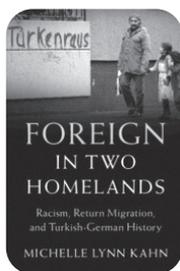


Michelle Lynn Kahn, *Foreign in Two Homelands. Racism, Return Migration and Turkish-German History*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2024



Abstract: Michelle Lynn Kahn's book underscores that global migration and mobility are central to modern European history. The book traces the shifting dynamics of the relationship between Germany and Turkey, from a period of "friendship" during the guest worker program to increasing tensions in the 1980s due to racism and return migration policies. The author presents in a relaxed and journalistic style the main effects and causes of the double estrangement felt by Turkish migrants towards their adopted country and their country of origin.

Keywords: Return Migration; Racism; Identity Conflict; Guest Worker; Integration; Homeland; Transnational Lives; *Almanca*.

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ESTRANGED AT HOME. TURKISH MIGRANT IDENTITY IN OPPOSITION TO GERMAN RACISM

The rising of far-right extremism is a reality that we can't no longer neglect. Although cultural studies have a focus point on the image of hybridity, marginal and periphery, it seems that on political scale a category of people who want to divide the world into "us" and "others" is growing. Michelle Lynn Kahn is against this reductive division. She is a scholar of the global and transnational history of Germany after 1945, with thematic expertise in far-right extremism, migration, and racism. The volume *Foreign in Two Homelands. Racism, Return Migration and Turkish-German History* (2024) sheds light on the transnational lives of Turkish-Germans and the enduring legacies of this migration. The author explores the complex relationships these individuals had with both Germany and Turkey, highlighting their experiences of estrangement and discrimination in both homelands. Migrants find themselves in a form of identity indeterminacy triggered by the plurality, because they are not fully received as either Germans or Turks. The author wishes to familiarize the European public with the multifaceted journey of Turkish migrants in West Germany "It is my hope that this book honors them, gives them voice and agency, and does justice to what truly are transnational lives."¹ The author utilizes archival materials, interviews, and cultural analysis to explore the challenges these migrants faced in both countries, highlighting their feelings of estrangement and shifting identities. The guest workers

life experience is delimited on the time axis between 1961 and 1990 focusing on themes of racism, return migration, and the complex history of Turkish-German relations. Kahn also considers the social, economic, and political factors influencing their decisions to migrate and remigrate, as well as the cultural clashes and evolving perceptions in both German and Turkish societies. Regarding Turkish society, the writing style does not idealize the country of origin. Instead, the difficulties that returnees faced in their homeland are revealed, reinforcing the same environment of exclusion they felt in Germany.

The return migration is a key theme to which the author has a categorical position. Migration studies present the return to the country of origin through a mythical, idealized perspective. The return to the origin is doubled on an imaginary level with a symbolic rebirth. In contrast to this approach, the author does not promote the idealization of the return to the homeland as an unattainable action that migrants dream of, but as “a core component of all migrants’ lives”². The pendulum movement between two countries deconstructs the myth of passivity and demonstrates how “migration was *never* a one-directional process, but rather a transnational process of reciprocal exchange that fundamentally reshaped both countries’ politics, societies, economies, and cultures.”³ Although the categorical statement of facts is a characteristic of this volume, rigid terms such as “homeland” or “German” are continuously interrogated and subjected to nuances in terminology. The delimitation of the country through fixed borders is surpassed by the country that is reconstructed from memories and affections by immigrants.

Just as the concept of “German” is being reshaped by the hybrid nature of migrant culture. Just as the presence of Turks in West Germany proposes a new understanding of the foreigner, their absence in Turkey forces those who remain to adjust their lifestyles around their departure. The label of foreigner is intuitively understood in the relationship of Turks with their adopted country, but in their relationship with Turkey it is explained by the absence that generates gradual estrangement.

