"Almanya: A [Different] Future is Possible" Defying Narratives of Return in Fatma Aydemir's *Ellbogen*

TRANSIT vol. 13, no. 2

Jon Cho-Polizzi

Introduction

What does it mean to 'return' to a homeland one inherits through narration, mediation, and/or a passport alone? From heritage tourism to programs of paid repatriation, the concept of returning 'home' has seen an upsurge in recent public discourse, yet few iterations of this conversation remain unproblematic. The difference between a self-motivated search for identity through 'returning' as tourist to an ancestral homeland, and an imposed repatriation where undesired positionalities are silenced by the threat of deportation is a question of power structures founded on the imaginaries of inheritance, ascription, and memory. But how do contemporary works of literature reimagine belonging in this polarized environment—against the resurgence of nationalist sentiments in the globalized present day? How can narratives of return—weighted encounters with a 'homeland' one often knew only secondhand or through fleeting encounters—help renegotiate the layers of diasporic identity? What possibilities can be activated through recourse to the archives of Turkish German memory, and can such activation truly offer a viable future? Through a close-reading of Fatma Aydemir's 2017 novel, *Ellbogen*, this article investigates the polemical positionality of a young, postmigrant[1] generation—its futures and trajectories—to transcend the narrative of return toward an as yet unwritten future, despite (or perhaps alongside) the violence of the German present day. I argue that Aydemir's protagonist utilizes her physical journey to Turkey to negotiate a new positionality between the expressions of belonging and Otherness she has inherited from both lifeworlds, emerging shattered but not wholly broken by the traumas of repatriation.

Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has argued fundamentally against an ontology in which individual identity is fostered through recognition and return from the alterity of the Other (2017). Viveiros de Castro reasons, instead, that self-

[1] In a German context, the term *postmigrantisch* [postmigrant] has been associated with Shermin Langhoff's 'postmigrant theater' at the Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Berlin Kreuzberg. The self-conceived label served as an "empowerment strategy of appropriation" for resisting labels such as 'migrant theater' which posited cultural productions among Berlin's migrant communities as inherently non-German (Schramm, et al 4). The term also circulated in the 1990s in the context of the intersectional activist network Kanak Attak. At least since the conference "Postmigrant Turkish-German Culture: Transnationalism, Translation, Politics of Representation" organized by Tom Cheesman at the University of Swansea in 1998, the term has seen wide circulation in academic research and has been applied to a number of discourses, including concepts such as a 'postmigrant perspective' or 'postmigrant society' meant to encapsulate the transformative and dialectical nature of migration and its broader societal impacts (Göktürk 440-44).

recognition and actualization are processual rather than comparative, while characterized by an ongoing state of negotiation. This position seems apt for understanding the complexity of *Ellbogen*'s narrative, in which Hazal—a young German-born woman of Turkish descent—seeks refuge in Istanbul, fleeing the consequences of street violence she encounters in Berlin. Despite her Turkish passport, Hazal's choice of Turkey (and Istanbul in particular) as her site of refuge is due more to the ascription of Turkish identity she has acquired through her life in Germany, than from any palpable connections to the place itself. She quickly discovers that the Turkish identity she has inherited by birth does not ensure a smooth transition into this new lifeworld, and the novel follows her transformation and ultimate acceptance of the lived reality of the world she comes to inhabit, including its triumphs and discontents.

In Viveiros de Castro's formulation, it is not merely encountering—and returning from the encounter with—the Other that facilitates a construct of selfhood, but rather the internalization of the Other's alterity: quite literally consuming and *becoming* the difference with which one is confronted, toward the reification of a more unified self. This conceptual framework—that encounter and return are not conclusive, but continual—forms a central tenet of my research. This article argues that such a framework can provide a working model for approaching the fluid demarcations of a postmigrant Europe, characterized by "multidirectional memory" and circular migration (Rothberg and Attia 2019). Throughout the course of the novel, the protagonist develops through repeated negotiations of her own positionality; she assumes (and consumes) the roles and identities of those she encounters while navigating her own repatriation.

