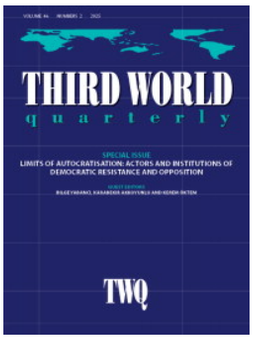

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Invisible pasts, erased futures: epistemic erasure in refugee and migrant experiences

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing influx of refugees and undocumented migrants has catalysed a more profound discourse on discrimination, stigmatisation, and social exclusion. Existing scholarship often delineates these challenges, yet it frequently characterises refugees as passive victims rather than active agents in shaping their own lives. This paper seeks to bridge this conceptual void through the lens of *epistemic erasure* – the systemic devaluation and exclusion of refugees' knowledge, narratives and professional identities – within host communities. Drawing on interviews from Syrian, Afghan and African refugees in Istanbul, we examine how these groups cultivate *collective capabilities* to subvert epistemic injustice and reclaim their agency and showcase how refugees foster collective strategies to safeguard their cultural heritage, preserve their skills and credentials and sustain their livelihoods. However, these collective capabilities, while essential for resilience and resistance, create a complex paradox: when confined to marginalised social and institutional spaces, there is a risk that they may inadvertently reinforce the very exclusions they seek to dismantle. By recognising these intricacies, we highlight the importance of fostering environments that validate the contributions of refugees and migrants, empowering them to redefine their identities and, reinforce their agency in the face of adversity.

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Introduction

This paper investigates the interplay between epistemic erasures and the collective capabilities developed by refugees as subversive strategies against discrimination and stigmatisation within the host community. By compiling and analysing testimonies from Istanbul – home to the most substantial population of Syrian refugees – alongside insights from undocumented Afghan and African migrants, this paper seeks to understand how these groups cultivate collective capabilities to counteract epistemic erasure. While providing a critical analysis of their

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adaptive strategies within a complex sociopolitical landscape, the paper's objective is to delineate the effectiveness of the mechanisms through which marginalised communities leverage collective action to affirm their identities and rights amidst the challenges of migration. These issues are prevalent in the labour market (Bagavos and Kourachanis 2022), residential segregation (Vergou, Arvanitidis, and Manetos 2021), and the formation of group identities across all host countries affected by migration (Hasbún López et al. 2019).

Stigmatised individuals often face exclusion, marginalisation and demeaning treatment which extends beyond individuals, intertwining with ethnic identity and perpetuating prejudice and discrimination while being closely tied to social, economic and political power dynamics (Iyiola 2017). We argue that the stigmatisation of immigrants and refugees aligns with the concept of 'epistemic erasure', which involves removing categories or resources from communicative spaces (Reynolds and Peña-Guzmán 2019, 221) due to their outsider status in the host community. Refugees often face 'testimonial injustice', as they are rarely recognised as full members of society in shaping public discourse, limiting their influence on policies affecting them. This leads to 'hermeneutical injustice', where their limited interaction with host communities prevents them from effectively communicating their experiences (Fricker 2007). Their narratives often fall into conceptual gaps, depriving them of the ability to give meaning to their experiences. Due to their exclusion, refugees form social bonds within their own communities, developing collective capabilities to navigate challenges and mitigate identity erasure. While migration studies emphasise the discrimination refugees face and advocate for them (Mendola and Pera 2022; Tsavdaroglou 2020), we argue that 'epistemic erasure' is a deeper form of discrimination, where migrants' voices are overshadowed by others speaking for them. This constitutes a profound epistemic injustice deeply rooted in traditional systems of knowledge production.

This study intersects migration (Ardits and Laczko 2020; Puggioni 2005; Sleijpen et al. 2017) and epistemic injustice literature (Medina 2018), aiming to prioritise the agency of refugee and migrant populations and provide a more coherent and un-victimising account of everyday lives of refugees. Building on the concepts of 'survival' (Campbell 2006; Golooba-Mutebi and Tollman 2004) and 'resilience' (Sleijpen et al. 2017), our analysis extends beyond the traditional focus on material needs and physical security to explore deeper everyday-life experiences. By moving away from the deficit model that primarily describes exclusions and discrimination, we centre our analysis on the collective capabilities these communities have developed to resist epistemic erasure and assess their effectiveness.

In the context of this study, Istanbul's diverse and substantial refugee population underscores its importance as a site where marginalised communities develop collective capabilities to resist epistemic erasure, amidst a complex socio-political landscape shaped by rapid urbanisation, economic growth and demographic diversity. As Turkey's largest city and economic hub, Istanbul not only drives the country's gross domestic product (GDP) but also serves as critical centre for trade, finance, and industry. Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Istanbul's cultural and social significance is equally profound, bridging continents and fostering rich cultural exchange, education and intellectual vibrancy. Serving as a contrast to such, in Istanbul, the epistemic erasure of refugees and migrants is evident in the disregard of their migration narratives, histories, professional backgrounds, skills and educational qualifications. These individuals are often stereotypically dismissed as unskilled and uneducated, leading to overlooking their valuable insights and solutions to personal and community challenges, thus undermining their autonomy. Additionally, there is a tendency

for hosts to extract knowledge from these communities without proper recognition of the knower, further contributing to epistemic erasure.

We identify two specific dimensions of epistemic erasure: one related to cultural heritage and the other to professional credentials and competencies. We hypothesise that the practices of exclusion exhibited by the host community operate within a racialised system that systematically devalues the epistemic contributions of these migrants. In response, migrants develop collective capabilities to preserve cultural identity, maintain social cohesion, and secure livelihoods through informal networks. While these capabilities provide practical solutions to exclusion and reflect resilience, they also present a paradox: when formed in socially and institutionally isolated spaces, they risk reinforcing epistemic erasure. Migrants outside dominant knowledge structures become further marginalised, their contributions dismissed or rendered invisible. Thus, while these capabilities empower communities, they may unintentionally perpetuate exclusion unless integrated into broader societal structures to challenge the epistemic hierarchies that sustain marginalisation.

