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***Heimat* in Visual Communication: A design
study of the German concept in the context of
migration and belonging**

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Projeto apresentado ao IADE - Faculdade de Design,
Tecnologia e Comunicação da Universidade Europeia,
para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção
do grau de Mestre em Design e Cultura Visual, realizada
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Keywords

Heimat, Migration, Visual Representation, Identity, Integration, Web Design

Abstract

The German term *Heimat* has complex historical and emotional connotations that are difficult to translate into English. Although it is often understood as ‘home’ or ‘homeland,’ the term goes beyond physical space and encompasses feelings of belonging, identity and security. In the context of migration, *Heimat* becomes even more complex and is often loaded with ambivalence, nostalgia or exclusion. The problem is that visual representations – from political campaigns to media images – shape the public perception of the term and can reinforce stereotypes.

The project emerged from the need to critically analyse how *Heimat* is visually constructed and communicated, especially against the backdrop of migration and cultural diversity. Combining historical analysis and contemporary personal stories, the project examines how design, typography and visual language influence public perception. The website *The f*ck is Heimat* serves as a central platform and offers both a critical reflection on the history of the term and an emotional approach through lived experiences.

The project demonstrates how visual communication can challenge exclusionary narratives and promote empathy. In doing so, it highlights the potential of design to transform the collective understanding of *Heimat* – from a controversial, sometimes divisive concept to one that supports pluralistic identities and shared cultural spaces in a globalised world.

Palavras-chave

Heimat, Migração, Representação Visual, Identidade, Integração, Web Design

Resumo

O termo alemão *Heimat* tem conotações históricas e emocionais complexas que são difíceis de traduzir para o português ou outras línguas. Embora seja frequentemente entendido como «lar» ou «pátria», o termo vai além do espaço físico e abrange sentimentos de pertença, identidade e segurança. No contexto da migração, *Heimat* torna-se ainda mais complexo e é frequentemente carregado de ambivalência, nostalgia ou exclusão. O problema é que as representações visuais – desde campanhas políticas a imagens nos meios de comunicação social – moldam a percepção pública do termo e podem reforçar estereótipos.

O projeto surgiu da necessidade de analisar criticamente como *Heimat* é construído e comunicado visualmente, especialmente no contexto da migração e da diversidade cultural. Combinando análise histórica e histórias pessoais contemporâneas, o projeto examina como o design, a tipografia e a linguagem visual influenciam a percepção pública. O site *The f*ck is Heimat* serve como plataforma central e oferece tanto uma reflexão crítica sobre a história do termo como uma abordagem emocional através de experiências vividas.

O projeto demonstra como a comunicação visual pode desafiar narrativas excludentes e promover a empatia. Ao fazê-lo, destaca o potencial do design para transformar a compreensão coletiva de *Heimat* – de um conceito controverso, por vezes divisivo, para um que apoia

identidades pluralistas e espaços culturais partilhados num mundo globalizado.

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INTRODUCTION

Right-wing extremists have increasingly appropriated the term *Heimat* to reject social change and propagate a vision of an ethnically homogeneous society. In their view, only those who conform to a narrow “German” image truly belong to German society, while migrants, refugees and even people born in Germany with a migrant background in their families are portrayed as outsiders. This exclusionary use of the term *Heimat* transforms it from a concept of belonging into an instrument of segregation, deepening social divisions and making integration even more difficult. It reinforces existing discrimination and makes it more difficult for people who feel rejected to build an identity.

This exclusionary rhetoric is reinforced not only by language but also by visual culture, which plays a significant role in shaping the collective imagination and public perception. Particularly in the context of abstract concepts, images have the power to translate ideas and notions into concrete symbols that reach a wider audience and are more accessible than political discourse alone. Using familiar motifs and a nostalgic aesthetic, visual culture supports narratives of *Heimat*, reinforcing the same exclusionary narrative and presenting it as a boundary against perceived outsiders. In this way, visual representations become central to understanding how *Heimat* is constructed in contemporary society. Traditional images of *Heimat* appear in advertising, politics, and media. Motifs such as rolling hills, traditional farmhouses, and idealized family life are frequently employed as visual symbols to construct nostalgic imaginaries. Right-wing populist campaigns use similar images to promote a narrow view of national identity, reinforcing the idea of a society characterized by a certain set of values. These images create a longing for simplicity and at the same time serve as a tool to exclude certain groups of people. Every person should have the right to belonging, security and safety – regardless of whether they live in the same place where they were born or not. This is even anchored in the third article of the German Constitution, which guarantees this right to all people, at least on a legal level. But access to *Heimat* is not always equal. Understanding how this concept is shaped in the contemporary discourse can help to show who is included, who is excluded, and how these ideas are reinforced through images and other types of visual communication. Therefore, this project focuses on the following key questions:

- How does the sense of belonging manifest in our lives? What gives us the feeling of "home"?

- How do visual language and graphic design influence this understanding?
- How can a more inclusive and universally accessible sense of belonging be fostered?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 THEORIES OF *HEIMAT*

The term *Heimat* has been the subject of extensive debate for a long time and is characterized by significant complexity and a multi-layered history across various social, economic, and cultural eras (Gutschik, 2024, p.21). Currently, *Heimat* is described as a complex and multifunctional construct that can be both static and changeable and allows for a variety of subjective interpretations (Gutschik, 2024, p. 25). This profound ambiguity has led to the term being both positively connoted and controversially discussed, often in the context of tension between tradition and modernity (Gutschik, 2024, p. 24). To grasp this complexity, it is necessary to examine different theoretical approaches, ranging from psychological considerations to philosophical and sociological perspectives.

Psychological perspective

From a psychological perspective, *Heimat* is understood as a deeply subjective, social, and emotional construct. It is a phenomenon that is closely linked to social location within a community and at the same time often remains tied to a specific geographical territory.

Psychologist Beate Mitzscherlich also explores this approach by viewing *Heimat* as something closely linked to biography, identity, and subjective experience. She defines it as being no longer a fixed place, but rather a “in der subjektiven Innenwelt konstruierte Beziehung zum äußeren Raum” (“relationship to external space constructed in the subjective inner world“) (Mitzscherlich, 2019, p. 182). The focus in her studies is on the “feelings of *Heimat*” which are described in Mitzscherlich's study as almost entirely positive. This feeling represents fundamental human needs such as security, familiarity, and comfort (Mitzscherlich, 2019, p. 183). *Heimat* refers both to biographical places of origin and to current centers of life, provided that social ties and opportunities for action exist there. Mitzscherlich identifies three dimensions of feelings of *Heimat* (Mitzscherlich, 2019, p. 185-186):

- Sense of community – the experience of social belonging and recognition
- Sense of control – the feeling of behavioural security and ability to act
- Sense of coherence – the subjective meaning and feeling of having arrived at the right place, even when dealing with ruptures or contradictions

From this perspective, Mitzscherlich understands *Heimat* less as a static state and more as an active and lifelong process of connecting with places, people, and value systems. She emphasizes: “Heimat ist also kein ‚Gut‘ mehr, das man oder frau ‚hat‘, [...] sondern etwas, was immer wieder hergestellt, emotional besetzt und reflektiert werden muss – ähnlich wie beispielsweise auch ‚Identität‘” (“Heimat is therefore no longer a ‘good’ that one ‘has,’ [...] but something that must be repeatedly created, emotionally charged, and reflected upon – similar to ‘identity,’ for example”) (Mitzscherlich, 2019, p. 187). *Heimat* is thus both individually and socially determined: it arises from the interplay of subjective experiences, social relationships, and cultural contexts and can change or multiply over the course of a lifetime.

In summary, it can be said that the psychological perspective presents *Heimat* as a fluid and dynamic process based on subjective feelings of security, belonging and continuity. This understanding contrasts with philosophical approaches that do not see *Heimat* as a lived experience, but as an abstract ideal and utopian vision of human life.

Philosophical perspective

Philosophical approaches, on the other hand, view *Heimat* as an ideal structure of human life that is linked to utopias.

Bernhard Schlink, for example, does not view *Heimat* as a clearly definable place, but rather as a utopia – something that is strived for but can never be fully achieved. According to him, *Heimat* is “[nicht] ein Ort [...] als der, der er ist, sondern als der, der er nicht ist” (“[not] a place [...] as it is, but as it is not”) (Schlink, 2000, p. 33). In this understanding, this feeling of familiarity and belonging is less a geographical or social reality than a philosophical ideal that provides orientation. It stands for the desire for belonging and security, without these ever being fully realized. Schlink emphasizes that *Heimat* also expresses a longing for stability and security, but that this remains fragile in a globalized world marked by social change (Schlink, 2000, p. 22). *Heimat* thus becomes an open category that describes an idea of the good life rather than a real, tangible entity. It is always imperfect and ultimately a utopia (Schlink, 2006, p. 49) that provides direction but cannot be thought of as a final state.

Karen Joisten also takes a philosophical approach but emphasizes the importance of security and safety in the development of *Heimat*, which occurs particularly in childhood. She describes it as a fundamental category that is closely linked to questions of identity, ethics, and social coexistence (Joisten, 2003, p. 24). In this approach, *Heimat* is not a static construct, but rather something that cannot simply be found, but is created through human action (Joisten, 2003, p.

19). Joisten pays particular attention to the fact that when talking about *Heimat*, there is often also talk of a distinction from the “foreign,” and that the term can therefore have exclusionary effects. She argues that it should not lead to exclusionary logic but should enable openness and recognition (Joisten, 2003, p. 27). Accordingly, it is also an ethical task: conditions should be created under which diversity can be recognized and integrated into a shared living environment. Like Schlink, Joisten emphasizes the utopian character of *Heimat*. Following Ernst Bloch, she describes the concept as something that no one has ever experienced (Joisten, 2003, p. 22). It thus becomes an open project that is not complete but rather points to a more just form of coexistence in the future. In doing so, she formulates an approach that understands *Heimat* not as a return to the familiar, but as the active and open shaping of a shared world.

Philosophical approaches understand *Heimat* as an open and utopian project. Thinkers such as Schlink and Joisten emphasise that the term cannot be fully realised but rather serves as a point of orientation in the search for belonging and security. In this sense, the concept is understood as a future-oriented task that is always imperfect and in progress. While this view emphasises ideals and human action, sociological perspectives focus on the lived realities of *Heimat*. They examine how it is shaped within social structures and how it fluctuates between ideological projections and everyday experiences.

Sociological perspective

Sociological approaches view *Heimat* as a network of relationships, with society as the central focus. They examine the emotional and social dimensions of *Heimat* and how these effect identity. Bausinger (1989) describes *Heimat* in this context as a construct that is “always situated between ideology (albeit of very different kinds) and reality” (p. 253). This means that experiences, memories, and social structures have been incorporated into this construct, but at the same time are transformed by ideological interpretations. These transformations can take the form of romanticized images, nostalgic ideas, or even political instrumentalization, whereby *Heimat* can convey familiarity and also be used for separation (Bausinger, 1989, p. 254). Nevertheless, Bausinger emphasizes that *Heimat* remains a deeply rooted reality. Even if images of *Heimat* are often ideologically charged, a need for connection and familiarity remains, nonetheless. He therefore argues against clinging to nostalgic clichés or political slogans, but rather to understand it as a social task. In his view, the aim is to create forms of coexistence that enable familiarity and belonging without reproducing exclusion and ideological distortions (Bausinger, 1989, p. 268). Bausinger (1989) considers a precise

definition of *Heimat* to be difficult, as it depends heavily on individual experiences (p. 254), but considers the term to be relevant despite its challenges (p. 268).

The theories examined illustrate how *Heimat* can be understood both as an individual process of identity formation and emotional attachment and as a social and political construct shaped by ideology, exclusion and utopian aspirations. Despite these different interpretations, all approaches agree that *Heimat* is not a fixed construct, but rather dynamic and constantly being redefined. It should be noted that the perspectives presented here represent only a selection from the multiple theoretical approaches to *Heimat*. Given the complexity and breadth of the academic discourse, it is not possible to cover all interpretations within the scope of this paper.

1.2 KEY RESEARCH ON MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION

Migration is a phenomenon that has shaped human history since its beginnings and continues to play a central role in today's globalised world. People have always been on the move due to major changes such as political upheaval, war or persecution (Koser, 2016, p. 18). Essentially, migration can be defined as the movement of people from one place to another, often accompanied by a permanent change of residence (Kok, 1999, p. 20). However, this definition is not sufficient to capture the entire phenomenon. As Kok (1999) emphasises, not every movement accompanied by a change of residence can be described as migration. Migration is a complex process that goes beyond geographical displacement and encompasses social, political and cultural dimensions (p. 21).

A distinction is often made between immigration, which describes the arrival of people in a new country, and emigration, which refers to people who leave their country of origin for a certain period (Tsegay, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, it is not always clear who is considered a 'migrant' or when someone is no longer considered as such. The term applies to a wide range of people in very different situations, from economic migrants to refugees, and there is no universally accepted legal definition (Koser, 2016, p. 25). The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) therefore uses the term generally to refer to all persons who change their place of residence, regardless of their motives or legal status (IOM, 2025). Even people with formal protection status, such as refugees, fall under this umbrella term, making 'migrant' a useful but deliberately broad term to capture the complexity of human mobility (Cummings, Pacitto, Lauro & Foresti, 2015, p. 9).

Categories of migration

Scientists and policymakers often classify migration into categories to better understand its dynamics. These categories help to clarify why people migrate, under what conditions and with what consequences.

International vs. internal migration: International migration refers to movement across national borders, often motivated by work, education, security or the search for better living conditions. Internal migration, on the other hand, takes place within the borders of a country, for example migration from rural to urban areas or displacement within a conflict region (Abubakar et al., 2018, p. 2619-2620). Data illustrate the growing scale of international migration: While there were around 84 million international migrants in 1970, their number rose to 153 million in 1995 and 281 million in 2020, representing 3.6% of the world's population (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024, p. 22). A recent example of large-scale international migration is the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, which forced more than 6 million people to cross into other European countries in search of safety and protection (UNHCR, 2019). Internal migration, by contrast, is illustrated by the massive rural-to-urban movements in countries such as China, where hundreds of millions of people have relocated from the countryside to industrial and metropolitan areas over the past decades in search of employment and education opportunities.

Voluntary vs. forced migration: Migration can be voluntary when people actively choose to move in order to pursue education, find work or improve their living conditions. Or it can be forced when people are compelled to leave their homeland due to war, political persecution, natural disasters or poverty (European Commission, 2024). Forced migration includes not only refugees who cross borders, but also internally displaced persons who remain in their home country (Becker & Ferrara, 2019, p. 2–3). A common example of voluntary migration is the movement of highly skilled professionals from India to countries such as the United States or Germany, where they seek better employment opportunities in the technology and healthcare sectors (OECD, 2024). In contrast, an example of forced migration is the displacement of millions of Syrians since 2011, many of whom fled to neighbouring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan due to the civil war, while others remain internally displaced within Syria under precarious conditions (UNHCR, 2019).

Political migration vs. labour migration: Political migration occurs when people flee from state oppression, war or persecution and often seek asylum. Labour migration, on the other hand, is

usually voluntary and economically motivated, as people move to secure employment or improve their income (Koser, 2016, p. 26).

Legal vs. irregular migration: Although there is no universally accepted definition of ‘illegal’ or irregular migration, the term generally refers to entering, staying or working in a country in violation of national laws – for example, entering without a visa or exceeding the permitted length of stay (Koser, 2016, p. 26). It is important to note that asylum seekers, refugees or victims of human trafficking often resort to irregular routes out of necessity, which complicates the legal and moral dimensions of irregular migration (IOM, 2025).

Environmental migration: Climate change is increasingly recognised as a driver of migration. Rising sea levels, droughts and extreme weather events can force people to leave their *Heimat*, creating so-called ‘environmental refugees’ (Kälin & Weerasinghe, 2017, p. 6). These people may be displaced temporarily or permanently, and the number of environmentally induced migrants is expected to rise in the coming decades (Abubakar et al., 2018, p. 2621).

Despite these classifications, scholars warn against overly rigid distinctions. Many migrants fall into multiple categories, and the reasons for migration often overlap. For example, an economic migrant who moves abroad may later become a forced migrant if a war breaks out in their country of origin (Koser, 2018, p. 27). Migration categories are therefore simplified models of a much more complex reality.

Causes of migration

Early research often explained migration using the ‘push-pull model,’ which described mobility as the result of negative conditions that drive people away from their *Heimat* and positive conditions that attract them to another place (Hunter et al., 2015, p. 386). This framework was systematised by Everett Lee (1966), who identified four main elements that influence migration decisions: factors related to the place of origin, factors related to the destination, intervening obstacles and personal circumstances (p. 50).

Push factors refer to unfavourable conditions in the country of origin that force people to emigrate, such as war, political instability, economic hardship, corruption or weak governance (UNHCR, 2018, p. 2). Current examples include the conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing political crises in Afghanistan and Iran, which have led to widespread displacement. In parts of Africa, despite significant natural resources, persistent poverty and political instability continue to drive emigration (Cummings et al., 2015, p. 24). Climate change is also increasingly

recognised as a powerful driver. Droughts, floods and rising sea levels undermine livelihoods, restrict access to vital resources and increase the risk of displacement (Hunter et al., 2015, p. 380). It is important to note that environmental degradation can both force and restrict migration, as the poorest populations may lack the resources to move. In some cases, migration becomes an adaptation strategy, with households sending members to other regions to diversify income and support those who remain behind (Hunter et al., 2015, p. 380).

Pull factors, on the other hand, are the conditions that make destination countries attractive. These include political stability, personal safety, employment opportunities, higher wages or access to education and healthcare. Refugees and asylum seekers often consider recognition rates and the perceived safety of host countries when deciding where to go (Tsegay, 2023, p. 4). Skilled migrants may also be attracted to economies where their qualifications are recognised, and job prospects are good.

However, migration is not determined solely by push and pull factors. Lee (1966) emphasised the role of obstacles such as financial costs, legal restrictions and geographical barriers that can hinder mobility (p. 51). Despite these challenges, many migrants undertake long and dangerous journeys in the hope of escaping war, persecution or economic insecurity.

Individual and social factors also influence migration decisions. Personal risk tolerance and willingness to change explain why some people leave their country under similar conditions while others remain (Cummings et al., 2015, p. 27). Social networks, including family and friends abroad, further shape decisions by providing information and practical support. The rise of digital communication and social media has further amplified these effects, giving potential migrants easier access to knowledge about destinations and opportunities (Cummings et al., 2015, p. 31).

Taken together, these findings show that migration cannot be reduced to a simple model. Instead, it requires a multidimensional perspective that takes into account the interplay of political, social, economic and environmental factors. Modern science recognises that migration often involves strategic decisions by households to improve their overall well-being (Hunter et al., 2015, p. 377). At the same time, the push-pull model has been criticised for failing to explain why people react differently under comparable conditions (European Communities, 2000, p. 3). Migration therefore remains a highly individual and context-dependent process shaped by a complex interplay of structural forces and personal motivations.

Effects of migration

Migration represents a complex reality in which opportunities and challenges are closely intertwined for both migrants and the societies they leave or enter. While many individuals move in search of safety, improved living conditions, or professional opportunities, they are simultaneously confronted with a range of structural, cultural, and personal obstacles. This duality underscores the ambivalence of migration, which can create new opportunities but also impose significant burdens.

One of the most pressing challenges is the growing “mobility inequality,” whereby individuals from countries with low Human Development Index (HDI) scores face limited access to safe and legal migration pathways. This inequality pushes many to take irregular and often dangerous routes, with fatal consequences. In 2024, for instance, approximately 9,000 people died while attempting to cross the Mediterranean, the highest figure recorded since 2016 (Reuters, 2025) (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024, p. 32). At the same time, migration is increasingly perceived through a security lens. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, fears of terrorism and radicalization have contributed to viewing migration as a potential threat to national sovereignty and public safety (Koser, 2016, p. 23). In many host societies, cultural differences such as language, religion, or lifestyle are framed as risks rather than sources of diversity, fuelling mistrust and prejudice (Koser, 2016, p. 23). Migrants must therefore navigate not only the practical difficulties of resettlement but also the experience of discrimination in housing, employment, and healthcare systems (Abubakar et al., 2018, p. 2624). Political discourse, particularly when shaped by populist narratives, often reinforces exclusionary attitudes and hampers integration efforts, while also generating long-term consequences for migrants’ physical and mental health (Abubakar et al., 2018, p. 2624). Studies show that migrants in Europe frequently face barriers to accessing healthcare; refugees and undocumented migrants, in particular, encounter restrictions, high costs, and language barriers (Lebano et al., 2020, p. 8). Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are also more prevalent due to both pre-migration trauma and post-migration challenges (Lebano et al., 2020, p. 4). While some evidence suggests that migrants initially enjoy better health outcomes than native populations (a phenomenon known as the “healthy migrant effect”) this advantage tends to diminish over time due to poor living conditions, discrimination, and lifestyle changes (Abubakar et al., 2018, p. 2642, 2685).

Migration also has consequences for countries of origin. The phenomenon of “brain drain” occurs when highly educated individuals relocate to countries that demand their expertise, resulting in shortages in essential sectors such as healthcare and education and representing a loss of state investment in human capital (Koser, 2016, p. 24). Yet despite these challenges, migration also offers significant benefits, particularly for destination countries. Migrants contribute to labour markets by filling both high- and low-skilled positions, thereby fostering economic growth (Abubakar et al., 2018, p. 2617). In contexts of demographic decline, immigration can help to stabilize pension systems and offset the effects of ageing populations (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024, p. 6). Although concerns are often raised about potential negative impacts on wages or employment for native populations, research suggests these effects are generally minor (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024, p. 6).

Beyond economics, migration enriches cultural and social life. Migrants bring new traditions, cuisines, languages, and artistic practices, contributing to multicultural environments that foster creativity and exchange (Koser, 2016, p. 23). Everyday experiences such as access to international foods, music, and cultural practices illustrate how migration continually reshapes and diversifies social life. Migration is thus best understood as a phenomenon that produces both tensions and opportunities, with long-term impacts on individuals, societies, and global interconnectedness.

Migration flows

Migration flows are defined as “the number of international migrants arriving in a country (immigrants) or the number of international migrants leaving a country (emigrants) within a given period of time” (IOM, 2025, n.pag.). These flows are not random but closely tied to structural inequalities, most notably with differences in income levels, labour market opportunities, and overall living conditions between states. Typically, people migrate from low-income to high-income regions in search of security, employment, and improved quality of life. Over time, these movements generate what scholars describe as migration corridors, reflecting the development of significant foreign populations in specific destination countries (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024, p. 23).

Within Europe, several key migration routes illustrate these dynamics. According to the International Organization for Migration (2024), the Central Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and the Eastern Mediterranean routes remain the most prominent channels of entry (p. 23). Each pathway is shaped by geographical challenges and demographic patterns. The Central

Mediterranean route, stretching from Libya and Tunisia to Italy, is the most dangerous. Each year, thousands of lives are claimed annually due to unsafe vessels and the absence of reliable rescue operations (UNHCR, 2019, p. 12). The Western Balkan route, which connects Turkey and Southeast Europe to destinations such as Germany and Austria, has seen a sharp increase in recent years, particularly since 2021. It is used primarily by migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and Turkey (EUAA, 2024, p. 34). This route reflects both necessity and opportunity: on one hand, people use it to escape conflict and instability, on the other, it overlaps with new labour migration pathways introduced by Germany and other states, where regulations have made it easier for individuals from these countries to secure employment (OECD, 2024, p. 210). Even in low- and medium-skilled sectors a concrete job offer is available. Despite these attempts to expand legal avenues, irregular migration remains widespread, often propelled by restrictive visa regimes, geopolitical volatility, and sheer desperation.

These contemporary dynamics differ from earlier forms of migration. As Koser (2016) observes, migration was historically understood as a one-time and permanent relocation, in which individuals or families severed most ties with their places of origin (p. 21). By contrast, current flows are increasingly characterized by temporality and circulation. Many migrants today engage in repeated mobility, maintaining strong transnational connections through seasonal work, return visits, or longer-term stays in their countries of origin. Affordable travel and digital communication have reinforced this trend, allowing migrants to construct hybrid lives across borders. Migration, therefore, should not be seen as a singular event but as an ongoing process that links departure and arrival contexts in new and fluid ways.

1.3 MIGRATION IN GERMANY

Due to its political history, economic position, and evolving social dynamics, Germany remains one of the most popular destinations for migrants in Europe. Around 25.7 million people (30.68% of the population) currently have at least a one-sided immigration history, of whom 21.1 million (25.25%) have a full immigration history (German Federal Statistical Office, 2025, n.pag.). Migration to Germany is driven by diverse motivations: while EU citizens benefit from freedom of movement, people from third countries often come seeking protection from persecution, war, or violence. Others arrive for professional, educational, or family-related reasons (German Federal Statistical Office, 2025, n.pag.).

Countries of origin and immigration patterns

The origins of immigrants to Germany reflect different phases of migration since the 1950s. In 2023, 30.4% of new migrants came from EU states, especially Poland (9.2%), Romania (5.1%), and Italy (3.2%). Another 34.1% came from non-EU European countries, including Turkey (11.8%), Russia (6.5%), and Ukraine (4.8%). Migrants also arrived from the Middle East, notably Syria (6.0%) and Afghanistan (2.2%), as well as Kazakhstan (6.5%), Iraq, Iran, India, Vietnam, and China. North African countries such as Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia accounted for 2.3%. Importantly, migration is both historical and contemporary: while over 80% of people with EU or US origins immigrated themselves, only about 55% of Turkish-origin residents did, with the remaining 45% born in Germany as the second generation (Social Report, 2024, p. 33).

Policy shifts and regulation

In 2024, net immigration declined by more than a third due to stricter border controls and asylum reforms, including accelerated procedures and benefit reductions (German Federal Statistical Office, 2025). Since 2023, Germany's policy has focused on two objectives: attracting skilled workers and reducing irregular migration. The Skilled Workers Immigration Law facilitated employment opportunities for non-EU nationals, while tighter restrictions aimed to deter unauthorized migration (OECD, 2024, p. 210) (EUAA, 2024, p. 17). These changes reflect a wider European trend toward securitization, especially in the run-up to the federal elections, while Germany continues to balance demographic needs with political tensions and integration challenges.

Economic role

Migration remains a demographic necessity for Germany, especially considering an ageing population and labour shortages. Migrants, particularly from Turkey, Syria, and Afghanistan, are essential for sustaining the working-age population (OECD, 2024, p. 210). They contribute to filling skill gaps, boosting economic growth, and increasing labour mobility. However, integration into the labour market is often hindered by language barriers, non-recognition of qualifications, and discrimination. Research shows that migrants are overrepresented in low-skilled jobs (15.3% compared to 4.5% of non-migrants) but that subsequent generations increasingly access skilled and managerial positions, indicating gradual improvement despite persistent inequalities (Social Report, 2024, p. 38).

Historical context of migration movements

Germany's migration history since 1945 highlights its structural importance. Post-war guest workers from Turkey and Yugoslavia arrived, followed by ethnic German returnees from Eastern Europe and refugees from the Balkan wars in the 1990s. After the EU's eastern enlargement in 2004, migration from Poland and other Eastern European states increased. More recently, refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia have shaped migration flows, alongside the displacement of over 1.2 million Ukrainians since 2022, marking the largest refugee movement in Europe since 1945. (Social Report, 2024, p. 237)

Public discourse

Beyond policy and economics, migration in Germany is deeply influenced by its cultural and symbolic representation. Media portrayals of migrants play a central role in shaping public opinion, political debates, and ultimately integration outcomes. The framing of migration in newspapers, television, and digital platforms often determines whether migrants are seen as victims in need of protection, as contributors to society, or as a perceived threat to security and social order. Research shows that media coverage during the 2015 "refugee crisis" was initially marked by strong humanitarian narratives, focusing on solidarity, empathy, and Germany's responsibility to provide shelter (Maurer et al., 2023, p. 13–15). However, this framing shifted over time. Reports increasingly emphasized issues of crime, social unrest, and the burden on welfare systems, constructing migrants not as individuals with complex experiences but as abstract figures of insecurity (Maurer et al., 2023, p. 15–16). This change in tone had significant social effects. Media discourses that highlight danger and threat foster prejudice and contribute to the stigmatization of migrants, particularly in communities where the local population has little direct interaction with newcomers (Maurer et al., 2023, p. 30). By influencing how migrants are perceived – either as integrated members of society or as outsiders – media narratives affect the conditions under which integration can succeed or fail.