In terms of structure, the book is divided into two parts. First part *Separation Anxieties*, focus on the initial separation of guest workers from Turkey, early experiences in West Germany and the evolving relationship with their homeland and identity. It is necessary to mention the empathetic manner in which these themes are described. The narrative voice that exposes life stories combines journalistic style with statistical data and theoretical theses. In this note, the first part is focused on the individual and his hardships. The author uses interviews and personal life experiences to make the reader feel the environment of the families and their personal agency and emotions. The book is influenced by migrants’ own stories and explore the history of everyday life that reveals how many felt foreign in two homelands. The sources of information and documentation for writing this volume are multiple, heterogeneous and transmedia, as listed “a kaleidoscope of sources collected in both countries and both languages, including government documents, newspaper articles, sociological studies, company records, handwritten letters, memoirs, films, novels, poems, songs, material objects, and two dozen oral history interviews that I conducted with

former guest workers and their children.”⁴ The complexity of the sources indirectly describes the author’s desire to create an image that is both authentic and scientific. Thanks to the casual formulations combined with historical, sociological and economic data, the content is accessible to the unspecialized reader, but can also be used in the demonstrations of specialized studies.

As the first chapter tells us, initiation of Guest Worker Migration begins in 1961 when Germany adopts the formal recruitment of Turkish guest workers. The motivation for migration is primarily economic, but the attraction to the Western world cannot be denied. The economic advantage was not one-sided, both countries benefited from this labor migration. Helga Letner writes about this topic in 1995 when she examines the politics of admission and exclusion for international migrants in post-war Europe. It argues that while European nations accepted temporary foreign labor for economic benefit, they were hesitant to grant these migrants full citizenship rights due to nationalism and racism. The study highlights how nation-states navigate the tension between economic needs for labor and desires for cultural homogeneity. The system was designed so that these foreign workers would contribute the necessary work hours to the national economy and then return home before they could utilize welfare state services.⁵ Kahn involuntarily supports the arguments presented by Leiner because both of them claim that the focus of new country was on economic function rather than social and political integration. I said that both countries had something to gain because the Turkish government view the program as a way

to “export surplus labor”⁶ In addition, the initial expectation was that guest workers would return with new technical knowledge and skills that would contribute to Turkey’s industrialization and economic development. The Turkish government even said it was a “patriotic duty”.⁷ Besides the ideological criticism that can be made of a state that considers leaving the homeland a national duty, those who left enjoyed significant economic advantages. It is worth mentioning, significant financial remittances sent by guest workers and money invested in their country through local businesses, factories, house construction and increased sales when they return. These are some examples of benefits that the Turkish government has received. On the other hand, purchases made by Turks in Germany are invested, in addition to their economic character, with a symbolic and emotional function of integration. Patricia Ehrkamp expounds that in essence, Turkish immigrants in Germany actively “place their identities” by embedding their sense of belonging into their local neighborhoods through practices that are deeply intertwined with their transnational ties.⁸ The new spaces created are imprinted in Turkish culture. The hypothesis is exemplified by numerous transcultural influences like fast-food restaurants, greengroceries, and specialized stores importing goods such as jewellery, textiles, music, and household items from Turkey. The success of these businesses highlights the close links between economic and cultural practices, as these goods provide familiarity and comfort in everyday life. Some immigrants express a desire for the built environment to better reflect their presence and contributions to the neighbourhood, highlighting

the connection between material and symbolic space in creating a sense of belonging

Another crucial aspect of place-making is the establishment of communal places such as mosques and teahouse. These places foster a sense of belonging with faith-based communities. While some mosques have strong transnational connections, belonging is also shaped by local interpretation of faith and family ties.⁹ It can be inferred that there are significant differences in how Germans and Turks viewed the concepts of family and gender. “Mediterranean,” “Southern,” and “foreign” families were condemned by Germans as “backward and oppressive” institutions that allegedly clashed with West Germany’s self-definition as a liberal democracy.¹⁰ The media coverage of stereotypes like violence and patriarchy has fueled discrimination against foreigners and heightened the fear of potential aggression. Kahn lay out how in both countries concerns about the family became enduring tropes in the migrants’ sense of dual estrangement. Concerns about the breakdown of the family were central to both German and Turkish perspectives, although the reasons and implications differed. In Germany Turkish men was racialized as prone to violating German women, while the German woman was portrayed in Turkey as a threat to the Muslim family. Due to the consistency with which she presents the reality of both ideologies, the author is freed from the accusation of a subjective position.