Describing his own experience as a subject of the so-called 'postcolonial' world, cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes: "identity is not a set of fixed attributes, the unchanging essence of the inner self, but a constant process of *positioning*. We tend to think of identity as taking us back to our roots […] In fact identity is always a never-completed *process* of becoming—a process of shifting *identifications*, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being" (16). This "process of becoming" is intrinsic to deconstructing the narrative of return: an intervention which underscores the dangers of a regressive construct of belonging and identity as bound to singular spatialities or insular constructs of the self.[2]

Within this framework, *Ellbogen* formulates one possible answer to the questions which concern my present investigation. In this coming-of-age story, the novel's young protagonist, Hazal, seeks to reconstruct her own layered positionalities as the Berlin-born daughter of Turkish immigrants through a physical 'return' (or rather, escape) to Turkey, a country that this combative antihero discovers she has never really known. Informed by the archives of her family's Turkish German memory, Hazal "dream commutes"—"*pendelträumt*" in the words of German Andalusian poet José F.A. Oliver ("1 Entwurf"

[2] Author and political scientist Max Czollek argues against the notion of fixed cultural identities in his 2018 *Desintegriert Euch!*, observing: "[…] *wir* [*müssen*] *wegkommen von der Idee der identitären Zugehörigkeit zu einer einzigen Gruppe, von der Idee, wir seien ganz und müssten unsere Ganzheit verteidigen. Jeder Mensch besteht aus vielen Teilen, die sich immer wieder verschieben. Die ungebrochene Identität ist eine gefährliche Illusion*" [we {…} need to move away from identitarian ideals of belonging to one, particular group: away from the idea that our identities are something whole and self-defining, and that we must fight to defend their integrity. Every human being is comprised of many shifting pieces. The unfractured identity is a dangerous illusion] (192).

123)—between the brutality of her life in present-day Berlin, the memories of rural Turkey she inherits from her immigrant family, and her postmigrant fantasies of Istanbul.

Hazal's 'archive' in this sense of the word need not constitute a physical realm. Author Deniz Utlu, a contemporary of and frequent collaborator with Aydemir, describes the archives of Turkish German memory in his essay "Das Archiv der Migration": "*Es trägt keinen Namen und hat keinen festen Ort. Es liegt verteilt im Land. In den Städten. In den Wohnungen. In Zimmern. In alten, verstaubten, lange nicht mehr geöffneten Schränken in den Kellern. Unter Häusern und Straßen*" [It bears no name and has no permanent location. It lies strewn across the land. In the cities. In the apartments. In rooms. In dusty, old, and long-unopened cupboards in cellars. Beneath houses and streets] (2011). These are the archives of (im)migrant memories—long ignored, side-lined by the cultural memory of the dominant culture,[3] and written out of public commemorations, museums, and monuments. Nevertheless, they persist, shaping the generations who follow in their wake and awaiting rediscovery decades later by those who come to recognize the importance of this inheritance.[4]

Aydemir's corpus of literary works is characterized by a distinct negotiation of these archives of (im)migrant memory—a notable attempt to write and rewrite the cultural signifiers of Turkish and Turkish German identity into the German-language literary record. In addition to merely compiling the names and associations of Turkish pop-cultural icons, Aydemir's works also function to redefine their legacies. Her 2022 novel, *Dschinns*, not only repeatedly references figures from Turkish pop culture like the singers İbrahim Tatlıses and Bülent Ersoy, in the case of Tatlıses, it also actively critiques the singer's many controversies (10-11). Ersoy, on the other hand, whose public transition as a trans woman resulted in sweeping stage and media bans in her home country, serves a pivotal role in the novel's plot—offering repeated references for navigating the personal identities of *Dschinns*' many characters (104-105, 348). Access to these archives of Turkish German memory provide a bulwark for representing the range and "radical diversity"[5] of Turkey and Turkish German heritage.

In *Ellbogen*, Hazal's own "commute" is also aided by a constant stream of mediation—memories, movies, music, television series—all of which help her to construct a fantasy of Istanbul as an inversion of the banality and injustice of her lived experience in Berlin. On the other hand, the physical 'return' described in this novel is one which simultaneously reactivates deep-set connections to both Turkey and Berlin—a lived model

---

[3]According to the 1995 monograph of the same name by psychologist Birgit Rommelspacher, *Dominanzkultur* [dominant culture] represents the hegemonic narrative of a given society or community, in defiance of its lived reality of cultural pluralism.