Epistemic erasure and collective capabilities

Our theoretical framework is based on two key concepts: epistemic erasure and collective capabilities, which are intricately linked, exist in a continuous relationship and are useful for understanding the experiences of marginalised migrant populations in Turkey. In developing our theoretical approach, we have built on the literature of ethnic competition, labour migration and intergroup contact theories. Ethnic competition research often examines how competition for resources such as jobs and housing creates tensions and negative perceptions of migrants (Blumer 1958; Evans 1989; Olzak 1992). In contrast, intergroup contact theory highlights how positive interactions – under conditions of equal status, shared goals and institutional support – can mitigate these tensions (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

Studies consistently show that positive, meaningful contact between the migrant and host community members reduces prejudice and fosters integration (e.g. Di Bernardo et al. 2022; McLaren 2003; Tropp et al. 2018), while also citing the importance of the quality of contact. For instance, Tropp et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of frequent and friendly contact for social integration, while Windzio and Bicer (2013) argue that high-cost interactions, such as home visits or shared leisure, have greater impact than superficial encounters. Likewise, labour migration research shows that structured environments such as workplaces encourage deeper, positive interactions, whereas competitive settings may intensify tensions (Di Bernardo et al. 2022).

Our contribution focuses on the far end of the discrimination spectrum, exploring erasures of marginalised groups' knowledge systems, languages and cultural practice and how systematic erasure occurs even amid integration efforts. Epistemic erasure is defined as 'removing entire categories or swaths of hermeneutical resources from a communicative space' (Reynolds and Peña-Guzmán 2019, 221) due to marginalisation of disadvantaged groups. From this perspective, epistemic erasure is both a process and a consequence of one's knowledge, credentials and values being sidelined and systematically eliminated by a dominant group or institution. We conceptualise epistemic erasure as an extreme form of epistemic injustice, a term explored by Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013), encompassing a range of biases where hermeneutical resources are dismissed based on an individual's perceived social identity. By dismissing diverse epistemic contributions, dominant groups not only

perpetuate a homogenised and impoverished understanding of knowledge but also stifle the collective potential for innovation, resilience and comprehensive problem-solving. Within this context, epistemic erasure functions as a corrosive force that marginalises certain voices and perspectives as well as critically impairing collective capabilities.

In the context of migration studies, epistemic erasure can be defined as the systematic exclusion or marginalisation of certain groups' knowledge and experiences, often seen in migration studies where migrant voices are excluded from dominant narratives and policy frameworks. This erasure extends to how migrants are denied full participation in defining their role in society, particularly in the areas of labour market integration and citizenship studies. Despite its significance, the concept of epistemic erasure is rarely applied in migration studies. The field has yet to deeply engage with the epistemic dimensions of exclusion, as migration studies have traditionally prioritised material forms of exclusion – such as legal status, labour market barriers and social discrimination – while neglecting the erasure of migrants' knowledge and lived experiences from dominant narratives. This gap stems from the limited integration of critical theories from epistemology, feminist philosophy and decolonial thought, which emphasises how marginalised groups are systematically denied recognition as knowers. Furthermore, policy-driven frameworks in migration studies tend to priviledge institutional knowledge over migrants' experiential insights, reinforcing this erasure. An exception to this gap in the literature is Tchoukaleyska's (2016) analysis touching on cultural erasure in the displacement of a North African market in Montpellier, France; this analysis remains limited to physical and cultural erasure. We extend this by introducing epistemic erasure, encompassing the suppression of knowledge, labour market experiences and cultural heritage. Our framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of erasure in migration and refugee studies, addressing complexities that the existing literature has not fully captured.

On the other hand, communities experiencing epistemic erasures and temporal disjunctions have developed various mechanisms to respond to epistemic erasures, and one such strategy is the concept of collective capabilities. Initially introduced by Evans (2002) and Ibrahim (2006), and later applied in migration research by Mkwananzi and Cin (2020), collective capabilities refer to the joint efforts of a community or group to achieve shared objectives. These capabilities act as catalysts for community development (Mkwananzi and Cin 2020, 324) and often arise in response to conditions of unfreedom, poverty or epistemic injustices (see also Cin et al. 2022). Collective capabilities become more prominent in constraining contexts, emerging through self-initiatives or organised collectives such as grassroots groups or communities that collaboratively formulate shared values and engage in actions to pursue common goals for their communities (Evans 2002). Ibrahim (2006) stresses that collective capabilities develop through social interaction, participation, and the pooling of social and cultural capital. For marginalised groups, such as migrants, these capabilities allow them to 'turn things to their advantage and market the best options available' (Carswell and De Neve 2013, 67). Collective actions play a crucial role in alleviating poverty, facilitating resource sharing, income generation, and community goal attainment, even in the face of opposition (Evans 2002). These efforts help build both 'power within' and 'power with' others (Kabeer and Kongar 2021), particularly in migration contexts in which individual agency is often insufficient to challenge structural inequalities. Thus, collective action becomes essential in addressing barriers to citizenship and labour market access (Pfister 2012).

To situate the concepts of epistemic erasure and collective capabilities within the broader literature on identity, citizenship and migration, it is essential to draw on existing frameworks

such as Arendt's (1973) 'right to have rights' and Hall's (2021) 'state hegemony'. Arendt's notion emphasises the importance of political recognition as foundational to human rights, highlighting how stateless individuals and migrants are often deprived of rights due to their lack of formal state recognition. This lack of recognition extends beyond legal and political rights to encompass epistemic dimensions, aligning closely with the concept of epistemic erasure. Migrants and marginalised groups are excluded not only from public discourse but also from societal recognition, where their knowledge systems and identities are systematically rendered invisible. Hall's theory of state hegemony further elucidates how state practices shape identity and citizenship by determining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This aligns with the dynamics of collective capabilities, which emerge as marginalised groups resist these state-imposed limitations through collective action. Collective capabilities enable communities to reclaim agency, organise, and assert their values, but they must navigate the hegemonic structures that often perpetuate their exclusion. In this way, collective capabilities can be seen as a direct response to the epistemic erasure caused by state hegemony as Hall's framework describes. The literature on ethnic competition and labour migration (e.g. Kunovich 2017) also sheds light on how migrants are often positioned within labour markets in ways that exacerbate social and economic inequalities. This positioning reinforces their marginalisation, contributing to both epistemic erasure and their limited capacity to assert collective capabilities. Thus, integrating these theoretical perspectives reveals how the concepts of epistemic erasure and collective capabilities fill critical gaps in the literature on migration, identity and citizenship. These frameworks underscore the necessity of collective action and political recognition in addressing the systemic erasure and marginalisation of migrant populations.

