

Work

by Fatma Aydemir

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Be Schierenberg

Fake smile, harem pants flowing, she comes bouncing towards me and says she gets it now: why I had gotten the interview. “MIGRANT BONUS!” Her words hit me like a slap in the face. She and I are both interning at a big German TV network. For six weeks, we are trying to make an impression on the editorial team because we both want to become journalists. But in truth, no one here can even remember our names.

“What is YOUR QUALIFICATION, anyway?” she had already asked me earlier during lunch break, when I’d nervously told her I had an interview for a traineeship with a daily newspaper. Now she nibbles on her lower lip. It’s gnawing at her. Even though an invitation to interview is still far from the actual traineeship, and a traineeship is nowhere near being a real job, but just yet another precarious internship position. Even though she herself would prefer working for “*National Geographic* or something.” She has googled like mad and found the traineeship ad: “Applicants with migration backgrounds preferred! That’s not exactly fair,” she says.

“Who said life is fair?” I should have replied and slapped right back. Instead, I went into the interview feeling even more nervous. I didn’t get the position. Whatever. I appreciated the posting nevertheless because it implied that there is an imbalance detrimental to the industry. That *another* white German trainee isn’t necessarily a plus. And the term “migrant bonus” might not be that wrong after all. It’s just that it’s not a bonus we *receive*, but one that we *give*. Maybe attentive employers have simply come to understand by now that they get more from us for the same money.

No idea whether there is such a thing as a typically German quality. But on trips abroad, I notice time and again how skewed the image is that people have of Germans: “All they ever think about is work.” Yes, it may be that the retirement age is higher here than in other countries. And yes, diligence as a Prussian virtue is, rhetorically at least, still of significance in this rich, *Weltmeister* export nation. But honestly, when I look around, I don’t see anyone in this country working as hard as (im)migrants. No one. But it’s only ever the Germans who suffer from burnout. Odd.

You think this remark is ignorant bullshit? True. A really dangerous assumption? Also true. Do you know what is at least as dangerous though? Fear of unemployment keeping you from calling in sick even with the worst flu. There are many statistics on burnout, just unfortunately none that take into account the number of people with a migration background among those concerned.¹ That is remarkable, considering that “The Burnout Epidemic” has been among the German media’s most popular headlines for years. Strangely enough, in comparison to German dominant culture this illness is hardly a topic among (im)migrant communities—even though the symptoms are obviously present. Maybe for many, this constant state of exhaustion has just become such a normal part of life—also cross-generationally—that there are almost never diagnoses. Maybe

speaking openly about mental crises is also considered a weakness, especially among those who, in order to survive in this society, had to learn to be particularly strong. The aforementioned statistics make evident that lower appreciation for the respective employee increases the risk of burning out immensely. And whose labor is valued less in this country than that of (im)migrants? Right.

I grew up in the Germany of the 1990s, where the contradictory slogans “foreigners are lazy” and “foreigners take away our jobs” were competing with one another—sometimes in the same mouths. In my own family—who had immigrated through the early-70s’ labor recruitment treaties between West Germany and Turkey—no one could afford to be lazy or to take anyone else’s job away. They all worked the kind of jobs that were intended for them and not the Germans. People like my grandfather were recruited because they could be exploited more easily than domestic workers: barely unionized, flexible, grateful for every Sunday bonus. While as of the 1960s, the majority of this affluent society played mini golf and drove fancy cars, it was the “guests” from Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and Turkey who were grinding away under undignified conditions in the factories to generate that prosperity. That migrant workers did not speak German and barely “integrated” was not of interest back then. On the contrary: better they kept to themselves, lived together in the same neighborhoods, and practiced their “own” culture and religion. It was easier to control them that way and send them back again when they were no longer needed.

The “hospitality” migrant workers were met with in Germany at that time is impressively described by Semra Ertan, poet and daughter of so-called guest workers, in her poem: “*Mein Name ist Ausländer*” [My Name is Foreigner].ⁱⁱ

While in Turkey this poem was even printed in schoolbooks for a while, sadly Ertan’s work and her tragic fate are hardly known in Germany today. In 1982, as racism in Germany was reaching a newly recognizable high, the 25-year-old Ertan called *NDR-Hörfunk* [Northern German Broadcasting], read her poem, and announced her suicide—which, intended as an act of protest against racism in Germany, would follow a few days later. The opening lines go like this:

I work here
 I know how I work
 The Germans know it also
 My work is hard
 My work is dirty
 I don't like this, I say

“If you don't like the work,
 go home,” they say.