[4] Digitalization has seen rapid advances in the official archiving of migrant memories. Projects such as Das Migration-Audio-Archiv, founded by the Stiftung Umwelt und Entwicklung Nordrhein-Westfalen and continued with support from the Westdeutscher Rundfunk and EXILE-Kulturkoordination have begun collecting and archiving the oral histories of (im)migrant families, preserving these memories for posterity.

[5] In *Desintegriert Euch!*, Czollek also describes the wide-ranging social implications of recognizing what he deems the "radical diversity" [*radikale Vielfalt*] of the German present day through explicit recourse to the cultural products of (im)migrant and other minoritized groups (72). This concept is further expanded upon in the essay "Pluralität zweiter Stufe" by Czollek and co-author Corinne Kaszner, published in *renk Magazin* (134).

for *Aufhebung* [sublation], which demands that these two spheres of identity exist as inseparably intertwined.

Indeed, a dialectic understanding—in which *Aufhebung* implies both confrontation with and victorious return from the alterity of an Other—is an improbable basis on which to construct emancipatory notions of selfhood or belonging. For, although such a dialectic process may provide the initial tools with which to construct discursive space for difference, the insistence on domesticating alterity implied by such a process of recognition and return precludes any meaningful progress towards a paradigm beyond fixed binaries. This is a flaw already identified by Emmanuel Levinas in his 1963 essay "The Trace of the Other," in which Levinas outlines the process of recognizing the Other's face as simultaneously a recognition of the Other's Others. Here, Levinas' unpacking of the multiple layers of Othering inherent in any social relation serves as an acknowledgment of the complex web of associations within the framework of a given community. At the same time that Levinas recognizes the social context of alterity, he also problematizes a process of self-recognition which demands the domestication of an Other for the purpose of self-definition.[6] For Levinas, it is the domestication process, in which recognition of alterity is charged and commodified for use by the self, that prevents the acceptance of an Otherness which remains defiantly Other. In recognition of this defiance, Levinas proposes an encounter which rejects the process of return entirely, a "setting forth" that does not expect or facilitate return, but only demands critical contemplation of what is. Levinas writes:

> *A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.* To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure. (348)

It is important to note that Hazal's return to Turkey—not the country of her birth, but the country of her passport—is never referred to in the novel as 'return' (Aydemir 12). Hazal's departure from Germany is precisely such a "setting forth," in Levinas' sense of the term: an arrival which is also simultaneously a further setting forth that *cannot* return to the same. Therefore, Hazal departs from Germany and returns to an unfamiliar Turkey, only to encounter a new understanding of her multidirectional affinities to both. Indeed, what does it mean to 'return' to an unknown homeland, or to a land known only through ascription or fleeting acquaintance? What *could* it mean to seek the self not through the Other, but the self *within* the Other through an open-ended "process of becoming?"[7] The novel's literary

[6] Levinas describes the alterity of the Other in regard to the cosmology of a social order within a given community—how one comes to recognize the boundaries of the self through acknowledgment of an Other's difference. Although, for Levinas, this process unfolds within the finite boundaries of one's own lived community, the process is described in markedly spatialized terms, and illuminated through the discussion of two canonical narratives of return: the Biblical exodus of Abraham to an as-yet unknown homeland in Canaan contrasted with the elusive promise of Ulysses' homecoming in Ithaca. The spatialization of Levinas' notion of the return from the Other's alterity has helped activate my own engagement with the author's work, serving as a nexus between the Levinian concept of return and my own interest in the physical process of homecoming, particularly 'returning' to an as-yet unknown 'home.'

[7] This distinction can be best qualified through the framework of contemporary cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, for whom the binary of the self and the Other is dissolved by this process of perpetual "becoming": the recognition that the boundaries between these spheres exist in a

imaginary provides, in Istanbul, a space in which return and returning are rethought into a paradigm which pushes beyond binaries of the self and the Other, permanent home and temporary residence, *Heimat* and *Fremde*. But advancing beyond these binaries also requires an ontology in which the self and the Other can be conceptualized as one and the same—a model hinted at by the movement and stasis of Aydemir's protagonist, Hazal.