The Turkish discourse of “Germanization” revealed a fear of excessive integration, contrasting with German anxieties about insufficient integration. In the midst of these two fears, it is necessary to open the discussion of identity. The phrase

Foreigner in Germany, *Almançı* in Turkey¹¹ poignantly captures the sentiment of feeling foreign in two homelands. For many migrants, “*Almançı*” was a slur, the Turkish equivalent of the German word for foreigner, “*Ausländer*.” The term “*Almançı*” was primarily imposed externally by Turks who had never lived in Germany and had little direct knowledge of life there. They judged returning migrants based on visible signs of their time in Germany, such as German cars, clothes, German chocolates, and the German language spoken by them and their children. The term implies a “Germanized Turk,” suggesting a process of gradual estrangement from Turkish identity and a partial transformation into Germans. This fear was so strong that the Turkish government and population worried that long-term exposure to Germany had made migrants unable to reintegrate into Turkey. The concept also reflected Turkey’s broader anxieties about its own modernization in a globalizing Cold War world. Discourses are dense and intensifying around children’s identity. These children often felt caught between two cultures, questioning their own identities. Children of guest workers were viewed as both victims and threats in both countries. In Germany, they were seen as a threat to the education system and German national identity. In addition to foreigners and non-integrated people, the concept of “suitcase children” who were sent back and forth between countries is likely discussed. The experience of Turkish guest workers and their children highlighted the fluidity of national identity. The very possibility that Turks could become culturally German contradicted Germany’s rigid, blood-based definition of identity.

The Turkish discourse of “Germanization” and the migrant experience revealed that Germans were not the only ones defining what it meant to be German; Turks also played a role in these debates. This argument is also supported by the researcher Jenny B. White. Her text contrasts Turkish and German perspectives on family, gender roles, and integration, noting how German society often essentializes Turkish culture and struggles to fully accept Turks as German. She argues that Turkish identity in Germany is a dynamic interplay of self-perception and how others perceive them, influenced by historical events and the evolving German and European landscape. However, the most important contribution made to the thesis is the concept of “processual identity.”¹² Processual identity is described as the “internal” component of identity, which focuses on building social relations and is in contrast to the “essentialist” or “external” component, which is visible as ethnic or other named categories and focused on boundary maintenance. The external component of identity, as described in the source, is about the observable, categorical labels and the efforts to maintain distinctions between people, which are often shaped by historical context and the power dynamics between different groups. From a theoretical point of view, the author defines processual identity as “cluster of meanings that acts as a cultural map and enables people to find a path in their own culture, regardless of changes in customs, rules, language, and behaviors.”¹³ In the context of the Turkish community in Germany, this processual identity is based on participation in generalized reciprocity. Consequently, identity is created by the mutual actions of individuals who

share emotional bonds, time, attention, information and assistance. From the statements and interviews taken by the writer, it is observed how the immaterial side of a person’s character is as appreciated as the material one. Those interviewed say that reciprocity also consists of borrowed money. A trustworthy person is a person from whom money can be borrowed. The ability to borrow money in Berlin has become a marker of a close relationship and community, with money becoming a primary vehicle of reciprocity and a salient metaphor of differentiation from Germans. Thus, the individual is integrated into the group based on his emotional openness and availability of financial support. One of the general functions of the concept is underlying coherence. “Expectations of generalized reciprocity sustain the coherence beneath the fractures, politicization, and differences in Turkish lifestyle. A processual identity is a cultural imperative that is shared despite other differences.”¹⁴ The author suggests that observers focused on external characteristics might miss or even undermine these positive, community-building, and integration-enhancing effects of processual identity. Contradictions between German and Turkish negotiations of identity at this processual level, particularly in family expectations and gender roles, can obscure gains in behavioral integration and lead to the perception that Turks are essentially unintegratable.

The second part of the book *Kicking out the Turks*, focuses exclusively on the 1980s whereas the entire book spans 1961 to 1990. Michelle Lynn Kahn explores the nexus between return migration and what she calls West Germany’s “racial reckoning of the 1980s”¹⁵ She surveys the resurgence