In the context of migration in Germany, the political debate about "Leitkultur" (dominant culture) plays a central role. The term was introduced in the 1990s by Bassam Tibi and later popularised in 2000 by the current German chancellor Friedrich Merz. It describes a cultural framework that is intended to serve as a basis for integration and social cohesion (Ahrens, 2021, p. 313). Leitkultur suggests that, despite all diversity, there must be common values to which all citizens adhere. Migrants in particular are expected to adapt to these norms (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb), 2025). While supporters argue that this framework is necessary to

create a common ground, critics highlight its exclusionary tendencies. Overall, the concept often functions less as a framework for shared democratic values and more as a tool for drawing cultural boundaries. By referring to the *Leitkultur* a symbolic separation is created between those who are considered “truly” German and those who are perceived as outsiders, especially people with a migration background. In this sense, the so-called *Leitkultur* establishes a cultural hierarchy in which migrants are positioned as potential disruptors of German culture rather than as equal contributors to society. This reinforces exclusionary narratives.

Another term that comes up in relation to migration in Germany is “parallel societies”. This term is used to describe the phenomenon of migrant communities living alongside the majority population without any significant interaction or integration. The concept gained prominence in the early 2000s, often as a criticism of multicultural policies. From this perspective, migrant neighbourhoods with their own cultural infrastructure – such as shops, religious institutions and language networks – are seen as spaces where integration into German society is avoided or rejected (Leibold et al., 2006, p. 10). Critics argue that such structures prevent social integration and reinforce the perception of migrants as outsiders. However, research shows that so-called parallel societies are often the result of socio-economic marginalisation, structural discrimination and barriers in the education or labour market, rather than the result of a conscious rejection of integration (Leibold et al., 2006, p. 10). In political discourse, the term is closely linked to debates about *Leitkultur* as it reflects fears of cultural fragmentation and challenges to national identity. Therefore, the framing of migrant communities as parallel societies does not only stigmatise them but also influences broader discussions about belonging.

1.4 VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND REPRESENTATION

Visual communication plays a central role in the debate on *Heimat* and migration, as it not only conveys information but also generates meaning and shapes social perceptions. Images, posters and campaigns are not neutral representations of reality, but cultural signs that construct values, norms and collective identities (Hall, 1997)(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 47). In this context, *Heimat* and migration are particularly sensitive topics that are decisively influenced by visual narratives. For example, the way in which migration is visually represented can have a direct influence on whether migrants are perceived as part of a shared society or marginalised as ‘the others’.

Building on this, Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides a framework for understanding the role of visual communication in shaping *Heimat* and migration. Hall (1997) argues that

representation is not a neutral reflection of reality, but an active cultural process through which meaning is created and disseminated (p. 35). Images and symbols therefore shape the perception of social groups and define who belongs to the collective and who is labelled as ‘the other’. In the context of *Heimat*, familiar motifs such as idyllic landscapes or family scenes are never merely descriptive but actively construct notions of belonging and exclusion. This explains why visual media were able to both evoke empathy and reinforce fears during the refugee debate: images do not simply represent events but negotiate collective identities and national self-perception.

This is particularly evident in the media. The media are considered key players when it comes to constructing a social narrative about migration. Studies show that, especially during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, visual media images significantly shaped the image of migration in Germany (Maurer et al., 2023, p. 13–16). At the beginning, depictions that generated empathy dominated, such as photos of women and children fleeing or of people being welcomed by volunteers. These images conveyed a narrative of vulnerability and solidarity. Over time, however, the focus shifted to security-related frames, with overcrowded boats, border situations or conflicts in the foreground (Maurer et al., 2023, p. 30). Such frames reinforce the perception of migration as a threat and lead to migrants being increasingly associated with insecurity, crime or loss of control. Visual representations thus have a dual effect: on one hand, they can mobilise compassion, but on the other hand, they can reinforce stereotypes and fears. This ambivalence makes them a central object of study in research on *Heimat* and migration.

A similar effect can be observed in design strategies that reinforce certain narratives and make alternative perspectives invisible. Hüppauf (2007) emphasises that the lack of diverse visual representations of migrant life contributes to alienation and a sense of feeling homeless. When migrant experiences either do not appear in the dominant visual languages or are only represented in a distorted way, a feeling of foreignness arises because belonging and everyday realities remain invisible (p. 135-136). This exclusion or stereotyping promotes hegemonic notions of *Heimat* as homogeneous, while the hybrid realities of migrants are marginalised. Another problem is the strategic staging of authenticity. Bland (2019) shows that selective images are often used in the context of *Heimat*, such as idyllic landscapes, rural traditions or regional dialects (p. 3–4). At first glance, these representations appear credible and trustworthy, but they conceal the fact that they are conscious design choices that emphasise certain meanings and exclude others. Authenticity is thus not discovered but constructed. In the context of

migration, this means that visual narratives often serve the longing for an idealised and homogeneous image of *Heimat*, while diversity or transcultural perspectives are hardly visible.

Furthermore, Gillian Rose's methodological approach to visual culture provides a framework for examining how *Heimat* is constructed and communicated in various fields of representation. In her work *Visual Methodologies* (2016), Rose emphasises that images cannot be understood solely through analysis of their content (p. 23). It is also necessary to examine the contexts in which they are produced, the ways in which they circulate, and the practices through which they are interpreted by audiences. She distinguishes between four areas of analysis: the place of production (who creates the image and with what intentions or institutional conditions), the place of the image itself (its formal and compositional characteristics), the site of circulation (who or what did it organize), and the place of the audience (how viewers perceive, decode, and respond to it) (Rose, 2016, p. 25-26). This four-part model is relevant in the context of *Heimat* because the meaning of visual representations does not lie solely in the image itself, but results from the interplay of production, form and reception. Applying Rose's framework makes it possible to understand why *Heimat* can be mobilised in so many ways. A political campaign that uses *Heimat* images to promote an exclusive national identity may employ similar visual strategies – such as landscapes, traditional symbols or family scenes – to an NGO campaign that depicts the concept as inclusive and pluralistic. However, the context of production, the channels of dissemination and the target audiences addressed lead to very different meanings. Rose's approach enables an analysis of how visual narratives of *Heimat* are redefined in different cultural and political contexts. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of power relations in visual culture which is a reminder that visuals of the concept are never neutral. They are linked to social hierarchies, ideological notions and unequal access to media platforms. For migration debates in particular, this means that the way *Heimat* is visualised can either reinforce dominant, nostalgic and homogeneous notions of belonging or open discursive spaces for alternative, more inclusive understandings of identity and community.

Academic discourse on visual constructions of *Heimat* remains limited. Although this discourse has intensified in recent years, there is still a gap, and only a few studies examine the connection in more detail (Schramm et al., 2022, p. 4). One of them is in the design science research by Holzner (2017), where *Heimat* design is understood as an attempt not only to illustrate the concept, but also to make it accessible and negotiable through design. It is an approach to a design concept that deals with the visualization and communication of *Heimat*. In contrast to the aesthetics of design, the focus is on the examination of cultural identity, belonging, memory,

and transformation around globalization and regionality (Holzner, 2017, p. 258). Holzner (2017) presents an approach that focuses on freedom and belonging in the world (p. 214). The focus is on developing a design that shapes experiences and not just products and does not limit people in their perception. Traditional identities and roles are changing and dissolving, which brings new challenges for the design of *Heimat*. The question “What do I do and with whom?” (Holzner, 2017, p. 152) becomes central to the design of social relationships. Design products should therefore not cement social conditions but rather soften them. According to Holzner, the fear that leads to a retreat into closed systems and prevents the emergence of *Heimat* is an obstacle to this (p. 163). At the same time, however, she emphasizes the importance of taking this fear into account to improve the design process.

There is currently a lack of empirical studies on the impact of the representation of *Heimat* in the media. As Schramm et al (2022) demand, future research should focus on investigating the demographic characteristics of users and their motivations, as well as comparative studies between different countries and cultures (p. 12). This thesis seeks to contribute to this research gap by investigating how visual representations of *Heimat* shape perceptions of belonging and exclusion, particularly in the context of migration. By analysing visual narratives in political campaigns, marketing strategies, and cultural productions, the study explores how images and symbols both reproduce nostalgic and exclusionary notions of the concept and, at the same time, open possibilities for more inclusive and plural understandings of identity. The thesis not only examines how *Heimat* is communicated in contemporary visual culture but also reflects on the socio-political consequences of such representations for integration and participation.

2. THE CONCEPT OF *HEIMAT*

2.1 DEFINITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS OF *HEIMAT*

The origin of the word *Heimat* can be traced back to the Old High German term "heimōti," which itself derives from "Heima", related to "Heim" (home) (Duden n.d.). It has been used in the German language since the 15th century at the latest (Schmidt, 2021, p. 23). Originally, *Heimat* referred to the specific place where someone was born or raised. However, as mobility increased through migration, industrialization, and globalization the meaning of the term expanded and became more complex (Eichmanns, 2013, p. 1). While *Heimat* often evokes a sense of origin and tradition, its contemporary relevance lies in understanding how individuals and communities construct their identities in an increasingly globalized world. Today, the term can refer to a geographical space as well as a cultural, social, or emotional concept. Researchers argue that *Heimat* represents an interconnection of belonging, identity, and memory and plays a fundamental role in shaping national consciousness. The discussion about the concept has been so widespread that any clear definition got eluded.

The concept of *Heimat* is deeply rooted in German-speaking countries such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Pais & Carrington, 2015, n.pag.). There is no direct equivalent of *Heimat* in other languages, as the term encompasses a complex mix of emotional, cultural, historical, and geographical meanings (Pais & Carrington, 2015, n.pag.). While words like "home" (English) or „la patrie" (French) convey a similar idea, they do not fully capture the emotional and cultural depth of the German term. In Portuguese, the idea of *Heimat* can be linked to the concept of "saudade", a feeling of longing and nostalgia for a place or time (Oxford University Press, n.d.). However, unlike the German *Heimat* which often implies a physical location, "saudade" is more abstract and emotional, reflecting a sense of displacement and a yearning for an idealized past. In Turkish, the words "vatan" and "yurt" translate as *Heimat*, but have different meanings. "Vatan" refers to the fatherland and stands for national belonging and collective identity (Tureng, n.d.). "Yurt", on the other hand, has fewer political connotations and encompasses cultural, spatial, and personal dimensions to a greater extent (Tureng, n.d.). As Schmidt (2021) states, it is necessary to combine several terms for expressing the concept in another language (p. 35). This linguistic uniqueness highlights the deep cultural significance of the concept in German-speaking societies and its close connection to identity formation. These comparisons across languages show that *Heimat* cannot be directly translated. The term is deeply embedded to specific cultural contexts and carries meanings that vary across societies.

This culture-specific character emphasizes the importance of visual representation, as it can function as a medium to communicate such complex notions across cultures.

2.2 EMOTIONAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

Heimat is deeply rooted in our emotions, whereas places play a significant role and can trigger a wide range of feelings, from enthusiasm and security to discomfort or a feeling of confinement. The emotional attachment to places, often referred to as “place attachment,” is a complex web of cognitive processes, emotions, and behaviours (Baumann, 2022, p. 401). It is about the ideas we have about a place and how these influence the feelings we associate with it, and whether we seek its proximity or want to preserve its character. This relationship to *Heimat* does not always have to be positive; it can also manifest itself as a “love-hate relationship” or as suffering under local conditions, as Robert Menasse and Max Frisch emphasize, who describe *Heimat* as unmistakable but also ambivalent (Baumann, 2022, p. 401-402). This complexity of feelings shows that *Heimat* represents a profound, sometimes contradictory, but always meaningful personal relationship that goes beyond mere comfort.

However, cultural aspects also play a central role in defining *Heimat* and are closely linked to interpersonal relationships. A survey by the German Bundestag (2019), which is described in more detail on the following pages, shows that close friends and family play a major role in the meaning of *Heimat*. Cultural elements such as language and customs also have a central function. Familiarity with the people around oneself and a similar social understanding are essential for not feeling like a stranger (Baumann, 2022, p. 398). Although today's society is characterized by high mobility and global networking, social relationships and cultural patterns do not completely dissolve from the place. For example, there are cafés and restaurants that include the word “Heimat” in their name. Either in combination with another word (e.g. “Café Heimatliebe” (“Heimat-Love”) in Heesfelder Mühle, North Rhine-Westphalia) or just the word itself (e.g. “heimat Restaurant” in Hamburg). This can be a café or restaurant that offers regional products and traditional recipes, but it can also be a café or restaurant that combines international cuisine with a feeling of home. The word *Heimat* in this sense evokes positive associations such as security, familiarity and belonging. In addition to cafés and restaurants, many football clubs also advertise themselves as a “*Heimat* club”. The football club Karlsruher SC (KSC) presents itself as such and conveys a modern, open understanding of *Heimat* in connection with its football club. The club sees itself as a place of integration and an emotional anchor for the region. It promotes sharing common values and feeling connected to others –

regardless of origin, religion or personal history. Through its presence in Karlsruhe and beyond, it sees its function as a connecting element that brings people from diverse backgrounds together and creates a sense of unity. This understanding of *Heimat* is also conveyed visually. The club displays images of cheering crowds and people holding hands, thus conveying a sense of togetherness. Photos of the stadium reflect a physical meeting place where common goals and values are shared. The visual appearance of the football club portrays the concept as a collective feeling and presents it as a positive emotional bond that goes beyond individual differences. The KSC distances itself from political or exclusionary interpretations of *Heimat* and makes the term inclusive: anyone can be part of the community, provided they share the club's values of respect, solidarity and fairness. While the club acknowledges its roots in the city of Karlsruhe, it also emphasizes its openness to the world and rejects a narrow, regionally based concept of *Heimat*. (Karlsruher SC, 2025)

In the pop-cultural context, musicians also address the topic to reflect on and reinterpret personal, social or political aspects of *Heimat*. The different approaches to the topic in the songs reflect the ambivalence of the term. For example, the song “Tommi” by the band AnnenMayKantereit (2023) is a tribute to their hometown of Cologne and deals with the longing for this city as well as the deep connection to this familiar place. The song shows how memories, shared experiences and emotional ties can make a place feel like home. The song “Koffer” (Suitcase) by Apsilon (2024) also deals with the concept of *Heimat* but focuses less on a place that is characterized by nostalgia and a sense of security. In his song, Apsilon deals with the question of the meaning of *Heimat* in a country that often treats him as a “stranger” and addresses the experiences of people with a history of migration in Germany. He criticizes the idea that people with a history of migration should leave their *Heimat* (homeland) even though they have long been part of society (Apsilon, 2024).

The political dimension of *Heimat* manifests itself in the need for active participation and a sense of responsibility for one's own spatial environment. *Heimat* is not just something that is simply there, but also something that must be preserved and helped to develop. (Baumann, 2022, p. 403). When societies or certain groups of people feel left out and *Heimat* becomes a pawn in political or economic interests, feelings of loss and anger can emerge. The question of whether *Heimat* is conceivable without democracy, as Robert Menasse asks, underscores that genuine feelings of *Heimat* require an active interest in the place and the opportunity to help shaping its future (Baumann, 2022, p. 403).

In the political context, the concept is interpreted differently by different political groups and mainly instrumentalised as a tool for their own political interest. As an example, right-wing nationalist groups use the term to demonstrate what it means to be German and thus apply it as an exclusionary tool to draw a line between the culture of refugees and migrants (German Bundestag, 2019, p. 7). In their election programs, the concept plays a central role as a defensive term in racist concepts and is used for differentiation and identity formation in the sense of “us against them”. The politically opposite sides, the left-wing groups, see *Heimat* as a controversial term to take action against a world with patriarchal structures and obsolete clichés (German Bundestag, 2019, p. 7).

While these definitions and uses of the concept reflect its diversity, systematic analyses of its visual representation are still limited. Particularly when it comes to understanding how images and symbols shape collective perceptions of *Heimat*, reinforce stereotypes, and influence debates about belonging and identity in today's society.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand what *Heimat* is about and what significance it has today, it is necessary to consider how the meaning of the concept has changed and developed over the past centuries. The history and thus the changeability of the significance of the term over the centuries show why the current meaning of the concept is characterized by a pronounced complexity and ambivalence. It can evoke both – positive and negative associations (Oesterheld, 2021, p. 571). Reflecting on the historical dimensions avoids misunderstandings in the present.

Since *Heimat* is a German concept and does not cross borders – even in Austria and Switzerland, the concept is less explored (Jäger, 2017, p. 26) – the chapter discusses the developments of the term in the context of German history.

3.1 19TH CENTURY

Up until the middle of the 19th century, the term *Heimat* served as a technical term and was used primarily by lawyers and officials to describe that someone had a right of residence with a place to sleep in a house. Back at the time, only those who owned property and supported the community through taxes and duties had a right on having *Heimat*. All those who were children of farmers, workers or day labourers were not entitled to this right and had no *Heimat* (Bausinger, 1989, p. 256). Therefore, they were homeless and had less privilege in the community. This idea – that *Heimat* was used in a simple geographical and legal sense – continued until the industrialization. The industrialization in Germany began around 1850, which led to an increase in the urban population (Hilt, 2020, n.pag.). For many centuries, people had lived in the place where they were born. With the industrialization, many people now left their homes to seek work in other regions and preferably in cities (Hilt, 2020, n.pag.). That's when bourgeois circles began to explore the identity of “being German” and the concept of *Heimat* was about to acquire a new meaning (Schmidt, 2021, p. 37). The separation of work and home led to the downfall of the domestic community and changed the understanding of the concept of *Heimat*. Towards the end of the 19th century, the term had less legal relevance and became increasingly ideologically charged (Schmidt, 2021, p. 37).

3.2 BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

At the turn of the 20th century, urbanization and industrialization in the German Kaiserreich gave rise to fears that traditional ways of life were under threat. In response, the *Heimatschutzbewegung* (Homeland Protection Movement) emerged as a cultural

countermovement (Bausinger, 1989, p. 216). Largely driven by the bourgeoisie, it criticized capitalist materialism and the social disruptions it produced: the decline of rural communities, the erosion of customs, and the anonymity of growing cities (Tourlamain, 2014, p. 37). At its core, the movement focused on preserving culture and nature, promoting a vision of international cultural renewal (Schmidt, 2021, p. 62). While it did not begin as an overtly nationalist project, nationalist commentators quickly tied it to anxieties about migration and urban growth, warning that these processes would weaken racial “purity” and dissolve people’s deep-rooted ties to the land (Tourlamain, 2014, p. 37–38).

The cultural dimension of the movement was reinforced through art and literature, which shaped changing notions of *Heimat*. “Heimatliteratur” presented rural life as stable and authentic and emphasized traditions as a refuge from modern anxieties (Tourlamain, 2014, p. 37). Around the same time, “Heimatlieder” (*Heimat* songs), inspired by 19th-century village tales, celebrated the beauty and serenity of nature while erasing the hardships of everyday life, offering an image of rural simplicity untouched by modernity (Bausinger, 1989, p. 259). These works created nostalgic idylls that resonated with those unsettled by industrialization and bureaucratization, while journals and organizations actively promoted reconnection with Germany’s natural landscapes (Tourlamain, 2014, p. 37). Yet this romanticization came at a cost: it ignored urban realities, diversity, and social tensions. By idealizing a homogeneous countryside, it reinforced exclusionary notions of belonging and narrowed the meaning of *Heimat* to a rural uniform ideal (Bland, 2019, p. 1).

Institutions founded during the Kaiserreich deepened this cultural orientation. While initially concerned with conservation and education, many adopted conservative, racial, and nationalist ideas, framing *Heimat* as something distinctly German to be protected in art, culture, and nature (Schmidt, 2021, p. 61)(Jäger, 2017, p. 14). Industrialization and modernity were presented as threats, while rural traditions were elevated as the essence of national identity. This thinking promoted the idea that people and landscapes were inherently connected, reinforcing an exclusionary attitude toward anyone deemed outside the “native” population (Jäger, 2017, p. 15). Even environmental protection became politicized, framed not merely as ecological concern but as safeguarding a uniquely German way of life.

These ideas also found their way into education. In 1908, “Heimatkunde” (local history) was introduced into school curricula to strengthen identity and foster attachment to one’s immediate surroundings (Schmidt, 2021, p. 61). With the rise of racialist ideologies, however, *Heimat*

became increasingly bound to notions of ethnic nationalism, cultural purity, and mystical connections to the land. Writers such as Gustav Frenssen played a central role in embedding these ideas into mainstream culture. His works not only romanticized rural life but also depicted the concept as an organic unity of people, landscape, and a sacred bond with nature (Tourlamain, 2014, p. 44). Through such cultural production, *Heimat* was increasingly entwined with nationalist sentiment and exclusionary ideologies, shaping collective imaginaries of belonging and feeding into the political dynamics of the early 20th century (Tourlamain, 2014, p. 81).

3.3 WEIMARER REPUBLIC AND THIRD REICH

The concept of *Heimat* underwent a profound transformation in the 20th century, shaped by two world wars and genocide (Hüppauf, 2007, p. 125). Closely linked to political, social, and economic upheavals, the collapse of the Kaiserreich and the instability of the Weimar Republic created a sense of crisis and a longing for stability and tradition (Bland, 2019, p. 1). For many, *Heimat* became a counterpoint to urbanization and the perceived moral decline of modern society and offered a nostalgic image of simplicity and security (Bland, 2019, p. 13). The spread of mass culture and standardized products further contributed to the homogenization of everyday life and intensified the tension between modernity and the desire for continuity (Schmidt, 2021, p. 136). Economic hardship, hyperinflation, and unemployment deepened disillusionment, fueling a search for cultural identity and belonging (Umbach, 2015, p. 10). In this context, *Heimat* provided both an idealized refuge in rural traditions (Bland 2019: 12) and a symbol of something increasingly fragile and endangered (Gebhard et al., 2007, p. 28). Bausinger (1989) describes how *Heimat* developed into a “culture of scenery,” staged as leisure-time experience rather than part of everyday life, a process reinforced by the destruction of real homes during the wars (p. 264).

The *Heimatschutzbewegung*, which had lost influence after World War I, sought new political relevance during the Weimar Republic and became associated with nationalist and regionalist ideas (Schmidt, 2021, p. 72–73). National Socialism appropriated many of its ideals but reinterpreted them in a racist and centralist manner. Regional traditions and diverse cultural expressions were increasingly suppressed or standardized to enforce an ideologically defined, unified *Heimat* (Schmidt, 2021, p. 79). This politicization created a cultural hierarchy in which *Heimat* became a tool for exclusion, marking migrants and minorities as “foreign” or “un-German” (Umbach, 2015, p. 28). In this way, *Heimat* was transformed into an instrument

for legitimizing persecution and expansionist policies (Umbach, 2015, p. 14), culminating in the radicalized and ethnically homogenous “Blut und Boden” ideology (Jäger, 2017, p. 15).

After 1945, only a fragmented and burdened image of *Heimat* remained. For many Germans, the term came to symbolize loss, displacement, and banishment (Schmidt, 2021, p. 84). Its political exploitation had undermined the unifying and integrative dimensions it once carried, leaving behind a homogenized and ideologically charged understanding that continued to shape cultural memory in the post-war period.



Figure 1. Niczky, Rolf. (1920). Heimatschutz. Deutscher Offiziers- Unteroffiziers- und Mannschafts-Bund (Homeland security of German officers non-commissioned officers and team federation) [Poster]. From Poster Museum. <https://postermuseum.com/products/heimat-schutz-tretet-bei>



Figure 2. Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte. (n.d.). *Plakat der NS-Gemeinschaft „Kraft durch Freude“* (1934) [Poster]. From Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte.
<https://www.bavariathek.bayern/projektzentrum/unterrichtsmaterial/realsschule-fos-bos-gymnasium/ns-volksgemeinschaft.html>

3.4 DIVIDED GERMANY AFTER 1945

After 1945 more than 11.5 million people who had been displaced because of the Second World War from the former German territories in Eastern Europe or other parts of Europe sought refuge in the remaining territories of Germany (Schmidt, 2021, p. 85). For these people, the displacement meant not only the loss of their home, but also the loss of familiar living spaces, cultural roots and social networks. This upheaval had a lasting impact on the collective understanding of *Heimat*.

In this post-war period, the *Heimatschutzbewegung* lost influence as it was seen as an accomplice of National Socialism (Schmidt, 2021, p. 87). Even though the concept of *Heimat* was negatively affected in the post-war period, it still found a way to be present in both East and West Germany. Initially, the term was increasingly used in seemingly non-political ways in popular media. In the 1950s and 1960s, *Heimat* films and literature were very widely embraced presenting an idealised image of the homeland and offered many people an emotional retreat

after war and destruction (Oesterhelt, 2021, p. 8). Eventually, the concept of *Heimat* was politically charged in both East and West Germany, though in different ways, as each side tried to build a new national identity.

In the East, *Heimat* became linked to socialist ideals and the rejection of the Nazi past (Goodwin, 2023, p. 141). The focus was on creating a new, collective identity rooted in socialist values and often downplaying traditional regional attachments (Goodwin, 2023, p. 141). This instrumentalization aimed to build loyalty to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its political system. But for many people the term remained too abstract and artificial. For them, *Heimat* was above all a private feeling, for example in the context of family, place of residence or garden club (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 18). Although there were attempts to allow a controlled reference to *Heimat* through cultural institutions or regional history preservation, any form that was not compatible with the socialist line was critically observed or prevented (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 18). From the mid-1960s, however, local history publications became popular. They reflected a need for identity and meaning – a need that later also found expression in politics (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 18). *Heimat* in the GDR was a field of tension between political instrumentalization and personal attitudes to life.

West Germany, on the other hand, initially struggled with the concept of *Heimat* due to the burden of the Nazi past (Goodwin, 2023, p. 141). There was a long period of silence regarding the Holocaust, overshadowed by the trauma of war and the need for reconstruction (Goodwin, 2023, p. 141). The term *Heimat* was frowned upon in intellectual discussions and institutions that carried the term in their name were relabelled (Schmidt, 2021, p. 85). The economic stabilization in the German Federal Republic which led to a collective self-confidence pushed the concept of *Heimat* into the background (Schmidt, 2021, p. 85). Consumption was seen as a means of moral cleansing and of repressing the past, to distract from the Nazi era. However, as younger generations began to challenge this silence in the 1960s, *Heimat* became a site of debate and re-evaluation (Goodwin, 2023, p. 141). The focus shifted towards confronting the past and redefining German identity with the historical atrocities in mind (Goodwin, 2023, p. 141). In particular, the student and environmental movements contributed to the redefinition of *Heimat* in an ecological and cultural context (Schmidt, 2021, p. 98). In doing so, they took up central ideas of the former *Heimatschutzbewegung*, such as opposing the dominance and anonymity of modern globalized society. The environmental movement emphasized the protection of the natural homeland, and the student movement and other groups viewed *Heimat* as a place of social justice and equality (Jäger, 2017, p. 23).

3.5 1990 – UNTIL NOW

These developments intensified in the early 1990s when Germany was reunified, and *Heimat* had to find its place in a Germany that had undergone significant changes due to various socio-political factors. The concept was less and less tied to a geographical location, but was increasingly associated with social networks, cultural identities or personal experiences (Oesterhelt, 2021, p. 568).

The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent integration of East and West Germany challenged existing notions of *Heimat*, particularly for those who had lived under different political and social systems. For East Germans, *Heimat* was often associated with the socialist state and its collective values, while West Germans had a different understanding rooted in capitalist ideals and individual freedoms. Increased immigration to Germany since the 1990s has further made the concept of *Heimat* more complex. As German society has become more multicultural, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional association of the term with a common German culture. Immigrants and their descendants often develop a sense of *Heimat* connected to their new country while also maintaining ties to their cultural heritage (Oesterhelt, 2021, p. 569). This required a more inclusive understanding of the concept that recognizes the diverse experiences and backgrounds of people living in Germany. Not only migration, but also globalization challenged the traditional notion of *Heimat* as a fixed geographical place, also contributing to the need for a more inclusive understanding. The world became increasingly interconnected across national borders, making it easier for people to maintain connections to their places of origin even while living in Germany. The internet and social media facilitated communication and cultural exchange, enabling people to find *Heimat* in multiple countries or places at once (Hüppauf, 2007, p. 133). As a backlash to a more inclusive and open understanding of *Heimat*, the rise of right-wing extremism and anti-immigration sentiment in Germany has emerged. Some groups have tried to define *Heimat* in exclusionary terms, emphasizing German ethnicity and culture to the exclusion of others (Schellenberg & Schellenberg, 2024 n.pag.).