To fully understand the collective response and capabilities that counter the epistemic structures perpetuating the silencing and social invisibility of certain individuals, it is essential to examine the specific locations and mechanisms where these erasures occur. Epistemic erasure impedes individuals from fully expressing their multiple identities (Crenshaw 1991). When a person is reduced to a singular label, such as 'refugee', 'woman' or 'African', it facilitates the establishment of hegemonic structures that erase other aspects of their identity. These erasures are often rooted in historical biases towards certain bodies and geographies (Garcia 2019; Youngman et al. 2022). In the context of this research, which focuses on South-to-South migration, epistemic erasure is seen as a socio-economic process shaped by power configurations. This focus offers a distinctive lens that diverges from South-to-North migration narratives that dominate academic and policy discourses.

We identify two distinct forms of epistemic erasure. The first is cultural, characterised by the devaluation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This process can foster resentment towards one's language and traditions, discouraging their transmission to future generations. As a result, marginalised groups may feel pressured to adapt to dominant cultural norms, which can lead to the gradual erasure of their heritage, especially in public spaces shaped by majority influence. The second form of epistemic erasure stems from the intersection of colonialism and capitalism. Radicalised capital markets often fail to recognise the skills of marginalised individuals, devaluing them and questioning their credibility. While 'deskilling' is commonly discussed in migration studies (Raghuram and Kofman 2004), the issue extends beyond devaluation to the failure to recognise the inherent value of these skills. This forces individuals into precarious labour and low wages. These mechanisms of epistemic erasure are reinforced by stereotypical generalisations that shape actions and contribute to a blindness towards marginalised subjectivities and perspectives (Alcoff and

Mohanty 2006). In the subsequent empirical sections, following the methodology, we explore heritage and labour markets as spaces of epistemic erasure, where collective capabilities emerge as a response to these exclusions.

Research design and method of analysis

Turkey's role as a key destination and transit country for refugees, notably from Syria since 2011 and Afghanistan due to ongoing instability, highlights its importance in studying epistemic erasures. With 3,763,686 Syrians under 'temporary protection' and over 805,529 undocumented migrants apprehended since 2019 (Presidency of Migration Management 2024), the country faces political debates and societal tensions, including false narratives linking refugees to crime (Bulgurcuoğlu and Aykutalp 2021) despite evidence to the contrary (Kayaoğlu 2022). This backdrop provides a unique lens to explore how refugees in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul – the city with the highest refugee concentration – navigate systemic injustices, and how limited choices imposed upon them by these systems can unintentionally contribute to epistemic erasures, as their responses to these injustices are shaped by the survival strategies available to them.

Istanbul, Turkey's economic hub, drives the nation's GDP through key industries in finance, trade, automative, textiles and electronics, while also acting as a critical trade and logistics centre. Rapid urbanisation and major infrastructure projects fuel its real estate sector, creating significant employment. Culturally bringing together Europe and Asia with its Byzantine and Ottoman heritage, Istanbul also hosts a large, diverse refugee and migrant population, making it essential for studying marginalised communities' collective capabilities against epistemic erasure. In this dynamic landscape, refugees and migrants counter stigmatisation, affirming their identities and rights amid urban and economic challenges.

This study draws on the data from the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul, with usage permission granted to the authors. While recognising the varying statuses within each migrant group, we categorise migrants based on their majority status into two main groups: documented migrants, including Syrians who hold legal status and residence permits, and undocumented migrants, comprising individuals who entered without authorisation, such as Africans and Afghans. The data for our study stems from 70 interviews conducted in 2020 in Istanbul, comprising a diverse range of participants. Of these, 59 interviews were held with migrant communities, reflecting a balanced gender distribution. The breakdown of these migrant interviews is provided in Table 1. Additionally, we also reviewed 20 interviews with neighbourhood administrators or local headmen (muhtars) that had previously been conducted by the municipality. This broad spectrum of participants provides a comprehensive understanding of the migrant experiences and community dynamics in Istanbul. Age groups of migrants ranged from 20 to 50 years old (35 men and 24 women). While the authors of this study were not directly involved in the data collection, they oversaw the process and contributed to the development of research instruments as academic advisors.

In our effort to address the epistemic erasures faced by refugees and migrants, we have employed narrative analysis – a reflexive methodological approach – to engage with their stories, exploring their processes of identity formation, meaning-making and interpretation while also gaining deeper insights into their lived experiences (Herman and Vervaeck 2019). Thus, it directs attention to the construction of narratives within specific socio-cultural

Table 1. Interview participant breakdown.

Participant group	Number of male interviews and occupations	Number of female interviews and occupations	Total
Afghan migrants	7 Education: 1 high school, 2 students, 4 primary school) Occupation: 1 translator, 2 students, 4 paper collector (recycling)	4 Education: 2 uneducated, 1 secondary school, 1 high school Occupation: 1 student, 1 housewife, 1 translator, 1 textile worker	11
NGOs (Afghan)	–	–	3
African migrants	8 Country of origin: 1 Ethiopia, 2 Guinea, 2 Nigeria, 2 Sudan, 1 Tanzania Education: 1 student, 2 working in an NGO, 2 translators, 2 working in textile and cargo, 1 unemployed Occupation: 4 secondary school educated; 4 university educated	3 Countries of origin: 1 Congo, 1 Cameron, 1 Nigeria Education: all university educated Occupation: They worked in various sectors, 2 unemployed at the time of research	11
NGOs (African)	–	–	2
Syrian migrants	12 Education: 2 primary school, 7 secondary school, 2 university educated and 1 student Occupation: 1 shoemaker, 1 electrician, 1 communication shop, 1 in construction sector, 1 textile shop owner, 2 students, 2 textile worker, 1 translator, 1 unemployed	13 Education: 6 primary school, 5 secondary school, 2 university Occupation: 8 housewives, 2 students, 1 counsellor, 1 textile sector, 1 translator	25
NGOs (Syrian)	–	–	1
Local headmen	20		20

NGOs: non-governmental organisations.

contexts, transcending the pursuit of objective truths, and acknowledges the inherent influence of researchers on the production of data, necessitating a reflexive stance. Our overarching objective is to investigate the strategies employed by migrants to contest distorted narratives.

