**Introduction: Notes on a Contested Concept**

Joscha Klüppel  
Weber State University

Problematic and romanticized, debated and contested, of the past and urgently current – there are countless ways of describing the concept of *Heimat*, all of which have their validity. Though egregiously burdened by its use to justify colonial exploitation and fascist genocide, *Heimat* remains an influential idea to this day, which is why this volume of *Konturen* takes up the question once more.¹

What are the various understandings of *Heimat*? Werner Nell (2023) explains that “first discourses on *Heimat* appeared around 1800, influenced by German Romanticism and in response to events such as the defeat of the ‘Old Empire’ in 1806 by the Napoleonic forces” (23). Early on we can thus see a tendency of viewing *Heimat* in connection to the creation of a unity in demarcation to challenges and threats (see Nell 2023, 31). As Johannes Strohschänk argues, “*Heimat* is the product of alienation” (2019, 52), which certainly aligns with the increase in *Heimat*-debates over the last two decades in Germany. In light of this, Maha El Hissy points to the absurdity of this response, particularly in the context of migration – a context that is relevant for several of the texts in this volume:

In view of the deterritorialization and the loss of home and property suffered by refugees, it is Germans that, in a peculiar way, demand a sedentary belonging and a defining category. It promises containment and exclusion and offers an opportunity of closing borders to a community of those who supposedly belong. In the current political context, *Heimat* consequently turns into a cipher for an enclosed world, for exclusion and discrimination because of difference. It thus turns into a nightmare for people with different, non-linear biographies. (2020, 148-149)²

After the Second World War, Nell argues that *Heimat* soon became one of the most popular concepts, at least “in the sense of referring to loss and generally
bypassing critical reflection” (2023, 24). It was, in particular, the success of Edgar Reitz’s film trilogy *Heimat* (1984-2012) that “sparked a broad discussion that went even beyond Germany and helped to liberate the concept of *Heimat* and its references from the Romantic, nationalist German traditions that had prevailed at least until the middle of the 1960s” (Nell 2023, 25). However, Nell contextualizes this shift in mindset, stating that, to this day, *Heimat* “still appears to be one of the keywords for establishing and promoting the idea of German unity and a German *Volk* in the sense of a nation” (2023, 29), and continues to be “as much a narrative of desire and need as it is the construction of a phantasma built over a gap” (2023, 31). Johannes Strohschänk (2019) points to a delayed picking up of the *Heimat*–discourse in academia, claiming that “only after German unification in 1990 […] was [it] gingerly rekindled among anthropologists and migration scholars who explored the original meaning of an apparently important concept” (41). However, as Peggy Piesche stated in an interview with Gabi Kathöfer and Beverly Weber in 2018, the archive of the concept *Heimat* is still toxic (2018b, 424). This might lead people to abandon the idea fully. Senthruran Varatharajah, German-Sri Lankan author, for example, wrote in a guest column for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: „Das Wort Heimat gehört nicht zu meinem aktiven Wortschatz. Dieses Wort hat keine Bedeutung für mich“ (2018). Sociologist Bilgin Ayata emphatically argued against the renewed conceptualization and use of *Heimat*, even in the plural, in her essay “”Deheimatize It!” (2020). At the same time, Piesche emphasizes that the answer to this toxic archive is not a refusal to engage with it: “Claiming *Heimatlosigkeit* in order to get rid of the toxic archive of *Heimat* actually still leaves us with a toxic archive of *Heimat*. At least some of us. […] It means somebody else has to clean it up. […] The other [side] is that this move easily avoids reflection on privilege” (Kathöfer and Weber 2018b, 424). But what exactly is *Heimat*?

Anja Barr, for one, emphasizes *Heimat’s* fluidity: “*Heimat* is understood not as a static attribution, but rather as a flexible and configurable world of experience/world of lived experience” (2016, 139). While Barr characterizes *Heimat* specifically within the context of the German film *Gegen die Wand*, (2004;
in English as *Head-On*), her understanding of *Heimat* implies a negotiation that takes place on both individual and societal levels more generally, allowing for the concept to remain shifting and volatile. She thus underlines the fact that *Heimat* is always something constructed. In his influential volume *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*, Peter Blickle writes that *Heimat* is “the imaginary space where a reconciliation with an alienated, moving world occurs” (2002, 40–41), describing it as an “imaginary real world.” Building on the constructed and volatile nature of *Heimat*, Blickle presents it as a return to something imagined, a protective mental hideaway, a contrast to reality, and, as such, a means to recoup or compensate for a feeling or for one’s idea of the self slipping away. The concept of *Heimat*, Blickle argues, works “through an imagistic and, thus, regressive representation of an ideal life, or at least of a lost ideal stage in life.” *Heimat*, as Beate Althammer and Anja Oesterhelt write in their co-edited special issue of *The Germanic Review* (2021), “has an emphatic sound that rouses feelings – be they hostile or affectionate” (223). This leaves us with a volatile, constructed concept that reacts to both spatial loss (of place) and temporal loss (of a particular phase of life), thus implying the loss of an emotional sense of protection as well.

