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To cite this article: Shpresa Jashari, Janine Dahinden & Joëlle Moret (2019): Alternative spatial hierarchies: a cross-border spouse's positioning strategies in the face of Germany's 'pre-integration' language test, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2019.1625136](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1625136)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1625136>



Published online: 17 Jul 2019.



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## Alternative spatial hierarchies: a cross-border spouse's positioning strategies in the face of Germany's 'pre-integration' language test

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how spouses waiting in Turkey to be reunited with their partner in Europe experience border regimes and deal with the transnationalised discourses on 'marriage migrants' they encounter. It is based on the analysis of a single narrative interview, that of a woman taking German classes at Goethe Institute in Istanbul in order to pass the required language test. Like other respondents, she is confronted with negative gendered preconceptions regarding 'Turkish import brides'. Her boundary work involves mobilising alternative hierarchies in an attempt to discursively construct a different Turkey than the one generally represented: she draws on social class (positioning herself as a member of the highly educated, mobile and economically better off), socio-spatial units (focusing on her urbanity) and gender (experiencing 'modern' and equal gender relationships). The paper emphasises the importance of the socio-spatial context, here the classroom, where boundary-making takes place. It also provides insights into the effects of global spatial hierarchies on migrants and their alternative narratives, a dimension that can only be understood through a decentred analysis. The article contributes to studies on cross-border marriages by analysing the 'outgoing' side, a perspective still rarely addressed in the literature.

### KEYWORDS

Boundary work; cross-border marriages; border regimes; gender; social class; space and place

## 1. Introduction

The first sentence with which the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees receives visitors to its 'Subsequent entry of spouses' webpage is: 'Language skills are an elementary requirement to ensure successful integration'. In 2007, the German authorities issued a new regulation, requiring citizens of what they call third countries to prove their basic German-language skills before being able to apply for a family-reunification visa and join their spouse. According to official statements, this regulation aims to not only facilitate integration, but also prevent forced marriages (Grote 2017, see also Block 2019). This regulation is only one example of the increasing restrictiveness of European family-reunification schemes (Block 2015; de Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli 2018).

In the politicised discourses legitimising these restrictions, cross-border marriage appears as a problem, a sign of failed integration, and is met with the suspicion of fraud or force. These narratives feature stereotypical figures such as the poorly integrated, violent second-generation migrant man and the voiceless Muslim 'import bride' who needs to be saved by Western state institutions (Abu-Lughod 2002; Strasser et al. 2009; Bonjour and De Hart 2013; Bonjour and Kraler 2015; Block 2019), as other contributions in this issue also argue.

While an extensive literature describes the effects of these policies and stigmatising discourses in European countries, the contexts and conditions of the 'outgoing' side, set in the countries of departure, are often neglected (but see Gutekunst 2015a, 2015b; Aybek, Strassburger, and Yüksel-Kaptanoglu 2015, for exceptions). Academic migration research funded by Western states focuses primarily on the 'receiving' side of cross-border phenomena. Although the transnational approach has been widely adopted in migration studies, research in this area still needs to be decentred (Amelina and Faist 2012; Dahinden 2017). In this article, we focus on people who are confronted by European border regimes from the 'outside'. We understand *border regimes* as a complex interrelation of institutional and individual actors, practices, discourses, materialities, movements and struggles for control and movement (Hess et al. 2015, 2). This performativist ethnographic approach looks at border and migration control as 'doing border', which makes it possible to consider both formal and informal practices (Scheel and Gutekunst 2018) and makes embodied encounters with actors, means and methods of control the starting point for analysis (Schmoll 2014).

We demonstrate that the culturalising, gendered and classed discourses on which these border regimes are based also cross borders and affect prospective migrants. As the introduction of pre-entry language tests shows, border regimes are increasingly being externalised, outsourced to actors located in the territory of so-called third countries (Cuttitta 2010; Hess et al. 2015). Gutekunst (2015a, 2015b) argues that institutions such as the Goethe Institute, whose traditional goals were to promote German language and culture, have become active players in enforcing Germany's border regime.

To understand how border regimes are experienced and dealt with by spouses waiting to join their partners in Europe, we carried out interviews in Turkey, Kosova and Sri Lanka. We have chosen to focus on one particular biographical narrative, that of Yüksel K., to demonstrate the complex processes through which she positions herself vis-à-vis these transnationalised discourses about 'marriage migrants'. We analyse her boundary-making strategies not only in the context of her biographical account, but also in the immediate spatial context in which this border regime is experienced, the classroom.