On the one hand, *Ellbogen* is a Berlin novel molded on the topography of the city and invigorated by the montage-like energy of such literary classics as Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz.* On the other hand, it is also a Turkish German intervention into the narrative of this metropolis, filled with the colloquial language of Berlin's Turkish German youth, and with pointed reference to Turkish and Turkish German media, including Fatih Akin's acclaimed 2004 film *Gegen die Wand*—the varying reception of which, across the members of Hazal's family, begins to point to the growing cultural divide within even a single household. In the same sequence in which Hazal first explains her affinity with her favorite Aunt Semra (the first of her family to be born in Germany, and also the first to have attended university), her extended family reacts to a trailer for the movie. Some identify strongly with the tragedy of the female protagonist, while others (including Hazal's mother) dismiss the film as "*der letzte Schrott*" [utter garbage] and its protagonist as engaged solely in "*Herumhuren*" [whoring around] (77-8). This framing provides an initial point of reference for the characters' divergent affinities later on—between language, culture, religion, locality, and obligations—within this urban space. It also foreshadows Hazal's own movement and flight, rendering *Ellbogen* as a Berlin novel eclipsed by both the promise and reality of Istanbul.[8]

Of Homecoming and Expatriation

On her eighteenth birthday, Hazal and her friends are denied entry to a popular Berlin club because they aren't "*Stammgäste*" [regulars], while a mixed crowd of young, affluent, *white* internationals are admitted in their stead (109). On the way home from the club, they are provoked and sexually harassed by a German student while waiting at the U-Bahn station. The situation escalates into physical violence: Hazal and her two girlfriends beat the student to the brink of unconsciousness, and Hazal strikes him with such force that he falls from the platform, cracking his skull against the tracks before the oncoming subway car. While her two friends remain in Berlin to await the consequences of their actions, Hazal discards her possessions and books a one-way flight to Istanbul, hoping to restart her

---

constant state of negotiation. The hurdles which Hazal faces in her process of assimilation—both in Germany and in Turkey alike—only become navigable as the character comes to accept the fluidity of her Turkish-Germanness through encounters with competing frameworks of alterity in both locations.

[8] Although a thorough investigation of *Ellbogen*'s contribution to wider conversations about the framing of Turkish-German literature is beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note the extent to which Aydemir's work remains in dialogue with broader trends in contemporary German-language literature. The novel's concern with navigating a plethora of identities in transit seems indicative of what Leslie Adelson has already deemed "touching tales" in her 2005 investigation *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* (22)—highlighting the proximity and entanglements born of simultaneous encounters with both the domestic and the foreign rather than prioritizing discrepancies delineated by distinct, immovable markers of identity. What I read as the novel's emphasis on "becoming' rather than "being" seems to affirm Ela Gezen's observation that "[transnational] cultural practices are never unidirectional"–that such practices always participate in the ongoing negotiation and dissolution of abstract borders (15).

life afresh in the anonymity of a city she has never known—yet one with which she has long identified.

Although the immediate cause for Hazal's repatriation appears to be accidental, Hazal's fascination with Istanbul has in fact long presaged her flight from Germany. The novel begins with a sequence in which a young Hazal is threatened by a German police officer with deportation: "*Weißt du, dass man dafür in sein Heimatland abgeschoben werden kann?*" ["Did you know you can be deported back to your homeland for this?"] after being caught for the petty theft of mascara in a drugstore (14). This scene provides the introduction to a critical subtext of the novel: Hazal's precarity, as facilitated by her Turkish nationality and German socialization—the hanging threat of being torn from her family and community at any given moment by a legal system which seems designed to deny her any sense of security or belonging.

Her Istanbul fantasy has also been facilitated by a romantic interest in a young Turkish German man she meets over Facebook, Mehmet—"*ein in Deutschland geborener Ausländer*" [a German-born foreigner] like herself, who has, indeed, been deported to Turkey due to transgressions in his youth—a process which also anticipates Hazal's own crimes and later departure from Berlin (37). A disenfranchised Berlin-born youth, Hazal has always dreamed of escaping the violence and discrimination of her German life, constructing a romanticized notion of the multicultural, Turkish city of Istanbul which stands in contrast to her own multicultural, Turkish community in Berlin. Although Hazal attempts to facilitate a concrete relationship to Istanbul in advance through her online affair with Mehmet, in moments of clarity she also admits to herself the utter lack of tangible connection to the city with which she and her social clique identify:

> *»Oh, ich wäre jetzt so gerne in Istanbul« schwärmt Gül und fast sich an die Stelle ihrer großen Brust, unter der sie ihr Herz vermutet. »Da ist es so schön, so warm, so laut, und alle Leute reden ständig miteinander. Niemand ist so mies gelaunt wie hier.« Sie spricht so, als wäre sie schon mal da gewesen. Typisch. Dabei kennen Gül und ich Istanbul beide nur aus dem Fenster des Busses, der uns jeden zweiten Sommer vom Flughafen in unsere stinklangweiligen Käffer kutschiert.*
>
> ["Oh, I wish I were in Istanbul," Gül gushes, placing a hand over the spot on her large breast under which she fancies her heart to be. "It's so beautiful there, so warm, so loud: everyone always talking to each other. No one's as pissy as they are here." She talks like she's already been there. Typical. But both Gül and I know Istanbul only from the window of the bus that shuttles us every second summer from the airport to our own boring shit towns.] (27)

A profound performance (and assumption) of identity is palpable in this passage, but there is also a very clear ascription of identification with another place: the *stinklangweiliges Kaff* [boring shit town] Hazal identifies through the archives of family memory as her "own." And yet, at the same time, Hazal recognizes her friend's self-identification with the unknown city of Istanbul as also "*typisch*" [typical], reflective, indeed, of her own not-so-secret desire for a different life. A desire Hazal believes she has begun to cultivate through her relationship with Mehmet.

Naturally, for a disgruntled, urban youth, it does not seem entirely improbable to identify more with one's imaginary of another great metropolis—at once alien, yet still tantalizing in its proximity—than with the dull realities of an ancestral village with which one has little shared experience of everyday life. Sociologist Avtar Brah has described the construction of a diasporic cosmology thus: "'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of *no* return […]" (192).[9] Even if return to the physicality of homeland would be possible, this does not suffice to fulfill the dream of homecoming. The physical, geospatial movement 'back' to her family's village on the coast of the Black Sea offers Hazal little recourse to such a fantasy, and so she and her friends develop an affinity for a different alterity in which they can invest their hopes for an eventual return, which would also provide for *new* beginnings.

The construct of Istanbul in Aydemir's *Ellbogen* negotiates a fine line between fantasies of homecoming and recognition of alterity. In the author's own words: a place for both author and protagonist to engage in "fact-checking our idea of Turkey" ("Capturing the Questions"). The digital space opened by Hazal's social media activities provides one potential model for negotiating this discursive realm, yet this imaginary fails to hold up when confronted with the realities of Mehmet's default life in Istanbul. Hazal's attempt to domesticate the foreign elements of the city through her cultivation of their online relationship ultimately proves to be incapable of establishing the kind of concrete ties she has desired upon her physical arrival there. In fact, the first words of narration after Hazal's arrival are the simple revelation: "*Ich weiß nicht, wo ich bin*" ["I don't know where I am"] (*Ellbogen* 131). Instead, the world of poverty, drug addiction, questionable employment, and precarious living conditions Mehmet inhabits does little to establish an atmosphere of refuge for *Ellbogen*'s protagonist—or reprieve from the desolation of postmigrant[10] Berlin—despite the romance she has cultivated over social media.

There are also constant affronts to Hazal's conception of her own Turkishness in Istanbul—her inability to engage in elevated discourse, her lack of basic cultural knowledge, and the accusations of strangers who question her belonging in Turkey directly. These daily struggles constantly confront Hazal with new types of alienation in ways different from what she experienced in Germany. In her first confrontation with an authority figure after leaving Berlin, Hazal's alterity is thrown back at her directly in the initial exchange: "*Warum ist dein Türkisch so beschissen?* […] *Du meinst wohl, ich merke nicht, dass du aus Deutschland kommst*" ["Why is your Turkish so shitty? […] You think I don't know you're from Germany?"] (191). Whereas in Berlin, it is largely the physicality of her personhood—appearance, dress, and socio-economic class—which mark her exteriority as Othered, in Turkey it is the more intangible attributes recognized through close interaction that continue to define her as outsider—accent, language use, cultural cues, and social conduct. Nevertheless, the realization of her sustained precarity continues to be dictated to Hazal in her interactions with Turkish authorities, just as it was projected onto her in her prior life in Berlin: "*Du weißt das vielleicht nicht, aber hier laufen die*

---

[9] My emphasis.