of racism in Germany where Turkish communities were publicly confronting anti-Turkish racism and the Nazi past. In the 1980s, the “Turks out” policy, which was desired and expected by many German citizens, manifested itself with an unprecedented intensity in the Federal Republic. Frustration grew until the 1990s when it materialized in violent neo-Nazi groups. It seems that since the 90s the Germans have forgotten that the guest worker program also served West Germany’s geopolitical interests during the Cold War, as the author describes, the advantage consisted in the fact that “the country developed a strategic hegemony over European migration policy.”¹⁶ Turkish immigrants represent the largest ethnic community in Germany and despite this, rising racism, neo-Nazis and ordinary Germans blamed Turks for unemployment, criticized their Muslim faith, and argued they could never integrate. Trying to overcome this tense situation, the German government passed a controversial law in 1983. This law offered unemployed former guest workers a “remigration premium” they would voluntarily leave the country by a strict deadline of September 30, 1984.¹⁷ This law was pejoratively called “paying the Turks to leave” and was perceived in two contradictory attitudes. Some of the Turks used the financial advantage to fulfill a long-desired dream, the dream of returning home, and for the second category it was a humiliation through which they understood that the state was acting following the amplification of the racist wave, but not defending the Turks, but abandoning them. Some ordinary Germans expressed shame and criticized the policy as exploiting legally entitled migrants. Some political parties have harshly criticized this financial

manipulation through which legal immigrants are subjected to psychological and moral pressure to decide. Without a doubt, this law has sparked an intrigue in the media, politics, society and the recent history of migrants. Despite all the criticism, commenced one of modern Europe’s largest and fastest waves of remigration: within one year, 15% of the migrants returned to Turkey. Naturally, from this theme, adjacent topics developed such as the condition of the children who returned, the blaming of Germanization by the Turks who remained, the disappointing experience of returning, the endless bureaucracy, the discrimination in one’s own state. All of this led to the second disappointment of double alienation.

The sensitive difference between integration and assimilation sets in motion the state of alienation. The difference felt by Turks is portrayed in article “*We Turks Are No Germans*”: *Assimilation Discourses and the Dialectical Construction of Identities in Germany*, which contains several discussions with different immigrants. Turkish immigrants differentiate between integration, which they see as a “two-way street requiring change from both sides and their emancipation within German society”, and assimilation, which they view as a “one-sided adaptation requiring them to give up their Turkish identity and culture.”¹⁸ They directly confront and challenge the assimilation discourses produced by the host society, including the negative portrayals and expectations placed upon them. Also, Mass media plays an important role as a platform for assimilation discourses because politicians and the mass media have the power to portray a broad image of a minority community. The author describes in another

article the role that television and journalism have in shaping identity, arguing that “TV is not simply a good for (passive) consumption, but is one of the many complex negotiations of local and transnational lives and social relations.”¹⁹ Public discourse and media portrayals framing Turkish migrants as a problem both in Germany and in Turkey and for this reason it is not always passive and can provoke strong reactions and discussions related to political identities. With their return to Turkey, they bring not only material goods, but also a change in language and attitude. Thus, there is a fear of influencing Turkish society with the Western European libertinism that is freely expressed in the press. On the other hand, Watching Turkish channels allows immigrants to stay informed about events in Turkey and provides a sense of connection that can alleviate homesickness. Television thus becomes the source of transnational development and the remodeling of space within an intercultural framework. The

analysis of the digital environment demonstrates the complex approach from trans-media positions to the topic of immigrants.

Finally, the author emphasizes the emotional side of migration, arguing that the individual stories of migrants should be the center of interest for each reader. The author believes that the overall picture of migration and return home should be secondary, and readers are guided to focus on the personal testimonies of those involved, which are vivid and undeniable. “These are not questions that can be answered by policy or dictated from above. They are matters of the heart, matters of the soul, and matters of human beings who all shape their own stories.”²⁰ Thus, the lack of final solutions is partially justified by the empathetic and emotional character that reorients us towards the individual. Besides that, a general criticism of the volume is that the well-documented descriptive and informative approach is lacking the author’s involvement in providing solutions.

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NOTES

1. Michelle Lynn Kahn, *Foreign in Two Homelands. Racism, Return Migration and Turkish-German History*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 47.

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3. *Ibidem*.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 10.
5. Helga Leitner. "International Migration and the Politics of Admission and Exclusion in Postwar Europe." *Political Geography*, vol. 14, no. 3, Apr. 1995, pp. 259–278, p. 264
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8. Patricia Ehrkamp. "Placing Identities: Transnational Practices and Local Attachments of Turkish Immigrants in Germany." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, Mar. 2005, pp. 345–364, p. 346.
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11. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
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13. *Ibidem*.
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15. Michelle Lynn Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 14.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 228.
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