This book offers a timely and authentic account of migrant academics’ experiences working abroad. Its narrative style and openness to creative expression make this book particularly original, and will appeal to a wide range of readers.

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This volume consists of narratives of migrant academics from the Global South within academia in the Global North. The autobiographic and autoethnographic contributions to this collection aim to decolonise the discourse around academic mobility by highlighting experiences of precarity, resilience, care and solidarity in the academic margins.

The authors use precarity to analyse the state of affairs in the academy, from hiring practices to culturally accepted division of labour, systematic forms of discrimination, racialisation, and gendered hierarchies. Building on precarity as a critical concept for challenging social exclusion or forming political collectives, the authors move away from conventional academic styles, instead adopting autobiography and autoethnography as methods of intersectional scholarly analysis. This approach creatively challenges the divisions between the system and the individual, the mind and the soul, the objective and the subjective, as well as science, theory, and art.

This book will be of interest not only to scholars within the field of migration studies, but also to instructors and students of sociology, postcolonial studies, gender and race studies, and critical border studies. The volume’s interdisciplinary approach also seeks to address university diversity officers, managers, key decision-makers, and other readers directly or indirectly involved in contemporary academia. The format and style of its contributions are wide-ranging (including poetry and creative prose), thus making it accessible and readable for a general audience.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to download for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary material, can also be found at http://www.openbookpublishers.com.
My essay reflects on how my experience of reintegrating into Italian academia was chiefly defined by my identity as a homecoming female researcher, and how moving back from a ten-year-long stay abroad made me radically aware of how gender marks the endemic precarity of cultural work within the European university system. I use an autobiographical lens, which runs through some of the moments and contexts of my life in the university, centering on my experience of moving from the center space of British academia to the relative margins of the Italian one.

My narrative revolves around the issue of mobility: my experience of entering certain academic spaces as a female ‘native’ returnee whose academic trajectory had crossed disciplinary boundaries. While centered on my own specific circumstances and lived experience, and without a claim to speak for others, I situate my own personal journey within the paradigm of gendered precarity and draw inspiration from existing literature about the contextual, contingent, and differential forms of vulnerability of transnational professional trajectories in neoliberal academia. I thus aspire to make a contribution to the growing conversation taking place among women cultural workers, which was initiated by intersectional, queer, and decolonial feminists, about

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1. On gendered precarity in the academic system see Zheng (2018); Morley (2018); Murgia and Poggio (2019). For a focus on the Italian context see Bozzon, Murgia, Poggio, and Rapetti (2017); Poggio (2017).
our peculiar positionality in the relations of super/subordination that pervade and sustain academic spaces.

Out of place

*I land in Belgium, at the Brussels-based campus of a UK university’s IR department, thinking: ‘What if they made a mistake?’ I learn to live with the impostor syndrome throughout much of my PhD experience, especially in contexts where (I thought) I should come across as smart and ‘at ease’... in English. That is the case also in social gatherings with colleagues and senior scholars which—I begin to understand—make up an important part of building my academic persona. ‘Manu, you’re too anxious! You should try yoga!’ suggests a male, native Anglophone colleague of mine. I do try yoga in the end, although not thanks to his advice but because, together with some of my PhD girlfriends, I decide that yoga could be a good way to address our common doctorate-related stress and have something that brings us together outside university. It does indeed help, as our friendship grows, and we build solidarity and a sense of community as young and ‘anxious’ migrant women trying to navigate precarious but exciting early careers in the knowledge production industry in the heart of Europe.*

I have come to understand this specific kind of anxiety as a sense of being ‘out of place.’ Rachele Borghi describes the ‘out of place syndrome’ as the internalization of the perspectives of dominant voices and the concurrent feeling of occupying a material or symbolic public space illegitimately (Borghi, 2020, 47). In my experience, trying to feel ‘in place’ when you struggle to adapt to new worldviews, scientific paradigms, languages, and scholarly habitus can be tiring and disorienting (ibid. 47–48). Indeed, as a Southern European (white) woman, adapting to the dominant academic center-space (a UK postgraduate school of international studies) often unsettled my sense of self and, at times, made me question my legitimacy as an aspiring researcher. Part of it was linked to my poor understanding of the taken-for-granted language, habits, and tastes that make up recognizable academic lifestyles and that, indeed, can be regarded as forms of cultural capital.2 The topic of my PhD research did not help either. In an IR department, I pursued

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2 On the dominance of English and anglophone universities in academic knowledge production, see Curry and Lillis (2007); Marton (2019); Nota (2020).
an ethnographic study of communal conflicts in India, with a gender focus and a feminist epistemology. A male English senior scholar I had previously and very briefly worked with once said: ‘You actually managed to pull off that project?!’ He seemed awkwardly surprised.