[10] Despite its use as an "empowerment strategy" (see Note 1), "postmigrant" should not be understood to imply a sense of temporal finality. The process of migration to and from Berlin remains ongoing and cannot be reduced to any single demographic or time period—thus the discontent experienced by *Ellbogen*'s protagonist is characterized by her continual marginalization despite an objective status as the product of a 'post'-migration family and upbringing.

Dinge anders als in Deutschland" ["You might not know it, but things work differently here than they do in Germany"] (192). The construct of 'return' in this novel alternates between various perspectives and crisscrossing narratives and is ultimately crystallized by Hazal's uncompromising rejection of the value systems and institutional structures which she blames for her downfall. Hazal must, instead, both assume and reject the identities of those around her in order to negotiate her own positionality.

This process begins in earnest when the apartment she is inhabiting with Mehmet and his revolutionary Kurdish roommate, Halil, is raided by a special anti-terror unit of the Turkish police. Although she is herself a new arrival to the city and knows little to nothing of the intricacies of Turkish politics, Hazal finds herself suspect by association, brutalized and violated by the police, accused of crimes about which she knows nothing. Fleeing from the unknown dangers of this new environment, just as she continues to flee from the known dangers of her former home, Hazal then seeks recourse in two other sources of potential salvation: Halil's girlfriend, Gözde, and her own Berlin-based aunt, Semra.

With no health insurance and no direct access to medical care in the aftermath of the raid, Hazal quickly sheds the revolutionary identity ascribed to her by the police and instead assumes Gözde's identity: at first borrowing (but then not returning) her ID card and dressing in her clothes. Although this transformation is less than skin deep, it suffices to gain Hazal access to medical attention, providing her with the necessary push to flee the toxic environment into which she has planted herself by living in Mehmet's apartment. Returning back to collect her things, Hazal discovers a good luck charm gifted to her by Aunt Semra in the pocket of her jeans. Believing that this independent and well-educated aunt with whom she had forged ties of solidarity in her youth might provide her with direction, Hazal reaches out, and Semra, too, travels to Istanbul (187-219).

It is the moment of confrontation with her aunt which best serves to crystallize Hazal's transformation in Istanbul. The multilayered return represented in Aunt Semra's journey to reunite with Hazal in Turkey at once severs the solidarities they had forged in Germany and serves to reinforce Hazal's conviction that she herself must stay in Istanbul and overcome the alienation she has come to recognize in her experience there, an alienation which she had described in a prior moment of despair as insurmountable:

> *Und auf Türkisch schaffe ich es schon gar nicht, genau das zu sagen, was mir durch den Kopf geht. Da ist immer eine Lücke zwischen dem, was ich meine, und dem, was aus meinem Mund kommt. Egal wie krass ich mich verbessert habe, die Lücke wird immer bleiben. Ich kann nie so witzig sein oder so schlagfertig wie auf Deutsch. Deshalb hat Halil mich nie richtig kennenlernen können. Weil ich ihm zu wenig von mir sagen konnte. Weil ich in seiner Nähe immer nur ein farbloses Abziehbild von mir selbst war.*
>
> [And in Turkish I never manage to say exactly what's going through my head. There's always a gap between what I mean and the things that come out of my mouth. It doesn't matter how damn well I've improved, that gap will never go away. I can never be as funny or as fresh as I am in German. That's why Halil never really got to know me. Because I couldn't say enough about myself. Because in his company, I was only ever a colorless carbon copy of myself.] (218)

The impregnable borders of linguistic proficiency in the moment of Hazal's existential crisis are later put into perspective by the truly existential threats to her life and freedom upon a possible return to Germany. For despite Aunt Semra's progressive worldviews, and despite their emotional closeness, Semra's profound faith in Germany's legal system of criminal justice (namely her conviction that Hazal must atone for her transgressions according to the letter of the law) and her inability to comprehend the alienation and anger her niece feels, suffice to shatter the connection between the two. With her hoped-for promise of absolution in ruins, Hazal internalizes the permanence of her relocation, recognizing the stakes at play in her *becoming*, in her successful negotiation of the uncanny alien-familiarity of her new residence. With the promise of return to Germany effectively closed off, Hazal retains only the realities of remaining in Istanbul and "never [returning] to the same"—the necessity of navigating a reality in which the conflicting positionalities of her personhood might coexist.

