

GIVING IMMIGRANTS A VOICE: EXPLORING MIGRATION AND IDENTITY IN THE VIDEO SERIES *GERMANIA*

La inmigración en el foco: voces e identidad a través de la video serie documental alemana Germania

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Keywords

Immigration
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ABSTRACT: In 2016, the German production company *funk* began a new weekly series of short documentary videos, *Germania*, designed to explore German identity and the reality of those living with a migration background. Although one in five people in Germany today have a migratory background, the focus of the series, according to promotional materials, was not the immigration debate (which has consumed much of public policy since 2015) but rather the fact that Germany has long been a land of immigration and is today firmly a multicultural society. Each video, ranging between 5 and 15 minutes, portrays a well-known young artist who talks in first-person about identity, their roots, and the geographies that have shaped and impacted them as well as their perspectives on Germany. The series eschews the traditional documentary format in favor of digital media and a YouTube/TikTok aesthetic. This article explores a select number of these videos and analyzes the concept of identity that they convey as well as the format chosen as a kind of synthesis of traditional documentary and digital media.

Palabras clave

Inmigración
Postmigración
Alemania
Identidad cultural
Heimat

RESUMEN: En 2016 la productora audiovisual alemana, *funk*, comenzó una nueva serie semanal de cortometrajes llamada *Germania*. La serie fue creada con la intención de explorar la identidad y la realidad que viven los alemanes de origen inmigrante. Aunque una de cada cinco personas en Alemania declara hoy en día ser de origen inmigrante, el interés de esta serie no es participar en el debate en torno a la inmigración que ocupa una gran parte del discurso de la política pública desde 2015, sino hacer constar el hecho de que Alemania ha sido durante mucho tiempo un país de inmigración y que hoy día continúa siendo una sociedad multicultural. Cada video, con una duración de entre 5 a 15 minutos, retrata a un/a personaje joven famoso/a que expone en primera persona su concepto de identidad, su historia familiar, resalta las ciudades que le han formado e impactado, y explica su visión personal sobre Alemania. La serie evita utilizar la forma tradicional del documental exclusivamente y se decanta por incorporar los medios digitales y una estética YouTube o TikTok. Este artículo explorará una selección de los videos y analizará el concepto de identidad alemana que en ellos se transmite, vinculando este aspecto a la elección de un formato visual que sintetiza elementos del documental tradicional con la estética de los medios digitales.

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In the first decade of the 21st century, many European countries engaged in debates and discussions about what national identity meant in the new millennium and in the wake of increased extra-European migration. While for some this was the result of a perceived cultural and political identity crisis, for others it was a reckoning with the reality of modern European society and an opportunity to rethink outdated conceptions of the nation-state. In 2015, these debates became more acute and pressing as the number of people seeking asylum in Europe grew exponentially. Reaction to the growth in migration varied, particularly in Germany. On the one hand, Germany experienced a «Willkommenskultur» a «Welcoming Culture,» in which citizens across the country welcomed and assisted those seeking asylum (Bock & Macdonald, 2019). On the other hand, right-wing, anti-immigrant parties, especially the Alternative for Germany (AfD) grew in strength and gained seats in state governments and federal parliaments. Writers, artists, politicians and intellectuals weighed in on the debate and Germans were once again confronted with the issue of what it means to be German as well as how to understand and represent Germany as a multicultural society. An integral part of that discussion (often missing in media and political debates) was the voice of those with a migratory background who could reflect on their own lived experiences.

In the following year, 2016, *funk*, the youth production arm of the two German state television stations ARD and ZDF, began a new weekly series of short documentary videos, *Germania*, designed to explore the issue of German identity and the reality of those living with a migratory background in the Federal Republic¹. Although one in five people in Germany today have a migratory background, the focus of the series, according to promotional materials, was not on the immigration debate but rather the fact that Germany has long been a land of immigration and is today firmly a multicultural society². Instead, the project sought to give voice to public figures in the arts scene who could tell their own story. Each video, ranging between five and fifteen minutes, portrays individuals, mostly well-known musicians, actors, and influencers, who talk in the first-person about their sense of identity, their roots, and the geographies that have shaped and impacted them, as well as their perspectives on Germany and belonging. The series eschews the traditional documentary format in favor of digital media and a YouTube/TikTok aesthetic, clearly aimed at a younger audience. Most importantly, the series gives voice to first- and second-generation artists with an immigrant background who speak about belonging and what Germany means to them. While there continues to be a rise in literary works by writers with a migratory background, this series focused on musicians, artists and actors popular with younger Germans and allowed them to speak directly about their personal, lived realities thereby offering an oftentimes different perspective than one debated in the political sphere or one propagated by the mainstream media.