After two hundred years, the development of the term has not come to an end, and it remains a dynamic and controversial topic in German society. Today's usage and significance of *Heimat* reflects on one hand a cultural trend and lifestyle and on the other hand a political instrument for preserving a traditional cultural identity (Ahrens, 2021, p. 325). Considering contemporary societal transformations—marked by globalisation, increased mobility, and individualisation –

the notion of *Heimat* has gained renewed significance as a stabilising force. However, the increase of personal decision-making options through these transformations also creates insecurity, injustice and uncertainty. The multi-layered concept conveys stability and rootedness in a changing world and creates the impression of a protected space that offers security in times of uncertainty (Ahrens, 2021, p. 327).

What *Heimat* means to the people is shown in a 2019 study in Germany, where 89% of respondents said that *Heimat* is important to them. When asked what it exactly means to them, 88% of the participants answered, “a place where they feel safe.” Human relationships and the social environment also play a significant role for many respondents, and around 80% associate *Heimat* with family and/or their life partner. For another 70%, they link the concept with the place they currently live in. In addition to the social dimensions, the emotional aspects are also important for many people. Around 64% of the people associate *Heimat* with childhood memories, such as their parents' house, and 60% with a feeling, such as a smell. Only in the middle of the ranking are nationality and culture associated with *Heimat*. For example, 59% of all respondents see the country Germany and 54% the continent Europe as their *Heimat*. The fewest agreement ratings in the study were given to the statement that *Heimat* is associated with people who think the same way you do (32%) and even fewer to the statement that it is associated with religion (18%). The study shows that the social and emotional meanings of *Heimat* carry more weight than the territorial and cultural meanings. The differences between people with and without a history of migration are shown separately, but the variations are only very modest. According to the author, the study demonstrates that there are more connecting elements in relation with *Heimat* than there are separating elements. (German Bundestag, 2019, p. 7-9)

The current discourse on *Heimat* is a fluctuation between tradition and reinvention, between emotional attachment and political charge. In a globalized society characterized by migration, the concept of *Heimat* has expanded: *Heimat* can encompass several places, change over the course of a lifetime, or be rooted in relationships, language, or culture. People can have several *Heimat* without giving up their original identity. This reflects the reality of many people who are characterized by migration and mobility. In Germany, with a total of 83.875 million inhabitants, around 30.68% (25.729 million) have at least a one-sided immigration history (German Federal Statistical Office, 2025). These demographic shifts are visible in public discourse. For instance, during the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, media coverage initially emphasized compassion with images of families being welcomed by volunteers at train stations,

before later focusing on overcrowded boats or border conflicts, which framed migration as a potential threat. More recently, the arrival of more than one million people fleeing the war in Ukraine has again redefined experiences of belonging, with images of solidarity and hospitality contrasting with earlier debates about cultural distance. These examples show how *Heimat* is constantly reshaped by new migration movements and their representation in the media.

At the political level, *Heimat* has become a contested and highly symbolic term. The German extreme-right party AfD has repeatedly used election posters to present *Heimat* as endangered, portraying migration as a direct threat to German culture and identity. In contrast, the establishment of the *Heimatministerium* (Ministry of *Heimat*) under Horst Seehofer in 2018 was intended to give the concept a positive and integrative function but instead provoked heated debates. Critics argued that such an institutionalization risks narrowing *Heimat* to a rigid national framework and excluding those who do not fit the traditional image. More recent media representations continue to vary between these poles: while some campaigns frame *Heimat* inclusively by highlighting diversity, others rely on nostalgic imagery of rural life and “authentic” traditions, thereby reinforcing exclusionary notions of belonging. Together, these political and media discourses illustrate the ongoing struggle over how *Heimat* should be defined in a pluralistic society.

In summary, it can be said that the concept of *Heimat* has undergone a profound change in today's society that goes beyond mere nostalgic or rural-idyllic ideas. While earlier *Heimat* movements often staged a “facade *Heimat*” that glorified rural areas and ignored urban or social tensions, today it is clear that *Heimat* is a multi-layered construct. It serves as an “instrument of identity” and counterpoint to diffuse global trends by offering orientation security as well as constant and reliable relationships and experiences (Bausinger, 2004, p. 270). Belonging to *Heimat* cannot be defined cartographically, but benefits from the diversity of the familiar, whether in the home, the neighbourhood, or the wider environment (Bausinger, 2004, p. 270). While *Heimat* today can be understood as a dynamic and inclusive concept, its meaning becomes more complex when considered in the context of migration. *Heimat* and migration are often perceived as opposing notions: one associated with rootedness and continuity, the other with movement and change. Because these ideas are negotiated not only in discourse but also through visual representations, it is essential to examine how images, campaigns, and media shape contemporary understandings of *Heimat*. The following chapter examines how these two

terms intersect, where they conflict, and how their relationship shapes contemporary understandings of belonging.

4. *HEIMAT* AND MIGRATION

The current situation around migration in Germany is marked by contradictions: humanitarian crises meet restrictive policies, demographic needs clash with cultural anxieties, and integration efforts coexist with systemic discrimination. Migration is not only the physical relocation of people but also a profound process of renegotiating identity, belonging, and social cohesion. For German society, this raises the question of how diversity can be reconciled with national self-perceptions. For migrants, it is an ongoing negotiation between origin and destination, loss and opportunity, exclusion and inclusion. These complexities become particularly significant when examined in relation to the emotional and symbolic dimension of *Heimat*. While *Heimat* is a complex, historically grown and emotionally charged term that promises orientation, belonging and familiarity, migration generates mobility, plurality and social dynamics. Both perspectives are neither contradictory nor identical, but they overlap, which offers opportunities on the one hand, but also challenges on the other. Building on the theoretical approaches outlined in the previous chapter (psychological, philosophical, sociological/anthropological approaches to *Heimat*) and the historical shifts in meaning of the term, this chapter examines how migration challenges and transforms established interpretations of *Heimat*. The aim is to show that *Heimat* and migration should not be understood as opposing dynamics, but rather as phenomena that are interdependent. This interdependence is reshaping how belonging and identity are negotiated in contemporary Germany.

At the centre is the observation that *Heimat* is not solely tied to geographical locations but must be understood as a socially constructed category. Migration makes this visible by shifting points of reference for belonging, expanding everyday networks, creating multiple ties, and confronting individuals and institutions with questions of recognition, participation, and boundary drawing. Migration thus marks a testing point for different readings of *Heimat*: from static, exclusive, and often nationally charged interpretations to open, dynamic, and plural understandings.

The chapter draws on three interrelated perspectives. First, transnational and diasporic approaches understand *Heimat* as a cross-border practice that makes hybrid identities and multiple belongings visible and analytically accessible. Second, psychological perspectives describe *Heimat* as an ongoing process of creating a sense of belonging that is shaped by security, familiarity, recognition, and opportunities for action. These perspectives also consider intergenerational experiences as well as feelings of displacement (or *Heimatlosigkeit*). Third,

social and political science perspectives focus on broader structures, including public discourses, institutional frameworks, and legal regulations. Here, issues such as models of integration, access to resources, and the symbolic framing of belonging in media and politics come into view.

On this basis, the chapter focuses on four central questions:

1. How does migration change the meaning and practical forms of *Heimat*, and under what conditions does this happen?
2. What role do host societies play with their political rules, institutions, and cultural representations in processes of arrival and settling down?
3. What tensions arise between individual experiences such as the need for recognition, security and meaning and structural conditions such as legal status, the labour market or discrimination?
4. And finally: How can these tensions be used to develop approaches for a more inclusive understanding of *Heimat*?

4.1 TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES REPLACE TRADITIONAL IDEAS

Traditionally, *Heimat* was conceived as a place of origin, a space marked by stability, security, and cultural homogeneity. In the context of migration, however, this notion has become pluralized: *Heimat* is no longer bound to a single location but emerges as a flexible construct that can exist in multiple spaces at once (Haedrich, 2019, p. 293). Migration challenges established ideas of belonging and familiarity and creates a field of tension between inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, *Heimat* can function both as a source of belonging and as a boundary that defines difference (Bruneau, 2010, p. 43).

Analytical approaches such as transnationalism and diaspora help to grasp this complexity. Transnationalism describes the cross-border networks and communication processes that migrants sustain, ranging from everyday practices like phone or video calls to organized structures such as associations, political initiatives, or religious communities (Faist, 2010, p. 9-20). These connections enable migrants to remain anchored in their country of origin while also integrating into their host societies. This “double anchoring” often leads to hybrid identities that blend elements of both contexts and allow for new forms of belonging (Bruneau, 2010, p. 43). The role of digital technologies has further intensified this process, as they facilitate constant contact with relatives, friends, and networks and stabilizing transnational ties across long

distances (de Haas, 2010, p. 20). From this perspective, *Heimat* becomes less a fixed geographical entity and more a transnational social network.

The concept of diaspora, by contrast, emphasizes the collective and historical dimensions of migration. It describes communities that remain permanently dispersed across regions but maintain enduring connections to their place of origin. These ties are less about everyday communication than about shared identity, memory, and cultural practices that create cohesion across distances (Weinar, 2010, p. 75). Diasporic groups often establish cultural and religious institutions in their host countries, which act as anchors of identity and sites of remembrance. At the same time, they provide spaces where culture can be preserved while new forms of adaptation unfold (Bureau, 2010, p. 48). Such institutions function not only as markers of continuity but also as arenas of social recognition where belonging is produced and reaffirmed.

Overall, transnational and diasporic perspectives make it clear that *Heimat* cannot be understood as a static place in the context of migration. Rather, it is a dynamic process that unfolds between the country of origin, the host country and global networks, and is constantly being renegotiated. Transnational and diasporic perspectives emphasise the diverse connections and networks that migrants maintain across borders, but they also point out how fragile these connections can be. When these ties weaken or break, the focus shifts from a negotiated sense of belonging to experiences of loss, leading to feelings of *Heimatlosigkeit* and rootlessness.

4.2 HEIMATLOSIGKEIT AND ROOTLESSNESS

Through these feelings of uprootedness, homesickness and the constant struggle with one's own identity (Aytemiz, 2019, p. 57), the individual challenges associated with migration come to the foreground. For many people in a transnational context, their country of origin remains a central source of identity and belonging (Boccagni, 2010, p. 201). This feeling is reflected in the continuity of traditions, language or symbolic acts such as building a house in the country of origin (Boccagni, 2010, p. 189). However, if this connection is severed and social networks or cultural practices are lost, a state of *Heimatlosigkeit* (homelessness) arises – an emotional vacuum between the country of origin and the host country (Canefe, 2012, p. 147). Overcoming this feeling requires much more than a change of location and means actively rebuilding identity and community in a new environment. However, homelessness does not only affect the first generation of migrants but can also shape the following generations. Children and grandchildren often grow up between two cultural systems: the values of their parents' country of origin and the norms of the majority society into which they are born (Başer & Toivanen,

2023, p. 311). This ‘in-between-ness’ can lead to inner conflicts, identity splits and a feeling of cultural dislocation (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 57). Discrimination and social exclusion intensify these conflicts. Some respond by consciously returning to the culture of their family of origin, placing greater emphasis on traditions and symbols (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 57). Hüppauf (2007) describes how severe the lack of belonging can be, using the example of young people with a Turkish migrant background in Berlin-Kreuzberg. There, the deprivation of belonging and recognition led to aggression, violence and petty crime (p. 135). He does not view *Heimat* as a romantic idea, but rather as a fundamental social experience where the absence leaves young people disoriented. Without this sense, young people cannot develop a stable self-image or self-esteem. They do not understand their environment and have no fixed point of reference. In this case, their propensity for violence does not arise from political or ideological convictions, but from a feeling of deprivation of understanding and belonging. This example reflects what feelings of *Heimatlosigkeit* can cause in people. (Hüppauf, 2007, p. 135-136)

This feeling of uprootedness and the questioning of belonging is also portrayed in Fatih Akin's film “Head-On” and explores these themes through the experiences of Turkish German characters (Aytemiz, 2019, p. 50). They struggle with their identity and feel out of place in both Germany and Turkey, as they neither fully belong to the liberal Western context nor to the traditional norms of their Turkish heritage (Aytemiz, 2019, p. 49). The film suggests that *Heimat* is not a fixed place, but a fluid and changing concept (Aytemiz, 2019, p. 58). This challenges the idea of a stable cultural identity and highlights the difficulties faced by people who live between different worlds.

Overcoming *Heimatlosigkeit* requires a comprehensive approach that takes both material and emotional needs into account. Key elements include an inclusive environment, equal rights and opportunities, and the promotion of intercultural understanding. Through social contacts, access to basic services and the active rejection of exclusionary narratives, host societies can help migrants develop a new sense of belonging and security.

4.3 POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF HEIMAT AND MIGRATION

In contemporary debates, *Heimat* is increasingly pluralistic but also politically contested. While left-wing parties rarely use the term, conservative and right-wing actors frame it as an identity-forming whole, often portraying it as threatened. Such rhetoric turns *Heimat* into a boundary

between belonging and foreignness and, as Heimerdinger (2018, p. 209–210) warns and can legitimize exclusion and claims to power (Ahrens, 2021, p. 316)(Kronenberg, 2018, p. 46).

One example of the political instrumentalization of the term is the establishment of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and *Heimat* in 2018 under Horst Seehofer (CSU). The “Heimat Ministry” was intended to respond to growing uncertainty among the population, which had arisen as a result of globalisation, migration and social upheaval and to establish *Heimat* as a key concept for trust and stability. Proponents saw this as a strengthening of cultural identity but argued that this step was too narrow and exclusive. Visual communication made this ambivalence visible: official appearances drew on rural motifs and landscape images that presented *Heimat* as familiar and manageable. At the same time, logos, colour schemes and imagery conveyed a sense of state authority that institutionally anchored the concept. On the one hand, this visual world created a sense of belonging, but on the other, it largely obscured urban diversity and transcultural realities of life.

However, nostalgic and territorial notions no longer reflect today’s realities. Historically tied to land ownership, *Heimat* must now be understood as a culturally constructed and individually experienced space shaped by uprooting and reconstruction. With 122.6 million displaced people worldwide in 2024 (UNHCR, 2024), scholars argue for a new legal understanding: a right to *Heimat* as a right to belong and therefore strengthening economic, social, and cultural rights of migrants and refugees (Haedrich, 2019, p. 295–296).

4.4 HEIMAT AS AN INCLUSIVE CONCEPT IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

The relationship between *Heimat* and migration highlights the need for transcultural spaces that are less physical and more symbolic in nature, enabling individuals to remain connected to both their roots and their current reality (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 57). Instead of an “either/or” logic, *Heimat* must be redefined as an open, flexible and dynamic concept that takes plurality and hybridity into account. Such an approach makes it possible to negotiate cultural differences, address questions of identity and reflect on belonging across national and cultural boundaries (Kronenberg, 2018, p. 59). A static and exclusive understanding no longer corresponds to the realities of a world characterised by mobility, diversity and transnational living environments. Rather, *Heimat* should be understood as a fluid space of experience that is determined primarily by subjective perceptions and feelings of belonging rather than by a fixed geography (Heimerdinger, 2018, p. 210). In this sense, it is relevant not only to those who remain in their

place of birth, but also to migrants who navigate between old and new ties by maintaining former connections while creating new ones (Haedrich, 2019, p. 293). Such an inclusive concept reflects the lived reality of diasporic and transcultural communities while providing a social foundation based on participation, recognition and diversity.

In visual communication, the idea of this inclusive concept is manifested where design, branding and aesthetics make hybrid identities and intercultural experiences visible. The lifestyle brand “Habibi you know” is an example of this. The brand was founded by people who position themselves as a transnational voice that celebrates pluralistic belonging and rejects narrow definitions of identity. In their manifesto, “Habibi you know” emphasises the interplay of cultures, languages and memories, presenting *Heimat* not as a fixed place, but as an experience of differences and connections. This message is translated into visual strategies as follows: the brand combines Arabic script with Western typography, streetwear aesthetics with traditional motifs, and uses photographs that depict people from different backgrounds in self-confident, urban environments. Through this interplay, “Habibi you know” visually represents what Faist (2010, p. 9–20) refers to as transnational networks – simultaneous connections to multiple cultural spaces. The brand illustrates how visual communication can both express and normalise transnational identities, offering alternative notions of belonging that break with exclusionary ideas of *Heimat*.

The discussion has shown that the concept of *Heimat* in the context of migration is shifting between inclusion and exclusion, stability and transformation. While transnational and diasporic perspectives highlight how belonging is negotiated across borders, experiences of *Heimatlosigkeit* and political discourses reveal the fragility of these processes and their social consequences (Boccagni, 2010)(Canefe, 2012)(Hüppauf, 2007). At the same time, calls for a redefinition of *Heimat* point to the need for inclusive and plural understandings that can reflect the realities of global mobility and transcultural life (Heimerdinger, 2018)(Haedrich, 2019).

These negotiations of belonging do not take place in discourse alone. They are also shaped or challenged through visual communication. Images, symbols, and design choices play a decisive role in how *Heimat* and migration are imagined collectively. Political campaigns and cultural productions show that visual representations can both reproduce exclusionary, nostalgic ideals and open up new, inclusive perspectives. Against this backdrop, the next chapter explores how

Heimat is constructed, reinforced, and redefined in visual communication, and how these representations influence broader debates about identity and belonging.

5. *HEIMAT* AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

In addition to language and narratives, visual representations play a central role in how *Heimat* is experienced. Images, symbols and visual narratives often shape ideas of belonging and identity more lasting than abstract definitions. Whether in films, music videos, exhibitions, social media, political campaigns or marketing strategies, *Heimat* is made tangible and emotionally charged through visual means. Especially in the context of migration, where different affiliations overlap or conflict with one another, visual communication can make hybrid identities visible and represent alternative forms of *Heimat* that go beyond traditional concepts. An example of the ubiquity of visual narratives of home can be found in the digital world. On platforms such as Instagram, users actively stage, negotiate and perform their sense of home. For example, there are over 4.1 million posts under the hashtag #Heimat and another 2.8 million under #Heimatliebe. These figures illustrate that *Heimat* is not just a theoretical or political concept but is also lived in everyday life and expressed in images, symbols and aesthetics. This makes it clear that *Heimat* is not only a subject of politics or cultural theory, but also a visual sign and symbol system. The following sections therefore examine different dimensions of these visual constructions.

5.1 *HEIMAT* AS A SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC SIGN

As a culturally charged concept, *Heimat* is not only represented in images, signs and symbols, but also generated performatively. Within a social semiotic framework, it can be shown how visual signs not only represent *Heimat*, but also actively charge it with meaning, stabilise normative orders or question them. The social semiotics of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) assumes that signs are not neutral, but are produced, used and interpreted in social contexts. Signs are therefore always an expression of social relationships, cultural norms and collective ideas (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 47). *Heimat* as a visual sign is often coded in the form of iconic references such as green fir trees, traditional costumes, mountain landscapes or agricultural nostalgia (Heimerdinger, 2018, p. 207). These signs function as memory anchors and cultural markers of identity, origin and belonging.

Visual communication about *Heimat* often works via narrative and iconographic strategies that create emotional closeness and cultural belonging. The industry has exploited this narrative already during the Third Reich, but also after 1945 through *Heimat* movies, novels, and songs (Bausinger, 1989, p. 264). These forms of entertainment depicted idealized actions and worlds. Photography, for example, played a crucial role in shaping the perception of *Heimat* during the

Nazi era, where images of idyllic landscapes, rural life, and happy families reinforced ideas of a harmonious German identity (Umbach, 2015, p. 347–363). From the 1950s onwards, *Heimat* films reproduced similar aesthetics of family, tradition, and landscape, while in the GDR, such films conveyed socialist values of belonging to the state (Jäger, 2017, p. 22). These visual codes stabilized hegemonic ideas and excluded diversity or social tensions. The historical use of visual narratives to idealise *Heimat* shows how cultural symbols can be employed to shape collective identity. Just as films, photographs and literature constructed seemingly “authentic” images of belonging, contemporary consumer culture reveals similar dynamics in the functioning of brands.

Douglas Holt's Consumer Culture Theory (2002) provides a useful framework here, as it explains how brands function as cultural resources that influence identity and belonging. Holt describes the historical change: in “modern branding”, companies had cultural authority and staged brands as an expression of social values. With “postmodern consumer culture”, the logic shifts and brands are now used by consumers to express individual identity. Brands are regarded as authentic cultural resources, but their meaning is constantly being renegotiated (Holt, 2002, p. 70-83). At the same time, contradictions arise, as authenticity often appears constructed, and movements criticise the commercialisation of culture (Holt, 2002, p. 88). According to Holt's approach, *Heimat* can be seen as a cultural resource that is staged by politics, the media and businesses and often used as an “authentic symbol” of belonging and security. This creates a double tension for migrants. *Heimat* can be inclusive when hybrid identities are made visible in advertising, but it also carries the risk of exclusion when it is portrayed as homogeneous. Holt's focus on brands as liberating and simultaneously restrictive resources reflects the debate about *Heimat*. In lived experience, it is pluralistic and transnational but often constrained by branding and political strategies.



Figure 3. Retzlaff, H. (1940). A Patriarchal Distribution of Roles: 'In the work service, the young working woman gets to know her beautiful German Homeland' [Photography]. Leipzig: E. A. Seemann.



Figure 4. German Democratic Republic (1951). Unsere Heimat (Our Heimat) [Song]. From Herbert Keller & Hans Naumilkat. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH1MiPVWek>

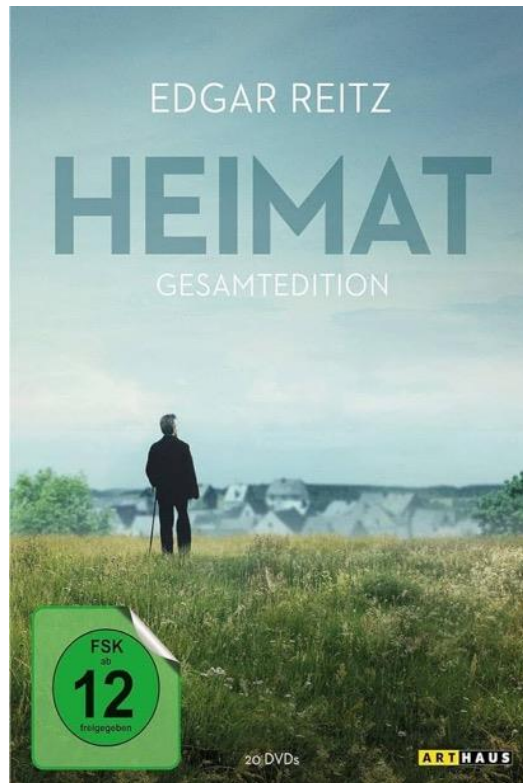


Figure 5. Reitz, E.. *Heimat* trilogy [Movies] (1984-2004). By Edgar Reitz.



Figure 6. Menzel, Jiří. (1985). Film poster for „Heimat, süße Heimat“ („My sweet little village“) (1985) [Poster]. From Barrandov Studios, <https://www.moviepilot.de/movies/heimat-suec-heimat>

5.2 VISUAL NEGOTIATION OF *HEIMAT*

As explained in the previous chapters, the concept of *Heimat* has changed significantly over time. This also has an impact on the representation of *Heimat* in visual communication. To summarise the change in the concept on a visual level: originally, *Heimat* encompassed the everyday living space, including food, housing, work and social relationships. However, with industrialisation and the advent of the modern world, the concept shrank and became increasingly reduced to pre-industrial elements such as old half-timbered houses, traditional costumes and customs. These representations were then presented in museums, on the radio and later on television, creating an image of *Heimat* as an intact, rural world without social tensions, but largely ignoring the urban or working population (Bausinger, 2004, p. 268). This reduction led to the emergence of a ‘facade homeland’ consisting primarily of demonstrative signs, although the desire to preserve a ‘real homeland’ lay behind it. Media agencies have further advanced this process of standardisation and delocalisation of *Heimat*. Bausinger (2004) describes this process as follows: symbols of home have crystallised into a kind of ‘*Heimat* syrup’ – an often sweet but in its pure form inedible concentrate that makes *Heimat* a questionable concept, functioning as “social creepy greenery in front of forbidding concrete boxes” (p. 269). This shows how visual communication disconnects the term from its actual meaning and reduces it to a superficial source of comfort.

Despite these trends, the visual presence of places continues to play a major role in people's feelings and sense of belonging. Buildings, landscapes or even the design of a street can trigger emotions ranging from a sense of security and well-being to discomfort. The subjective perception of places is closely linked to conceptual grids, so that certain materials such as marble can be associated with prosperity or wood with naturalness, while a village can be perceived as idyllic or backward (Baumann, 2016, p. 397). These visual and conceptual images shape our relationship to a place and contribute to our feeling of connection and familiarity to it, as well as our understanding of ourselves as part of a larger whole (Baumann, 2016, p. 397).

However, *Heimat* should not be reduced to mere visual signals, but rather symbolises for quality of life, a sense of orientation and reliable relationships. A real and physical space is essential for human experience, even if virtual spaces facilitate access to information (Baumann, 2016, p. 401). The concept of ‘place attachment’ makes it clear that attachment to a place encompasses emotions and behaviours and that this attachment does not necessarily diminish even with cosmopolitan attitudes or frequent travel (Baumann, 2016, p. 401). Visual communication can

therefore play a central role in raising awareness of the diversity of *Heimat* and strengthening identification with the spatial environment by making visible the deeper, albeit sometimes ambivalent, and meaningful relationship between people and places (Bausinger, 2004, p. 270) (Baumann, 2016, p. 401).

5.3 CASE STUDIES: *HEIMAT* AS A MARKETING STRATEGY

Heimat remains a resource in branding and advertising, where it is used less as a clearly defined concept and more as an emotional sales narrative (Schmidt, 2021, p. 119). In supermarkets and product campaigns, references to *Heimat* promise naturalness, tradition, regionality, and honesty even if the actual origin of the product does not fully match these claims. Companies and designers often rely on visual strategies to create this impression: pictures of farms and mountain landscapes, traditional colours such as green, brown, or beige, and rustic typography that conveys craftsmanship and authenticity. These details evoke a sense of familiarity and trust. However, this authenticity is not simply discovered but carefully constructed. Marketers decide which cultural images and values are emphasized such as village life, landscapes, or dialects and which are left out, often ignoring the diversity and complexity of contemporary realities (Bland, 2019, p. 3–4). In this way, *Heimat* becomes less a literal description of place and more a flexible cultural narrative, visually staged to generate emotional connection and consumer loyalty.

To analyse these dynamics, this thesis applies a visual discourse approach that focuses on how images and design strategies produce or challenge cultural meanings. This method enables a critical reading of visual codes such as colour, typography, and imagery, while also linking them within broader socio-political discourses. The case study here consists of selected examples from German consumer branding, political campaigns, and social initiatives. By comparing these different fields, the analysis explores how *Heimat* is visually used as a marketing strategy, how it conveys notions of authenticity, and how it fluctuates between inclusion and exclusion.

“Unsere Heimat – echt & gut” (“Our Heimat – genuine & good”) by EDEKA

The product line “Unsere Heimat – echt & gut” demonstrates how the notion of *Heimat* can be strategically employed within visual communication to evoke trust, authenticity, and emotional attachment. Rather than being defined geographically, *Heimat* is framed as a set of values that connect nature, tradition, and community. The brand name itself already establishes this connection: the pronoun “unsere” signals collectivity and belonging, while “Heimat” activates emotionally charged associations such as safety, familiarity, and rootedness. In combination

with the label “Bio”, the concept of *Heimat* is further reinforced through connotations of naturalness, sustainability, and ethical responsibility.

The packaging design translates these associations into a visual system. Dominant colour tones are green and brown, representing nature and organic farming. Wooden textures on the packaging recall rustic kitchen tables or traditional farm settings, reinforcing the idea of a rural food culture. This impression is underlined by the inclusion of unprocessed ingredients (such as tomatoes, parsley, or shallots) in the product presentation, which connect the packaged goods to the notion of fresh, natural produce. Typography and symbols further support this communication strategy. The logo is framed by a stylized tree, which functions as a metaphor for rootedness and a bond with nature. The use of a simple, legible typeface emphasizes clarity and reliability, avoiding experimental forms that could contradict the brand’s claim of tradition and trustworthiness.

Through this interplay of name, imagery, and material aesthetics, *Heimat* is constructed as a narrative of trust, regionality, and moral authenticity. The consumer is invited to associate everyday food consumption with feelings of belonging and continuity, while simultaneously linking *Heimat* to sustainable and “good” choices. (EDEKA n.d.)