The Point of No Return

Hazal's conversations with Semra revolve in an eddy—because Aunt Semra does not know what questions to ask her, and Hazal does not know what answers they both might need:

> *»Hast du geglaubt, dass du glücklich wirst, als du nach Istanbul kamst?«*
> *»Keine Ahnung. Ich bin nachts ins Bett gegangen und morgens wieder aufgewacht. Vielleicht habe ich daran geglaubt, ja.«*
> ["Did you believe you would be happy when you came to Istanbul?"
> "I dunno. I went to bed at night, and I woke up in the morning. Maybe I believed in that, yeah."] (234)

There is an ambiguity in Hazal's convictions—a belief in both the promise of salvation and the emancipation of a life lived without preconceptions, a life in which each day might offer new experiences, new perspectives, new possibilities of being: a life that promises both continuity and change.

Transcending the narrative of 'return' to instead inhabit a state of alterity oneself is central to what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Viveiros de Castro's English translator, anthropologist Peter Skafish, summarizes the potentiality of this process, reiterating: "Self-consciousness is reached not through confrontation with the Other and subsequent self-return but through temporarily occupying […] the enemy's point of view, and seeing "oneself" from there" (12). This serves to disrupt the binary of selfhood and alterity by proposing an ontology in which concepts of selfhood remain inherently fluid—subject not to one's own positionality vis-à-vis the Other, but through the attempt to understand the self *as* the Other (as a plurality of Others). Hazal's trajectory begins with a fantasy of proximity grounded in the archives of her friends' and family's memories and facilitated by the projections of her digital romance. But this charade pivots in the moment in which she comes to physically inhabit the identity of Gözde—on the one hand, a well-adjusted and even affluent young Turkish woman (everything that Hazal finds that she is not), and on the other hand, a potential rival in Hazal's growing infatuation with Mehmet's roommate, Halil. From the moment Hazal assumes the identity and physicality of her rival, she commits to a cycle of ongoing

transformation. For Viveiros de Castro, such an imaginary—in which the capacity for *becoming* Other precedes all ontological notions of selfhood—opens the potential for a perspectivism which Skafish describes as “radically, anarchistically plural” because, as he reasons: “Once it is accepted that an alien body of thought is indeed thought, then there is no longer anything to decipher except for what its coordinates, values, suppositions, and truths are, and how these throw our own into disarray by depriving them of universality […]” (18).

The very notion of a successful ‘return’ in *Ellbogen* always remains illusory: inherently flawed—because Hazal’s migration represents at once a search for forgotten roots, but also an escape—a venturing forth with no intention of returning to the same. More than a decade before the publication of *Ellbogen*, the German Andalusian poet José Francisco Agüera Oliver already represented the false promise of an ascribed homeland through recourse to the grotesque. In doing so, he describes the mountains of his family’s ancestral home on the Mediterranean as “[…] *schlummernde Zyklopen / die mich streichelnd aufschrecken // aus Träumen herausgerissen / reifen meine Gedanken / beim Anblick unserer künstlichen Liebe*” [“[…] slumbering cyclopes / startling me with their caress // torn from dreams / my thoughts ripened / by the sight of our artificial love”] (“Andalusien,” 34). Oliver’s representation of the ancestral *Heimat* is artificial indeed, for there is something profoundly uncanny in the assumption of homeland as a strange country, an unfamiliar lifestyle, and a community of strangers rather than a familiar landscape that one should automatically recognize as one’s own. There is something deeply unsettling in the confrontation with an Other, with whom one is told *should* be familiar, and who yet remains perpetually aloof.