1. GERMANY: A LAND OF IMMIGRATION

While Germany was once a land of emigration in the late 19th and early 20th century, its volatile 20th century history has made immigration and identity central to its conception

¹ In a 2005 micro-census, the German government asked for the first time about ethnic or migratory background, whereas before, a distinction was only made regarding citizenship. The goal of this question, according to the law passed by the Bundestag, was to explore and understand issues and challenges of integration. <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/304523/migrationshintergrund#footnode3-3>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

² <https://www.funk.net/channel/germania-863>. Last access: 20/01/2022.

of nationhood in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. From the guest worker program in post-war Germany to the influx of East Germans and ethnic Germans in the 1990s, Germany has clearly become a country of immigration. However, as the Documentation Center and Museum on German Migration (DOMiD) has insightfully noted: «De facto Germany is a country of immigration; however, it is not a society of immigration. There are still many prejudices and stereotypes that have a negative impact on living together in society» (DOMiD, 2022). To be sure, every country faces challenges regarding discrimination of minorities or integration of immigrants, but Germany's unique history and relationship to exclusionary nationalism makes this debate all the more acute and a bellwether for other European countries.

Nowhere has the issue of identity been more pronounced than in debates over multiculturalism and a German *Leitkultur* (guiding culture). In 2010, Horst Seehofer, the leader of the Christian Socialist Union (CSU) and the sister party to Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), declared at a gathering of young leaders that multiculturalism in Germany is dead and that those living in Germany must avow themselves to a German *Leitkultur*, a culture determined by and based on Judeo-Christian values and European Humanism. What Seehofer seemed to be implying was that Islam is not compatible with German and European values and therefore Muslim immigrants cannot integrate into Western society. A few days later, Merkel herself joined the debate arguing that the project of multiculturalism in Germany had failed and that too many immigrants had not fully or properly integrated into German society. While Merkel blamed failed policies of the past 30 to 40 years, Seehofer argued more directly that immigrants' greatest task was first to qualify for immigration and then to integrate into German society³. Such pronouncements—that qualification for immigration was not just economic but also cultural—not only created controversy in the media (and in the Bundestag) but also raised two additional questions: what does it mean to integrate into Germany society and how is the determination made whether someone has or has not successfully integrated into society? While Merkel stated that a prerequisite for integration is that one speaks German, she went on to say, perhaps recognizing the implications of that statement and thus correcting herself, that «we should not be a country either which gives the impression to the outside world that those who don't speak German immediately or who were not raised speaking German are not welcome here.»⁴. By raising the connection between language and nationhood, Merkel recalls a long-standing notion of a linkage between language, nation and culture that dates back in the German philosophical tradition to Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt and the Romantic concept of the nation. But as Karen Risager has argued, Herder and Humboldt were interested in linking the concepts of language and peoples but not equating them to nationhood, an idea that arose much later in the 1930s (2006: 61). Nevertheless, there is a pervasive notion in many Western cultures that national or cultural belonging is linked to fluency in a national language (often a core element of a *Leitkultur*), something that Merkel sought to dispel.

³ «CSU-Chef Seehofer erklärt Multikulti für tot.» *Die Welt online*, 15 October 2010: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article10326616/CSU-Chef-Seehofer-erklaert-Multikulti-fuer-tot.html>; «Seehofer erklärt Multikulti für tot.» *ZEIT ONLINE*, 16 October 2010: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2010-10/seehofer-multikulti-junge-union>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

⁴ «Merkel says German multicultural society has failed.» *BBC News*, 17 October 2010: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11559451>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

Understanding the language of a country is without a doubt important for integration for practical and pragmatic reasons; integration of one's cultural values and religious beliefs are, however, another matter in a liberal democracy and more difficult to mandate or encourage. Seehofer's comment regarding German *Leitkultur* and cultural values came in response to an assertion made a few days prior by Lower Saxony's Minister President Christian Wulff (CDU) who in a speech on the 20th anniversary of German unity stated: «Without a doubt Christianity belongs to Germany. Without a doubt Judaism belongs to Germany. That is our Judeo-Christian history. But meanwhile Islam also belongs to Germany.»⁵ Wulff unlike his fellow party members was making a case for multiculturalism and the ability of people of all faiths to live together in contemporary Germany. Making political speeches and assertions about immigration and integration is one thing, but the lived reality is often quite another. In the debate that ensued, it is important to note that most all of the political participants were Germans from the dominant culture without a migratory background and too often missing from the discourse were those Germans whose lived reality is one quite different than the one reflected in the media and political discourse⁶.

2. GERMANIA: AN EXPLORATION OF GERMAN IDENTITY

It was in that context that the production company funk began its new weekly series of short documentary videos, *Germania*, which was designed to take up these questions and explore German identity from the perspective of those living with a migration background in the Federal Republic⁷. The producers recognized the reality of contemporary German society (that Germany is and has long been a multicultural society) and used this as the starting point for their exploration of their country. Rather than creating a traditional length documentary, they decided to release the videos on YouTube presenting short portraits of an individual who usually begins by introducing him- or herself, saying where they were born, where they live and what their migratory background is. The subjects are some of the most well-known and popular names in the cultural industry, especially in the realm of rap and pop music. The videos have since attained over 30 million views and in 2018 the series was awarded the prestigious Grimme Prize for excellence in television production (even though it was never streamed on television).