Figure 7. EDEKA. (2020). *Products „Unsere Heimat“* [Photograph]. From EDEKA.
https://www.unsereheimat.de/files/_processed_/e/1/csm_UH_Gruppe_Bio_16_2020_f17a8f8652.jpg

Heimatbier by Starkenberger (beer)

The product *Heimatbier* by the Tyrolean brewery Starkenberger demonstrates how the concept of *Heimat* is integrated into brand communication to evoke tradition and regional pride. The term *Heimat* functions as a cultural anchor that connects the beer to symbolic notions of identity and local craftsmanship. The brand presentation emphasizes these associations through linguistic and visual codes. The use of the word “Heimatbier” directly positions the beverage as an expression of regional belonging. References such as “100% Tiroler Gerste” and “Tiroler Brauhandwerk seit 1810” add a historical dimension, underlining continuity, heritage, and artisanal credibility. *Heimat* is thus narrated as something that is preserved across generations and embodied in traditional recipes and local raw materials.

The design language reinforces this narrative. The Gothic-inspired typography of “Heimatbier” evokes historical associations and lends the product a traditional and somewhat solemn appearance. The colour palette of deep burgundy and muted tones communicates maturity, seriousness, and a sense of heritage. Additionally, the inclusion of heraldic elements and barley illustrations further ties the product to agricultural roots and craftsmanship. The narrative on the packaging explicitly situates the beer within Tyrolean culture, inviting consumers to participate in a regional identity through the act of drinking.

Through these combined strategies, *Heimat* is constructed as a symbolic value system of tradition, craftsmanship, and communal pride. The product becomes a medium through which *Heimat* is consumed both literally and culturally. (Starkenberger n.d.)



Figure 8. Starkenberger. (n.d.). *Heimatbier promotional image* [Photograph]. From Starkenberger <https://www.starkenberger.at/heimatbier-2.html>

“Abschiebeoffensive 2023” (“Deportation Offensive 2023”) by AfD Baden-Württemberg

In contrast to commercial branding, political actors such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) use the concept of *Heimat* as a rhetorical and visual instrument to mobilize emotions, demarcate boundaries, and construct political identities. The AfD campaign poster with the slogan “Sichere Heimat. Nur mit uns!” illustrates how *Heimat* is strategically linked to exclusivity, protection, and national identity.

The linguistic framing plays a central role. In combination with the adjective “sicher”, the semantic field of *Heimat* is shifted towards notions of threat, defense, and security. *Heimat* is thereby constructed not as an inclusive space, but as a fragile entity that requires active safeguarding. The second part of the slogan, “Nur mit uns!” („Only with us!“), reinforces exclusivity and positions the AfD as the sole political guarantor of this security. Through this rhetoric, *Heimat* becomes a political tension and is reduced to logic of exclusion.

The visual design strengthens this message. The contrast of white typography on a blue background, combined with the red box around “Nur mit uns!”, ensures immediate visibility and conveys urgency. The use of red signals alarm and underlines the party’s claim to decisive action. The overall aesthetic is minimalistic and direct, which mirrors the simplicity of the message: *Heimat* is under threat, and only one political actor is capable of its protection. Furthermore, the incorporation of party logos and regional identifiers (e.g., Fraktion BW, the Baden-Württemberg flag symbol) connects *Heimat* to a concrete political frame.

In this way, *Heimat* is not presented as a construct rooted in community, but as an object of political control. The AfD’s communication strategy exemplifies how *Heimat* can be transformed into a populist rhetorical tool: by framing it as endangered, the party legitimizes exclusionary policies and positions itself as the defender of a “true” *Heimat*. (AfD n.d.)



Figure 9. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Fraktion Baden-Württemberg, 2023. *Campaign image* „Abschiebeoffensive 2023“ („Deportation Offensive 2023“) [Graphic]. From AfD Fraktion Baden-Württemberg. <https://afd-fraktion-bw.de/politik/kampagnen/abschiebeoffensive/>

“Zusammen sind wir Heimat. ” (“Together we are Heimat. ”) by Caritas

The Caritas campaign “Zusammen sind wir Heimat” (“Together we are Heimat”) illustrates how the concept of *Heimat* can be mobilized in a social and integrative context, contrasting both the commercial and political appropriations of the term. Rather than evoking exclusivity or protection, the campaign frames *Heimat* as a shared and emotional experience.

The visual design communicates this message through a domestic and familiar setting. Photographs are presented within picture frames on a wallpapered wall, evoking associations with a private living room. The central image of two men of different cultural backgrounds laughing together foregrounds interpersonal connection and emotional intimacy. *Heimat* is here visually constructed not through territory or tradition, but through human relationships and moments of togetherness. The textual framing strengthens this inclusive interpretation. Phrases such as “Heimat ist, wo man gemeinsam lacht” (“Heimat is where we laugh together”) or “Zusammen sind wir Heimat” (“Together we are Heimat”) shift *Heimat* to a collective term. *Heimat* becomes something co-created in social interaction rather than inherited or defended. The use of the hashtag #ZusammenHeimat additionally situates the campaign within a digital and participatory discourse, inviting broader identification and involvement. Design choices such as the warm colour palette, the mixture of handwritten and serif typography, and the emphasis on the keyword *Heimat* in red, highlight warmth, closeness, and emotional resonance.

The integration of the Caritas logo underscores the institutional framing of *Heimat* as a value aligned with solidarity and care.

Through this composition, Caritas redefines *Heimat* as an open, shared, and integrative concept. Unlike commercial branding strategies that emphasize authenticity or political campaigns that focus on security and exclusion, this communication positions *Heimat* as a dynamic space of community and mutual recognition. The campaign thus exemplifies how *Heimat* can be used in visual communication to counteract exclusionary narratives and promote social cohesion. (Caritas n.d.)



Figure 10. Caritas. (2017). Campaign image "Zusammen sind wir Heimat" ("Together we are Heimat") [Graphic]. From Caritas. <https://www.caritas.de/magazin/kampagne/zusammen-heimat/startseite/startseite>

These four examples show how *Heimat* can take on different meanings depending on the communicative intention and ideological framework. In commercial branding, such as EDEKA with "Unsere Heimat – echt & gut" (Our Heimat – genuine & good) and Starkenberger with *Heimatbier* (Heimat beer), the term is used as a symbol of authenticity, regional pride, and emotional familiarity. *Heimat* functions here as a nostalgic reference to rural tradition and craftsmanship and aims to win the trust of consumers through emotional resonance and cultural

identity markers. In contrast, the AfD's "Abschiebeoffensive 2023" (Deportation Offensive 2023) shows how the term can be mobilized as a mechanism of exclusion. Here, it becomes a rhetorically charged and visually coded concept of exclusion that defines belonging through negation and constructs *Heimat* as something threatened that must be defended. This stands in contrast to Caritas' "Together we are Heimat" campaign, which redefines *Heimat* as an inclusive, evolving, and socially constructed space created through shared experiences, empathy, and solidarity. These diverse uses of the term illustrate its semiotic ambiguity and cultural significance: *Heimat* can connect or divide, affirm belonging or assert otherness, depending on how it is visualized, contextualized, and communicated. As such, it remains a powerful but controversial symbol in contemporary visual culture.

The analysis of *Heimat* within visual communication demonstrates how the concept is bound to processes of representation, interpretation, and negotiation. As the case studies show, *Heimat* is far from a fixed or neutral idea: it can be mobilized commercially to evoke authenticity and regional ties, politically to demarcate exclusionary boundaries, or socially to promote openness and solidarity. In each of these instances, visual strategies ranging from colour schemes and typography to iconographic motifs such as landscapes or domestic spaces play a decisive role in shaping how *Heimat* is perceived, remembered, and contested. What becomes clear is that the concept functions as a semiotic resource with high emotional resonance. Its representations can stabilize traditional images of rural idyll, reinforce nostalgic longings, or, alternatively, open spaces for pluralistic and transcultural understandings of belonging. In this way, visual communication does not merely depict *Heimat* but actively participates in its social construction. The tension between authenticity and construction, inclusion and exclusion, tradition and transformation underscore the ambivalent character of the concept in contemporary societies. For design, media, and cultural studies, this implies a responsibility: visual representations of *Heimat* should be critically examined for the values and power relations they reproduce. At the same time, they offer the potential to develop new imaginaries of the term that are more inclusive, dynamic, and reflective of global mobility. Ultimately, the visual sphere becomes a key area in which *Heimat* is not only communicated but also redefined. Research should not only examine how the concept is currently represented but also explore how different visual approaches and cultural practices could redefine the concept. In this way, *Heimat* can be imagined less as a tool of exclusion and more as a space that allows for diversity and transcultural belonging.

6 METHODOLOGY

6.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The project is based on a qualitative exploratory research design that combines creative practice and scientific methods. The starting point was the question of how *Heimat* can be perceived and visually communicated today in the context of migration. To grasp this complex and emotionally charged topic, the project combines the three levels of theory, empiricism and design. The theoretical level comprises the analysis of historical and current discourses surrounding the concept of *Heimat*. At the empirical level, qualitative interviews are conducted with people from different backgrounds to gain personal perspectives on home in the context of migration, which are difficult to grasp theoretically.

The research design is thus iterative: theory, empiricism and design intertwine and develop the results step by step. The design process functions not only as a result, but also as a research method in itself in the sense of “research through design”.

6.2 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the project works with personal stories about *Heimat* and migration, it was particularly important to handle the content sensitively. Many of the stories touch on intimate experiences of belonging, loss, or discrimination, which is why anonymity and respect were prioritized. Before the interviews, participants were informed that their information would only be used with their consent. They were free to decide at any time what information could be published. The stories were designed with the aim of making diversity visible without reproducing stereotypes or instrumentalization. The project thus sees itself as a safe space where experiences can be shared authentically and perceived in a climate of empathy, recognition, and respect.

6.3 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

To gain a deeper understanding of how people individually perceive and define *Heimat*, qualitative interviews were conducted in written form. This method was chosen because it allows participants to reflect on their personal experiences, emotions, and subjective perspectives in a private setting, which is essential when working with a concept as multifaceted and intimate as *Heimat*. Standardised or quantitative methods would not have captured these nuances adequately.

1. The questionnaire was structured into three main sections, each addressing a different dimension of the topic:
2. The current life situation: focusing on where and how participants currently live, and how they evaluate their present living conditions.
3. Personal feelings towards (living) places: exploring associations with their country of origin, what they need to “feel at home” and what is essential for them to receive this feeling.
4. The individual meaning of *Heimat*: examining personal experiences of homesickness, moments of belonging, symbolic objects connected to *Heimat*, translations of the concept into other languages, and finally a personal definition of *Heimat*.

Altogether, the questionnaire consisted of ten open questions. Each section began with a guiding question and included sub-questions to support reflection and encourage more detailed answers. The open format allowed participants to provide as much detail as they felt comfortable with, ensuring depth without imposing restrictive categories.

Participation requirements

Selection criteria for participation were defined clearly: only individuals who no longer live in the place where they were born or raised were included. This criterion was essential, since the experience of moving – whether through migration, emigration, or internal relocation – creates particular conditions for reflecting on *Heimat*. Belonging, foreignness, and redefinitions of *Heimat* are especially evident when one’s living environment changes.

Additionally, some formal conditions were set: only fully completed questionnaires could be considered, and any responses containing offensive or discriminatory content were excluded. Participation was anonymous to ensure honesty and openness.

The diversity of participants in terms of backgrounds, age groups, and biographical contexts created a broad and multi-layered picture. The aim was not to achieve representativeness, but rather to capture a range of subjective views and illustrate the many ways in which *Heimat* can be experienced and defined. In this sense, the interviews provided qualitative depth and contributed to a richer understanding of *Heimat* as an evolving, individually shaped concept.

6.4 SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND REFLEXIVITY

In qualitative research it is important to recognise that the results are not completely neutral or objective. The way knowledge is created depends on the position of the researcher and the specific context in which the study takes place. This also applies to the interviews conducted for this project: the design of the questions, the choice of participants and the interpretation of the answers are all shaped by my own background and perspective. Rather than being a weakness, this is part of the research process. This means it is co-constructed between participants and researcher. For this reason, reflexivity is necessary in order to remain aware of these influences and to reflect critically on how they affect the understanding of *Heimat* in this study.

7. INTERVIEWS

7.1 HEIMAT BETWEEN IRAN AND GERMANY: MOBINA HANIFEH

Mobina Hanifteh (24) lives, studies and works in Leipzig (Germany). Her current living situation is characterised by language challenges and the feeling of being socially isolated which she herself links to her insecurity in the German language. She is living in Germany for two years and currently doesn't feel comfortable. For her, there is a lack of belonging and a restrictive feeling of being free - both in Germany and in her country of origin, Iran. She sees both societies as unfree, however in different forms: In Iran, oppression is obvious and embedded in law, whereas in Germany it is more subtle and systemic, which she finds equally constricting. That's why even though she doesn't feel content in her current living situation, she doesn't miss Iran where she was born and grew up. Her relationship with her country of origin is ambivalent: on one hand there are pleasant memories of nature and certain places, but on other hand a feeling of pressure, restriction and stress prevails. Her moving to Germany triggered many things in her, including the search for a home. In the interview, she says that one day she wandered aimlessly through the streets of Leipzig looking for a street or a corner that reminded her of her street in Iran. She didn't find such a place and eventually stopped looking. She feels something similar about *Heimat*. The idea of *Heimat* as a geographical place has dissolved and transformed into an inner state that she experiences through interpersonal closeness and self-connectedness. One of the times she realised this was when she woke up one morning and missed her father's voice. She realized *Heimat* for her is not a place but people. A feeling of *Heimat* arises in her when she can love and be loved, when she dances, cooks or shares music with others – in other words, in moments of genuine emotional closeness. Mobina's idea of *Heimat* is characterised by a search for identity, uprootedness and inner growth. She does not experience *Heimat* as a fixed place, but as an emotional state that arises through interpersonal warmth and self-connection. Her experience makes it clear that *Heimat* is not a static category, but a changeable feeling that can be cultivated within oneself, especially in the absence of external belonging. For Mobina today, *Heimat* is a form of freedom within, even if she often experiences herself as unclassifiable or like a stranger in the world.

Mobina Hanifteh's story shows how strongly the concept of *Heimat* is shaped by individual experiences, ruptures and relocations. Her example demonstrates that *Heimat* can no longer be understood solely as a geographical location, but rather as an emotional state that arises from relationships, closeness and self-connection. Mobina's story thus points to an understanding of

Heimat that is comparable to psychological approaches such as Mitzscherlich's, where the concept is described as a process of settling down and as an emotional feeling of security, familiarity and recognition. On the other hand, her experience can be traced back to Schlink's philosophical interpretation as a utopian ideal that is never fully achieved but rather represents a longing for belonging and freedom. Mobina's view makes it clear that in a globalised world, *Heimat* is no longer tied to geographical locations but must be understood as an internally anchored concept that is individually and relationally reshaped. Her perspective shows that in a globalised world shaped by migration, *Heimat* is anchored less in the “where” than in the “how” and “with whom”.

7.2 LINGUISTIC IDENTITY AND THE FEELING OF FOREIGNNESS: PIERRE CALBA

Pierre Calba (39) lives with his wife and two children in a house in Osnabrück (Germany). He describes his living conditions as satisfying and feels comfortable in his current living situation. Pierre has lived in Germany for almost 20 years and has found a new home for himself in Osnabrück over the years. The neighbourhood is familiar, his children are growing up there and he doesn't feel like a stranger. Nevertheless, an ambivalence remains noticeable: although he feels at home, he misses many things from France, such as literature or cultural delicacies. Linguistic identification plays a central role for Pierre: for him, French is an expression of his identity. The loss of linguistic spontaneity (e.g. humour or subtle communication) in Germany is particularly difficult for him. The constant labelling as ‘the Frenchman’ through his accent and other cultural differences (e.g. rules or habits) also lead to a feeling of foreignness. Despite social integration and professional security, he does not feel that he has fully arrived in Germany, as he lacks the linguistic and cultural naturalness. As a result, he has felt somewhat uprooted for around five to six years, intensified by being a parent. He feels homesick for the French landscape, culture, family and missed moments such as celebrations or meetings. Nevertheless, after many years in France, he misses the connection to current political, social and cultural issues. He speaks openly about feeling increasingly like he doesn't belong somewhere – neither Germany nor France. Pierre represents a transnational understanding of *Heimat* that is characterised by conflict and longing. *Heimat* is no longer a stable place for him, but an emotional state between past and present, between linguistic identity and social reality. Although he has built a home in Osnabrück, his *Heimat* remains France at least in his heart and in his language. At the same time, he expresses the fact that the idea of *Heimat* has become an abstract, barely tangible concept for him. His answers reveal a profound need for linguistic belonging, cultural resonance and family closeness that cannot be fully satisfied in migration.

Pierre Calba's story illustrates how the concept of *Heimat* becomes a multi-layered phenomenon in migration contexts. On one hand, he has built a new life for himself over two decades in which he finds familiarity and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, there remains a gap that is particularly evident in his language, culture and emotional ties to France. For Pierre, *Heimat* is therefore not a clear place, but rather a field of tension between integration in his host country and his continuing attachment to his country of origin. His story shows that *Heimat* often cannot be completely relocated in migration. Culture and memories remain central points of reference that cannot be replaced and whose loss can cause feelings of alienation and unfulfillment. At the same time, a transnational understanding of *Heimat* emerges. It arises from simultaneous belonging to several cultural and social spaces, without it being possible to pinpoint a single location.

7.3 OTHER INTERVIEWS

Akram Ehab

Akram Ehab (30) lives in a shared flat in Lisbon, where his life is currently shaped by work and study. Stress and lack of time leave him little space for reflection or rootedness, so he feels neither uncomfortable nor truly at home, but he believes this could change with a calmer lifestyle. Born and raised in Cairo, he has a complex relationship with Egypt: it represents family, childhood, and pride, but also anger and sadness about its current state. In stressful times he experiences homesickness and longs for security, which he addresses consciously by allowing grief and valuing the feeling. Over time, he has developed an open, process-oriented understanding of *Heimat* where it is no longer a fixed place, but settings of peace, acceptance, and safety.

Asma Knauer-Amine

Asma Knauer-Amine (38) lives in Bad Honnef with her husband and three-year-old daughter in the house they bought four years ago. She describes her life as pleasant and fulfilling and she enjoys the chance to create a true home. Yet she sometimes feels lonely and misses her friends in the Netherlands. Especially recalling the isolation she felt when she first arrived in Germany. For Asma, *Heimat* is not tied to places or material things but to people, trust, and emotional security. She wants above all to give her daughter a safe home and describes their house as an emotional space of connection. Languages and sensory impressions (e.g. Moroccan food, Dutch directness, or the scent of flowers) also serve as anchors. Her life in Germany today is defined by stability, security, and family.

Camellia Yang

Camellia Yang (35) lives in Lisbon, where she feels most at home thanks to the city's literary scene and its connection to her favourite writer, Fernando Pessoa. Born in China and raised in New Zealand, she describes herself as a "Chinese New Zealander" but does not feel fully rooted in either culture. Since 2019, she has lived in over several countries, adapting to each but never developing a lasting sense of home. For her, *Heimat* is not a fixed place but a fleeting feeling of peace, creativity, and connection. She symbolically anchors these moments by collecting Starbucks mugs from cities like Manchester, London, Lisbon, and Shanghai.

Catalina

Catalina (33) lives alone in Lisbon, where she feels safe and free. Her home is her flat, which she fills with plants, creativity, and social moments. Originally from Barranquilla, Colombia, she associates love and pride with her homeland but does not feel safe living there. Although she has been separated from her family for over a decade and still struggles with homesickness, she finds emotional support in her Lisbon home. For her, *Heimat* is a space where she can be herself (e.g. cooking, dancing, painting, or sharing coffee with friends) and where nature and the sea provide a sense of wholeness. While Colombia remains meaningful, Lisbon has become the safe space where she creates her own *Heimat*.

Fahrije Jahaj

Fahrije Jahaj (57) has lived in Bremen for over 20 years, where she feels safe, balanced, and at home. She fled Kosovo with 29 due to the Kosovo-Serbia war and did not come to Germany voluntarily. The first years were marked by homesickness and the wish to return, but over time she settled, especially by building a family. Today, she appreciates Germany for the opportunities it provides and describes it as her new *Heimat*, while Kosovo remains tied to her childhood memories and cultural roots. For her, *Heimat* is both place and emotional construct, shaped by security, belonging, and relationships.

Gabriel Etxebarria

Gabriel Etxebarria (33) lives in a shared flat in Berlin, where he feels comfortable but only rarely experiences a true sense of *Heimat*. Originally from Spain, he identifies strongly with the Basque Country, valuing its culture and landscape but also feeling confined there, which led him to leave. Homesickness often affects him, especially after the loss of his grandfather, and he maintains closeness through regular contact with family. For Gabriel, *Heimat* is not a place,

but a fleeting state tied to calmness, loved ones, or small moments like family dinners or late-night talks. It remains a constant search that he can rarely hold on to, leaving him longing for a more stable sense of belonging.

Joonsoo Lee

Joonsoo Lee (22) lives in Halle's Neustadt district, where he feels stressed by poor housing conditions and plans to move soon. Born in Korea, he moved to Germany with 16 years old for school, initially struggling with homesickness, language, and cultural differences. Over time, speaking German fluently has given him small moments of belonging. His true *Heimat* remains Bundang, Korea, tied to childhood memories and his mother's Jeolla-style kimchi. For Joonsoo, *Heimat* is emotional support built through time and memory – while Korea is his clear *Heimat*, Germany is still a place of transition where he is “building a second *Heimat*.”

Leonardo Ebner

Leonardo Ebner (38) has lived in Brussels for ten years and appreciates its multicultural openness and lack of a dominant national identity, which eases integration. At the same time, he criticises right-wing politics, segregation, and the “Euro bubble” of expats. Originally from Italy, he identifies as culturally Italian but feels little emotional attachment, seeing Italy mainly as family and memories while rejecting its conservative politics. He rarely feels homesick. Instead, *Heimat* for him is a shifting cluster of memories found in family, language, food, or returning home after a journey. He defines *Heimat* as a flexible perspective rather than roots and as a dynamic reference point that allows him to compare multiple *Heimaten* without binding himself to one.

Leonie Schäper

Leonie Schäper (24) lives in a shared flat in Lisbon, where she feels comfortable but unsettled by frequent moves and the lack of permanent belongings. Stability appeals to her, yet she values her current freedom. A close friend in Lisbon gives her a sense of home, showing her that belonging is tied more to people and routines than to places. Geographically, she associates *Heimat* with Germany, where she grew up, and the Netherlands, where she studied and developed cultural ties, though never feeling fully part of either. Over time, her idea of *Heimat* has shifted from a fixed location to emotional connection, cultural familiarity, and openness allowing her to imagine several *Heimaten* or even the world as her *Heimat*.

Marijke Eschenbach

Marijke Eschenbach (35) lives between Togo and Benin with her partner in a shared flat. She enjoys the variety of life there, though daily challenges such as climate, transport, and noise are more difficult than in Germany. For her, *Heimat* is defined less geographically than through people, routines, and sensory impressions (e.g. her partner, her cat, or familiar smells and dishes). While she can feel at home in many places, she associates *Heimat* primarily with Germany, where her family and traditions such as Christmas remain central. Yet her feelings are ambivalent: distance evokes nostalgia, while longer stays highlight negative aspects like narrow-mindedness or politics. She describes *Heimat* as a tension between closeness and limitation and finds strength in living across diverse places and relationships.

Noemi Fattel

Noemi Fattel (59) lives in Victoria, Australia, where she has a stable job and family but still feels little emotional connection after almost 15 years. Born in Mexico City, she values Mexican hospitality and nature but criticises corruption. She misses her friends and family, feels homesick during important events, and maintains ties through calls, films, and music. While Australia offers safety and daily stability, Mexico remains her emotional *Heimat*, tied to childhood, family, and nostalgia.

Patrick Tindana

Patrick Tindana (40) lives in Lisbon but was born in Accra, which he left over 20 years ago. Critical of Accra's lack of openness toward non-heterosexual people, he contrasts it with New York City, which he values for its freedom and anonymity. For Patrick, *Heimat* is not tied to geography but to moments of emotional resonance, acceptance, and intimacy. He finds belonging in shared laughter, interpersonal connections, and in aesthetic settings such as luxurious bathrooms, scents, and music that create comfort and retreat. *Heimat*, for him, is the interplay of atmosphere, connection, and inner freedom rather than a fixed place.

Seohye Kim

Seohye Kim (29) lives in Lisbon with two flatmates and feels safe and comfortable there, despite some frustrations with bureaucracy. Originally from South Korea, she moved to Australia at 21, which broadened her perspective and made her prefer multicultural over homogeneous environments. She feels little attachment to Korea, describing her identity today as global, and does not experience homesickness for places but for people, food, or care in

moments of vulnerability. *Heimat*, for her, is not tied to geography but to freedom, self-expression, nature, and connections with open-minded people, something she can experience in many places.

Victoria Weidemann

Victoria Weidemann (38) has lived in Paris for over 20 years, but after a traumatic fire set by extremist protesters in 2023, she no longer feels safe or at home there and plans to move to Dublin. Once her chosen place of longing, Paris has come to represent frustration, insecurity, and alienation. For Victoria, *Heimat* is not tied to origin but to relationships, emotions, and sensory moments such as smells of nature or music and literature. While she feels some regional ties to Germany, she remains distanced from the country as a whole. She describes *Heimat* as future-oriented and dynamic and shaped by experiences across borders rather than fixed places.

Yasemin Derici

Yasemin Derici (32) lives in Lisbon with her husband and enjoys the city's liveliness. Born in Turkey, she associates her homeland with warmth and beauty but criticises its recent political and economic developments, which strain her emotional attachment. Still, she feels homesick for her family. For Yasemin, *Heimat* is not a fixed place, but an emotional state tied to people, familiarity, and sensory impressions (e.g. the smell of garlic, the sea, sunlight, or everyday moments with her husband and plants). Torn between her origins and new life, she creates a personal, dynamic sense of *Heimat*.

7.4 CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the interviews made it clear how difficult it is to establish a universal definition of *Heimat*. The term is too diverse, too individual and too emotionally charged to be reduced to a place, an origin or a clear feeling. However, what became apparent in almost all the conversations is that *Heimat* is not a fixed place, but rather an emotional state composed of childhood memories, relationships, smells, sounds, routines, freedom and belonging. It is a state that can change over time.

The written format of the survey had both advantages and limitations. On the one hand, it created space for reflection: participants could engage with this intimate topic at their own pace and in their own words. This led to responses that were often personal, introspective and emotionally nuanced. Perhaps even more so than would have been expressed in a spontaneous conversation. Since I did not know all the participants before the interview – and they did not

know me either – the distance of the written form may have reduced the pressure to perform or explain something to me as an unknown person, allowing for a more honest and thoughtful articulation of inner experiences. On the other hand, answering the interview questions in written form meant that I could not ask follow-up questions, clarify ambiguities or explore emotional undertones in greater depth. Especially with such a complex and subjective concept as *Heimat*, the opportunity to respond and react spontaneously would have added another layer of complexity to the data. Personal or semi-structured interviews might have allowed for greater depth of dialogue and emotional resonance, provided that the participants were open and felt comfortable enough to share more. Despite these limitations, the written responses provided valuable insights. They showed not only the complexity and variability of *Heimat* among different individuals, but also the many ways in which people consciously or unconsciously reconstruct their sense of belonging through language, relationships, daily rituals or sensory memories. The collected material serves as a meaningful basis for understanding *Heimat* as a dynamic experience that is not easy to be defined but can be deeply felt.

What particularly moved me was the openness and depth with which the participants shared their experiences. Mobina Hanifeh, for example, described how she walked through the streets of Leipzig in search of a street that reminded her of her former home in Iran – an attempt to reconstruct her *Heimat* visually and emotionally. Others described a feeling of being in between: Gabriel Etxebarria, for example, feels too confined in the Basque Country but does not really belong in Berlin either. Pierre Calba, who has been living in Germany for almost two decades, describes the gap between linguistic integration and emotional arrival by small moments of strangeness, such as his French accent or the inability to be humorous in German. As already mentioned, a common thread runs through the interviews: *Heimat* is rarely equated with a specific place, but rather arises from connections to people, to nature, to rituals, or to oneself. For many, it is small, everyday moments that trigger this feeling: for Catalina, it is coffee with a friend on the balcony, for Camellia Yang, it is visiting a literary site, for Asma Knauer-Amine, it is the scent of flowers, and for Patrick Tindana, it is laughing together at the absurdity of life. The topic of homesickness was also discussed rarely as a longing for a specific place, but rather as an emotional state of deprivation that occurs particularly in stressful situations, such as illness, loneliness or mental overload. In such moments, there is a need for familiarity, comfort and security – and thus a piece of *Heimat*.