It is for this reason that *Heimat* is often evoked in a dichotomy with something that disturbs either that place or stage in life: foreignness. Jürgen Hasse describes *Heimat* as “a relationship between something with which one identifies [Eigenem] and foreignness [Fremdem] that continuously sheds its skin” (2018, 17). While we may see this relationship in individuals moving to a new place or even a new country, we encounter it more strongly when “foreignness” supposedly unsettles the status quo. It is no coincidence that the notion of *Heimat*, neatly packaged into repurposed slogans like “We are the people,” is undergoing a resurgence at a time when large numbers of refugees are coming to Germany looking for safety and a future. Instead of tackling the intricate and complex societal issues that are at the root of growing feelings of unrest and a loss of control – economic discrepancies between the federal states of the former GDR and the former FRG, the political disillusionment of broad swaths of the
German public, the denial of the existence of structural racism in Germany, the long-term and lasting failure of both political and societal institutions to take into account the inevitable and necessary shifts in the make-up of society\(^3\) – a return to an imagined space of control and nostalgia is subsumed within the concept of Heimat. Often, this return presents itself as the emotional recuperation of a lost status quo that operates via exclusion.

Unsurprisingly, then, the concept has received its fair and merited share of criticism, most recently in a collection of essays titled *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Your Homeland is Our Nightmare, 2019), edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah.\(^4\) Published in part as a reaction to the addition of Heimat to the title of the Federal Ministry of the Interior in March 2018, often colloquially referred to as the Heimatministerium,\(^5\) the collection critically addresses the term Heimat. In charge of renaming the ministry was its new head, conservative politician Horst Seehofer, one of the leaders of the CSU (Christian Social Union). The addition of the two words Bau (building) and Heimat (officially translated as community) was thus a conservative reframing of the importance of specific discourses. Political sociologist Bilgin Ayata describes this change as the institutional reintroduction of Heimat, an attempt to revise history that is emblematic of a shift in contemporary political discourses (2020, 43). Aydemir and Yaghoobifarah harshly criticize the notion of Heimat in the foreword to *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* on the basis that “the concept of Heimat has never described a real place in Germany, but always the yearning for a particular ideal instead: a homogeneous, white, Christian society in which men have the final say and women worry about childbirth – where other realities of life simply do not find a place” (2019, 9). They emphasize their rejection of the term by placing it in single quotation marks – the written equivalent of touching something with gloves, in this case because of the inapplicability of the word to their lived experience, their reality, the reality of many. In her essay in the same volume, Mithu M. Sanyal states succinctly: “Simply put: if ‘the nation’ functions as an outer border, then ‘Heimat’ creates an inner border” (2019, 104).\(^6\) Aydemir, Yaghoobifarah, and Sanyal are only a few of the voices giving expression to the
exclusion inherent in the concept of *Heimat* that has been rearing its ugly head again with particular force since the 1990s. It is already problematic when the notion of *Heimat* is used to exclude refugees and migrants, but it becomes unbearable when it is used to exclude German citizens simply because they are not perceived as “German” due to their name, skin color, or religion. What too many consider “German” is not representative of today’s society. It is, however, representative of the exclusion and racism many face, and this is linked to the idea of *Heimat*.

Luckily, many of those excluded provide their own epistemological concepts, claiming their stake in the discourse. Mark Terkessidis, for one, argues for a political and societal program of “Interkultur” in which everyone is granted accessibility (“Barrierefreiheit”) and given the same opportunities in a manner that accounts for multiplicity within society: interculture as a rule of action (“Handlungsregel”; 2010, 10) for everyone. Terkessidis understands this rule of action as an organizing principle – but one that emphasizes communication and the creation of new connections. There is no such thing as harmony, Terkessidis argues, and it does not always have to be the goal. Instead, German society should strive for a flexible form of communication and interaction that can account for “life in an ambiguous state and the creation of a future that is still vague” (2010, 10). “Interkultur” means that we should not stop at respecting each other’s differences. Respect is necessary but living together successfully and productively requires more than that. Terkessidis proposes that the goal needs to be a diverse public space “in which accessibility prevails and everyone can maximize their potential” (2010, 126). While not specifically formulated as an alternative to Heimat, this could lessen its necessity in political and societal discourses, and deconstruct the idea of a default, a norm set in stone of what is considered “German.”