From the start, the series was constructed as a kind of provocation, both in content and in visual aesthetics. The title sequence, first and foremost, conveys the creators' desire to deconstruct established tropes about German identity. After a short introduction of the subject profiled, there is a still frame with somewhat traditional German architecture and

⁵ «Das Christentum gehört zweifelsfrei zu Deutschland. Das Judentum gehört zweifelsfrei zu Deutschland. Das ist unsere christlich-jüdische Geschichte. Aber der Islam gehört inzwischen auch zu Deutschland.» All translations mine unless otherwise noted. «Der Islam gehört zu Deutschland. Die Geschichte eines Satzes.» *Deutschlandfunk*, 13 January, 2015: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/der-islam-gehört-zu-deutschland-die-geschichte-eines-satzes-100.html>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

⁶ Statistically the CDU/CSU have the fewest members with a migratory background in their union. See Mediendienst Integration's website: <https://mediendienst-integration.de/artikel/15-abgeordnete-mit-migrationshintergrund.html>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the German term *Migrationshintergrund* (migration background), its history and usage, see Will (2020).

the title «Germania» written in a stylized font reminiscent of 18th and 19th century German lettering (Figure 1). All of these visual elements recall older, even ancient conceptions of Germanness, which the series seeks to problematize.



Source: YouTube.

Figure 1
Germania opening title shot

The title of the series itself, «Germania,» is the title of Roman historian Tacitus's ethnological study of the Germanic peoples outside of the Roman Empire. It was also the Latin term for the land of the *Germani* and signifies an ancient conception of a pre-nation state Germany⁸. Moreover, the title sequence shows each profiled subject (mostly dark-skinned, dark-haired individuals) under the title written in lettering reminiscent of *Fraktur*, a typesetting font developed in the 16th century and used in all German-speaking countries well into the 20th century. The Nazis continued to use this «gothic» font (as opposed to Antiqua) due to its supposedly specifically German nature (it was used, for instance, on the cover of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*). In 1941, Martin Bormann, head of the Nazi Chancellery, banned its use, claiming that it was in fact Jewish lettering, thus complicating even more the associations with this once quintessential German font⁹. Moreover, the background melody for each video sequence is Franz Schubert's «Am Brunnen vor dem Tore,» (At the Well Before the Gate) sometimes known as «Der Lindenbaum» (The Linden Tree). The song is part of Schubert's cycle «Die Winterreise»,

⁸ There is a long history of the usage of the term, including later (mis)appropriations for nationalistic purposes, including, among others, the name of Hitler's reimagined Berlin. In the post-war era artists have often sought to deconstruct the nationalist references.

⁹ See the facsimile of Bormann's edict reproduced here: <http://ligaturix.de/anfang.htm>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

one of the most well-known and beloved song-cycles in the German art song repertoire. The titular linden tree has similarly played an important symbolic role in German cultural identity; it was, in many versions, the leaf of the linden tree which fell on Siegfried's back in the German medieval saga *Das Nibelungenlied*, rendering him vulnerable and undercutting his invincibility and the linden has a long association with peace and justice in German historical traditions.

Thus, each episode of *Germania* opens with visual and aural references to what could be viewed as traditional German *Leitkultur*, yet they are undercut and contested with the contrasted portrait of an individual who does not reflect the stereotypical image of a German. The producer of the series, Bastian Asdonk, acknowledges that this title sequence was meant as a provocation to call this view into question:

«It's a provocation, of course. It was actually the starting point of this whole story. Germany has had—even before WWII and the Holocaust— a massive identity problem. And what one understood under "Germany" was many different things as it took a long time until there was a German nation-state. Basically, [the idea for the series] was about taking a concept that was completely burned up and completely out of the question and re-defining it.»¹⁰

To that end, the videos seek to re-define what it means to be German—and by extension what German culture is—in the 21st century. Juxtaposing traditional German visuals and landscapes with individuals who are not «stereotypically looking» Germans could serve as the starting point of a discussion, Asdonk maintains. But it also raises the question as to who has the right to lead this discussion? This debate—like that over German *Leitkultur*—has always been led by people who do not have a migratory background, Asdonk maintains, and it has been only more recently that people have insisted on having their voices heard in cultural productions and in political discourse in order to be part of the discussion. These video portraits thus reflect a broader, more inclusive image of a multicultural Germany and convey, particularly to younger viewers, a more complex picture of who Germans are rather than what might typically be portrayed in the mainstream media.

3. GERMANY AS A POST-MIGRANT SOCIETY

The political debate over multiculturalism and identity in contemporary Germany is in many ways rooted in an antiquated perspective of a bifurcated society consisting of an immigrant and an autochthonous population, when in fact there are second- and third-generation Germans (those with a so-called «migratory background») who fit into neither category and may or may not hold German citizenship. In attempting to bridge critical migration research and empirical social science research, sociologist Naika Foroutan (2019b) has advocated for an understanding of German society as a post-migrant society, one that, following Shermin Langhoff, no longer divides society into native and migrant categories¹¹. Post-

¹⁰ Bastian Asdonk, Personal Correspondence during 2021. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ «Post» in post-migration does not suggest the end of migration rather presumes the reality and explores the acts of identity negotiation that occurs ex post facto. «Post-Migrant Society,» Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdosiers/205295/post-migrant-society>. Last access: 06/07/2022.

migrant societies, she writes, are ones characterized by societal negotiation and adaptation, processes that occur *after* migration has already occurred: «The central assumption is that it is not about immigration itself, rather about socio-political negotiations that take place *after* migration has occurred but are hidden *behind* the migration question and that go above and *beyond* mere migration» (2019a: 19). Migration is a global reality that has become part of most all societies, yet at the same time, «this demographic normality is turned into an anomaly by “migrantizing” one part of society, which entails exclusion from a country’s identity» (Foroutan, 2019b: 149). This process ensures that those categorized as migrants and their decedents can never fully be accepted or part of the dominant or native society.