Particularly interesting is the finding that was already apparent in my theoretical framework but has gained further depth through the interviews: When it comes to *Heimat*, the question “Where

do I come from?” is increasingly being replaced by the question “Where can I be completely myself?”.

8. PROJECT “THE F*CK IS HEIMAT”

This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual and practical development of the project. Building on the results of the literature review and qualitative interviews presented in the previous chapter, I designed the project with the intention of visualising an open and dynamic understanding of *Heimat*. The aim is to break down stereotypes and create new perspectives. The insights gained from theory and empirical work serve as a basis for translating the multifaceted meanings of *Heimat* into a visual format.

The project is motivated by a personal interest in exploring how home can be conveyed in visual contexts. The representation of multiple perspectives is particularly important in order to broaden the visual understanding of what it means to create a new *Heimat* or to grow up with more than one *Heimat*. By making these perspectives visible, the project aims to create spaces for reflection and dialogue.

My motivation is also shaped by current social and political dynamics. At a time when issues of belonging and migration are shaping our society, it is clear that *Heimat* affects us all – whether we take it for granted or struggle to find it. The increasing polarisation of debates on migration and the instrumentalization of *Heimat* in political discourse underline the need to establish new and more inclusive approaches. Existing references that already deal with these tensions of loss and the search for belonging – such as the song ‘Koffer’ by Apsilon – gave me further inspiration to engage with this topic and visualise its complexity. Through this project, I want to contribute to viewing *Heimat* not only as a nostalgic memory or political slogan, but as a living concept that is constantly being renegotiated.

To translate these considerations into a design, I developed a visual language for the project. This helps to capture the complex and emotionally charged topic and give it a dynamic and open character. In the following sections, I will outline my design process step by step and break down the visual system I created – from the colour palette and typography to the imagery. Finally, I will show how this system is brought to life in practice by applying it to the website and to a printed product.

8.1 CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

References

An important reference for my project was the Instagram page *ichbinsophiescholl*. This account told the story of Sophie Scholl, a 21-year-old resistance fighter against the Nazi regime, during the last ten months of her life between May 1942 and February 1943. The format worked in real time, with at least one post, story or reel per day showing exactly what had happened 80 years earlier. The page functioned as a digital diary and was based on Sophie Scholl's letters and notes from 1937 until her execution. This approach creates a subjective and personal narrative that brings history closer to a young target audience. The intention was to convey history in an emotional and accessible way, to strengthen democratic awareness and to emphasise the importance of civil courage. The project also rethought the culture of remembrance and showed how social media can bring historical stories to life in a contemporary form.

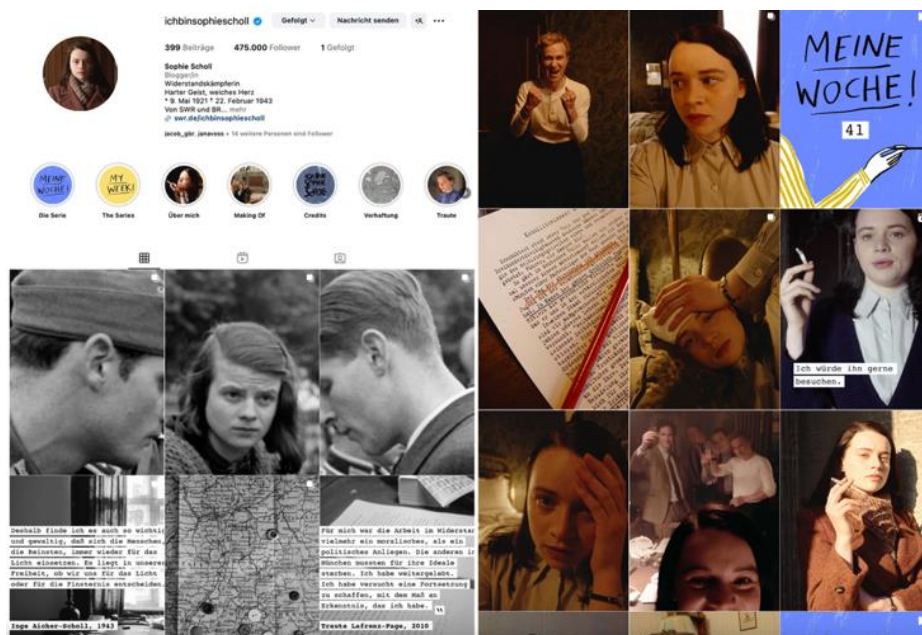


Figure 11: Sophie Scholl. (2025). Instagram-Account "ichbinsophiescholl" [Screenshot]. From Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/ichbinsophiescholl/>



Figure 12: Sophie Scholl. (2025). Instagram-Account "ichbinsophiescholl" [Screenshot]. From Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/ichbinsophiescholl/>

Another inspiration was the streetwear label habibi.you.know. The brand name refers to the Arabic word 'Habibi,' which means 'darling.' The use of Arabic script in a Western context is often fraught with negative connotations shaped by media stereotypes. By reclaiming this script in a positive way, the brand aims to change these prejudices and spread a message of cultural appreciation. The pieces are made to order in a family business and embroidered by hand, emphasising sustainability and quality. Beyond clothing, the brand conveys a broader vision: the creation of a space where cultural diversity is celebrated and where a misunderstood culture can be represented in a positive and authentic way.

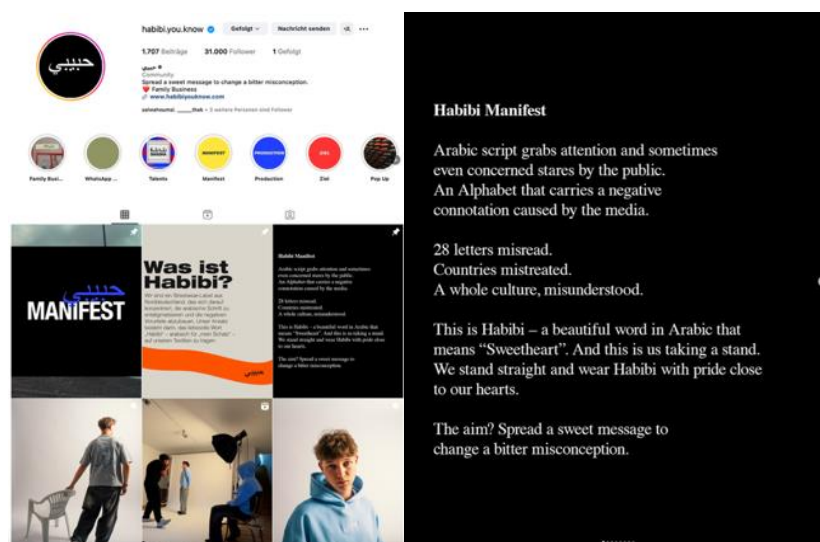


Figure 13: habibi you know. (2025). Instagram-Account "habibi.you.know" [Screenshot]. From Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/habibi.you.know/>

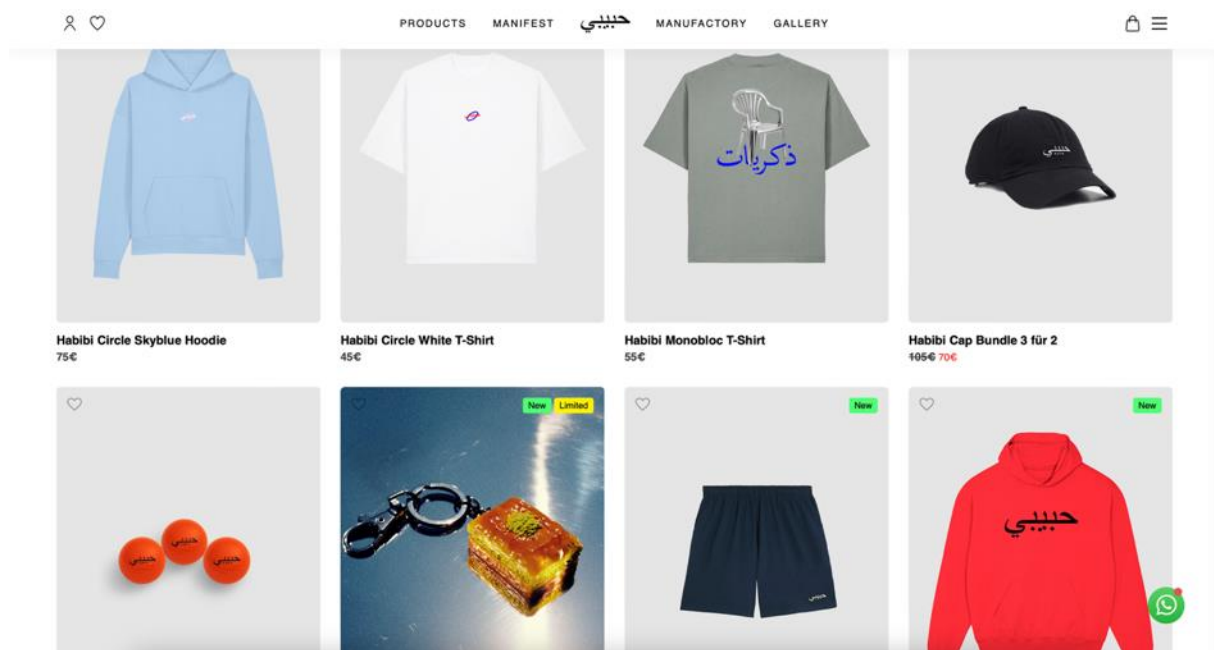


Figure 14: habibi you know. (2025). Website "habibi you know" [Screenshot]. From Website <https://www.habibiyouknow.com>

A third reference was the digital archive Feminist Protest. This website collects and documents visual elements of feminist protest movements from different eras and continents, from the 17th century to the present day. It presents banners, graffiti, performances, illustrations and other forms of visual expression as central instruments of activism. The project is collaborative and designed to grow continuously by integrating contributions from artists, activists and interested individuals. Interactive filters allow users to search the content by time, place, form of protest, medium or keywords. The platform shows the power of visual elements in feminist activism while promoting critical reflection on their role and influence. It demonstrates how a digital format can create a shared space for knowledge, memory and exchange.

Visual Impact of Feminist Protest

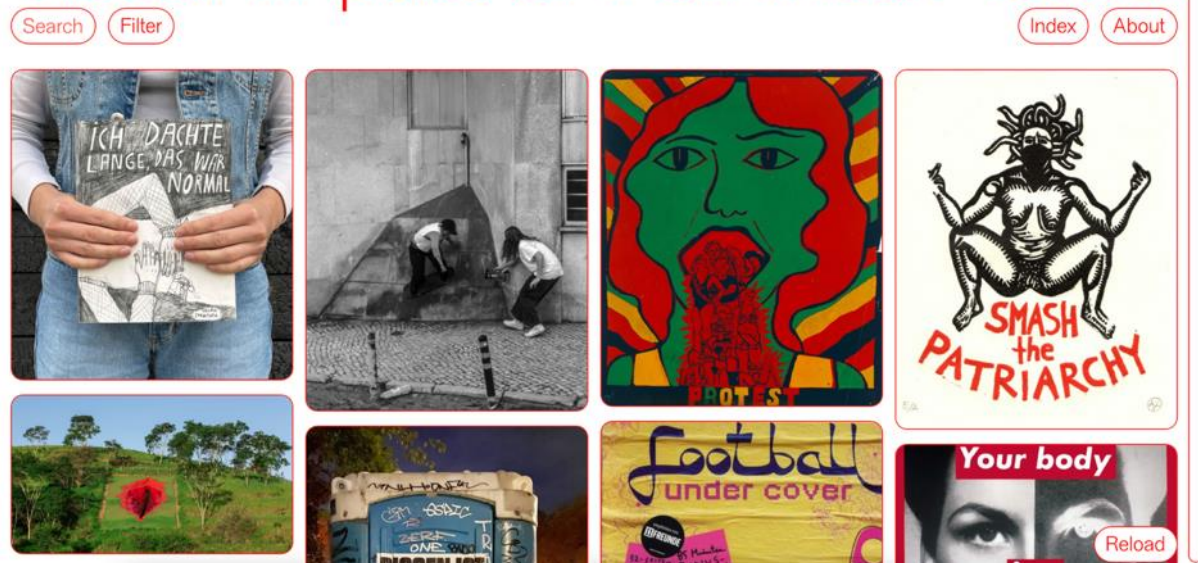


Figure 15: Visual Impact of Feminist Protest. (2025). Website "Visual Impact of Feminist Protest" [Screenshot]. From Website <https://www.feministprotest.net>

These three references show how visual media can translate complex cultural topics into accessible and engaging formats. They illustrate various strategies for combining narrative, design and participation to reach a diverse audience. These approaches have also influenced my project on *Heimat*, which aims to create an open and dynamic space in which diverse perspectives become visible.

Mood Board

This mood board combines references from contemporary web design, graphic experiments and visual culture. Minimalist website layouts with clear typography and grid-based structures served as a guide for creating a design that makes this complex topic accessible. These examples show how clarity and structure can help convey complex content. In contrast, expressive references such as eye-catching posters and typographic experiments underscore the power of visual communication to convey energy and urgency. They show how design can also be used to express resistance, activism and cultural dynamics. The strong use of colour, contrast and experimental images within the mood board evokes dynamism. Overall, the selection illustrates the desired balance between clarity and accessibility on the one hand and expressiveness and emotional impact on the other.

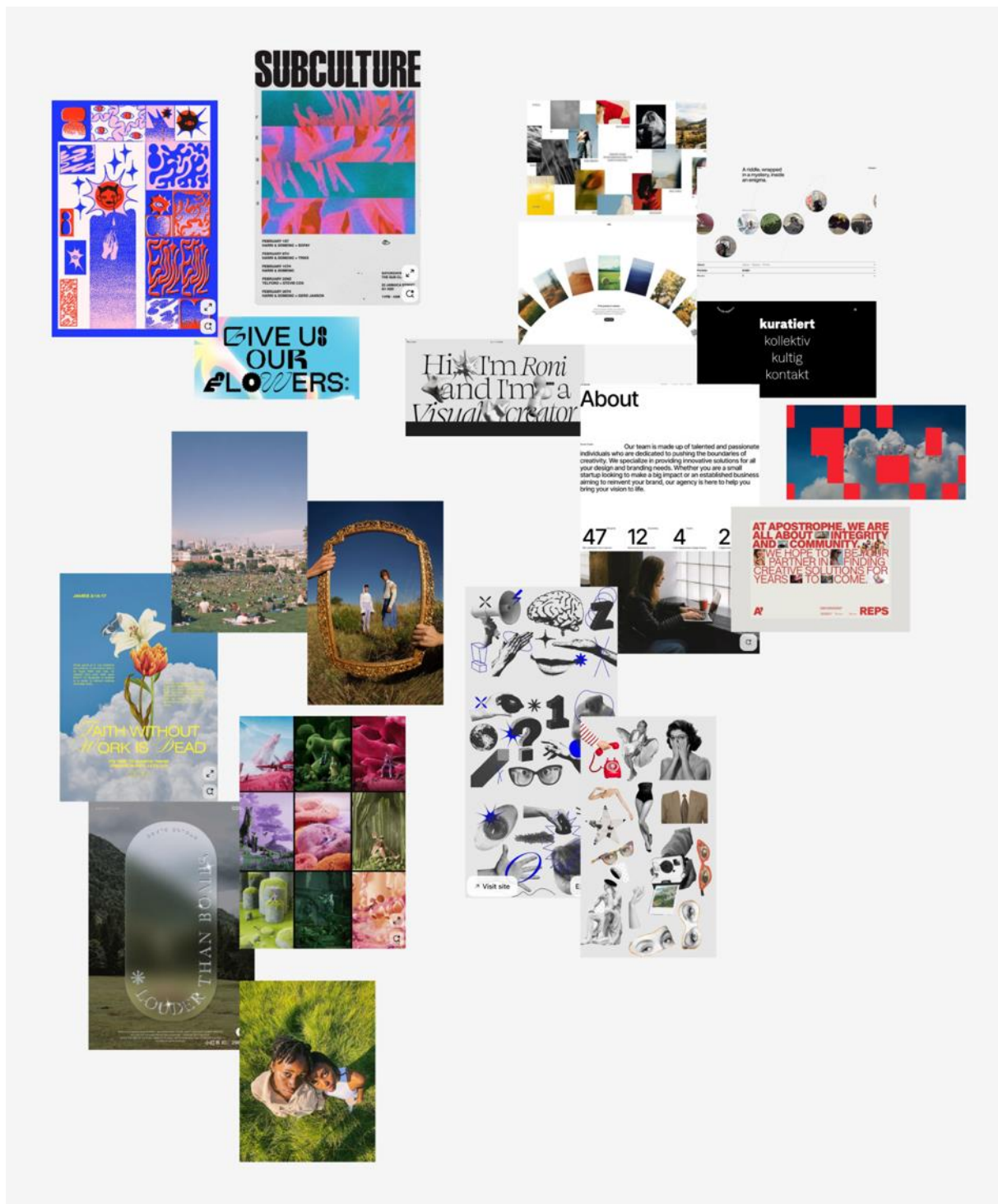


Figure 16: Mood Board. Screenshot by the author. 2025

Target Group

The project is primarily aimed at young adults (aged 18–35) with a migrant background, including those whose parents or grandparents have migrated. For them, issues such as identity, integration and belonging are central, and a platform that reflects their views on *Heimat*, ideally through interactive formats and personal stories, that can be helpful tool to feel seen.

A broader audience is the general public interested in social issues such as integration, diversity and social change. They are looking for easily accessible but well-founded information that helps them understand migration experiences.

Politically engaged individuals and NGO staff are another important group. They are looking for practical insights and perspectives that can support their educational and advocacy work.

Finally, designers and artists form a creative audience. They expect aesthetically appealing and inspiring approaches to migration and *Heimat* that can influence their own practice, with visual content and interactive design appealing to them most.

Overall, the focus is on young and socially engaged users who are active on digital platforms and open to interactive forms of communication.

8.2 TOOL: STORYTELLING

Storytelling was chosen as the approach for this project because the concept of *Heimat* is closely linked to individual experiences, emotions and memories. As already explained in the previous chapters, *Heimat* is a term that cannot be captured by general definitions alone. Personal stories and visual impressions make these subjective dimensions visible. Storytelling therefore offers a suitable method for translating the diversity of perspectives on *Heimat* into a form that can be experienced both intellectually and emotionally.

The written part of the storytelling is based on the qualitative interviews I conducted. These interviews contain reflections on *Heimat* that are shaped by different life situations and personal backgrounds. In order to make the content accessible and not only reproduce the interviews word-for-word, I converted the answers into short stories that highlight the essence of the statements. This format makes the participants' voices more accessible while preserving their individuality. This allows readers to engage with the topic on a personal level.

To expand on these narratives, I have created a visual dimension with images. These images were generated using AI tools and serve as visual interpretations of the written stories. They are not direct representations of the participants themselves, but rather of visual moods and symbolic scenes that express the feelings and elements from the texts. These images make abstract ideas such as belonging, distance or duality tangible. The use of AI also makes it possible to incorporate different styles and moods that reflect the diversity of experiences of *Heimat*.

The combination of text and image forms the core of the storytelling approach. The short stories provide meaning and structure within a narrative framework, while the images add emotional depth and visual resonance. The texts explain, the images illustrate, and together they complement each other to form a well-rounded presentation. In this way, the project opens up multiple points of access to the theme of *Heimat* and shows how design can contribute to a broader understanding of what it means to build a new *Heimat* or to live with more than one.

8.3 VISUAL LANGUAGE

Colour system

On the one hand, *Heimat* gives a comforting, familiar, and secure feeling. On the other hand, feelings toward *Heimat* can be marked by loss, sadness, or disappointment. I reflected this ambivalence in the colour palette. However, before I developed the final colour palette, I created several experimental variants that tested different directions. These drafts served primarily to get a feel for the effect and applicability of the colours. Through this process, I determined which tones create a harmonious balance when combined. This ultimately resulted in the final colour palette that best reflected my ideas for the visual identity of the project.



Figure 17: Experimenting with colours. Screenshot by the author. 2025

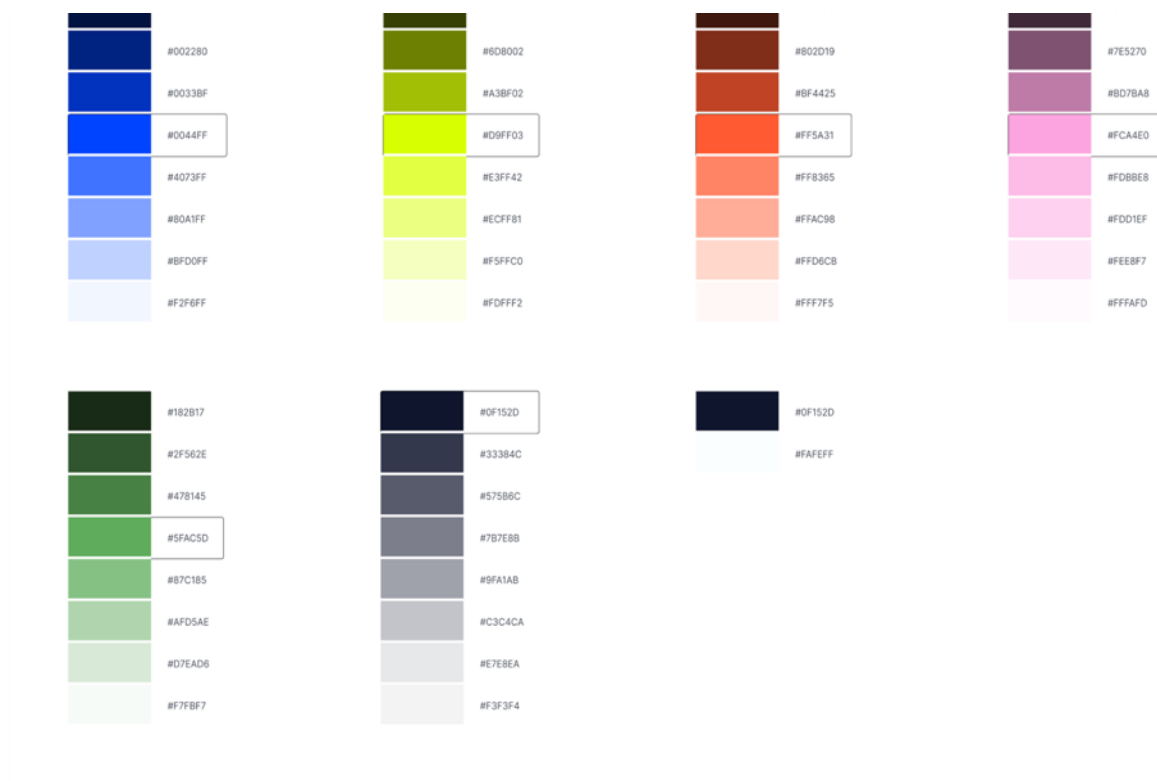


Figure 18: Final colour palette. Screenshot by the author. 2025

The final colour palette for the project is divided into three levels: primary, secondary, and accent colours. The primary colour blue (#0044FF) has a certain presence and signal effect due to its colour intensity. Since blue is often associated with stability, clarity, and order, but also conveys modernity, this colour is used as the basis for the colour palette. The secondary colour yellow-green (#D9FF03) contrasts with the blue and has a neon-like radiance that attracts attention and irritates the eye. This gives the blue a dynamic quality and conveys a sense of new beginnings and provocation. By combining the two colours, I take up the idea of understanding *Heimat* not as a static concept, but as a changeable and sometimes even conflictual one. The accent colours add further emotional and atmospheric components to the palette. Orange-red (#FF5A31) brings energy and passion, and light pink (#FCA4E0) opens a softer level. Medium green (#5FAC5D) is considered a calming element that creates balance and conveys naturalness. Blue-black (#0F152D) is considered a neutral colour that is used for contrast and legibility. Overall, this creates a colour world that does not focus on harmony in the classic sense, but rather on the contradiction between emotionality and rationality. This tension reflects the ambivalence that the concept of *Heimat* carries in today's society.

For digital applications, I have created different brightness levels for the colours to enable flexible use. The light tones are suitable for background areas, as they ensure clear legibility of

the typography. The medium shades can be used for secondary buttons or info boxes. And the darkest values can be used as contrasts for headlines or in combination with white space.

Typography

The path to the final typeface for the project was marked by several rounds of experimentation and iteration. The goal was to use typography to capture a sense of *Heimat* and translate it into a visual language. From the beginning, the challenge was to find a balance. The font had to be expressive and versatile without becoming playful, while maintaining a serious, modern touch.

At the beginning, I roughly sketched out various ideas to represent the word *Heimat* in as many different ways as possible. The idea behind this was to make the diversity directly visible in the typography and to select the remaining fonts based on this. I then digitized these designs and tried out different font combinations. However, it became apparent that the desired diversity did not work in practice as I had imagined. The result seemed too restless and deprived the design of the necessary clarity.



Figure 19: Scribbles and digital drafts of fonts. Screenshot by the author. 2025



Figure 20: First font system. Screenshot by the author. 2025

I then developed a rather simple font system and tested it with first drafts for the website. This system was functional but seemed too neutral and lacking in character to me. In a further loop, I eventually came across blackletter fonts again. These introduced a historical, cultural, and at the same time provocative level that suited my project well in terms of both content and form. Ultimately, I decided on the Chomsky font as a prominent headline and character font. It carries the emotional and discursive weight of the project and sets a clear accent.

To balance this dominance, I combine Chomsky with Power Grotesk, which forms a modern counterpoint and lends more contemporaneity and clarity with its sans-serif character. For the body text, I use Helvetica Neue, a neutral sans-serif font that is particularly impressive in digital applications. It ensures readability and restraint and supports the informative nature of the content.

The final font system thus consists of three levels: the expressive Chomsky as a strong headline font, the modern Power Grotesk as a subhead font, and the clear and neutral Helvetica Neue for the body text. This combination creates a balance of expression, modernity, and functionality.



Figure 21: Final font system. Screenshot by the author. 2025

In the process of developing the typography, I created a font design, which functions as a logo for the project. The typography shown is based on a classic blackletter font, which is varied through different colours and textures, giving each individual letter its own materiality. While the Fraktur font refers to the long historical use of the word *Heimat* and therefore builds a bridge to its cultural and political significance, this reference is broken by the diverse structures. The letters appear as composite fragments that, despite their differences, form a whole. This creates a dynamic impulse that symbolises the openness and complexity of the project. What at first glance resembles an old typeface appears modern and experimental in the overall context due to colour and digital textures. The design thus intentionally breaks away from a one-dimensional idea of *Heimat* and opens the term to new, pluralistic interpretations.



Figure 22: Font design „HEIMAT“. Screenshot by the author. 2025

Even though it is not a classic logo, the typography functions as the first visual impulse of the project. It forms the starting point for further design elements such as the website and the packaging of the card collection, where it acts as a recurring leitmotif. It holds the visual language together and makes the project recognisable.

Imagery

The visual language of the project is as already mentioned based on AI-generated motifs that create a fictional world which, at the same time, appears accessible and familiar using photographic elements. The images combine photographic representations with the imagination of artificially generated scenarios. The ambivalence between reality and staging is essential here. At first glance, the scenes appear photorealistic and are based on photographic

conventions in terms of sharpness, lighting, composition, and depth of field. Only at second glance does the artificiality become apparent: houses, landscapes, or objects seem to exist on floating platforms, everyday objects are placed in surreal contexts, and situations such as a picnic take on a fairy-tale flair thanks to their AI-generated character. This exaggeration creates an intermediate world that is not purely real, but also not completely abstract. It creates space for interpretation and invites to reflect on the idea of *Heimat* without committing to generic images. To generate the images, I used the AI tool Midjourney. My approach was to first develop a structured prompt based on the following pattern:

Scene + Subject Details + Setting Details + Style Details.

This allowed me to describe the desired situation, the people or objects, the context and the aesthetic impression. In this way, I created an individual prompt for each story, which I refined in several iterations. After each generated image, I reviewed the results and adjusted the wording until the image visually conveyed the respective story as I had imagined it. The iterative process was essential: I did not use the first result, but through repeated adjustments and variations, I eventually created an image that accurately reflected the atmosphere and content of the experience being narrated.