Navigating epistemic challenges: cultural heritage and marginalisation in migrant communities in the job market

In this section, we explore two specific instances of epistemic erasure: the loss of cultural heritage and the disregard for professional credentials. In doing so, we go beyond studies that focus on the effects of state practices on identity and citizenship through theories such as Arendt's 'right to have rights' and Hall's 'state hegemony', which underline the themes of statelessness and exclusion. We focus on the Turkish context and the illustrative sample from Istanbul, demonstrating deeper layers of epistemic injustice that affects both cultural recognition and economic integration.

Epistemic erasure of cultural heritage: negotiating identity, resistance and marginalisation in migrant communities

The discourse on epistemic erasure among marginalised, undocumented migrant, and refugee populations, particularly in terms of their cultural heritage, remains underexplored (Pantazatos 2017). It is important to examine how this form of erasure affects their self-perception and identity. Interviews reveal a pervasive bitterness among participants

concerning the loss of their cultural heritage, attributed to discrimination from the host community. Discriminatory practices include verbal harassment on public transport and reluctance to seek healthcare due to fear of prejudice. Many face stigmatisation that pushes them into low-paying, precarious jobs and overcrowded housing, further reinforcing negative perceptions. This creates social and psychological pressure, exacerbating social exclusion, economic insecurity and barriers to basic services, ultimately impacting both refugees and societal cohesion. Moreover, such discrimination often leads them to abandon traditional cultural practices, including the use of their native language in public, and influences their children's reluctance to embrace familial cultural norms to fit in and be accepted into Turkish culture. Despite these challenges, there is evident resistance, especially among women, who endeavour to reclaim some of these cultural elements through collective actions and rituals.

As a case in point, a 34-year-old Syrian refugee woman expressed comfort with her children adopting Turkish traditions due to the cultural similarities (Interview #11, Syrian, female). The cultural similarities between Syria and Turkey arise from shared historical, religious and societal values, particularly their predominantly Muslim populations and common practices such as Islamic holidays, Ramadan fasting, and daily prayers. Both countries emphasise family-oriented norms such as respect for elders, hospitality and communal gatherings. In the interview cited, the Syrian woman noted that these similarities, especially in religious and family customs, made her comfortable with her children adopting Turkish traditions without feeling they were abandoning their heritage. However, she also noted occasions when their lifestyle caused discomfort among Turkish people, leading to their silent response by preference. This silence, chosen in the face of cultural conflict, subtly contributes to the erasure of their identities. This scenario illustrates epistemic erasure not just as cultural assimilation but also as a power dynamic forcing refugees to mute parts of their identity for peaceful coexistence, showcasing how marginalised groups internalise pressures to silence themselves.

An important process of epistemic erasure of cultural heritage manifests in the realm of language, where participants express resentment towards speaking their own language in public spaces due to explicit reactions and discrimination from the host community. A notable example involves a 54-year-old male Syrian refugee who highlighted his encounters with discrimination on public transportation, where members of the host community react negatively and complain about Arabic being spoken (Interview #15). These reactions often escalate to verbal attacks. Similarly, a female participant with limited Turkish language skills mentioned that she takes her children to the bazaar to avoid harassment because the children can speak Turkish on her behalf (Interview #25, Syrian, female, 46 years old). Such attitudes imply that Arabic is deemed inappropriate for public spaces, consequently discouraging their own children and other community members from speaking aloud in Arabic in the public sphere (Interview #30, Syrian, female, 35 years old; Interview #11, Syrian, female, 34 years old). The absence of Arabic language instruction at schools presents a related potential risk of episteimc erasure as it jeopardises the preservation of a vital component that contributes to their cultural identity. The risk of such epistemic erasure was conveyed by two female Syrian refugees who remarked that their children perceive their own language and culture as inferior, hindering their ability to express their linguistic identities and assimilate into the dominant culture (Interview #40, age 29; Interview #5, age 26).

To counteract this, several women enrol their children in Quran courses to ensure they can still learn and write in Arabic.

> The kids only speak Turkish in public spaces, and they have a native accent […]. We are concerned that they will lose their Arabic identity. We are sending them to Quran courses where they can learn how to read and write in Arabic, but I cannot send them all because it is expensive; one goes and teaches the others. (Interview #10, Syrian, female, 38 years old)

The study participants had several declared strategies aimed at mitigating the risk of discrimination encountered in their daily lives. For instance, Ahmed, a 22-year-old refugee, revealed that he communicates in Turkish with his [Syrian] friends in shopping centres and public spaces (Interview #3, Syrian, male). This strategic language choice helps him navigate social interactions and potentially avert negative reactions. The linguistic capability becomes an epistemic erasure for women as the lack of this capability locks them in the private sphere, rather than fully participating in the public sphere. Nevertheless, their deliberate avoidance of utilising their own language deprives them of a valuable hermeneutical resource, thereby exposing themselves to the risk of epistemic erasure for their community in the future.