Black-Germans, Turkish-Germans and other members of the non-dominant culture often share experiences on social media of being asked where they are from, of being spoken to in English (assuming an inability to speak German) or complimented on their German (assuming that German could not be their native language). In fact, the rapper Celo, born in Germany to Bosnian immigrants and who raps with his partner Abdi, the son of Moroccan immigrants (both of whom are profiled in a *Germania* episode) recounts that while growing up in Frankfurt, his parents spoke Bosnian with him at home and German was for him the language of school and on the street with friends. He came to recognize the structural and linguistic hierarchy of bilingualism that is prevalent among Germans and that represents a particular form of racism. If parents speak French or Norwegian to their children at home, he notes, Germans are amazed at how cultivated and cosmopolitan the family is. However, when it comes to languages like Turkish or Farsi being spoken at home, views change and suddenly, the discourse becomes one of failed integration and an unwillingness to learn German (Sternburg, 2020: 26). «Immigrant» languages are thus socially less acceptable (no doubt in part being from outside the European Union) and impose a stigma that speakers of such languages are somehow less German or less European, an issue Chancellor Merkel addressed regarding the multiculturalism debate. Speaking both Arabic and German or Turkish and German is thus not viewed as educated or cosmopolitan rather is a vestige of the individual’s home country that he or she cannot shed.

In worst cases scenarios, Germans with a migrant background who do not look stereotypically German are told to go back where they came from or are confronted with other xenophobic paroles. Writer and journalist Fatma Aydemir, the daughter of Turkish immigrants, has recounted the struggles that her parents and grandparents had particularly in the 1980s, when they felt not welcomed in Germany. Even today, she feels, the coveted positions on the job market still mostly go to her «white peers» while those with a migration background who are successful have to experience the effects of tokenism and the appearance that their success is the result of quotas or some form of affirmative action (2020: 117). Such tensions reflect a continued understanding of society in terms of native and migrant which then in turn fails to allow for the construction of a broader, multicultural German identity that exists post-migration. In fact, the debate over the failure of multiculturalism was centered around the supposed need for integration and assimilation to prevent the growth of parallel societies rather than recognizing the reality of a Germany that is multicultural. Here too there is a failure not just of politicians but also on the part of the media to address the complexity of immigration and the difficulties the children of immigrants face when it comes to belonging.

The rapper AK Ausserkontrolle’s story and video portrait is a good example of the complexities and challenges for individuals in a post-migrant society. Born Davut Altundal in Berlin-Wedding, his Turkish-Kurdish parents fled Turkey for Lebanon for political reasons

before settling in Germany. Although he was born in Germany, he says that he never felt fully integrated in part due to Germany's antiquated citizenship laws. Because of his parent's immigration status, he does not have a German passport and his residency and work permit was always limited to one to two months, something not unusual in Germany today. In fact, some twenty percent of refugees and migrants in Germany have limited residency permits, even many who were born in Germany. This situation shuts them out from participating in a democratic society but also on the job market¹². In his video portrait, he describes his struggles to understand German society, something his parents could not prepare him for, and to make something of his life. Most all doors and opportunities were shut for him, leading to a life of criminality. He became involved in a group known as the «gully cover band» (*Gullideckelbande*) which robbed high-end stores around Germany. After a two-year prison sentence, he decided to leave the criminal world and to focus on music. This led to a very successful career including a number one album and top-10 songs. Nevertheless, he says, he is still viewed as a Turk in Germany, rather than as just a German, even though he himself feels part of the country.

Despite the difficult upbringing he had, his criminal background and inability to gain permanent residency, he nevertheless states in the video that he thinks it is «cool» that there are so many opportunities in Germany. While he feels that he has been let down by his adopted country, he holds no grudges: «I was born in Germany, make German-language music. I have a lot of German fans. I am not a German, but I'm a part of this country and I have been here my entire life and I am happy and content here» (Sternburg, 2020: 47). In the video, we see the musician both in rundown sections of Berlin-Wedding as well as in the studio, reflecting both the difficulties of his youth as well as the success of his adult life. In the opening and closing sequence, he is portrayed standing in the middle of a street in Berlin with his arms outstretched, as if he owns the city (or the world—a kind of braggadocio not uncommon in the rap scene—). In many ways, this is also typical of the series in that it portrays individuals who struggled with poverty, abuse, marginalization and xenophobia, but who have now become successful and famous. In the opening sequence of the portrait of the rappers Celo & Abdi, the two are asked what Germany means to them. While Celo argues that for him, Germany is a «really nice rye bread», Abdi proclaims: «Germany is for me the greatest country in the world. And you can ask any Nadori in Morocco. They will have the same opinion» (Germania, Celo & Abdi, 2017)¹³. Germany has afforded them great success and wealth and the opportunity to leave their difficult past behind them.