In its overall effect, the visual language thus becomes a visual experiment that combines traditional photographic credibility with the openness of speculative imagery. In this way, the visual language adapts both in content and form to the project's subject matter: *Heimat* is not shown as a fixed concept, but as a space that is constantly being renegotiated.



Figure 23: AI-generated image for Camellia Yang's story. Photo by the author. 2025

A surreal floating miniature landscape, hyper-detailed, set against a pure white background, zen-like minimalist design. At its centre, a tiny Lisbon café with an open window, a Chinese woman sitting at a table with a notebook and coffee, bathed in soft ambient light. Around it, winding cobblestone streets and fragments of Lisbon architecture, including the façade of Casa Fernando Pessoa, delicate and dreamlike. Floating nearby: a cluster of mugs from Manchester, London, Lisbon, Shanghai, suspended like memory-markers. Tiny streetlamps cast natural shadows, books and handwritten pages scattered like leaves in the air. The textures are highly detailed--ceramic mugs, cobblestones, paper fibres, weathered stone. The whole scene hovers lightly in space, balanced, peaceful, poetic.



Figure 24: AI-generated image for Noemi Fattel's story, Photo by the author. 2025

Surreal scene, soft muted background, gentle depth of field, hyper-detailed textures, zen-like balance. At the center, a bubble with inside a miniature Mexico: vibrant houses, festive lights, music notes, gatherings around food. The bubble is attached to the roof of a house, is transparent and takes up 50% of the picture. Surrounding it stretches Australia: open landscapes, eucalyptus trees, a safe suburban house. Soft diffused light, natural shadows, calm and poetic.



Figure 25: AI-generated image for Seohye Kim's story. Photo by the author. 2025

Surreal world, soft muted background, gentle depth of field, hyper-detailed textures, calm and dreamy. A single harmonious landscape combines elements from South Korea, Australia, and Lisbon: tiled rooftops blending into sunlit Mediterranean houses, open beaches meeting cobble streets, green parks flowing into ocean waves. On a picnic cloth lie Korean dishes, while sunlight drift through the air. Soft diffused light, natural shadows, poetic and balanced.

8.4 WEBSITE

Initially, my idea was to implement the project through an exhibition. The idea behind this was to enable people to experience and feel the theme of *Heimat*. After some initial consideration, I ultimately decided against this and chose a website as the primary medium for the project. A website is better suited to the *Heimat* project than an exhibition or even a book because it reaches more people, is flexible, and still allows for interactivity. While a book or exhibition is limited in terms of space and time, a website can be accessed at any time and is not tied to a specific location. Content can be updated or supplemented, which fits in with the dynamic nature of *Heimat*. Due to the many different perspectives and experiences on the topic, it was important to me not to limit this discourse locally, but to allow it to take place in an open space. Overall, the website thus proves to be a suitable medium for this project.

Intention and goal

The website aims to serve as an educational platform that gives users access to the topic of *Heimat* and how people with a migration background experience this concept. It highlights current and historical perspectives and showcases different experiences and points of view. In addition to the content, visual communication plays a central role: the design is intended to convey the complexity of the topic in a clear, accessible and visually inspiring way. It is not just about information, but also about empowerment: users should have the opportunity to share their own experiences, develop a sense of belonging and reflect their perception of the concept. The website thus encourages reflection and reinforces a positive narrative about *Heimat* in the context of migration.

In terms of design, the website is based on principles such as minimalism, clarity and typography. The look is intentionally minimalist and clean, so that the content remains in the foreground and users are not overwhelmed. A clear, easy-to-understand structure ensures that users can navigate intuitively and perceive the platform as a pleasant and safe space. The website is not a finished project, but a sustainable resource that encourages long-term engagement with the topics of *Heimat* and migration.

For the conception and design of the website, I used Figma as the central tool. Figma enabled me to develop the prototype interactively and with flexibility. This allowed me to translate the

visual language of the project directly into the digital implementation and to establish the connection between content, design and user experience.

Structure: navigation, sitemap and wireframes

The navigation of the website is intentionally clear and minimalistic to make it easy for users to find their way around. The main menu includes the central section Homepage/Landing Page, Stories, History and Theory of *Heimat*, About and Contact. In addition, there is a language selection between German and English. Since *Heimat* is originally a German term, the German language remains central to understanding it in its original context, while the English version makes the discourse accessible internationally.

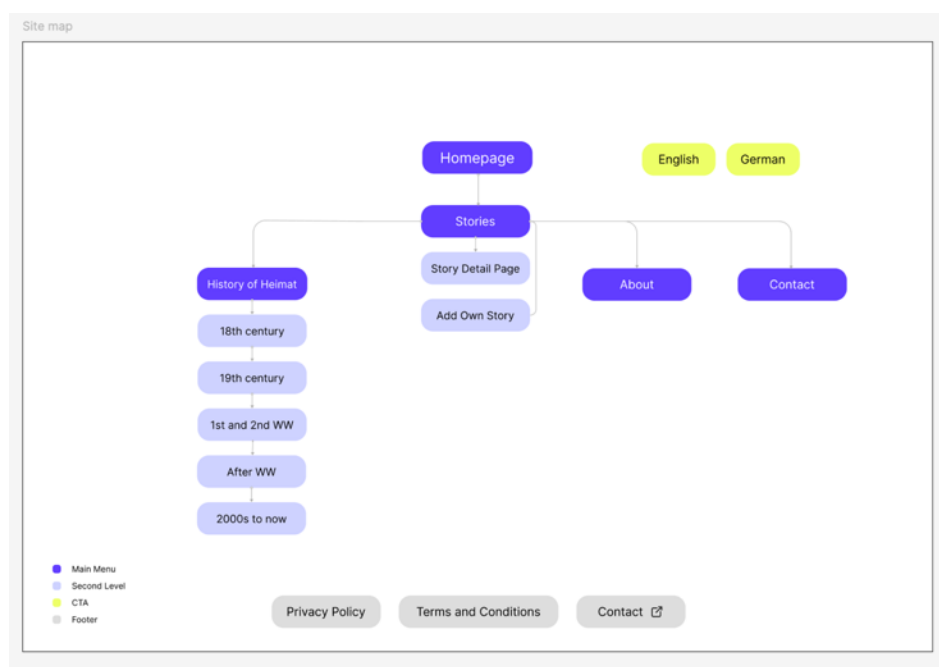


Figure 26: Sitemap. Screenshot by the author. 2025

For clarification, I have created a sitemap that shows the hierarchical structure of the site. From the homepage/landing page, the user can go directly to the main category, where the different stories of the people are shown. The overview page then leads to the individual story detail pages. There is also a function for adding your own story via a questionnaire. In addition, the subpage explains the concept and history of the word Heimat. The static pages About and Contact are for informational purposes.

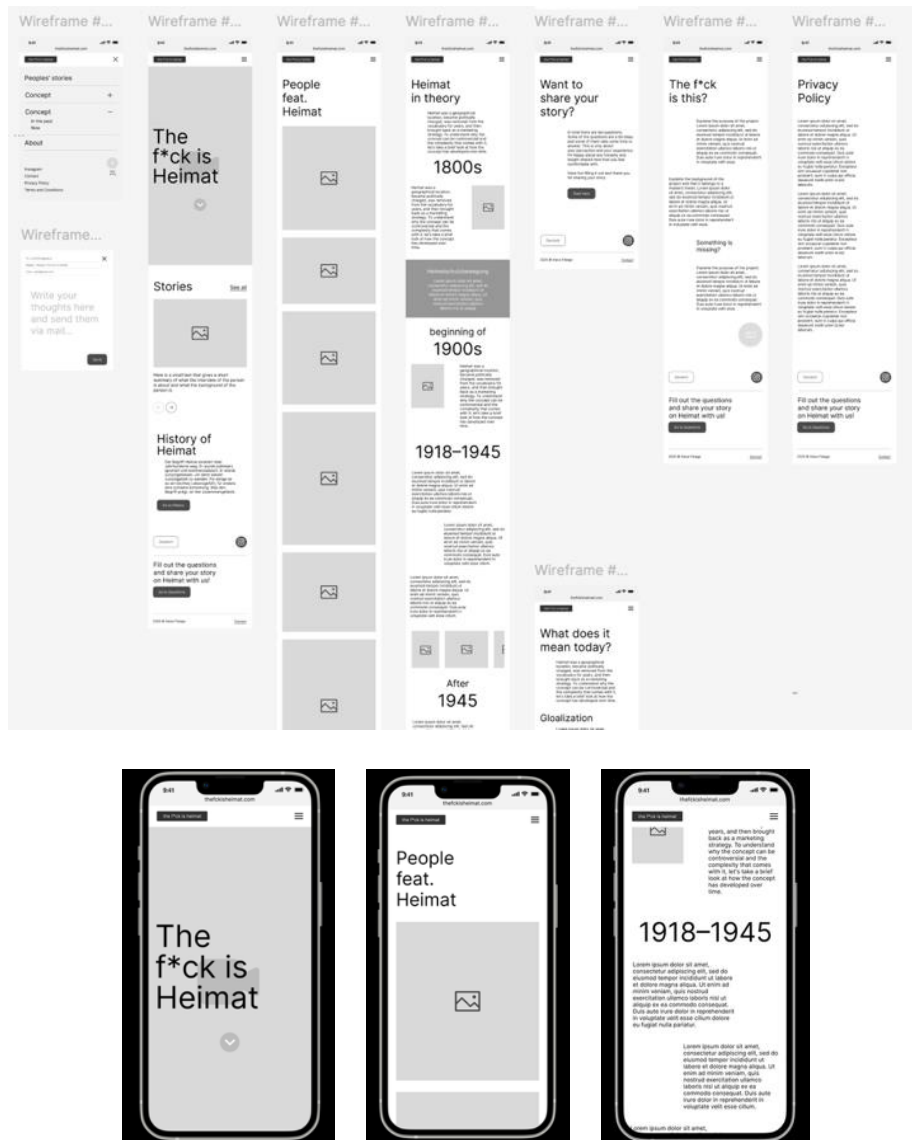


Figure 27: Wireframes - overview and mock-up. Screenshot by the author. 2025

After I had established the basic structure, I created wireframes to structure the content and get an overview of the elements to be designed. Even though I changed and adapted things during the process, the wireframes provided a good initial orientation. The landing page introduces the project title ‘The f*ck is *Heimat*’ which then leads to the home part of the website: the Stories section which presents personal narratives with image and text elements. The History section is structured chronologically in terms of visuals and text so that historical developments and other theoretical knowledge can be comprehended in steps, and About and Contact are deliberately kept simple in order to convey the most important information clearly.

With the defined navigation, sitemap and wireframes, the basic framework of the website was established. The next step was to design the individual UI elements that shape the user

experience and translates the conceptual framework into a concrete visual language that is functional and aesthetically appealing.

Design: UI-Elements and interactions

Before starting to create the components and UI elements, I first made a few sketches and digital drafts to quickly visualise my ideas and get a first impression of possible design directions. This step was primarily exploratory and served to develop a feeling for the shapes, proportions and interaction of individual elements. I tried out different variations and compared them with each other to find out which approaches could be convincing in terms of content and visuals. These tests allowed me to identify which ideas were realistically feasible and how the elements interacted to form a consistent visual language even before I started the actual development.

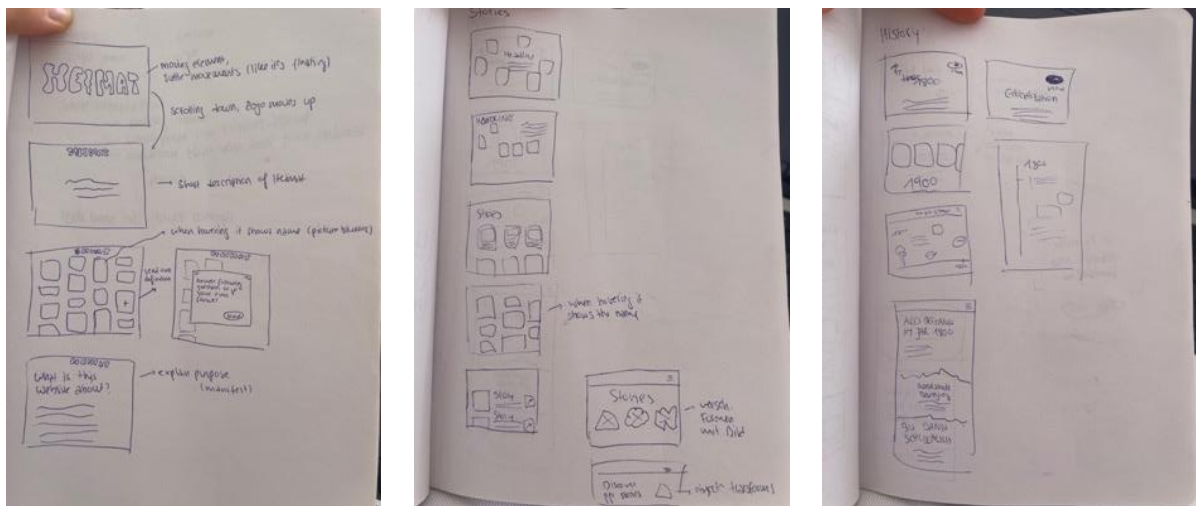
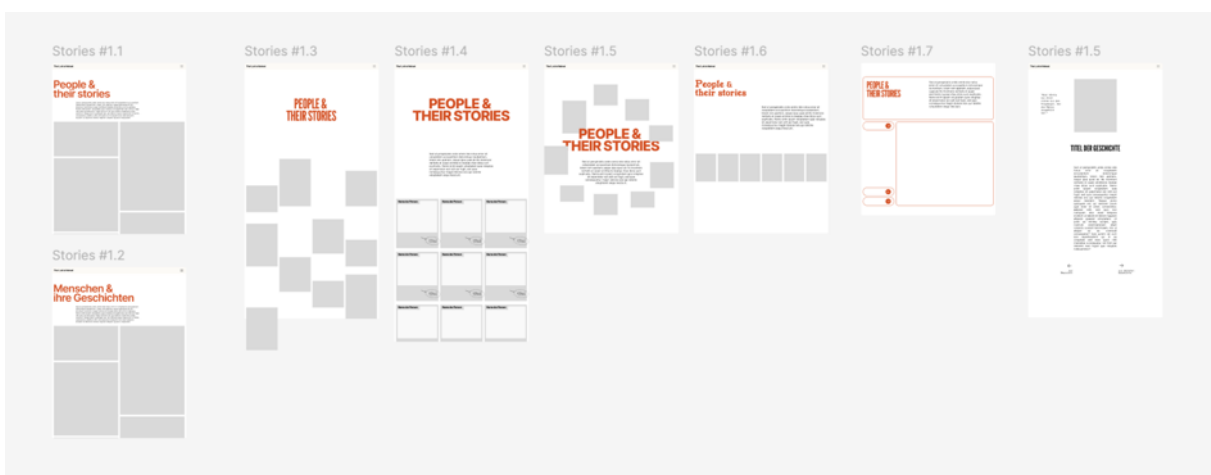


Figure 28: Scribbles for the website. Photo by the author. 2025



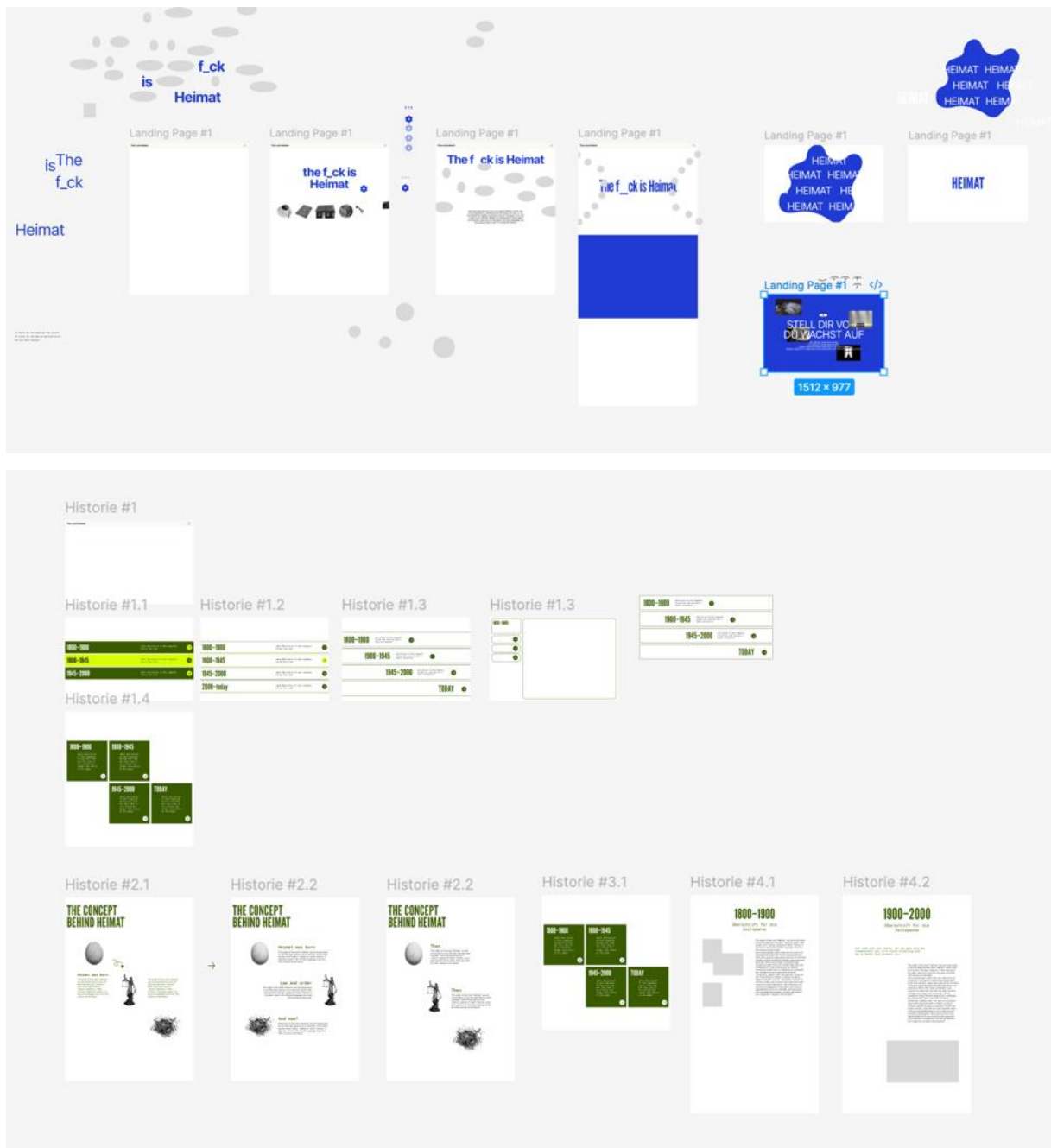


Figure 29: Digital drafts. Screenshot by the author. 2025

Eventually, I moved on to the next phase to develop the concrete components and UI elements. The aim here was to establish a consistent system that was both functionally and visually appealing and to transfer the previously developed visual language into the digital application. The buttons have a default and a hover variant to create an interactive effect. I also designed the form fields to be consistent and made them interactive with hover effects. For content such as stories or teasers, I developed cards that present content in a compact form using images, titles and short descriptions. The rounded corners and clear structure convey openness and make

it easier for users to grasp content briefly. Special text blocks, such as quotes or questions, were visually highlighted. This design creates variety in the flow of reading and draws attention to key content.

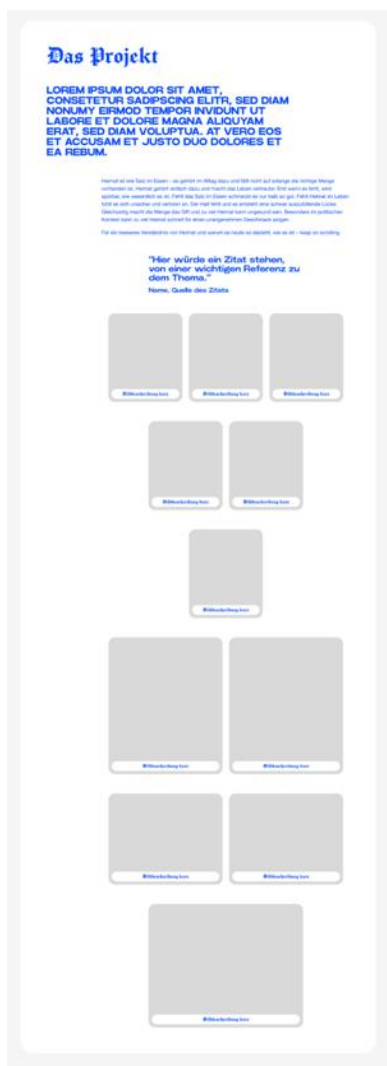


Figure 30: Design elements. Screenshot by the author. 2025

A crucial element is the font design. The heading font Chomsky, with its blackletter character, lends historical depth and directly signals a critical approach to the term *Heimat*. It is combined with Power Grotesk and Helvetica Neue, which ensure modernity, legibility and neutrality. This mixture creates an exciting and harmonious system that conveys the core idea of the project. The colours pick up on the previously developed palette and are used specifically for structuring and highlighting. Blue serves as the primary colour for buttons, headlines and text, while neutral backgrounds and clear contrasts ensure clarity and orientation. Yellow works as the highlighting colour and is only used with interactive elements or to signalize a current status.

Overall, the UI elements function as part of a consistent system. Buttons, form fields, cards and text blocks are designed according to the same principles, creating a consistent user experience. The design of the website is intentionally kept open and resembles a puzzle with its individual text and image elements. This creates a dynamic character that allows new content to be added at any time. In this way, the design reflects the complexity and changeability of *Heimat* and makes it clear that it is an ongoing and expandable concept.

Desktop and mobile version

The website was designed with the intention that its design and structure would be primarily suited to desktop viewing. This is where the full visual and content experience unfolds through generous typography, modular text blocks and detailed imagery that are particularly effective in this format. At the same time, it was important to me to also develop a mobile version for smartphones to enable access regardless of the device and to make the content more widely available. The mobile view displays the essential functions and ensures that users can also use the site on the go. Nevertheless, the desktop version remains the place where the entire visual language and narrative of the project can be experienced to their full extend.

The background

The backgrounds of the website were chosen to support the content and visual structure. A sky motif forms the background on the homepage. This was chosen because the story blocks has the structure of floating in the space, yet are arranged in relation to each other, creating a balance between openness and structure. The other pages use colour gradients based on the colour palette that was developed. Gradients create a flowing transition effect that conveys depth and dynamism and loosens up the elements of the page. Together, this results in a background system that visually supports the openness and complexity of the project while creating a consistent connection to the overall colour scheme.

The website initially serves as a digital showcase, but it is also more than that. Its main purpose is to provide an accessible, evolving platform where knowledge, stories and perspectives on *Heimat* and migration come together. It functions as a space for learning and reflection, allowing users to explore existing narratives and contribute their own experiences. The design supports the idea of home as a dynamic and multifaceted concept that cannot be reduced to a single definition.

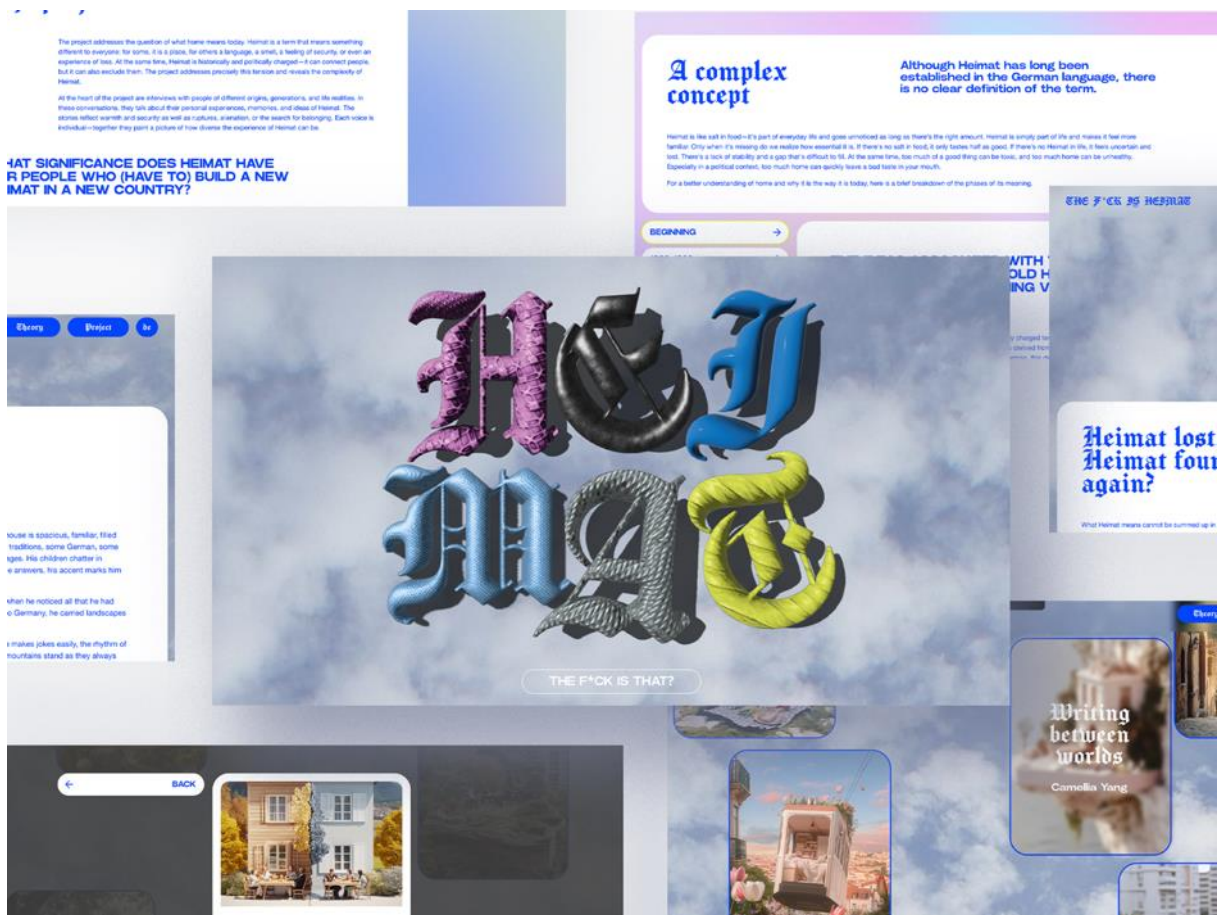


Figure 31: Pages of the website. Screenshots by the author. 2025
(more pictures of the website in the appendix)

8.5 PRINTED EDITION: CARDS

In addition to the website, I developed an analogue map collection that complements the digital project in a practical way. The idea behind this was to give the stories about *Heimat* a physical dimension and thus create a tangible connection. While the website thrives on openness and interactivity, the analogue medium offers a different approach: the cards can be picked up, sorted, passed on or collected and are offering a personal way of engaging with the content.

Design: card and package

Each card shows a generated AI-picture on the front and the corresponding story on the back. Since the images are very detailed and rich in content itself, the front cover despite that only contains the title of the text and the name of the person to whom the story belongs. The title is slightly more prominent and larger than the person's name to create a clear hierarchy and direct the eye. The positioning of the two elements is adjusted to fit in with the harmony of the image. For this reason, the colour of the font is not the same on every card but adapts in nuances to the image to ensure a harmonious overall composition. The images themselves have a slight grain effect to make them softer and more atmospheric. The backs are also designed in a similar way. They contain the text of the story, the title and the claim that the story is based on an interview with the specific person. Here, too, the layout differs slightly depending on the length of the text. The background of the cards also varies. The card either has a white, dark blue-purple or sky background. I chose this to match the front of the card. The same fonts are used as on the website, as well as a similar colour style, which, however, had to be slightly adjusted for printing in the CMYK colour space. The rounded corners of the cards refer to the similar style as on the website, creating a consistent link between analogue and digital media. The postcard format (A6) makes the cards handy and gives each story its own stage.

The packaging serves as an introduction to the overall topic and holds a manifest of the concept on the back. On the front, the word *Heimat* is designed in the same style as on the introductory page of the website. The spacing between the upper and lower rows of letters is slightly larger, and phrase “The F*ck is” is incorporated between them as it’s the title of the project. The title is also featured on both sides. The back of the packaging contains the manifesto that introduces and presents the concept of *Heimat*, referring to the cards inside the packaging.