Discriminatory behaviours towards Syrian refugees often intensify when their Syrian identity becomes apparent. Among women migrants in Turkey, this has led to the erasure of traditional attire in favour of styles that prevent public backlash, such as adopting Turkish hijab styles over more conspicuous garments like the burka, which they wear in their own neighbourhood. One woman recounted abandoning the burka after being attacked, choosing instead less conspicuous Turkish headscarves to avoid further hostility. Similarly, both Afghan and Syrian migrants experience a cultural erasure, altering their dress and grooming to 'look like Turkish' (Interview #32, Syrian, female, 26 years old). For instance, an Afghan male mentioned shaving his beard and wearing Western-style clothing to avoid being identified as Afghan, illustrating a deliberate modification of identity to blend in. Likewise, an Afghan women mentioned that while she initially wore an Afghan-style headscarf, she faced persistent comments about her choice, eventually leading her to stop wearing it in public. This shift, prompted by social discomfort, reflects the subtle erasure of her cultural identity (Interview #78, Afghan, female, 19 years old).

This type of identity modification among migrants can be understood as an example of epistemic erasure – an extreme form of epistemic injustice, where individuals with lesser power are marginalised by those with greater epistemic authority (Medina 2018). By altering their language and appearance, Syrian refugees navigate discriminatory norms imposed by the host society. However, these adaptations – while strategies of survival – can create internal tensions within communities, as those unable or unwilling to adapt to the host culture's way of living may face additional marginalisation. As others blend in and reduce their exposure to marginalisation by adopting the host culture's norms, those who remain visibly different are perceived as even more of a minority, intensifying their marginalisation and reinforcing their outsider status. Importantly, these outcomes are not a result of the refugees' actions but are driven by the systemic injustice and pressures of assimilation placed upon them. Similarly, a 32-year-old Afghan woman expressed that they avoid sharing their Afghan heritage to sidestep repetitive prejudiced questions and assumptions tied to war and cultural stereotypes which psychologically harm them. This self-censorship limits their ability to discuss their qualifications or concerns openly, further isolating them from community support or advocacy that could improve their conditions (Interview #90, Afghan, female). Additionally, the strategies of invisibility available to Syrian and Afghan migrants are not accessible to many African migrants, whose skin colour impedes their ability to blend into the host community. This visible difference reduces their opportunities to avoid discrimination but simultaneously exposes the structural

racism embedded in the host society. Despite this, African migrants have created informal networks to support one another. For instance, they rely on community-based associations to access housing, healthcare and education for their children, although their legal status limits their ability to benefit from formal state services. Many migrants express frustration with the lack of legal protection and policies aimed at reducing discrimination and promoting social inclusion in Turkey, especially in comparison to the rights provided to other migrant groups like Syrian refugees.

Moreover, the erasure extends to social and cultural practices. Many refugees restrict their leisure activities to private gatherings, such as visiting relatives and friends at their homes, meeting them outside, or going to picnics. Attending cultural events such as cinema, theatre and concerts remain economic luxuries. Negative perceptions by the host community – viewing migrants as loud and disruptive – further force the refugees to modify their cultural practices, as can be noted in a statement by a Syrian woman: 'Turks do not like noise. Neighbours are complaining. We had a wedding, and the Turks came and complained: "You make a lot of noise"; "the voices are very loud"' (Interview #11, Syrian, female, 34 years old). The majority expressed their inability to continue with their everyday cultural practices, as these are not well tolerated by the Turkish population. For example, women described how they gradually modified their cultural practices due to negative reactions from the host community. This was especially true for Syrian women, particularly those who are more conservative, as their outfit often makes their identity visible. While other migrants may have also faced similar challenges, they may not have experienced them to the same extent, which may be the reason why this issue appeared mostly in our interviews with conservative Syrian and Afghan women. Additionally, other migrants might not be able to fully articulate or recognise what they have experienced, which can be seen as a form of hermeneutical injustice.

This discussion is reminiscence of Heugh's (2022) observation on the dynamics within educational settings, where spaces occupied by Black women are perceived as hostile and overly noisy by white women, yet represent solidarity and communal joy for Black women, highlighting the importance of cultural heritage. Similarly, refugees face challenges in preserving their cultural heritage, experiencing a profound sense of cultural erasure and exclusion. The host community's reluctance to embrace refugee cultural practices further marginalises these groups, limiting refugees' ability to express and protect their cultural identities.

Similar experiences were reported by male African migrants. A 27-year-old migrant described locals' reluctance to provide even basic information, such as directions, implicitly denying him access to social knowledge and marking him as an outsider unworthy of recognition (Interview #80, Africa-Gine-, male). Similarly, a 21-year-old Ethiopian migrant noted feeling isolated after two years in the Ümraniye district without knowing his neighbours, thereby being excluded from informal community support, limiting his social integration (Interview #79, Africa, male). To counter this isolation, he actively cultivates relationships with fellow Ethiopian students and Turkish friends, fostering a collective capability that helps sustain his identity and sense of belonging.

Women often play a crucial role as custodians of cultural heritage, selectively preserving certain elements. Many utilise their homes as venues to maintain cultural practices, gathering with neighbours for activities like cooking and singing. Despite the existence of small charities facilitating epistemic interaction for cultural exchange, many women opt to remain indoors due to public hostility. It is also noteworthy that Syrian migrants are not a

homogenised group; cultural organisations often reflect the dominance of Arabic Syrians, creating limited space for Kurdish and Turkmen Syrians to participate fully. Kurdish and Turkmen Syrians also adopt different strategies to navigate marginalisation within Syrian cultural organisations and Turkish society. Kurdish Syrians often avoid public *iftar* tents during Ramadan to escape further stigmatisation, while Turkmen Syrians rely on their linguistic and cultural similarities with the host society to mitigate discrimination. Some Turkmen refugees even disguise their Syrian identity by presenting themselves as locals from eastern cities like Gaziantep. However, this strategy can be emotionally taxing, as participants report discomfort in denying their identity to fit in. These coping mechanisms illustrate the complex intersection of internal ethnic divisions and host society prejudices. A similar diversity is also present for Afghan and particularly African migrants.