Critics have faulted the series for showing a too positive image of Germany and only presenting immigrants who are successful and thus accepted into society. Writing in *Die Zeit*, Emily Dische-Becker (2017) argues that some of the things that the artists say would come across as embarrassingly patriotic were they uttered by a «Bio-German»¹⁴ and that the series format offers hymns of praise to a German Heimat with the pretense that it is being critical because they come from people with a migratory background. In some ways

¹² In 2012 the German Constitutional Court declared that the benefits paid out to asylum seekers was degrading («menschenunwürdig») and that the law needed to be reconsidered (Sternburg, 2020: 39).

¹³ Translation is from the English subtitles in the YouTube video.

¹⁴ The term «biodeutsch» has become more prevalent in the integration debate to signify Germans without a migratory background but with a critical ironic tone. While the term was first used on the political left, it was quickly appropriated by the right but is now used to question the term «native» and to point to the problem of binary thinking in a post-migrant society. See Goldmann (2017).

the series does play into the notion of «good» immigrants who have successfully integrated, are financially independent and love Germany. The anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany, for instance, pushes this idea of the good immigrant, writing in its 2017 party platform: «Successful integration requires that immigrants of all ages acquire a sufficient command of oral and written German, respect and endorse our legal and social systems, and earn their own living after a reasonable period of time». Moreover, they go on to state: «Each immigrant has an obligation to integrate. He has to adapt to his new host country, not the other way around. The continuing influx of people with extremely poor integration prospects exacerbates existing problems, and is therefore irresponsible» (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017). Asdonk takes issue with this critique of the series, however, arguing that not all of those portrayed are as successful as they pretend to be (part of the rap scene, he notes, is pretending to be wealthier and more successful than one actually is): «We wanted to highlight stories of people who had made the best out of their situation. Of course, one could have shown people living in misery or addiction but what would have been the point? I wouldn't have done that nor would have wanted to see that with autochthonous Germans either»¹⁵. Many of the artists portrayed suffered abuse, discrimination, and poverty in their past. While they are thankful for the opportunities Germany has given them and view themselves as German, many also recognize that they are not fully accepted into German society despite their success and fame.

Compounding this problem is that fact that since the wave of increased migration in 2015, immigrants have once again become increasingly targeted by right-wing populist parties and organizations who see them as a threat to German society and societal order. Viewing Germany as a post-migrant society, Foroutan argues, «enables the deconstruction of migration as a scapegoat for social insecurities and threats by offering a counter-response to debates on migration and security that are framed around identity and cultural conflict» (2019b: 152). The dynamics of such a society, she writes, are characterized by various poles: alliances and antagonisms on the one hand and acknowledgement —recognition, arrangement and negotiation— on the other. In the middle of this dynamic is a pluralistic society defined by ambiguity, hybridity and ambivalence. Foroutan derives her schema in part from Zygmunt Bauman's work on the stranger and postmodern ambivalence. Bauman defines ambivalence as «the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category,» and is, he argues, a «language-specific disorder,» in that there is a linguistic inability to properly name or segregate people or things into distinct categories (1991: 1). It is human nature to want to name things and to be able to have them placed in distinct categories in order to make sense of our reality. Complicating this is the concept of *strangerhood*, which, he maintains, cannot be reduced to the usual, solvable hermeneutic problems (ibidem: 58). Our usual understanding and ability to assimilate fails us due to the «incongruent existential nature» of the stranger, who is neither inside nor outside of our realms of knowledge and is thus neither included nor excluded (ibidem: 76). Instead, strangers are true hybrids who represent a «third element,» as they are not just unclassified but unclassifiable (ibidem: 58).

This ambivalence, situated between acknowledgement —negotiation and alliance— and antagonism, is typical of the post-migrant society, in which individuals with a migratory background are not unlike the «third element», for «they question oppositions as such, the very principle of the opposition, the plausibility of the dichotomy it suggests and the

¹⁵ Bastian Asdonk, Personal correspondence during 2021.

feasibility of separation it demands (ibidem: 58-59)¹⁶. Many of those profiled in the series implicitly acknowledge this tension and find alliances (cultural, social) as well as antagonisms (political) in their lives that complicate their sense of belonging. As a «language-specific disorder», we thus encounter the linguistic problem of classification, which has prompted the somewhat awkward terms in German of individuals with a «migratory background» or «biodeutsch». The nature of cultural belonging combined with the retrograde nature of German citizenship law should certainly not suggest first- and second-generation migrants be viewed as «strangers» in the usual sense of the word, but rather it recognizes that they live a reality in which the terms «native» and «migrant» are not applicable, leading to uncertainty and ambivalence.