Printing and material

Before deciding on the final material, I carried out a test print to examine both the layout and the effect of different paper types. Among this tryout-session was recycled paper, which has a slightly rougher, more irregular texture and often a softer, muted colour reproduction. I chose to test this option because recycled paper conveys an authentic and tactile quality, which seemed fitting in the context of personal stories and an intimate handling of the cards. In addition, I tried single-sided coated cardboard, as well as double-sided coated cardboard, to compare how much colour brilliance and surface finish would influence the overall impression.



Figure 32: Test print. Photo by the author. 2025

These tests helped me to understand how differently the materiality affects the perception of the print and the storytelling connected to it. I wanted the print to reproduce the images and colours with high intensity and detail but also choose a surface that still feels natural and not overly glossy. The recycled paper captured the naturalness I was looking for, but the colour reproduction was not intense enough considering the detailed images. The double-coated cardboard, on the other hand produced detailed colour results, but felt too artificial and lacked the tactile quality I wanted for the cards. This led me to the final choice: a 280-gram coated cardboard with one glossy frontside finished which helps to show off a detailed and colour intensive print. The backside is uncoated and has a matt surface. The colours appear more muted, which creates a natural effect. The contrast between the coated and the rough side makes the material interesting to handle and indicates my intended effect.



Figure 33: Final print of the cards + package. Photos by the author. 2025

A key advantage of the cards with the packaging over a book is that the collection can be expanded at any time. In this way, it follows the same open and dynamic principle as the website: *Heimat* remains a concept in transition and the card collection can grow with this change.

8.6 SUMMARY AND CONTRIBUTION

The project demonstrates that a new visual language for the concept of *Heimat* is both necessary and possible in order to make the complexity of the topic visible. The concept developed, with the website at its core and the card collection as an analogue supplement, understands *Heimat* not as a static concept, but as an open and dynamic system that can be expanded and adapted. Through its clear, minimalist design, the use of typography, colour and imagery, and its modular structure, *Heimat* is communicated as something multi-layered, something processual and constantly renegotiable.

From a scientific point of view, the website contributes to the representation of *Heimat* in the context of migration by making different narratives and perspectives accessible. In doing so, it not only creates an educational opportunity, but also a space for exchange and participation. Users can add their own stories, allowing the concept to be told from multiple perspectives. The project highlights how differently *Heimat* is experienced, the tensions that exist between loss, belonging and new forms of location, and how strongly personal narratives shape the image of the concept. These insights would only be partially comprehensible on a purely theoretical level. The combination of research, design and interaction creates a more multi-layered picture that is relevant both scientifically and creatively.

The project ties in directly with the methodology: the website serves not only as a communication platform, but also as a practical research tool. It combines the perspectives gathered in qualitative interviews with a design implementation that makes these voices visible. The result is a research process that relies not only on analysis but also on design as a method, thus opening a new approach to the discourse surrounding *Heimat* and migration.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The project shows that *Heimat* as a concept can no longer be understood solely in terms of origin, territory or tradition, but must be renegotiated in a context that is shaped by globalisation and migration. In a world where millions of people are leaving their places of origin due to war, poverty or climate change, an exclusive and ethnically homogeneous understanding of *Heimat* is no longer sufficient. Rather, we need an open and dynamic concept of the term that recognises diversity as potential and enables belonging in pluralistic societies.

The empirical interviews have made it clear that most people no longer describe *Heimat* as a fixed place, but rather as an emotional state which is shaped by relationships, rituals, language, smells or moments of security and comfort. Migration makes it clear that *Heimat* is not static, but fluid: many participants move between several *Heimat* locations, feel “in between” or develop hybrid identities. At the same time, experiences of *Heimatlosigkeit* (*homelessness*) show how exclusion from belonging can lead to isolation and alienation.

A key finding is that visual communication has a significant influence on how *Heimat* is understood and evaluated by society. For decades, political campaigns, advertising and the media have used similar motifs, such as idyllic landscapes, traditional family images and familiar symbols. This presents the term as an exclusive and nostalgic space, thereby creating a sense of separation. At the same time, counterexamples such as NGO campaigns or artistic projects show that visual language can be used to promote an inclusive understanding of *Heimat*, to create empathy and to make marginalised voices visible.

This is where my project comes in and develops a new visual language for *Heimat*. Through an open and modular design system, the concept is presented as a puzzle that is never complete. This visual principle reflects the openness and dynamic of the term: new content, perspectives and stories can be added at any time, either digitally via the website or analogously via the map collection. This shows that *Heimat* cannot be grasped through general definitions, but rather experienced through personal stories. The interviews and their visual translation in particular reveal ambivalences and new perspectives that would not be apparent from a purely theoretical perspective.

The project demonstrates that visual communication plays a decisive role in how *Heimat* is framed in the context of migration. While traditional representations portray the concept as exclusive and static, the newly developed visual language opens for an inclusive, open and dynamic narrative. As Mitzscherlich (2019) advocates, *Heimat* can thus become a place of harmonious coexistence that, while imperfect and changeable, is characterised by recognition, justice and respect (p. 191). By bringing together design, theory and empirical evidence, the project shows that visual communication is not only a mirror but also an active shaper of social narratives.

9.2 LIMITATIONS

Despite the results in terms of content and design, the project also has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. While there is research on migration, identity and even the political instrumentalization of *Heimat*, there is very little specific literature on the effects of visual communication on the perception of *Heimat*. Similarly, the concept has hardly been examined from an academical design perspective. As a result, there was a lack of established references to link the visual perspective with existing research.

In terms of the empirical evidence, the selection of interviews and stories is limited, so that only a fraction of the diversity of perspectives on *Heimat* and migration is presented. The results cannot therefore be generalised but rather provide exemplary insights.

Furthermore, the images used in the project are predominantly AI-generated. Even though this opens new aesthetic possibilities, there is the limitation that they are not based on real documentation and therefore always carry a certain degree of artificiality and fictionality. In addition, the implementation as a website in Figma was only created as a prototype and has not yet been transferred to a fully functional online platform, which currently limits its actual interactivity and reach.

9.3 RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE REASEARCH

For future research, it would be useful to further deepen the approaches developed here. Firstly, broader empirical data collection with more interviews and different target groups could open up new perspectives on *Heimat* and migration and make the diversity of voices more visible. In particular, marginalised groups could be more strongly involved.

Secondly, it would be useful to examine the influence of visual communication on the understanding of *Heimat* in a more targeted manner. As there is little specific literature on this

topic to date, a combination of experimental studies (e.g. image styles on the perception of *Heimat*) and qualitative methods could provide helpful insights. A design focus could bring not only visual representation to the foreground but also design as a method. Accordingly, “research through design” could be used specifically as a tool to gain new insights into *Heimat* and migration.

Thirdly, the prototype of the website could be established as a fully functional online platform. This would make it possible to analyse interactions and user behaviour and the role that visual design plays in this.

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11. APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Interviews

The files of all the interviews can be found here:

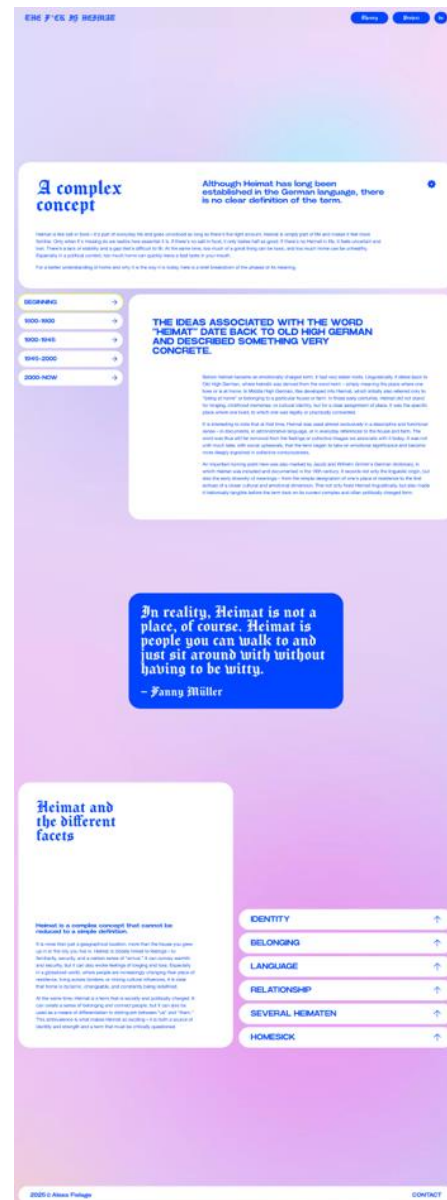
[Google Drive folder](#)

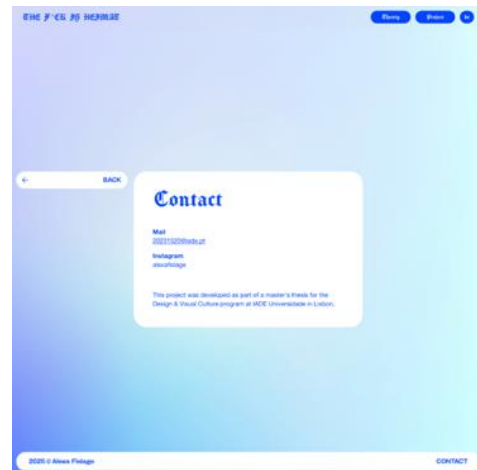
Appendix 2 – Website

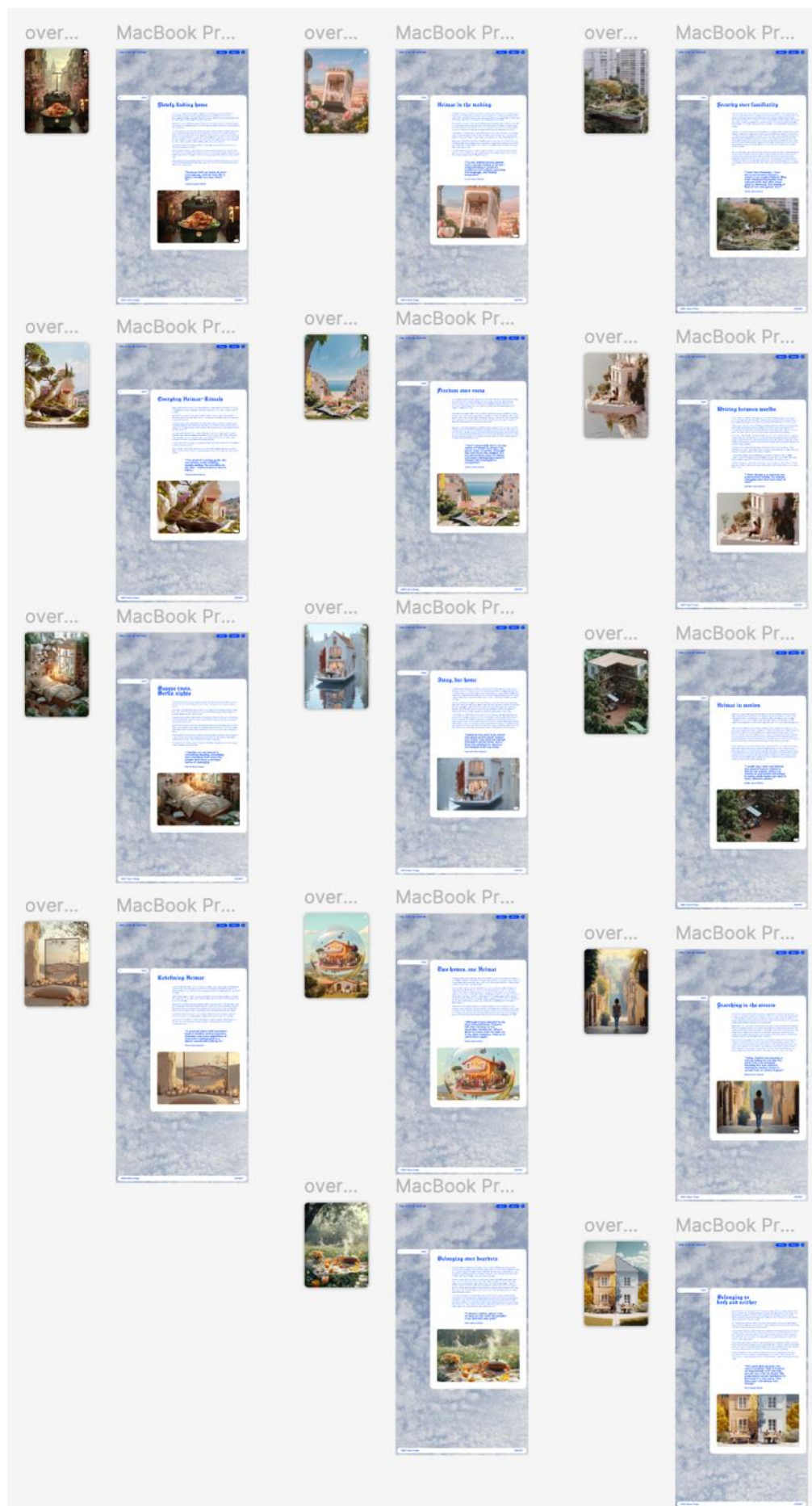
Desktop version (English)

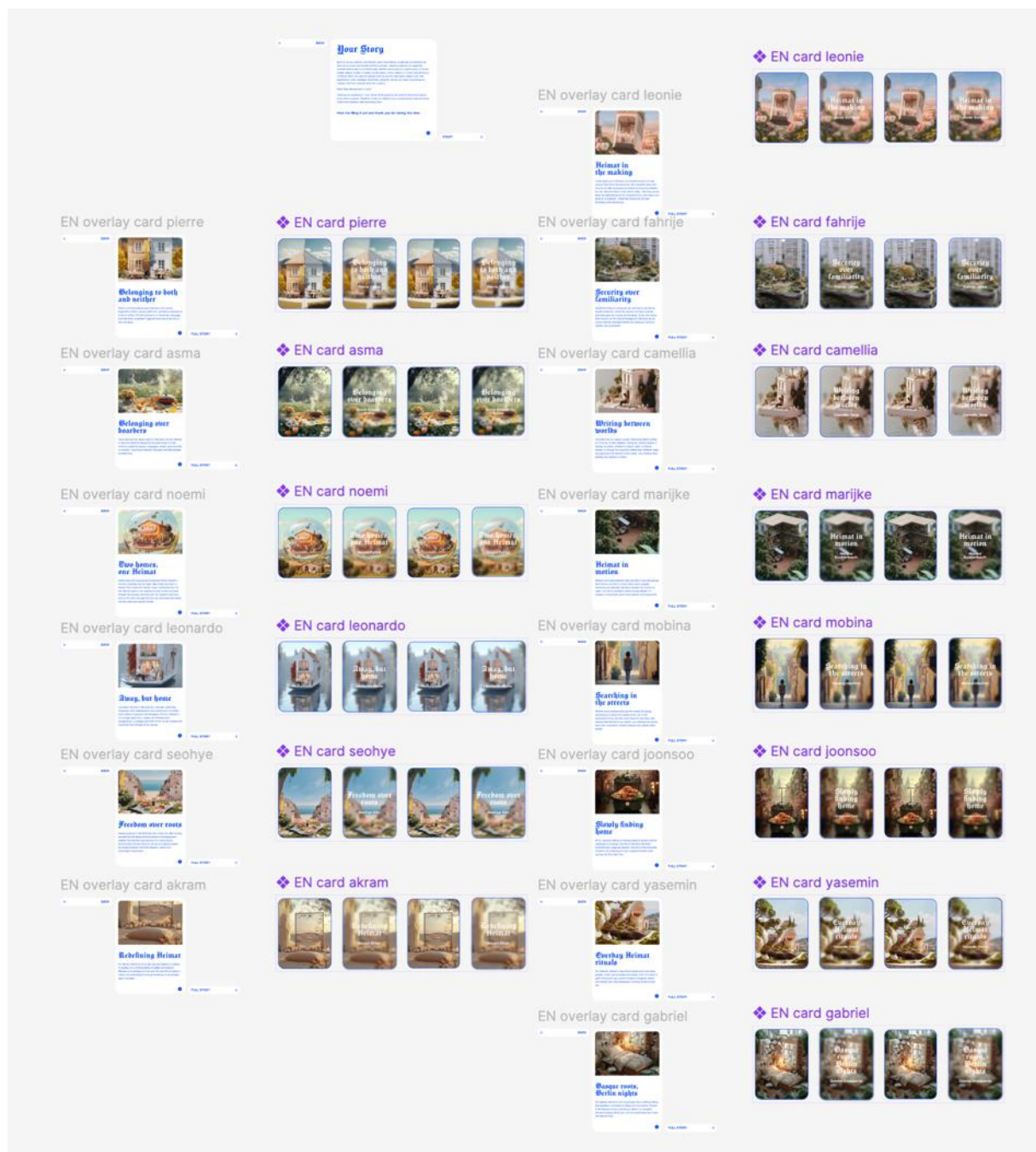
- Landing page
- Homepage with the conducted stories
- Concept
- Project
- Contact
- Overview of the story-based pages
- Overlays with summary of the story + components









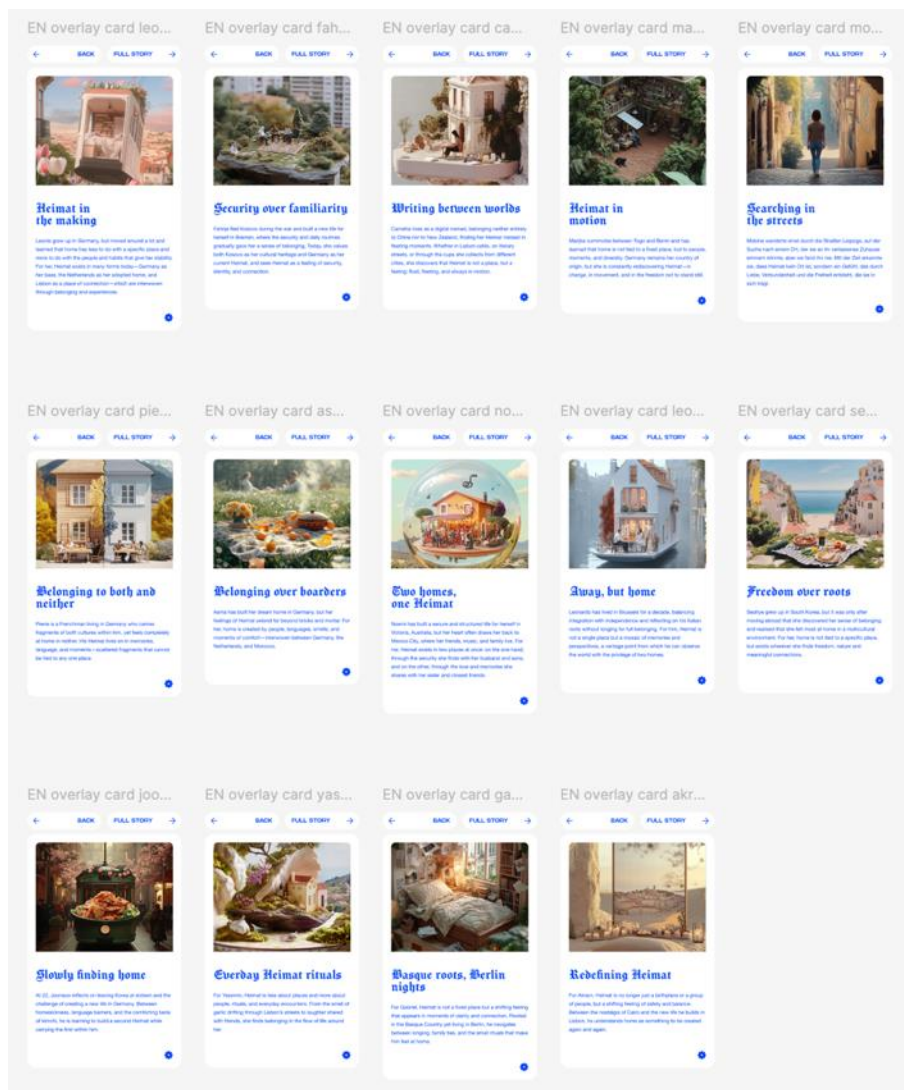


Mobile version (English)

- Landing page
- Homepage with the conducted stories
- Concept
- Project
- Contact
- Overview of the story-based pages
- Overlays with summary of the story





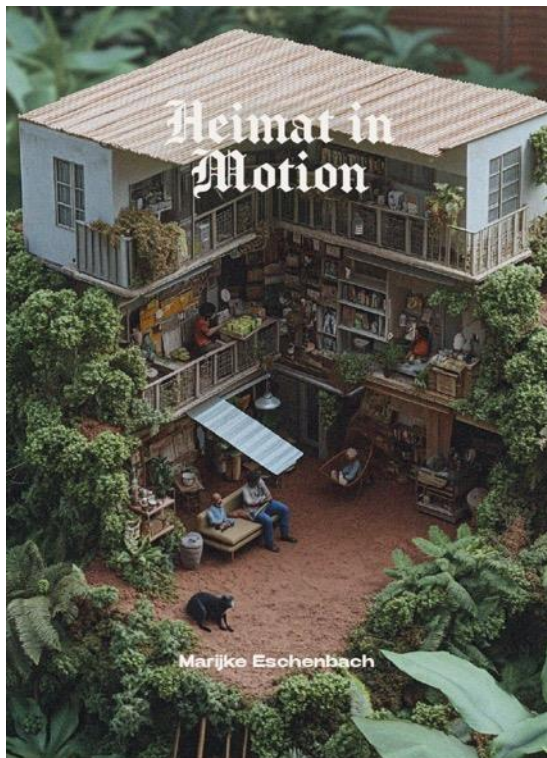


Appendix 3 – Carddeck

- Package outside and inside



- Cards front and back



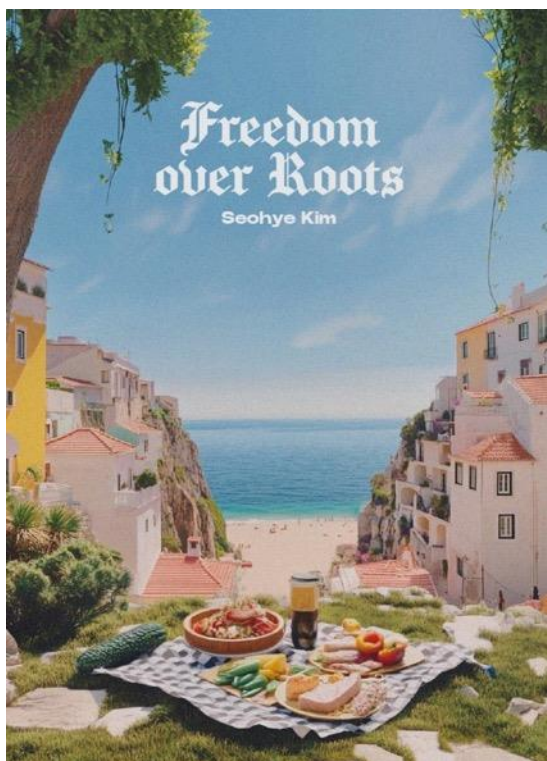
Heimat in Motion

based on
Marijke
Eschenbach's
interview

Marijke never stayed in one place for too long. Right now she lives in West Africa, she moves between Togo and Benin, living partly with her partner and partly in a lively shared apartment. The rhythm of her days is filled with noise – sometimes joyous, sometimes exhausting. She knows her life is privileged compared to many around her, yet harder in some ways than in Germany: unreliable health systems, chaotic traffic, relentless heat. Still, the constant change suits her. The variety keeps her restless spirit alive.

When she thinks of Germany, her birthplace, the feelings are mixed. Absence makes her long for it – the fresh air of spring, the smell of summer evenings, the traditions of Christmas with her mother. Yet prolonged stays leave her unsettled: the narrow-mindedness, the unfriendly glances, the heavy tone of politics. Heimat, she realized, could not be reduced to pride in a nation. For her, it is where her partner is, where her cat purrs at the end of the day, where a familiar dish or drink reminds her of a place she loves. But it is also something fleeting – as she was living in Cameroon, she could count days, missing home so much she wrote numbers on paper, yet feel suffocated at the thought of never leaving Germany again.

Heimat, for Marijke, is never singular. It is tied to her origins, to her mother, to family holidays. But she also has inhabited multiple places and made her own for a time. What gives these places meaning is not permanence but renewal. She needs variety, the sense of weaving her identity through different streets, languages, and routines. Heimat, she understood, could feel confining if frozen in one place. It was only through movement and contrast, that it became something positive. For her, belonging is not about settling down – it is about carrying the freedom to move, and the certainty that Heimat could always be found again, somewhere new.



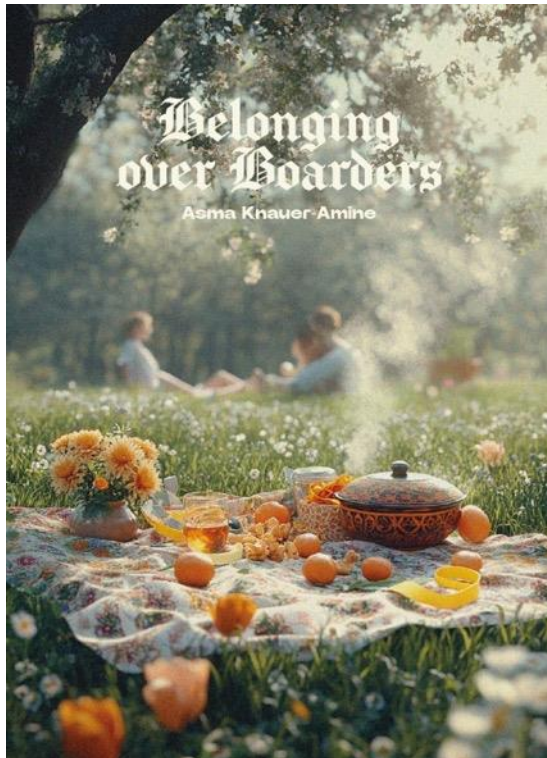
Freedom over Roots

based on
Seohye Kim's
interview

For the first twenty years of her life, Seohye lived in South Korea. At the time, she didn't question it; home was simply where she had always been. But moving to Australia at twenty-one shifted everything. Suddenly, she saw her own country with new eyes: its homogeneity, its social pressures, its silent boundaries. In Korea, wearing a bikini at the beach invited stares. Only after leaving she realized how limited her perspective had been.

In Australia she discovered multiculturalism, a setting where differences did not separate but connected. For the first time, she felt she could truly belong among people who were all, in some way, outsiders. She realized she didn't miss Korea as a place. Homesickness came only in the form of cravings for food or the sound of her mother's voice. She made lists of dishes to eat upon her return and called her mother more often. What she longed for was not geography, but connection.

Now living in Lisbon, Seohye defines home differently. Heimat, for her, is not tied to a single country. It is the freedom to express herself without judgment. It is being close to nature, the ocean, green spaces, the warmth of the sun. It is the joy of living in multicultural environments, surrounded by open-minded people who make her feel she belongs. She knows she has several Heimateen, each place bound by two constants: nature and meaningful connection. For her, Heimat will never be fixed to where she grew up. It will always be the place she feels free.



Belonging over Borders

Asma Khauer-Amine

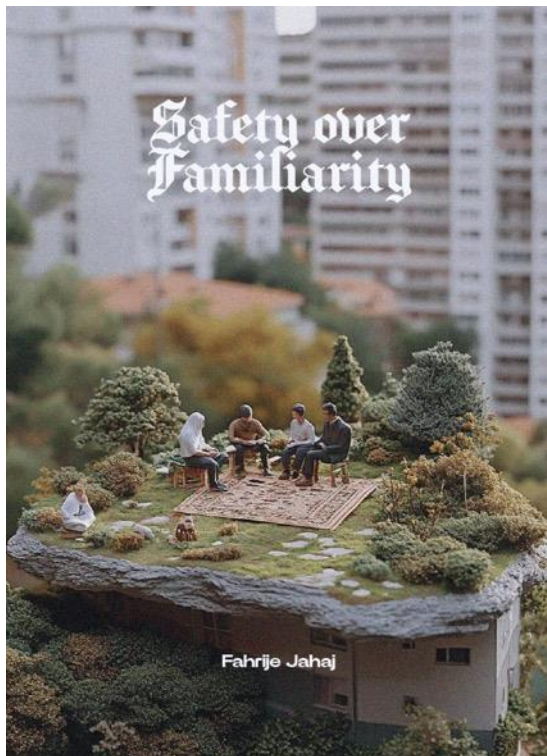
Belonging over Borders

based on
Asma
Khauer-Amine's
interview

Marijke never stayed in one place for too long. Right now she lives in West Africa, she moves between Togo and Benin, living partly with her partner and partly in a lively shared apartment. The rhythm of her days is filled with noise – sometimes joyous, sometimes exhausting. She knows her life is privileged compared to many around her, yet harder in some ways than in Germany: unreliable health systems, chaotic traffic, relentless heat. Still, the constant change suits her. The variety keeps her restless spirit alive.