Similarly, Afghan male migrants create closed networks where they can engage with their culture away from Turkish influences; as one migrant noted: 'We stay with other Afghan friends, and we cook together, we listen to our own music' (Interview #89, Afghan, male, 39 years old). The practice of gathering with other Afghan friends to cook, listen to music, and share cultural traditions represents an important collective response to the potential of epistemic erasure. By coming together as a group, these men are pooling their cultural capital – shared knowledge, traditions and customs – to create collective capabilities. This collective action strengthens their connection to their cultural heritage and serves as a form of resistance against marginalisation. While these practices are confined to private settings, which can further their invisibility, the pooling of cultural resources among the group becomes a powerful mechanism to safeguard their identity. This act of cultural preservation, through collective capabilities, allows them to selectively transmit valued elements of their heritage, countering the forces of erasure that threaten their traditions in broader societal contexts.

In contrast, many Syrian women report that their children are increasingly identifying with Turkish culture, adopting its secular, mixed-gender norms and customs over Syrian traditions. This shift, occurring just a decade after their arrival in Turkey, reflects the impact of discrimination, leading to cultural erasure among the children. In response, these women come together, forming collective capabilities within their home environments to counter this epistemic erasure. By pooling their cultural capital – shared traditions, customs and values – they position themselves as key conduits of cultural transmission. Through collective efforts, they selectively preserve and pass on specific elements of their Syrian heritage to future generations. This process of creating collective capabilities allows them to navigate integration while maintaining agency over which cultural practices to sustain, thus mitigating the risk of complete cultural erasure. In doing so, they strengthen their cultural identity and build resilience against the marginalisation of their heritage in the broader society. However, it is important to note that the preservation of cultural traditions is done selectively, as not all aspects of their heritage are equally valued. Many women intentionally choose to leave behind certain cultural practices, particularly those that restrict women's freedom and confine them to private life. For instance, a striking example comes from a Syrian woman who viewed her culture back in Syria as oppressive to women. She expressed a strong desire for her daughters not to inherit these aspects of the culture, emphasising the active role women play in shaping the transmission of heritage based on their own values and experiences. As she explained, 'Here, women are free, not like the culture we had back home. I want my daughters to study, be independent, and have jobs and careers. I don't want them to grow up in the culture that I was raised in' (Interview #10, Syrian, female, 38 years old).

This example highlights how women exercise agency, predominantly among Syrian women, in selectively preserving cultural elements, consciously rejecting those that perpetuate gender inequality. In this way, their collective capabilities are not only a response to epistemic erasure but also a means of redefining their cultural identity to align with their aspirations for greater autonomy and empowerment. Collective capabilities, formed through shared cultural practices and community support, allow women to act as epistemic agents, deliberately choosing which aspects of their heritage to preserve or discard based on their values and experiences. For example, women gathering in homes for rituals like cooking and eating together not only fosters a sense of epistemic empowerment – often absent in public spaces (Meah and Jackson 2013) – but also serves as a form of resistance (McKeown 2015). Hence, women pool their collective cultural and social knowledge, challenging the hegemonic narratives imposed by the dominant culture. However, the insular nature of these gatherings can simultaneously isolate them from broader societal engagement, making their experiences and perspectives largely unseen and unheard by the dominant culture. In this way, despite their collective efforts, the risk of epistemic erasure persists, as the dominant culture continues to marginalise and overlook their contributions. Nevertheless, these collective capabilities enable women to maintain and redefine cultural identity on their own terms, resisting complete assimilation while selectively shaping the future of their intangible cultural heritage practices.

Unrecognised credentials and the epistemic erosion in the job market

The employment market is one of the places where discrimination manifests itself in both personal and institutionalised forms. Personal discrimination often takes the shape of experiencing mistreatment in the workplace, being subjected to more demanding tasks, or increased scrutiny and expectations based on one's identity and ethnic background. Institutional-structural discrimination, on the other hand, primarily relates to legal status and employment rights. Both of these forms of discrimination can result in epistemic injustice, where the knowledge, experiences and perspectives of individuals from marginalised groups are disregarded, or invalidated and undervalued, leading to inequitable access to resources, opportunities and fair salaries. However, our research indicates that certain individual and collective strategies adopted by refugees to combat epistemic injustices and various forms of discrimination, whether institutionalised or not, complicate the process of epistemic erasure. This complexity arises from the realisation that these strategies, while effective in resistance, do not entirely eradicate epistemic erasure.

The manifestation of epistemic erasure within the employment market is revealed through the strategic approaches adopted by migrants to confront the deficiency in the recognition of their existing skills. These individuals grapple with the challenges of overcoming such recognition deficiency with regard to their credentials within the formal employment sector. While our research does not specifically investigate the process of racialisation within markets, as discussed by Tilley and Shilliam (2018), the narratives shared by participants provide insights into their placement within a noticeable racial hierarchy within the job market. As a result, migrants strive to find employment in sectors and settings where their skills are less likely to be questioned. However, as they adapt to the demands of the job market, they gradually internalise and accept their deficiency, and abandon their struggle for recognition, which contributes to the erasure of their valuable knowledge and experiences.

Afghan migrants experience intense credential erosion, often mistaken for Syrians and facing hostility. This double marginalisation leaves them excluded from aid directed towards Syrians, effectively erasing their visibility and need for support. Lacking legal protection and formal employment, many turn to precarious work like shepherding or recycling to survive. To resist this erasure, they form online communities, fostering solidarity and mutual support (Interview #87, Afghan, male, 26 years old).

This erasure is even more significant for Africans who are equipped with educational skills and mastery in more than one foreign language. A 21-year-old Guinean man, despite high qualifications, reports lower pay than locals for the same work, reflecting the devaluation of his skills (Interview #79, Africa, male). To resist, he navigates temporary jobs and interpreter roles while improving his Turkish and mastering multiple languages, enhancing his participation in Turkish society. His efforts showcase resilience and adaptability, exemplifying collective resistance against epistemic erasure.