This ambiguity, however, raises important questions, prompting Foroutan to ask whether it is «the hybridization of society or the act of immigration itself that creates this uncertainty?» (2019b: 146). While the answer to that question is likely both, culturally, she notes, the consequences have been the continued «Othering» of migrants and immigrants. Politically, responses have been to attempt to address this uncertainty by decreasing both hybridization and immigration —pushing for greater assimilation through a common *Leitkultur* to lessen hybridization on the one hand and, at least until 2015, strengthening «Fortress Europe» by limiting the number of immigrants coming to the EU, often with Germany as the destination—. German citizenship law has certainly complicated matters even more as it has had since 1842 *ius sanguinis* laws in which German citizenship was passed down via bloodlines. Even after the citizenship law reforms in 2000, Germany only recognizes the principle of *ius soli* under certain circumstance that would allow children of immigrants born in Germany to be granted citizenship¹⁷. To be sure, the reforms in 2000 made it easier for immigrants and their descendants to become citizens in that children born in Germany to non-German residents who had been legal residents of Germany for at least eight years can acquire German citizenship. However, between the ages of 18 and 23, the children of these immigrants must decide whether to keep their German citizenship or that of their parents, often forcing difficult decisions. Others, like the rapper AK Ausserkontrolle, live with uncertainty and constant fear of deportation so that they are forced to live as members of this «third element». These stories have too seldomly been told in the media and those living this reality are often denied the opportunity to have their voices heard within the debates in the public sphere over immigration and citizenship laws. Those individuals who have achieved success in the cultural industry thus have an important role to play in influencing the debate.

4. MIGRATION AND THE MEDIA

With the possible exception of the 2008 financial crisis, migration and immigration represent the greatest challenge to the European Union both at present and in the future. Right-wing

¹⁶ See also Foroutan (2019b: 146).

¹⁷ According to Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, German nationality law recognizes *ius soli* under certain conditions, namely if at least one parent is a legal resident for at least eight years and has permanent right of residence at the time of the child's birth. https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/faqs/EN/topics/migration/staatsang/Erwerb_der_deutschen_Staatsangehoerigkeit_durch_Geburt_en.html#doc9400784bodyText2. Last access: 12/05/2022.

populist parties have arisen and entered the parliaments of most all European member states in large part due to the EU's handling of the 2015 wave of asylum seekers. While Germany's response was one of both a welcoming (*Willkommenskultur*) as well as rejection (AfD), the representation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the media has subsequently come under scrutiny. Journalist Ismail Einashe and cultural critic Thomas Roueché, writing in an introduction to a collection of essays exploring the media's portrayal of migrants offer a sharp critique:

«The European media (...) have systematically failed in their coverage of [migration]. Migrants are represented in the European media in extreme binaries, as either vulnerable or as dangerous outsiders. If they are present in media coverage, they are merely seen as statistics or represented as silent actors, never as authors of their own stories.» (2019: 13)

The failure to allow migrants and refugees to be given agency in telling their own stories in the media has been a point of criticism in works dealing with international migration¹⁸. This has only perpetuated the native/migrant binaries of representation, oftentimes with artistic works emphasizing their vulnerability and the failure of Western societies to respect their dignity, while journalistic accounts focus on problems of integration and crimes committed by immigrants or those with a migratory background. Even attempts at humanizing stories, as Nesrine Malik attests, are generally either success stories or ones that presents individuals as objects of pity. What they rarely convey are stories that are «complicated, fractured, and profoundly displaced» (2019: 117).

This more nuanced and direct perspective is what *Germania* sets out to address, namely to allow young individuals in the popular music and cultural scene in Germany with a migratory background to tell their own stories, without an intermediary, a voice-over narrator or even a context. Creator Bastian Asdonk has stated that the basic idea for the series arose from a particularly German debate about migrants: «people in the media and especially in documentary films come from a particular milieu and tell their own stories from their perspective and when they tell the stories of migrants it has a certain paternalistic tone; we wanted to let the people speak for themselves.»¹⁹. As they continued with the series, this became even more important as Asdonk remembers:

«At the beginning, I didn't realize that the issue of representation was so important for people. Many people told me later it was the first time they had seen or encountered people [with a migratory background] who were not attributed to particular genres —either criminality, rap, sport, soccer— all the things that we know. But it was the first time that seemingly normal people told their stories and that was for many people very important.»²⁰

Asdonk felt that for each episode it was important for his team to offer insight into the world of their neighbors, first- and second-generation migrants whose stories were complicated and not simply reduceable to the typical representation in the media. The producers, did,

¹⁸ A recent literary example is Jenny Erpenbeck's critically acclaimed novel, *Go, Went, Gone* (2017) which was faulted for having a white, male narrator as opposed to giving voice to the immigrants whose plight figure prominently in the story.

¹⁹ Bastian Asdonk, Personal correspondence during 2021.

²⁰ *Idem*.

however, choose to spotlight young, well-known artists, thereby perpetuating the success stories that Malik warned about (2019). However, as is revealed in many of the different stories, their paths to success were certainly not easy and often involved earlier bouts with criminality, overcoming abuse and discrimination and coming to terms with conservative parents or grandparents for whom their lifestyle choices were foreign or unwelcome.