Aydemir’s novel presents a powerful protagonist seeking to redefine her own positionality through a negotiation of both ascribed identity and the ascriptions of place (in this case, Istanbul) that Henry Lefebvre might deem “representational space” (26). Such spaces are constructed through consumed imaginaries, through the evocation of place-specific language, and a conception of belonging which Oliver’s poetic cosmology describes as “*gelernt und nachgesagt*” [learned and repeated] (*Schwarzwalddorf* 43). Physical return to such places of memory contributes to destabilizing the binaries of belonging and alienation, selfhood and alterity, because it forces a confrontation between the representational and the real. Transcending the narrative of return reassesses not merely the divide between two places, two moments, two languages, or two people. It also calls into question the underlying structures of division. Recognition of such divides finds voice in the acknowledgment of a participatory belonging, through an imaginary which reflects the fluidity that such participation must engender. *Ellbogen* concludes with a flashback in which Hazal remembers a conversation with her Berlin friends:

> *Einsamkeit kann man nicht teilen* […] *und vielleicht fühlen wir alle ja dasselbe, vielleicht bin ich doch nicht ganz allein, vielleicht sind wir irgendwie miteinander verbunden. Das ist auf jeden Fall eine schöne Idee, ein beruhigender Gedanke, dass da jemand ist, der dieselben Kämpfe wie ich kämpft, nur woanders.*
>
> [Loneliness cannot be shared […] and maybe we all really feel the same, maybe I’m not really alone, maybe somehow we are all bound together. That’s a nice idea,

> anyway, a comforting thought: That someone's there fighting the same fight as me, just somewhere else.] (251)

The potential of inhabiting a multiplicity of places becomes tantamount to inhabiting a multiplicity of positionalities—to participation in a multitude of concurrent lifeworlds—not a return at all, but a state of synchronicity. An understanding of who we are and who we might also be remains an open question—a perpetual becoming which retains a glimmer of hope for the uncertain future, because as James Clifford reminds us: "[This] future is always unwritten" (25).

Works Cited

Adelson, Leslie A. *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Aydemir, Fatma. *Dschinns*. Hanser Verlag, 2022.

————. *Ellbogen*. Hanser Verlag, 2017.

————. Interview by Canan Marasligil. *Capturing the Questions of Our Time*, 13 March 2018, https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/an-interview-with-fatma-aydemir-canan-marasligil. Accessed 11 September 2021.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.

Clifford, James. *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard UP, 2013.

Czollek, Max. *Desintegriert Euch!* Hanser Verlag, 2018.

Czollek, Max and Corinne Kaszner. "Pluralität zweiter Stufe." *renk Magazin*, volume 3, 2021, pp. 130-45.

Gezen, Ela E. *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature*. Camden House, 2018.

Göktürk, Deniz. "Transnational Connections, Introduction." *The German Cinema Book*, edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, Deniz Göktürk, and Claudia Sandberg. Bloomsbury, 2020, pp. 440-44.

Hall, Stuart. *Familiar Stranger*. Duke UP, 2017.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space* (1991), translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, 2011.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "The Trace of the Other" (1963). *Deconstruction in Context,* edited by Mark C. Taylor, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Oliver, José F. A. "1 Entwurf. 1 Tristolog." *Konzepte: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, issue 35, 2016, pp. 119-33.

————. "Andalusien." *HEIMATT und andere FOSSILE TRÄUME. Lyrik*. Das Arabische Buch, 1989, pp. 34.

————. *Mein andalusisches Schwarzwalddorf*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007.

Rommelspacher, Birgit. *Dominanzkultur: Texte zu Fremdheit und Macht*. Orlanda, 1995.

Rothberg, Michael and Iman Attia. "Multidirectional Memory and *Verwobene Geschichte(n)* [Entangled (Hi)stories]." *TRANSIT Journal*, translated by Melody Makeda Ledwon, vol. 12, no. 1, 2019. http://transit.berkeley.edu/2019/attia-rothberg/. Accessed 20 June 2021.

Schramm, Moritz, Sten Pultz Moslund, and Anne Ring Petersen, eds. *Reframing Migration, Diversity, and the Arts*. Routledge, 2019.

Skafish, Peter. Introduction. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 9-33.

Utlu, Deniz. “Das Archiv der Migration.” *der Freitag*, 31 October 2011, https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/das-archiv-der-migration. Accessed 15 November 2021.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Peter Skafish. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.