While the devaluation of credentials has been extensively examined in migration literature (Basran and Zong 2007; Ferrer and Riddell 2008; Verkuyten 2016), the focus has predominantly been on migrants moving from the Global South to the Global North. However, our research reveals a parallel discourse within the context of South-to-South migration. The scholarly literature consistently highlights that refugees and migrants are often relegated to a lower position within the social hierarchy, with their skills being undervalued in comparison to those of the host community (Kaufman 2002). This disparity is primarily rooted in ethnic and racial biases and prejudices (Tesfai 2017) that not only reflect the racial hierarchy of the host community (Kmec 2003) but also contribute to a distinct form of epistemic erasure.

Colonial capitalist mechanisms are evident within the migratory framework of Turkey as well. A notable scholarly investigation in this realm has been undertaken by Şimsek and Sayman (2018), titled '*çabuk çabuk*' in Turkish, which translates to 'hurry up, hurry up'. Their study elucidates the expectations placed upon African migrants in Turkey, whereby regardless of their skill set, they are compelled to engage in rapid-paced labour activities. Despite managing to find employment, usually in informal sectors, migrants frequently encounter a significant hurdle: their skills and credentials do not align with the practices and norms of the host country. Consequently, they are compelled to relinquish their own expertise and conform to the expectations imposed by their employers, who perceive them as lacking skills and diminish the value of their epistemic livelihoods.

The situation described by our participants is similar to the findings of the migration literature (Ferrer and Riddell 2008; Kaufman 2002; Verkuyten 2016) and specifically the literature on ethnic competition and labour migration (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017; Bloch 2004). Syrian refugees, often successfully entering the labour market, particularly in Istanbul, where their labour force participation rates are similar to or near the Turkish average (Demirci and Kırdar 2023), have prominently found employment in labour-intensive sectors that face a scarcity of workers albeit with relatively low wages. This experience of starting at the bottom of the labour market is a shared phenomenon globally, and it seems to be reproducing itself among Syrian refugees in Istanbul. In this context, the individuals most affected are those who possess higher education and held prestigious positions in their country of origin. One example is a Syrian male refugee, who worked as a food engineer with significant expertise, lamenting, 'nobody cares about my education or experience; all that matters is that I am Syrian' (Interview #68, male, 42 years old). Likewise, a Syrian man working in a shoe factory expressed the following experience, widely illustrative of other experiences we have come across in the field among more educated migrants:

> When we first arrived, it was already clear. You might ask how it was clear. There were signs of opportunism. Let's say our value is x lira per week, they would only give you half of that. They did these kinds of things for a while. They did it for a while … I want to develop in my own field but there are no opportunities. Firstly, I can't find the job I want, and even if I do, I am not accepted because I am Syrian. (Interview #38, Syrian, male, 18 years old)

The narrative describes how Syrian refugees face systemic exclusion, with employers offering lower wages and discriminating against them based on their nationality. This reinforces their economic marginalisation and perpetuates epistemic erasure, as their knowledge, skills and aspirations are undervalued. In response, rather than remaining passive, refugees exercise agency by establishing their own markets and businesses. This form of small-scale entrepreneurship becomes a collective strategy to resist marginalisation, providing not only economic opportunities but also a means of building solidarity and community networks. By working together to form their own markets, Syrian refugees are creating a space where they can share resources, skills and knowledge, thereby fostering their collective capabilities. This shared entrepreneurial effort offers more than just survival – it cultivates the potential for collective well-being and empowerment. It also enables them to bypass structural barriers such as discrimination and language difficulties, reflecting a form of resilience rooted in collaboration and shared agency. In a context such as Turkey's, where migration levels are high and formal employment opportunities are scarce, the development of collective capabilities through entrepreneurial activity offers a practical solution to systemic exclusion. Thus, collective capabilities in this context underscore the importance of community-driven strategies in overcoming barriers, fostering resilience, and creating spaces for inclusion and recognition.

However, this phenomenon contributes to the segregation of Syrian migrants. This was revealed in an in-depth interview with a neighbourhood administrator, who reflected on the reactions of local businesses towards this situation:

> The locals have expressed complaints about Syrian citizens, stating that they have very few interactions with them. They mentioned that Syrians generally prefer to frequent businesses owned by their own community, such as neighbourhood grocery stores, barbershops, clothing stores, and sock vendors. In other words, they have their own establishment that caters to about 90% of a person's daily needs …. Our local shop owners feel that Syrian citizens rarely visit their businesses and mainly support businesses from their own community. The shop owners claim that they receive no benefits from them. Syrians tend to go to their own established chicken shops, kebab shops, and grocery stores whenever it comes to their minds, as all of these services are already available within their own community. (Interview #47, Turkish neighbourhood administrator, male, 56 years old)

These words highlight how Syrian migrants are pushed to create parallel economic ecosystems – supporting businesses within their own community – as a direct response to their exclusion from the local job market and formal workspaces. This segregation, both spatial and economic, emerges not only as a result of language barriers and cultural differences but also as a way to resist epistemic erasure of their skills and experiences. Syrian migrants are often channelled into non-standard work, such as zero-hours contracts or causal employment, where their skills and knowledge are undervalued.

The hierarchical structures in these workplaces perpetuate the devaluation of migrant labour, reflecting racial capitalism, a term defined by Cedric Robinson as capitalism inherently structured by and dependent on racial inequalities to sustain profit and power (Robinson

1983 [2000]). This system manifests through colonialism, slavery, and incarceration and adapts by using inclusive frameworks to maintain inequality. Here, migrant work is systematically undervalued compared to that of native workers, shaped by the persistent influence of racial capitalism on labour markets. However, despite these conditions, Syrian migrants build collective capabilities by forming their own networks and economic structures, such as neighbourhood shops and service providers. These businesses are more than just economic ventures – they represent a reclaiming of agency and the creation of spaces where their skills and knowledge are recognised and utilised. By supporting one another within their own communities, migrants are developing a form of collective resilience, using their shared experiences and skills to meet their community's needs. This collaborative effort serves as a response to the epistemic erasure they face in the formal economy, allowing them to exercise control over their economic activities and create opportunities they are otherwise denied. By building collective capabilities, Syrian migrants create a counter-narrative to the idea that their work and contributions are of lesser value, reaffirming their right to participate in society on their own terms.