Thus, our analysis examines how boundary-making practices and the making of borders come together in the experiences and sense-making strategies of our respondent. To do so, we first outline our theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework, and then present a biographical analysis of Yüksel's story.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual background

Our theoretical point of departure is that individuals are socially situated in multiple and intersecting hierarchies, related in particular to social class, race, gender and place (Winkler and Degele 2009; Anthias 2013). Cross-border spouses confront specific

hierarchies in the process of being granted the necessary documentation to migrate. Spatial imaginaries of ‘the West and the rest’ circulate within the institutions they encounter: immigration officials, embassy agents and language schools. By reinforcing culturalising and orientalising (Saïd 1978) gender stereotypes, these imaginaries function as discursive legitimisations of global power hierarchies (Hall 1992) and (im)mobilisations (Schmoll 2014).

The cross-border spouses we interviewed, confronted with negative identity markers, develop strategies to regain positive identifications (Tajfel 1981). These strategies involve actively responding to boundaries and attempting to modify or re-draw specific symbolic boundaries (Barth 1970). Boundaries allow social actors ‘to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space [... to] acquire status and monopolise resources’ (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168 our emphasis). Our focus on space demonstrates that the boundary work of these cross-border spouses mobilises but also challenges global spatial hierarchies while emphasising local spatial distinctions, particularly that of urban versus rural. Consequently, we include a theoretical perspective on the urbanity-rurality opposition. The phenomenological and epistemological distinction of this dichotomy continues to be difficult in a growingly globalised and interrelated world (Woods 2009). Social sciences dealing with this concept-dyad have yielded new terminology reflecting its blurriness, interconnectedness and hybridity and have led to more interdisciplinarity, sending subdisciplines such as rural or urban geography through disciplinary identity crises (Champion and Hugo 2003; Cloke 2006). But however problematic any scientific definition, their power as a boundary marker in everyday practices remains untouched –for instance when mobilised subversively, as in the case at hand.

We focus on a particular set of categories and their intersections: space, mobility, gender and class. This choice is driven by both theoretical considerations and the data. Theoretically, hierarchies and categories related to space have received much less attention than others in the literature – in particular ethnicity, but also religion, gender and social class (for an exception see Amelina 2017). In terms of data, these categories emerged as the most prominent ones in the self-positioning discourses not only of Yüksel K., but also the great majority of our respondents in all our research.

We argue that we can better understand how socio-spatial boundaries and national borders are dealt with discursively by focusing on the multi-layered embeddedness of cross-border phenomena in space and place. In the first part of our biographical analysis, we examine *space* as ‘a distinct dimension of social inequality, along with the dimensions of gender, ethnicity/race and class, among others’ (Amelina 2017, 61). In the second part, we examine *place* as a concrete, experienced environment. We understand place as a particular articulation of space (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Massey 1994) that partakes in the shaping of individual experience (Löw 2001). This broad, multilevel approach to spatiality helps avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) and the reproduction of nation-states’ categories (Dahinden 2016; Moret, Andrikopoulos, and Dahinden 2019).

Space and place are always gendered, as feminist geographers in particular have demonstrated (Massey 1994; Silvey 2006; Riaño and Baghdadi 2007). We understand *gender* as a relational and analytical category that consists of the social construction and production of the feminine and the masculine. Gender relates to identities and subjectivities, but also to systems of domination and subordination (Butler 1990; Gildemeister

2001; Lutz 2010). What men or women should be or do thus varies over time and place, but the idea that they should be and do radically different things is what constitutes the structural and symbolic basis of the (heteronormative) differentiation process. Gender is an element actively reproduced and transformed in social practices and interactions – ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ gender (West and Fenstermaker 1995) – as will become clear in the analysis of Yüksel’s biography.

Gender is constitutive of the dominant hierarchising discourses regarding Europe, the West, the Orient, the Balkans and so on. These discourses build on dichotomous culturalising oppositions, as they draw seemingly geographic lines between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ places, thus constructing global hierarchies (Saïd 1978; Hall 1992; Todorova 1997). As we will show in our analysis, these gendered and culturalising ascriptions come together in Western imaginaries of figures such as the ‘Turkish import bride’ (Dahinden, Duemmler, and Moret 2014). The heavy focus in European migration policies on forced marriages, which are used to justify the language requirement, is an example of such gendered representations. The equation of a country, its people and their supposed culture is crucial, since marriage migrants from other places, such as the United States, Japan or Brazil, are mostly unaffected by such policies (Gutekunst 2015a, 2015b).

This indicates that spatial hierarchies are also strongly related to social class. *Class*, in this article, is understood as an overarching category of difference and not as an objective, quantifiable entity. We are interested in how class is lived and experienced by gendered, ethnicised and spatialised social actors (see for instance Reay 1998; Skeggs 2004). Yüksel mobilises class in her narrative to create alternative hierarchising boundaries to those with which she is confronted, anchoring her classed boundary making in gendered imaginaries of urbanity and rurality.