Getting there

I actually pass my PhD viva without corrections—a rather rare occurrence in British academia. I feel rewarded and—for some time—relieved of the out-of-place syndrome. I have actually made it. ‘She defended her dissertation in a remarkably undefensive way’ I find written on the examiners’ report. This remark brings me back to the feeling of calm and confidence I felt as I sat in front of them, rooted in the awareness of my path and the choices I had made to make the project work both for me (a feminist scholar) and for them (who had to judge it based on the assessment standards peculiar to the UK academic system). I especially remember how feminism had opened me up to the possibility that feeling out of place could turn into a sense of hanging in the right place, finding the political in the personal and seeking to connect with those who, in the end, questioned—and fought against—the normality of privilege.

Feminist bonds have shown me that feeling out-of-place is tiring but can feed into our political consciousness. It can lead us to ask questions about why what is normal does not feel right. It might eventually make us feel that, when we start questioning how things are, we will continue to struggle but will find ourselves in very good company. According to Borghi (2020, 14), this process of understanding your positioning as a political issue has to do with unmasking the tacit ways in which academic authority and power are differentially distributed based on interlocking systems of oppression. Gender and class, of course, matter, but they cannot be separated from whiteness and country of origin in a knowledge production industry that channels internationalization in specific directions that usually uphold center-periphery dynamics (Marton, 2019).

So, from there, the lens through which I looked at my personal struggles became inevitably political. I began to recognize the privilege of my Belgian residence permit, as a white, middle-class European ‘pondering her options’ after completing the PhD, but I also started to realize the specific way in which gendered precarity was becoming a defining aspect of my post-PhD life as a female, unemployed migrant academic.
Coming home

After a ten-year-long stay in Belgium, my partner and I decide to go back to Italy (our native country) with our two-year-old baby girl. I am somewhat ambivalent about moving. We love Brussels and we are surrounded by wonderful friends, but relationships feel potentially impermanent as our circles consist mostly of migrant professionals like us. At the same time, I feel excited at the idea of coming home, hoping I will find a job, capitalizing on my research and work experiences abroad. I break the news to colleagues and friends at the university. Encouragement, support, bittersweet goodbyes, and promises to stay in touch, and… ‘Are you sure? I mean, you could end up like those educated, middle-class Italian women with a professional future in front of them until they have a baby, quit their jobs and start knitting and baking cakes while waiting for their husband at home!’ I think my face shows my disbelief and uneasiness at this comment (rage mounts afterwards as I narrate the conversation to a friend of mine) because he quickly adds: ‘Joking, of course!’

Feeling diminished based on the interlocking dimensions of your social identity reveals how out-of-place syndrome is, indeed, a political issue. It is related to how privilege tacitly marks a person’s sense of entitlement (or lack thereof) based on her positioning with respect to the norms that underscore relations of domination in the academic space (Borghi, 2020, 23, 44). I learned that the precarious feeling of fitting in, mediated by the possibilities which my social positioning as a white European opened for building up my cultural capital within UK academia, could be easily jeopardized, as the prospect of ‘going back’ activated commonly held gender and cultural stereotypes. When I recall my journey through academia, I describe out-of-place syndrome as a corporeal dimension of gendered precarity, which creeps into your core and manifests as uneasiness in interactions with senior colleagues and staff or even when entering university buildings, where your social identity somehow determines to what extent you belong, and whether or how you will have to prove you actually do.

Options

Employment prospects back home are dim, and the whole process of looking for options is tiring. I get a new PhD scholarship so that I can get paid for my
research and realize—once again—that I am not alone. There are actually a few of us in the Italian university system: early-career scholars with a PhD obtained abroad, who come home and embark on a new PhD programme, in a different—although often akin—disciplinary field. And among them, the majority are women. I see a pattern taking shape: after short-term post-doc fellowships, publications, low-paid teaching contracts, exhausted by the prospect of endless precarity, many drop out, and some of them become schoolteachers. Many find motherhood very hard to reconcile with early-career academic life. I feel scared but determined to work myself through the precarity of Italian academia while I get to know the women—whom I will come to consider my ‘sisters’—of the Italian feminist movement Non Una di Meno (‘Not One Less’). By sticking with them and taking an active part in the movement, I become acutely aware that my struggle is personal in the way it translates into ‘my life,’ but exquisitely political in the way its dimensions match the struggles of many other women.

And I do register in the national schoolteachers’ ranking lists; one never knows!