Mithu Sanyal also argues for a productive and reformative approach that formulates *Heimat* “in the plural, thus accounting for the lived realities of an increasing number of Germans by acknowledging how (im)migration enriches the *Heimat*” (2019, 120). However, Sanyal emphasizes the importance of creating
such a notion in the “process of consensus building” (2019, 121). This process thus requires a diverse and complex assortment of experiences and voices, including those currently excluded (such as disabled people, LGBTQIA+, migrants, Germans who do not conform to the ideal of Heimat criticized by Aydemir and Yaghoobifarah), resulting in an understanding and acceptance of plurality that is reflected in a concept of Heimaten. Althammer and Oesterhelt emphasize that “Heimat could become pluralized” (2021, 225) in the context of migration and, we might add, in the context of postmigration.

The idea of pluralizing Heimat is, in and of itself, nothing new. Celia Applegate and especially Alon Confino think of Heimat as something that does not merely exist in the singular. Confino understands Heimat as a combination of collective memory and imagined community (1993, 47), connecting “the local, the regional and the national community” (1993, 50). It is in this sense of the local, regional, and national that he argues for the existence of a plural Heimat – what he calls “Heimats” (1993, 62).

If one's Heimaten are simultaneously a city or village, a federal state, and a nation, then an individual should be able to inhabit a multitude of Heimaten. There are, however, two problems with Confino’s understanding of Heimat (and Heimaten) in the context of twenty-first century postmigrant Germany. The first is the essential role that Heimat plays in collective memory. Confino traces this collective memory from the nineteenth century and the German empire into the twentieth century. He focuses on a notion of collective memory that inevitably excludes refugees and the descendants of guest workers, for example, from the collective memory of what is supposedly German, thus making Heimat inaccessible on a temporal level to millions of people living in Germany. Secondly, Confino’s idea of Heimat in the plural is not the same as, for example, Sanyal’s. For Confino, each instantiation of Heimat (e.g., a local Heimat, a regional Heimat, a national Heimat, etc.) is still based on the singular and exclusive idea of Heimat that Aydemir, Yaghoobifarah, Sanyal, Terkessidis, and many others criticize for not being representative or timely. Confino himself says as much when he writes: “A thousand Heimats dotted Germany, each claiming uniqueness and particularity. And yet, together,
these Heimats have informed the ideal of a single, transcendent nationality,” which he calls the “generic Heimat” (1993, 62). Confino’s pluralities are simply branches that sprout from the tree that is this “generic Heimat.”

