necessary to explore individual agencies for potential solutions. These solutions should go beyond the dominant form of politics of 'care', mostly conceptualised as 'solidarity' that runs the risks of being one-sided and patronising (al-Haj Saleh 2018). Consistently mapping our research through cooperative partnerships across various geographies can aid in this practice. These partnerships can provide diverse perspectives on concepts and concerns, shedding light on the complexity of migration from multiple angles. Partnership, in this sense, is a horizon for better transnational knowledge production, particularly on topics that connect us across borders such as, but not limited to, migration.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on an autoethnographic approach, in this article, I argue for transnational migration research that critically examines asymmetrical power relations involved in academic knowledge production on different levels of abstraction. First, I explored the complexities of transnational spaces to reflect on conceptual simplifications and consequences for migration studies in terms of problematisation. Secondly, I subsequently traced complexities of transnational power dynamics comprising academic institutions to discuss legacies of colonialism, their (re)production and the potential for research appropriation by authoritarian regimes or hegemonic groups. These colonial legacies become manifest in various forms of Orientalism which continue to shape perceptions of and research on the Middle East.

In particular, I introduce 'reorientalism' to emphasise that even well-intended attempts to 'decolonise' knowledge production can reproduce Eurocentric perspectives if they fail to equally account for the subjectivities and power dynamics within the Middle East. In other words, overemphasising the role of colonialism can overshadow the agency and lived realities of individuals and communities in the region. Furthermore, I highlight the appropriation of anti-colonial discourse by authoritarian regimes and elites in the Middle East. By co-opting the language of decolonisation, these states silence dissent and further marginalise already vulnerable populations. I emphasise the need for transnational researchers to remain constantly aware of these intricate power dynamics to avoid replicating oppressive dynamics in their research practices. Third, I review my personal experiences and challenges in German academia to reflect on the complexities of transnational power dynamics on a concrete level in the daily life of a migration researcher. Fourth and lastly, I explore the challenges of complex transnational power relations for the subjectivities of the researcher. One primary challenge stems from the multiple and mutable positionalities of researchers inherent in transnational research. I use a reflection on my in-between position as a migrant researcher doing migration research to emphasise that researchers' multiple positions can shift dramatically across geographical contexts, influencing the problematisation, process and reception of their work. For me, this denotes the double spaces I am engaged with as a first-generation migrant, to emphasise my location in geographies of knowledge production in between established boundaries. With these examples and explorations, from different perspectives, I discuss the complexities of transnational power relations involved in knowledge production on migration.

Through the above discussions, I hope to invite researchers to consistently map their studies through collaborative partnerships spanning diverse geographies to explore multifaceted perspectives on concepts and concerns. It is critical to recognise that there is no definitive checklist for ensuring the success of a transnational migration study. Moreover, the reality is that material inequality and power imbalances between societies will not disappear in one day, and it is unrealistic to expect a solution that shields academia from the consequences of this reality. The present moment is the product of various forms of inequality operating on different scales and temporalities throughout history. However, this should not imply that researchers and other knowledge producers lack agency and responsibility. On the contrary, the complexity and challenges associated with the transnational approach should motivate us to consistently consider the power dynamics involved in our research. Such considerations should be a standard procedure and an ongoing concern in migration studies.

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