Around the same time, my grandfather, too, was told he should go back to his homeland. Although being “told” is a bit of an understatement. After the second oil crisis in the early 1980s, the German federal government positively lured him with a so-called “repatriation grant.”ⁱⁱⁱ If he were willing to leave Germany forever, he would receive 10,500 D-Marks. In addition, an extra 1,500 D-Marks were offered for every child he’d take with him. West Germany wanted to get rid of him, after he had served seven-day

weeks for years in a steel factory whose chemical residues are so unpredictably toxic that today, a short thirty years after the plant's closure, the premises are still cemented over and fenced in: a shameful stain in the middle of town. Grandfather left, my parents stayed (*güle güle* 1,500 D-Mark)—and drudged on.

I had only just learned to write my name when my mother was already holding three jobs at once: bakery in the morning, board mill at noon, laundry service at night. My father worked for almost forty years under harsh factory halogen lights and recently fell into a crisis because for the first time in his life he was unemployed. His employer had made job cuts and laid him off in the process. But my father barely lasted three months. Then he let himself be sent into another factory by a temp agency, for half the pay and less holidays. And yet he's happier this way. Because he cannot not work anymore.

I am not telling you this because I want to praise my parents as diligent people. We've been taught since elementary school that diligence is a positive quality. But this one-sided connotation disguises what is actually the most common cause for workers becoming diligent workers: fear. The sheer dread not to be able to make a living. It is always there, even when eventually there are no rational grounds for it anymore. All working-class families know this, or people who grew up in one. That sweet slacker life of strolling about and having coffee in hip city neighborhoods can only be indulged in by those who—in times of crisis—can expect a soft landing. The rest of us use every free minute to put away a few extra Euros for harder times. What German colleagues don't have to live with, however, are racist hostilities, structural discrimination, and the constant fear of losing—or the actual loss of—resident status. Germans aren't being deported to far away countries because they don't earn enough. (Im)migrants are.

Wage labor is, for many people, the only justification permitting them to remain in this country. Besides a clean criminal record, immigration status is mostly dependent on income levels. And receiving social welfare services is one of the biggest obstacles to naturalization as a German citizen. I applied for naturalization a couple of years ago as the first (and to date only) member of my family. After a year of red tape, the moment had finally come. And yet, even on the day I was officially awarded citizenship in the city hall of Neukölln, all with certificate and much ado, I had to provide my current wage statement again to prove I still had an employment contract of indefinite duration. That I was still worthy of the German passport.

Not only in legal matters, *Hartz IV* and welfare benefits quickly become an issue. Socially, too, they are the eternal stigma of the Others. “Mass (im)migration into the German social system,” “economic refugees,” “asylum tourism”—increasingly, such aggressive polemics from the political right are becoming normalized. By now, they've come to dominate politics and the media. Fear is being fueled about those who've come to rob the Germans of—something. The only plausible explanation for this fear of loss, though, is racism. Nothing else. Germany has always profited from migration and it still does today, no matter what concerned citizens and so-called *Heimatminister* [Ministers of Homeland] would have us believe. Migration is always also labor migration. No one comes to Germany expecting free hammocks.

For instance, about a quarter of those who had come into the country during the War in Syria in 2015 were employed and paying into social insurance within only three years. The hidden numbers of informal hires on construction sites, in retail and the food service sector should be substantially higher. “But they don't pay taxes and cash in on *Hartz IV*!”

one might scandalize. True. That surely holds for some. I just wonder why precisely this point is in such inflationary use, while a party like the AfD receives 400 million Euros merely for pursuing an inhumane political agenda in the German Bundestag for four years. A substantial portion of our gross salary is flowing into the bank accounts of rightwing extremists with a criminal record, just so that they can staff AfD members' offices, sit around, and deny us our right to exist. But sure, kicking down at those below matters most. Plus: If public authorities actually had an interest in regulating unregistered employment in the aforementioned industries, workers surely wouldn't say no to compensation insurance and a minimum wage.