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Heimat, for Marijke, is never singular. There is Heimat – tied to her origins, to her mother, to family holidays. But she also has multiple places she inhabited and made her own for a time. What gives these places meaning is renewal. She needs variety, the sense of weaving her identity through different streets, languages, and routines. Heimat, she understood, could feel confining if frozen in one place. It was only through movement, through contrast, that it became something positive. For her, belonging is not about settling down – it is about carrying the freedom to move, and the certainty that Heimat could always be found again, somewhere new.



Safety over Familiarity

Fahrje Jahaj

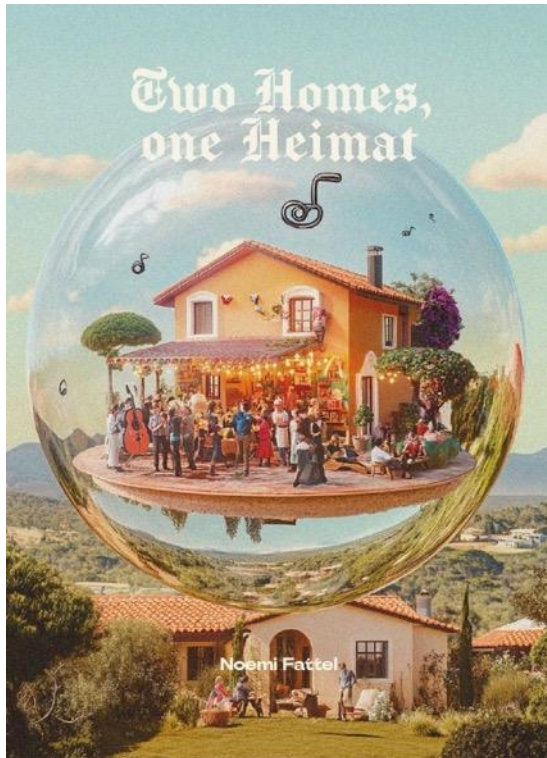
Safety over Familiarity

based on
Fahrje Jahaj's
interview

Fahrje was twenty-nine when she left Kosovo. The war had torn through her country, forcing her and her husband to make a choice they never wanted to face. Germany was not a plan, but a necessity. When they arrived in Bremen, the distance from her mother and family felt unbearable. More than two thousand kilometers separated her from the voices, the foods, and the celebrations that had shaped her life. In those early months, she often thought about returning, but the reality of war left no space for that. She carried Kosovo inside her, in memories of language, music, and traditions – yet her new surroundings felt cold and unfamiliar.

Over time, Bremen became more than a place of refuge. The city offered stability, safety, and the possibility of building something new. Fahrje and her husband raised their children here, creating a household filled with their own routines and laughter. She found comfort in the balance of everyday life: the rhythm of work, the patterns of her neighborhood in Bremen, the reliability of a "normal" standard of living. Still, Kosovo remained present. Each year, they returned to visit family. Sharing meals, hearing Albanian spoken around her, and taking part in familiar festivities made her feel rooted again in her birthplace. At home in Germany, cooking traditional dishes or listening to music from Kosovo could bring that same sense of closeness, even across borders.

After more than twenty years in Germany, Fahrje no longer saw herself as a visitor. For her, Heimat had become twofold: Kosovo as her beginning, her cultural anchor, and Germany as her home in the present. Heimat, she realized, was not just about where one is born. It was about belonging, security, and identity. And in both Kosovo and Germany, she had found those in different ways.



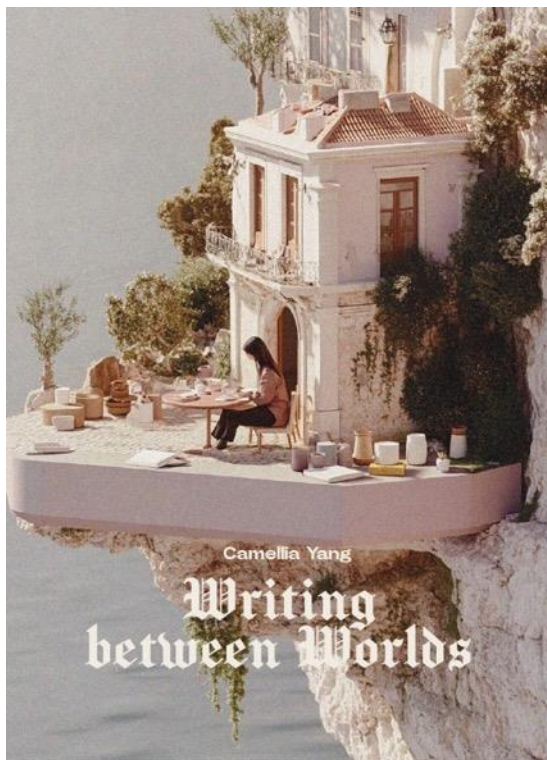
Two Homes, one Heimat

based on
Noemi Fattel's
interview

In Victoria, Australia, Noemi Fattel lives a life she had carefully built. She owns a house, has a stable job, and her office is just fifteen minutes away. Three days a week she works from home, three days she goes to the gym. Habits that keep her healthy. Safety, routine, and proximity define her daily life. "This life suits me," she often thinks. And yet, something is missing.

Noemi was born in Mexico City. She carries with her the warmth of Mexican hospitality, the laughter of Friday night gatherings with friends, the music that can instantly transport her back. She misses those moments most: sharing food, stories, and support. In Australia she has friends too, but conversations require effort, every word in English demands focus. She feels tired sometimes, lonely even, often reminded that she has not fully blended into the community around her. Homesickness comes not every day, but every time she misses a milestone, good or bad: weddings, graduations, when her sister or extended family fell ill. In those moments she turns to video calls, to movies from her childhood to the familiar sound of Mexican Spanish.

Over time, Noemi accepted that Heimat is not singular. She has two. One was in Australia, with her husband and sons, where safety and stability allow her and her family to grow. The other is in Mexico, alive in the bonds with her closest friends and her sister. Heimat, she realized, was not a nation or a community, but the feeling of being safe and loved, of sharing life with those who mattered most. For her, belonging was never in one place but spread across two worlds, two homes, held together in one heart.



Writing between Worlds

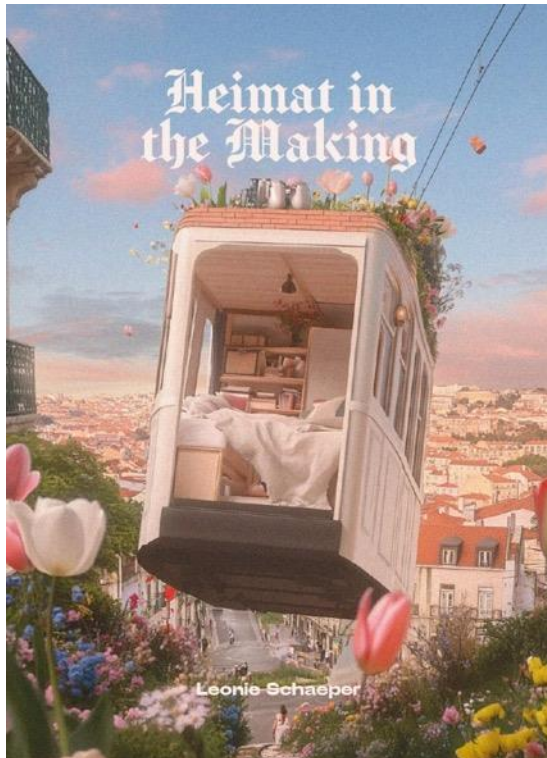
based on
Camellia Yang's
interview

A café in Lisbon. Camellia sits by the window, a notebook open, words flowing onto the page. Around her, voices rise and fall in Portuguese. She doesn't understand them all, but she doesn't need to. What matters is the peace in her chest, the rare stillness that lets her write. For now, this is home.

Another day, she walks past Casa Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa is her favorite writer. He lived in the city she lives. He walked on the same streets she is walking on. Literature ties her to the city. She belongs to words, to writers, to the invisible threads between stories and streets. On her desk, a small collection: mugs from Manchester, London, Lisbon, Shanghai. Starbucks mugs, each carrying a piece of a life lived elsewhere. To her, they are markers of belonging, fragments of Heimat she gathers along the way. None lasts forever.

She already visited and lived in over 30 countries. None of them feel like home, only a few cities had the feeling of Heimat. She accepts that. Heimat is not permanence, it is a moment. She thinks of China. She thinks of New Zealand. Neither is fully hers. Instead, she carries a light kind of alienation, a distance that never fully disappears. In England she felt it again, walking streets she had only known from novels and films. A sudden recognition, a flicker of belonging, as if she had stepped into a page she once underlined. Heimat is like that, she realizes: a feeling that appears, burns bright, then fades so the search can continue.

Camellia smiles into her coffee. To her, Heimat is not a country, not a passport, not even a house. Heimat is peace at a café table, words filling her notebook, the certainty that she is always on the move and always, briefly, arriving.



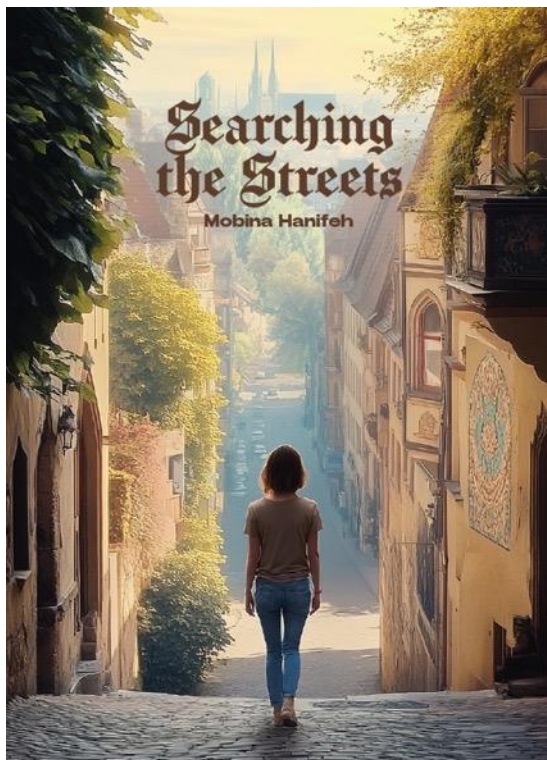
Heimat in the Making

based on
Leonie
Schaeper's
interview

The kitchen in Lisbon is filled with the voices of her roommates, pans clattering, a pot of pasta steaming on the stove. Leonie laughs with one of her roomies, her friend, the one who makes this place feel safe. The walls are bare – no shelves of books, barely any decoration. She knows she cannot collect too many things. Moving has been constant, and yet, tonight, the kitchen feels like a corner of home. On the phone, her mother's voice is steady, familiar. Sometimes homesickness hits hardest when she hears it – around Christmastime, or when she misses a family gathering back in Enmerich. She remembers her hometown: quiet, green, sometimes too still. Germany is stability, the soil she grew up on. She is grateful for that, even if the town itself never seemed beautiful to her. Family and friends made it worth living.

The Netherlands was different. There, she learned how much a place could teach. Walking through Dutch streets, she felt both inside and outside at once. She understood people's daily lives, their rhythms, their humor. Pride mixed with distance – close, yet never fully one of them. An "adopted homeland," she calls it. Lisbon gives her freedom. Narrow streets, unfamiliar language, the sea nearby. She knows she lives in an international bubble, yet something in the city's light keeps her rooted. Heimat might be too strong a word here but belonging – at least a fragment of it – finds her in the laughter of friends, in the ease of knowing where to walk without a map.

For Leonie, Heimat is never fixed. It travels: in people, in routines, in small rituals. She carries it with her each time she learns to settle, each time she feels less like a visitor. Heimat is not one address – it is the feeling of arrival, wherever life takes her.



Searching the Streets

based on
Mobina
Hanifeh's
interview

One evening in Leipzig, Mobina wandered through the streets without direction. She was searching – not for a shop or a café, but for a corner that reminded her of her home in Iran. The houses, the pavements, the air – she studied them closely, hoping that something would stir recognition. Nothing did. After hours of walking, she realized there was no street here that would mirror the one she had left behind. It was painful, but also strangely beautiful. Eventually, she stopped searching.

Mobina left Iran a few years ago. Her memories of her Heimat country carry weight. There were moments of beauty: the landscapes, the nature, places that felt almost dreamlike. Yet there was also the restrictions, the absence of freedom that made her heart restless. Since moving to Germany, she never felt homesick for Iran. Instead, she felt trapped, even from far. Germany, too, often left her feeling unsettled. The language created distance, the constant question "Where are you from?" reminded her of not belonging. For a time, she believed she had no home at all.

Slowly, she discovered another truth. Heimat was not in the streets she walked, nor in the countries she compared. It was within her. Every time she loved and was loved, sharing a good song with a friend, cooking together, dancing without fear, she created a piece of home. Heimat became the presence of her father's voice in memory, the warmth of friends who made her feel understood, the energy she carried inside herself. Heimat, she realized, was not a country or a house. It was a feeling, like the wind, free, unbound, touching everyone without needing to explain where it came from or where it would go.



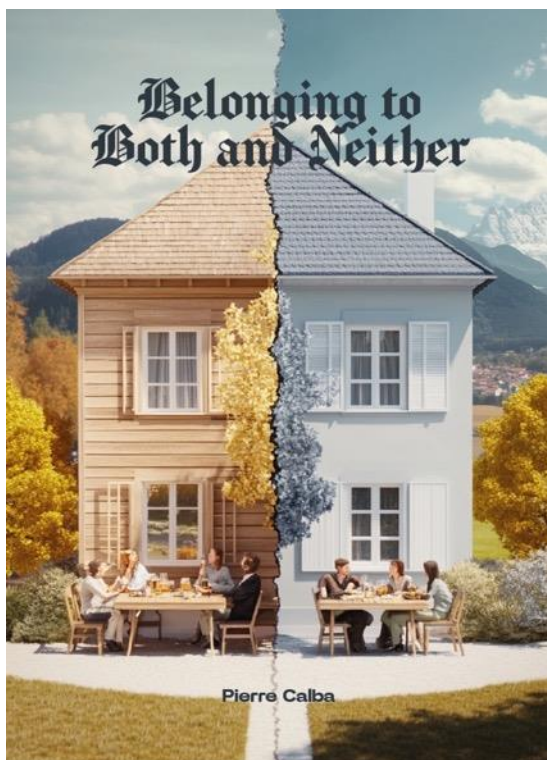
Away, but home

based on
Leonardo
Ebner's
interview

Leonardo had lived in Brussels for a decade. The city's international rhythm suited him: voices in many languages, a certain ironic distance from the idea of a single national identity. He appreciated that freedom. Yet there were parts of the city he avoided, places that felt segregated, or the so-called Euro-bubble where expats lived for twenty years without learning a word of French or Dutch. Between these worlds, he sought balance: integrating without dissolving into the culture around him, remaining himself without becoming a stereotype.

Italy was his starting point, though not his anchor. He thought of it as family, friends, warmth but also as conservatism, old patterns, politics that seemed frozen in time. When he returned, he often felt like a tourist with insider knowledge: culturally Italian, yes, but without the comfort of belonging. He could eat pizza because he liked it, but not because it "proved" his identity. Stereotypes tired him most when others projected them onto him. Home, he realized, could not be reduced to symbols, foods, or flags.

For Leonardo, home shifted constantly. Sometimes it was his living room in Brussels. Sometimes it was Italian food and language. Sometimes it was the act of traveling far, so that returning felt like rediscovery. Heimat, to him, was not nostalgia but a state of mind, a cluster of memories that changed with time. In Italian, he called it "casa": a word broad enough to mean house, home, a place of belonging, but free of the political weight of "patria". Over the years, he came to see Heimat as a vantage point, the place from which one observes the world. Once, when he had only one Heimat, he had not noticed how partial that view was. Now, with two, he knew the privilege of comparison, the luxury of being away, and still feeling at home.



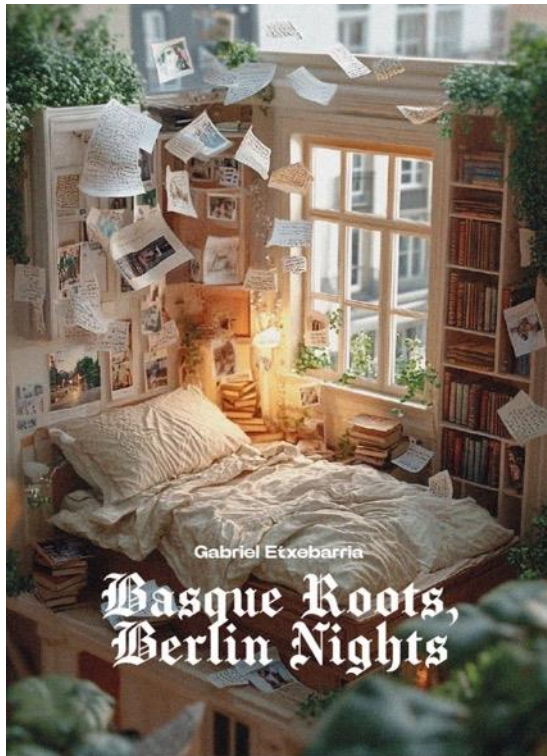
Belonging to Both and Neither

based on
Pierre Calba's
interview

The table in Osnabrück, Germany is set with croissants and coffee. The house is spacious, familiar, filled with the routines of family life. Here, his children grow up; here, he builds traditions, some German, some French. His children chatter in German, his wife switches between languages. Pierre smiles, but when he answers, his accent marks him instantly. Always French. Always the outsider. He did not know homesickness until late. It struck after visits to France, when he noticed all that he had missed—birthdays, family gatherings, the rhythm of daily life. Returning to Germany, he carried landscapes in his mind, the taste of food, the echo of familiar voices.

Some part of him always looks back to France. There, the words flow. He makes jokes easily, the rhythm of language carrying him. His cousins laugh, his parents embrace him, the mountains stand as they always have. And yet, after nearly twenty years away, he no longer feels fully at home there either. The everyday details like politics, cultural references, habits slip past him. In one place, he longed for the other; in the other, he no longer fully belonged. At the university, teaching French gives him relief. Sharing culture with students brings a sense of grounding. Yet outside, in daily conversations, he stumbles, excluded by nuance. He carries objects across borders: wine, books, photographs, even chairs. Fragments of one world placed carefully into another. They comfort him, but they do not erase the gap.

France is no longer entirely his. Germany has never fully become his. Two decades here, two decades there. Two homes and none. Heimat, for Pierre, is scattered: in memories of youth, in the cadence of French words, in the rituals he passes on to his children. Between two countries, he belongs to both and to neither.



Basque Roots, Berlin Nights

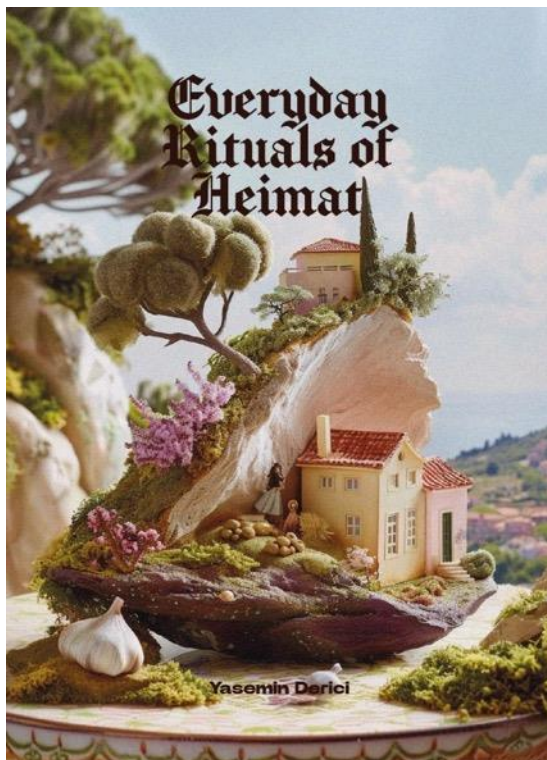
based on
Gabriel
Etxebarria's
interview

Gabriel is 33 and lives in the center of Berlin, sharing an apartment with three other people. His room is small, but he likes it. "My own little space," he says. His roommates are nice, the location is right, it's perfect.

Born in Spain, he actually feels more connected to the Basque Country. That's where his family, his dog, and his best friends are. He loves the food, the culture, the landscapes. But the feeling of being stuck sometimes has also driven him away from there. "I always have to deal with a constant feeling of not belonging," he says. For him, home is not something fixed, but rather fleeting, a state that comes and goes. When his head is clear and he is with people he loves, he feels most at home.

He often feels homesick in everyday life. It was particularly strong when his grandfather died, two weeks before he was planning to visit him. Moments like these bring everything into focus. That's why he often calls, sends pictures, and asks for photos to be sent back to him, so he can stay close to his family and friends. Gabriel sometimes finds home in small, fleeting moments: leaving the cinema after a good film, dozing off on the couch after a family dinner, talking nonsense with friends after a long night out. "These are the moments when I can switch off my mind and just take in what's happening."

For Gabriel, Heimat is mostly the people. Heimat remains fleeting, changeable, elusive. He envies people who have a stronger sense of belonging.



Everyday Rituals of Heimat

based on
Yasemin Dericli's
interview

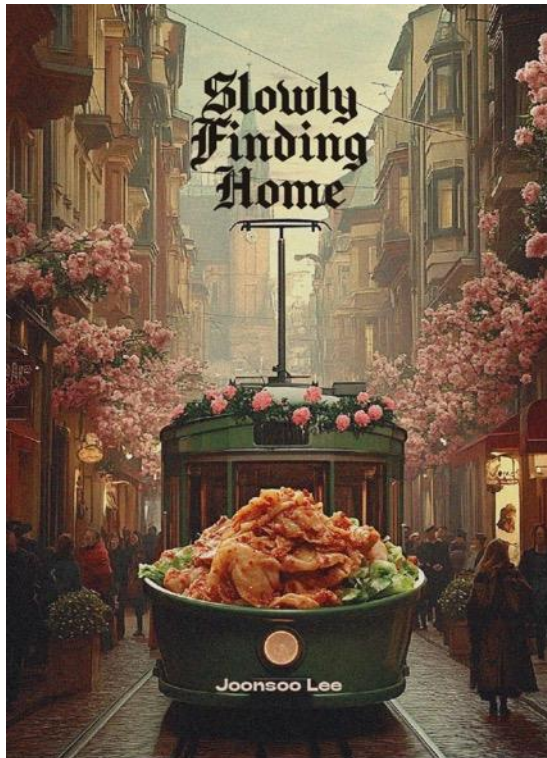
Yasemin lives in the heart of Lisbon, in a small rented apartment she shares with her husband. It's not as comfortable as the home she had before, but she likes the buzz of the city center, the crowds, the life on the streets.

She was born and raised in Turkey, a country she remembers for its kind people, stunning nature, rich culture and beauty. Yet when she looks back today, she sees how much has changed: law, economy, and security, all for the worse.

What makes her feel at home are sincerity and closeness: the people around her, familiar gestures and connections. Homesickness comes when she thinks of her family in difficult times, or when her work and living standards in Lisbon feel too low. But she reminds herself: everything is a process, problems will pass, and things will improve.

Her vision of Heimat shows itself in moments and sensations: the smell of roasting garlic drifting from a neighbor's kitchen, the salty sea breeze, the warmth of the sun on her skin, birds chirping, and strangers smiling. Belonging is there too, when she cooks with her husband, shares a meal with friends, greets neighbors on the street, or gives directions to someone who's lost. She associates Heimat with simple, living things like the plants and flowers in her apartment: "Because they live in this house and with us too."

For her, Heimat is not a static place but a flow of people and rituals. Dialogues, shared laughter, tears, dreams – these make her feel at home. Cities may change, rituals may shift, but she still manages to find her flow.



Slowly Finding Home

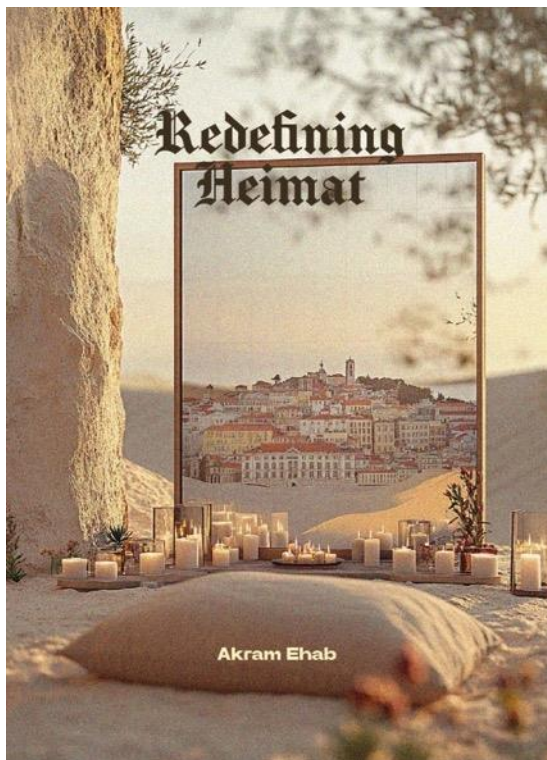
based on
Joonsoo Lee's
interview

Joonsoo is living in Halle-Neustadt, a neighborhood he calls cheap but far from beautiful. The supermarket is close; the tram stops nearby. Practical, yes, but the streets often stink, and the surroundings feel neglected. Even though he describes himself as a stable person, the area sometimes makes him feel unsafe.

Joonsoo is 22, born in Korea, and moved to Germany alone at the age of sixteen. He identifies as Korean even though he lives in Germany. Back in Korea, he experiences belonging and security, two words that, for him, define Heimat.

The early years in Germany were tough. Homesickness was a constant companion, especially during high school. The language barrier was heavy, and he faced many restrictions, like being forced to live in a boarding school. The food there was something he never really got used to. Today things are easier: he speaks German more confidently and has accepted that a flight ticket to Korea is simply expensive. Sometimes, walking through the city, he understands conversations without trying. In those moments, he doesn't feel so alone in the world, relaxed even. He has one clear Heimat: Bundang, the district in Korea where he grew up. But at the same time, he is building a second home in Germany.

When asked about Heimat, a taste comes to mind: kimchi. Homemade, Jeolla-style, just like his mother used to serve every day. "That kimchi tastes like home," he says, remembering the dish prepared by a Korean woman who once invited him. Heimat for him means more than just a birthplace. It is the place of nostalgia, somewhere you always long to return to. And maybe because he left Korea so early in life, that's why Heimat also feels like a place he has to return to at some point.



Redefining Heimat

based on
Akram Ehab's
interview

Akram is 30, born and raised in Cairo. Today he lives in Lisbon, in a shared student flat. Life there feels like constant motion, study, work, hustle. Maybe he hasn't had the chance to really judge the place yet, he admits. Comfort, for now, comes less from the city itself and more from the people around him, from friends and locals.

When he thinks of Egypt, emotions mix: sorrow and anger about what the country has become, but also deep pride in its history, its people, and the belief that it deserves better. Family and childhood friends still anchor him to that place.

Heimat, for him, is simple in definition but difficult in practice: the place where you feel safe, where you can return and recharge. Sometimes homesickness strikes in stressful times. He lets himself grieve, gives the feeling space, and then reminds himself: home doesn't have to stay in the past. It can be created anew, through awareness, through actions, through building places where kindness and acceptance prevail.

No single object symbolizes Heimat for him. Instead, he describes fleeting moments of nostalgia, like stumbling upon a toy or book from childhood, suddenly thrown back into a time when he felt safe.

Over time, his view has shifted. Heimat is not only a place, not even necessarily people. It's more of a feeling for him. A state of balance, of peace, of belonging – something that changes as life and circumstances change.

[LINK TO VIEW THE PROJECT](#)