It is hard not to think that perhaps the racist and sexist ‘joke’ that my colleague in Brussels made about Italian women with promising but aborted careers might actually be rooted in the fact that dropping out of academia because of gendered precarity has become normalized—it is just ‘the way things are.’ And the explanation I find, based on the feminist lens I wear, is that when a similar phenomenon gets ‘taken for granted,’ it has to do with the workings of a politico-economic regime where the division of labor is clearly gendered, racialized, and classed. Early-career female scholars are constantly reminded of their subaltern position through the material implications in terms of overwork, low pay, and exhaustion experienced when stepping into a male-dominated, androcentric space of knowledge production (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001). In that sense, life for female academic migrant returnees is not necessarily more difficult than for other female scholars in this academic space. However, the process of making your scholarly trajectory fit into the national academic system can add a layer of uncertainty, in terms of lacking the necessary contacts and understanding of the system, besides having to embark in time-consuming and expensive bureaucratic procedures for skill and qualification recognition.
Engrained in the system

I get a teaching contract as adjunct faculty. Many of us, early-career academic returnees, do it in order to set foot in the institutional setting. A senior fellow academic tells me that ‘precarity is also an opportunity to make unconventional career choices,’ but I am not sure how my current professional situation can be read as an opportunity to choose, as I do not see many available paths ahead of me. Patronizing comments, even if well-intended, are part of the things that make me feel out of place. I feel I should do something so that my international experience and my interdisciplinary background pay off. Yet, the worried expression of most of my colleagues when I tell them about my unusual academic trajectory—spanning from Area Studies to Feminist Theory and Sociology—rings an alarm bell: ‘traveling across disciplinary boundaries is risky.’ And it is indeed, in a scholarly environment that, despite the grand narrative about multi- and inter-disciplinarity, frames career progressions and appointments within separate and non-communicating fields. I now feel, ironically, deeply engrained in the normality of this neoliberal institutional setting: here I am, carrying out fundamental teaching almost for free, trying to build the necessary credentials to advance in my career, which (however) is fundamentally split between non-communicating disciplinary fields. I ask myself whether, by accepting to play into the system, I somehow contribute to reproducing this logic.

The gendered logic of academic precarity plays a part when looking at the career conundrums of early-career researchers with paths that hardly conform to country-specific academic cultures. While ‘internationalisation is a dominant policy discourse in higher education’ as a ‘major form of professional and identity capital in the academic labour market’ (Morely et al., 2018, 538), transnational mobility is mired with uncertainty and insecurity in terms of life trajectories. Moreover, flexibility can certainly open doors to short-term appointments in multiple academic settings, but can sometimes turn into an obstacle to career progress, contributing to engraining precarity in academic employment practices. According to Robin Zheng, the main issues confronting contingent faculty come from their condition of ‘cheap, flexible and disposable’ workforce (2018, 236). For women in particular, this kind of precarity in academia often means juggling different, low-paid tasks while managing home life. While Zheng looks specifically at the US system, her observations resonate with the situation of many Western academic contexts (Murgia and Poggio, 2019). In the end,
continues Zheng, some painstakingly make it, but many keep floating just above the surface for a very long time and—sometimes—decide it is simply not worth it.

Finding your tribe

I look at my journey to the center space and back to the relative periphery of academia as a path towards understanding how each personal story is situated in a complex nexus of relations that, in the end, reveal the workings of privilege in the gendered, racialized, and classed European university system. My approach is now quite pragmatic: I see the way I am privileged enough to still be able to choose whether to stay or to leave academia, and the way my personal struggles are informed by my identity as a female migrant academic. The best piece of advice I have received so far came from Cassandra Ellerbe, a Black feminist scholar and social activist based in the Netherlands, who once said to me in an informal conversation: ‘the only way to survive and, perhaps, to finally thrive, is to find your tribe.’ It’s proven to be true. Although I keep struggling with time issues, torn between publication deadlines, teaching, conference presentations, and childcare, I have made time for feminist connections within and without the university. I have discovered vibrant, diverse, and committed communities of feminist scholars who dare to break the rules: they get together, organize, exchange information, work together, transform scientific paradigms, and support each other in the process of navigating the realm of academic (gendered) precarity. Taking care of oneself and others goes against some of the disconcertingly demeaning and taken-for-granted mantras of academic success and competition (e.g., ‘publish or perish’). I cherish the feeling of mutual recognition that I experienced after reading the thoughtful comments and suggestions from a friend and feminist researcher on a chapter she volunteered to read. I have learnt it is possible to carve out safe spaces for critique but that it is even better when they turn into possibilities for alternative—although still marginal—academic practices. I have realized that the material implications of gendered precarity still bear on the extent to which I will be able to hang in there, but that, in the meantime, it is possible to live through it by building niches of resistance.
Works cited


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