But the hurdles of the German job market are also draining for second- or third generation (im)migrant children like me who were born here, or for people of color in general. It's nice that there are more and more of us who make it through the racism of our school system and enjoy the privilege of ever having seen a university from the inside. All the same, the coveted positions mostly go to our white peers in the end. Or is it merely coincidence that the staff of, say, public institutions and the media industry is as diverse as a Lena Dunham show at best?

Those of us who have, in turn, somehow made it into an "open-minded" if also predominantly white company, too often have to experience the effect of tokenism: "Of course we are diverse. We have Fatma after all!" Yes, but every fourth person in Germany has a history of migration.^{iv} Provided that this hypothetical business doesn't consist of only four people, then Fatma just serves as a token^v—as a minority representative meant to emulate equal opportunity and distract from strategies aimed at upholding power structures. The question of whether Fatma at least earns as much as her colleagues do often has to remain unanswered—because talking about money is the Germans' second biggest taboo topic after racism. All the while, Fatma will most likely also have to provide unpaid educational work in addition to her wage labor, when once again there is a heated debate around (im)migration by the office coffee machine. Thanks for nothing.

"If you want to accomplish something, you have to work twice as hard as the Germans." We are all familiar with this phrase. We have internalized it, and it's gotten stuck in our heads with the persistence of an Ariana Grande song. On the one hand, it's good that way, because our parents had reasons for their litany. On the other hand, unfortunately, this phrase caters wonderfully to a neoliberal narrative according to which we can achieve anything if only we put in enough effort. As if there were no patriarchal and racist structures. No vitamin B.

Job postings that explicitly encourage "people with migration backgrounds" or those who "experience discrimination" to apply, were a good start once. But they do not solve the problem. Sure, an injustice is being identified here that it is imperative to counteract. Unless rules like quotas are established, however, such postings ultimately peter out as a merely symbolic gesture. In the end, it is not the well-intended statement that counts, but who is being hired. And who isn't.

Migration is always a promise of a better future, a German Dream. My grandparents' German Dream was to set some money aside and buy a piece of land with it in Turkey. My parents' German Dream was to give their children access to higher education and to drive a big German car. And what is my German Dream? It's quite simple: I want to take away their jobs. I don't want the jobs that are intended for me, I want the ones the

Germans want to reserve for themselves: with the same pay, the same conditions, and the same opportunities for advancement.

My German Dream is that we can all finally take what we are entitled to—and not die trying. Rest in Power, Semra Ertan.

ⁱ In the US, there are occasional studies concerning the frequency of burnout in certain industries that sometimes do explicitly account for people of color. A study on burnout among racial justice activists, for example, shows that signs of burnout in activists of color can be traced back directly to racism experienced within the scene, that is, from white activists. Source: Paul. C. Gorski (2018): “Fighting racism, battling burnout: causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: 10-1080/01419870.2018.1439981.

ⁱⁱ In: Tamer Düzyol and Taudy Pathmanathan, eds. *Haymatlos*, (Edition Assemblage, 2018) p. 168.

*Ich arbeite hier
Ich weiß, wie ich arbeite
Die Deutschen wissen es auch
Meine Arbeit ist schwer
Meine Arbeit ist schmutzig
Das gefällt mir nicht, sage ich*

*“Wenn dir deine Arbeit nicht gefällt,
geh in deine Heimat”, sagen sie.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Towards the end of 2018, the repatriation grant had a come-back by the way: The German Federal Ministry of the Interior launched a large-scale, multi-lingual poster campaign (“Your country. Your future. Now!”), offering declined asylum seekers a “reward” of up to 3000 Euros if they left the country voluntarily. Demand remained very low.

^{iv} According to the German Federal Statistical Office, as of 2018, 23.6 % of Germany’s population have a so-called “migration background.” That means: They themselves are not or at least one parent is not a German citizen by birth. There is no reliable survey on the number of people subject to racism. It is unknown for instance, how many black people live in Germany, because not all of them have a migration background as per the above definition. Source: Federal Statistical Office: micro census—population with migrant background.

^v In the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X both cautioned against tokenism and considered it a strategy that could sabotage the goals of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Sociologists such as Rosabeth Moss Kanter have studied how individual women in leadership positions were leveraged to argue that women in general were no longer disadvantaged. There is more about tokenism in Germany in Mohamed Amjahid’s book *Unter Weißen* [Among Whites] (Hanser Berlin, 2017).