This is merely a snapshot of a continually growing discourse on Heimat to which this volume of Konturen means to make a contribution. Jonas Teupert opens the volume with an analysis of Feridun Zaimoğlu’s Kanak Sprak (1995) and its successor, Koppstoff (1999), paying particular attention to what is often rejected as “erroneous speech” by migratory subjects. Teupert argues for the disruptive potential of improvisation and, more broadly, the effects linguistic interventions on social orders. Then, Hevin Karakurt examines the potential for a “deheimatization” of German cultural spaces by analyzing three German novels by Kurdish authors, Ronya Othmann’s The Summers (2020), Karosh Taha’s In the Queen’s Belly (2020), and Imran Ayata’s My Name Is Revolution (2011). Karakurt shows how each novel reflects differently on localizations of Heimat, demystifying and challenging them. Tobias Lehmann focuses his attention on Ernst Bloch’s The Principle of Hope (1954–1959) in which he examines the interaction between Heimat as a social construct and the authentic longing for Heimat and security. He locates a conflicted plurality in the desire for new practices of Heimat-making. The volume is rounded out by three texts that tackle the question of Heimat from the first-person perspective. In a chapter from his book More Than One Heimat: How I Redefine Germanness, Ali Can defends a conception of pluralized Heimaten that emphatically includes those who originally hail from a different place, such as Can himself or the Syrian refugee with the fictional name Firas whose story Can relates. Kyra Mevert’s travel memoir “Hadi Tschüss” retells her 2015 journey from Germany to Turkey to visit her estranged father; the trip prompts reflections on her identity and that of the place from which her family emigrated—one that could not easily be called a place of home for her. Paired with Mevert’s piece is the autobiographical piece “Unpacking” by Didem Uca; her text powerfully casts the experience of losing a parent and of navigating a cultural triangulation between Turkey, the U.S., and Germany as an open and incomplete story that is also crucially shaped by language.
The following list is not intended to be complete or exhaustive. The discussions about Heimat in the last half century have been extensive and, as the following list shows, have increased in quantity in the last decade. After decades of postwar silence, academic (and social) debates about 'Heimat' started in the 1970s and took off in the 1980s: Alexander Mitscherlich and Gerd Kalow (1971); Ina-Maria Greverus (1972, 1979); Karlheinz Rossbacher (1975); Wilfried von Bredow and Hans-Friedrich Foltin (1981); Hermann Bausinger (1983, 1990); Horst Bienek (ed., 1985); Eduard Führ (1985); Jochen Kelter (ed., 1986); Christian Graf von Krockow (1989); Karl Konrad Polheim (ed., 1989). Discussions continued in the 1990s and 2000s, bringing with them influential discussions in the English language, especially Celia Applegate's A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat (1990), Alon Confino's essay "The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Heimat, National Memory and the German Empire, 1871-1918," (1993) and Peter Blickle's Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland (2002). Further scholarship in the 1990s and 2000s: Ludger Klein (1990); W.G. Sebald (1991); Michael Neumeyer (1992); Andrea Bastian (1995); Katharina Wieand (ed., 1997); Gisela Ecker (1997); Thomas E. Schmidt (1999); Bernhard Schlink (2000); Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman (2000); Martin Hecht (2000); Karen Joisten (2003); Johannes von Moltke (2005); Fabienne Liptay, Susanne Marschall, and Andreas Solbach (eds., 2005); Jens Korfkamp (2006); Christoph Türcke (2006); Gimter Gebhard, Oliver Geisler, and Steffen Schröter (2007); Andreas Bossert (2008); Herta Müller (2009). As mentioned, scholarship has grown drastically in the last two decades: Andrea Lobensommer (2010); Miriam Kanne (2011); Friederike Eigler (2012, 2014); Friederike Eigler and Jens Kugele (eds., 2012); Halina Hackert (2012); Gabriele Eichmanns and Yvonne Franke (eds., 2013); Robert Manesse (2014); Werner Nell and Marc Weiland (eds., 2014); Sylvia Fischer (2015); Vanessa Plumly (2015, 2019); Anja Barr (2016); Verena Feistauer (2017); Dmitri Kapitelman (2017); Christian Schüle (2017); Garbiñe Iztueta et. al. (eds., 2017, 2021); Reinhard Müller (FAZ, 14. Feb 2018); Nazli Nikjamal (2018); Jürgen Hasse (ed., 2018); Peter Zudeick (2018); Susanne Scharnowski (2019); Thomas Ebermann (2019); Martina Hüll, Olaf Kühne, and Florian Weber (2019); Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (eds., 2019); Eduardo Costadura, Klaus Ries, and Christiane Wiesenfeldt (eds., 2019); Ayata Bilgin (2019); special volume (vol. 54.4) of Seminar in 2019 (edited by Gabi Kathöfer and Beverly Weber); Dana Bönisch, Jil Runia, and Hanna Zehschnetzler (eds., 2020); Hanna Zehschnetzler (2021); Svenja Kück (2021); Anja Oesterhelt (2021); Wilhelm Schmid (2021); Thorsten Carstensen and Oliver Kohns (eds., 2022); Len Cagle, Thomas Herold, and Gabriele Maier (2023).

My translation; see also: “The term Heimat is as old as the German language, but its use became pervasive only in the nineteenth century, and it seems highly plausible that the rise of the modern concept of Heimat was directly associated with the experience of mass migration” (Althammer, Oesterhelt 2021, 226).

Mark Terkessidis highlights this last point excellently in the first chapter of his 2010 book Interkultur, referring to this phenomenon in bigger cities as “Parapolis.”

Translations of the essays of Eure Heimat ist unser Albtroan have recently been published by UC Berkeley’s Transit journal in a 2021 issue titled “Homeland.”

The “Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat,” officially translated as the Federal Ministry of the Interior, of Building, and Community, although Heimat and community are certainly two different things with perhaps some overlap. After the elections in 2021, new chancellor Olaf Scholz ordered the ministry be renamed again in early December of 2021, this time dropping the word “Bau.” The word Heimat, however, remained. This speaks to the normalization of the concept, introduced by conservatives, and retained by Social Democrat Scholz.
Similarly, Nazli Nikjamal writes in her dissertation on *Die Konzeption von Heimat im Werk deutscher Schriftsteller iranischer Herkunft* that “Heimat provides a feeling of ontological security at the expense of those who are not allowed access” (2018, 121).

Throughout, I will refer to the plural of *Heimat* as *Heimaten* as it is the grammatically correct German plural form.

---

**Works Cited**


Fischer, Sylvia. *Erkundungen zu Heimat in Literatur und Film der DDR der 50er und 60er Jahre*. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2015.


Müller, Herta. Heimat ist das, was gesprochen wird. Saarbrücken: Gollenstein, 2009.