5. RAP MUSIC AND GERMAN IDENTITY

A large number of the interviewees in *Germania* come from the German rap scene and some of the biggest names in German rap, in fact, are musicians with a migratory background themselves. Hyperbole, one of production companies behind *Germania*, had since 2016 also been producing another YouTube series called Disslike, which similarly features first-person interviews with prominent guests from the world of politics and culture. Here too rap musicians were prominently featured, first and foremost, as Asdonk, explained, in order «to reach people who normally would not be reached through the mainstream political media like television or newspapers» (Kuba, 2017). Moreover, he states, «many rappers are representative of other immigrants or children of immigrants. Rap as a music form developed out of the history of African slaves and therefore always tells of cultural identity in a foreign country» (ibidem). In this case, of course, Germany is not a «foreign country» in the traditional sense of the term for those with migratory backgrounds, rather it can be perceived as «foreign» or «strange» in that culturally these artists are often «othered» and made to feel foreign. Their music and lyrics reflect this struggle for acceptance and recognition in the face of the cultural ambivalence that Bauman (1991) has described toward the third element. Besides that, Asdonk often chose to highlight rappers as they are simply good storytellers.

German hip-hop, as has been well-documented (Greve, 2003; Güngör & Loh, 2002; Klein & Friedrich, 2003; among others), was in its beginnings highly-influenced by the North American rap scene and began in Germany primarily in Turkish-German circles. As Oliver Kautny maintained: «Many ethnic immigrant rappers in Germany report how important it was for them to follow this example and to view themselves no longer as marginalized objects but as creative subjects» (2013: 406). It was empowering, he writes, for them to be seen and heard in public, as their migratory background had rendered them almost invisible in the media and the public sphere. The success of American hip-hop allowed a new generation of German artists, most with migrant backgrounds, to tell their stories and critique the dominant discourse through their music. It has also allowed them to engage in debates over multiculturalism and assimilation. However, despite its popularity, as Kautny argues, by the 1990s the public perception of hip-hop was «less focused on hybridity than on ethnic criteria as non-immigrant Germans also began performing as rap artists» (2013: 409). This served only to further the native/migrant binary that a post-migrant society seeks to deconstruct. The portraits in *Germania* thus reveal a more nuanced understanding of identity, belonging and Heimat for first- and second-generation German migrants.

6. RE-ENVISIONING HEIMAT

Concomitant with the feeling of belonging has traditionally been a connection to a place as a pillar of identity, a feeling often linked to the German term «Heimat.» The disruptiveness caused by migration complicates this sense of home and belonging. Many (im)migrants are displaced due to war, famine or persecution, and while they may find a home in a new country, they may not necessarily develop a sense of belonging. Additionally, an emotional connection to one's birth country can be painful because of the sense of loss that arose through displacement but also because of the trauma that might be associated with that land. For second-generation immigrants, however, seeking connection to one country or the other becomes even more complex. Culturally, they often feel a sense of attachment (if not belonging) to their country of residence yet an equally strong connection to their parents' country of origin. The interview-portrait of the German-Turkish singer Elif reveals the complexity of this issue and is a good example of this conflict. The video opens with her speaking to her sense of belonging:

«I always wanted to belong. I always wanted to have the feeling of being part of something. And because I am here in this country [Germany] and was born here, when people say "go back home" ... I think to myself: "Huh? Back where?" There is only here for me.» (Germania, Elif, 2017)

As in all the videos, it then cuts to the title sequence, showing her standing in the middle of a street in Berlin with the «Germania» image at the top of the screen, emphasizing that individuals like her are also the face of Germany. Nevertheless, she reveals the doubt and struggles that she has with this sense of identity. An ethnic or «Bio-German» would never have to question their sense of belonging to Germany or German society, yet as someone born in Germany, she occupies for some a cultural in-betweenness, characteristic of the third element. She goes on to recount a somewhat typical childhood in Berlin, growing up as the daughter of Turkish migrants —speaking Turkish at home, Turkish food, Turkish music, friends and family—. This meant, she says, a Turkish world at home and a German world outside her home that nonetheless created a bilingual, bicultural world that enriched her musical style but complicated her sense of belonging. Leslie Adelson, in her influential study of Turkish-German literature and identity, notably rejected the «between two worlds» paradigm as a cultural fable, suggesting that the shared histories of Germans and Turks are far more intertwined and complex than often imagined (2005: 5). Indeed, Elif's music is influenced by Turkish rhythms and emotions, and, like the Turkish-German literature that Adelson analyses (*ibidem*), her music represents more of an interplay between two cultures than a polarity. Moreover, while her parents are well integrated, they have not, she says, given up their culture and feel a strong connectedness to Turkey. She and her siblings on the other hand, having been born in Germany, feel a strong connection to Germany, yet similarly have not forgotten their cultural and familiar roots. In many ways, her family's story of successful integration reflects the desire of those who argue for the need for a German *Leitkultur* that helps in the integration process. However, like many with a migratory background, she finds herself in a position complicated by both Germany's citizenship laws as well as a feeling of belonging reflected in the term «Heimat,» a sense of home and homeland.