One of the most prominent challenges skilled migrants' face is the lack of recognition of their education and experience acquired in their country of origin, resulting in the loss of qualifications in the host country, which presents an obvious epistemic erasure through the loss of credentials. This situation extends to both refugees and skilled workers from all demographic groups that we studied whether they are skilled or not, or whether they originate from Africa, Syria or Afghanistan. Therefore, migrants who must sustain their livelihoods in one way or another become a vulnerable group susceptible to labour exploitation in the job market, and their bargaining power decreases, forcing them to work in challenging conditions in the jobs they can find. Although labour exploitation was prevalent across all migrant groups, it was especially visible among African migrants, who often reported precarious working conditions. Despite holding degrees, many educated African immigrants struggle to secure suitable employment in Turkey due to the inflexibility of the job market and structural racism. This often results in accepting exploitative working conditions to meet their basic needs or to increase their chances of finding better opportunities, leading to the phenomenon of 'credential loss' and perpetuating negative migrant stereotypes.

We discerned a prominent instance of epistemic erasure among African migrants, specifically concerning their vocational skills. These migrants, despite securing employment in fields corresponding to their qualifications, often found their approach to work unacknowledged and even disparaged. Despite previous experience and training as an electrician, an African migrant employed as an electrician had his procedures and practices denigrated by his superiors. He was directed to abandon his inherent techniques, those learned in his homeland, and adapt to new methods – a true epistemic erasure, whereby the migrant is compelled to leave behind his established knowledge base, effectively marginalising his vocational identity. The insistence on conforming to local practices signifies an underestimation of his professional competence, fostering a work environment where his skills are systematically devalued. Consequently, this negates the diversity and richness of experiences that migrant workers can bring to their workplaces. This is a potent manifestation of epistemic erasure, as it undermines the migrant's expertise and obliges him to relearn his craft according to unfamiliar norms and standards.

Conclusion

This research provides a critical examination of the intricate manifestations of epistemic erasure within the domains of cultural and economic engagement within the South-to-South migration context. These erasures permeate the fabric of individuals' lives and impact entire communities, emphasising the urgent need to re-evaluate and redefine their experiences, which we do in this paper through the lens of epistemic injustice. Such a conceptualisation is essential not only for a deeper comprehension of their collective responses to discrimination but also for understanding how these responses, whether intentional or unintentional, contribute to the amplification of these erasures, thereby facilitating a profound understanding of the resilience and agency exhibited by these marginalised communities, while simultaneously exposing the systemic forces that perpetuate their marginalisation. By exploring the interplay between their agency and the structural constraints they face, we gain valuable insights into the complex dynamics that shape their lives and the pathways towards dismantling the mechanisms of epistemic erasure.

The erasure of intangible cultural practices presents a multifaceted and intricate challenge impacting the preservation and transmission of cultural identities. Consequently, this erasure undermines the linguistic and cultural diversity brought forth by migrants. While adaptation strategies, such as modifying cultural symbols related to attire and appearance, are often employed to mitigate discrimination, they simultaneously contribute to the erasure of visible markers of their cultural heritage. Moreover, these strategies necessitate the relinquishment of cultural aspects of their identity. Within this complex web of challenges, it is evident that all women (Syrian, Afghan and African) play a pivotal role in safeguarding and perpetuating cultural heritage. Through the creation of enclosed spaces within their homes and active engagement in activities that uphold cultural practices, women cultivate communal bonds and mount a form of resistance against the erasure. In doing so, they facilitate the expression of alternative epistemologies and values, ensuring the survival and continued significance of cultural heritage in the face of adversity.

Turning towards the erasures related to credentials, our research shows how the racialised nature of the market contributes to a systematic devaluation and disregard of the skills, knowledge, and experiences of marginalised individuals. This devaluation often results in the knowledge and skills of refugees and migrants being overlooked or undervalued, casting a long shadow on their experiences within the employment market. The narratives starkly highlight the rampant opportunism and discrimination encountered in workplaces, leading to unfairly low wages and stunted opportunities for growth. The irregular or non-standard employment structures compounded by the subtle yet destructive effect of racial capitalism that depreciates their labour further intensifies the phenomenon of epistemic erasure. These dynamic drive these communities to seek employment opportunities through their social networks or engage in workspaces led by fellow refugees, where there is a higher likelihood of their skills and experiences being recognised and valued.

However, this strategy precipitates an intriguing paradox. While it may afford them greater recognition of their skills, it also results in the creation of their own business environments, such as shops or restaurants, which predominantly cater to specific demographics, such as Africans or Syrians. This situation, while serving as an adaptive response to discrimination, might inadvertently contribute to their social and economic isolation, furthering the cycle of epistemic erasure. Thus, while it may initially appear to be a path towards self-sufficiency and recognition, this situation underscores the complexities and contradictions inherent in these survival strategies.

The dual domains of epistemic erasure, along with the responses they elicit, show that wherever there exists an instance of epistemic erasure, there simultaneously arises a form of resistance. However, it is important to note that the various forms of devaluation often lead to a significant loss in cultural and economic capabilities, as well as knowledge, and the subsequent necessity for adaptation accelerates this process. Concurrently, these instances of epistemic erasure yield pockets of resistance that make crucial decisions regarding which values and knowledge should be retained. These processes inevitably lead to the reinterpretation of the cultural heritage that migrants and refugees bring with them, while also simultaneously reconfiguring prior notions of their identities. As consistently indicated by the testimonies of the refugees, this reconstituted identity often stands in stark contrast to their pre-migration selves.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics statement

We confirm that informed consent was obtained from all study participants prior to their involvement in this research. Oral informed consent was provided, covering the purpose of the study, procedures involved, potential risks, benefits, and the right to withdraw at any time. Participants were also informed about the confidentiality measures implemented and the handling of any identifiable information within the manuscript. We affirm that all participants have been anonymised, and any identifiable details have been carefully excluded to protect their privacy within the manuscript.

Data availability statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are included in the paper.

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