While many societies and languages have a term for a feeling of home and belonging, in the German context «Heimat» is somewhat unique and connotes a feeling of connectedness

to a landscape or homeland often associated with one's childhood. Many of the artists portrayed in the *Germania* series reflect on the idea of Heimat and discuss what it means to them both personally as well as in a post-migrant society. Many find that identifying Heimat complicates their sense of identity as well as their struggle to belong—for some Heimat is their country of birth, for others it is Germany and for others still it is both—. The concept of Heimat refers though to more than just a homeland or place of birth and embodies a sense of «language, identity, geography, politics and notions of the self» (Blickle, 2002: 8). Where one may live is different than one's «Heimat» which evokes trust, community and safety and as such stands in contrast to feelings of foreignness or alienation, once again underscoring the native/migrant binary (Bausinger and Köstlin, 1979). Jörn Ahrens (2021) has more recently argued for a political connection between *Leitkultur* and «Heimat» as a way of excluding or prejudicing notions of Otherness. The fear of migrants and the cultural Other, both of which have been politically weaponized by the right, are now being coupled with the desire to impose a *Leitkultur* on immigrants, ostensibly to ensure integration and assimilation, but also as a way of claiming German authenticity. In doing so, it has radicalized the idea of a German «Heimat» and made it an exclusionary term. Yet once again, these arguments are being put forward by politicians in the dominant culture, whereas the subjects in this series reclaim the term and define it for how it fits their lived experience. Elif, for instance, defines «Heimat» differently and on her own terms: «I found out that for me "Heimat" is not connected to the place where I am, rather there, where my friends and loved ones are. That is where "Heimat" is. Borders are not so important» (*Germania*, Elif, 2017). This ability to redefine terms and concepts to fit the reality of a post-migrant society is particularly important and a central question for many of the *Germania* subjects.

The rapper Capital Bra similarly reappropriates the term and defines it to reflect his reality. Born in Siberia, he lived in Ukraine until he was seven, then moved with his mother to Germany. «Ukraine is my Heimat, I was raised there. But Germany is also my Heimat. I grew up here, learned the language and my friends and family are here» (*Germania*, Capital Bra, 2017). Like Elif, he emphasizes that identity and feelings of belongingness are complex and not binary. He, like many others in the rap scene, find a solidarity with other musicians that similarly have a migratory background. Capital Bra has, for instance, worked with other very successful rappers, such as Bushido, who is of Tunisian descent, and Celo and Abdi, who are of Bosnian and Moroccan descent respectively. These alliances and the solidarity they feel with musicians with similar life stories reflect another important aspect of a post-migrant society, in which alliances rather than ethnicity structure conceptions of identity and belonging (Foroutan, 2019a: 199). Such alliances, Foroutan argues, can rebuff the old conception of solidarity through shared ethnicity or country of origin and instead create new hybridities based on personal experience or positionality, which she calls, following Andreas Wimmer, «boundary blurring,» something Elif has recognized in a more personal manner by rejecting the importance of physical and cultural borders (*ibidem*).

7. CONCLUSION

In 2022, *Germania* began its seventh year of production and, based on feedback that they received from viewers, has begun producing longer portraits of the young protagonists

from the fields of culture and sport. The goal remains to present a contemporary but «controversial» image of Germany that questions what exactly German identity is and what «Heimat» means for people with a migratory background and told in first-person accounts by those with this lived experience (ZDF Presse, 2020). While the series has been criticized for being at times too laudatory of German society, the protagonists spotlighted and the format chosen represent an attempt to reach a youth audience and to promote a concept of German identity that counters the image propagated by right-wing, anti-immigrant parties (AfD) and organizations (Pegida) whose popularity have been on the rise since the large wave of migrants and asylum seekers in 2015.

But the series also seeks to counter a dominant narrative in the media. As Nesrine Malik (2019) has argued, there has been a tendency in recent years to humanize migrants and their stories. These attempts, however, have too often led to a caricature of either the «utterly dispossessed, or Nobel Prize winners» (ibidem: 117) rather than the complex stories that they most often are. The reason, she maintains, is that the stories are too often told from the host's perspective that is «spun to fit into a larger fabric, stitched in neatly, blending into the host society's values» (ibidem: 118). The stories told in *Germania* are certainly complicated and they do contest some of the host society's narrative. To be sure, the protagonists portrayed are successful and have made a life for themselves in Germany despite previous hardships. However, they do not hide the fact that even with wealth and fame, they still encounter discrimination and marginalization. They are grateful to Germany and feel a strong sense of attachment to the country and its culture, yet they maintain connections to their parents' or grandparents' country of origin as well. They reject the native/migrant binary and, as Bauman has suggested (1991), as a kind of «third element» they occupy a liminal space in German society that they own, embrace and navigate successfully. Many multicultural societies struggle with the ambivalence of assigning categories to groups in order to structure or make sense of society. By their nature, however, these societies and their members cannot be easily categorized, so it is all the more imperative that the media, politicians and the cultural industry continue to give voice to those outside the dominant culture.

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