### 3. Methods and methodology

The case study we have selected is part of a larger multi-sited study, which includes semi-directed narrative interviews with women and men in Turkey, Kosova and Sri Lanka who were about to join their partners in Europe, as well as interviews with representatives of embassies, intermediary agencies and NGOs. The interviews in Turkey were conducted in April and May 2016.

We chose a single case study approach (Zittoun 2017) to address our question and applied a discourse analysis methodology (Foucault 1981/fr. 1969; Völter et al. 2005). We selected Yüksel’s story not only because it demonstrates a particularly wide array of positioning strategies, but also because the discursive intersection of the boundary-making categories of space, mobility, gender and class, which is so prominent in all of our biographic interviews, comes out very strongly and clearly in this case. The benefit of choosing a single case study lies in the in-depth insight it gives into the multifaceted institutional dynamics at play. A fine-grained analysis of the categories that appear in the narrative and biographical background can open up various starting points for further generalisations in this field of study (Zittoun 2017).

For the Turkish fieldwork, the authors collaborated with Ceren Topgül, a Turkish researcher based in Istanbul, who carried out most of the interviews, including the one with Yüksel. She transcribed the interview and provided a translated English version. Almost all interviews were undertaken with students enrolled in the so-called Pre-

integration Course at the Goethe Institute in Istanbul, which is targeted exclusively at migrants who will move to Germany within the framework of its family-reunification scheme. The researcher could contact these students after having been introduced by the teacher, and although all interviews followed rules of anonymity and confidentiality, they were conducted during or after class, at the school or a nearby café. These elements are important to bear in mind when analysing respondents' positioning strategies, as they are part of the context in which the narrative develops.

To pass the German-language test, applicants for family reunification are strongly encouraged to take German classes, and the Goethe Institute in Istanbul (as well as in Ankara and Izmir) is one of the few schools whose courses are recognised by the German state. Following our conceptual and methodological choices, we consider the classroom as part of the socio-spatial context of experience, a 'lived place' where a struggle for recognition and position takes place. The classroom is an integral part of the border-regime apparatus with which these people are confronted (Gutekunst 2015a, 2015b). Depending on the course, the class meets two to four times a week for at least two months (longer for those who fail the test), which is enough time for specific social structures to emerge.

#### 4. Yüksel K.'s life story: 'only one dream'

To the transcript of the conversation with Yüksel, the interviewer added a brief description:

She seemed very extroverted and was very eye-catching, with her dyed bright blond short hair. She also has a tattoo (handwriting) on her chest.

These two sentences open a crack in the dominant image of who a cross-border spouse is and what she is supposed to look like. A stereotypical 'Turkish import bride', if you will, wears her – dark – hair long and probably covered by a scarf, not short and blond. Her hair and tattoo do not fit Western orientalist images (Saïd 1978) of the Muslim 'import bride', but instead indicate a 'modern' urban woman – traits reserved for collective stereotypical imaginaries of 'the Western woman' (Dahinden, Duemmler, and Moret 2014; Korteweg 2017).

Yüksel's appearance announces the positioning she elaborates in the account of her life, her relationship and her experience with the German class at the Goethe Institute: she is different. But from whom and with respect to what, exactly?

The contrast created by her 'modern' look – and the fact that the interviewer deemed it worth mentioning – implicitly reinforces generalising spatial distinctions, both global ('the modern West' vs. 'the traditional Orient') and local ('the modern city' vs. 'the traditional village') (Erman 1998). Throughout her narrative, Yüksel draws abundantly on these spatial hierarchies and develops her life story around them. She responds to the boundary she is confronted with, categorised as a 'Turkish spouse', by drawing different boundaries, based on education, spatiality and gender. This boundary work allows her to place herself on the positive, meriting side of the hierarchy: as an urban, well educated, 'modern' woman.

Yüksel is a 26-year-old woman who grew up in a small city in northern Turkey. She lives in Istanbul, in an apartment building for female professionals, a fact that recurs

frequently in her narrative and reveals the core element of the self-image she presents. She places the figure of the (female) professional in an urban imaginary and stresses the fact that she lives in an apartment. As has been pointed out in research on rural-to-urban migration, apartments – as opposed to squatter settlements – are an indicator of urban identification (Erman 1998). Primarily, however, Yüksel's emphasis on her urbanity says something about her socioeconomic background: she is the child of a relatively well-off middle-class family. Her father, a university graduate and self-employed civil engineer, and her mother, a primary-school graduate and housewife, moved from a village to the city with Yüksel and her two younger siblings. Her family seems to embrace Kemalist secularism, a set of values that, though not expressed explicitly or in the form of a political conviction, strongly shines through in her self-positionings and is reinforced by the fact that she makes no mention whatsoever of religion.

The predominant narrative lines in Yüksel's life story, which both run parallel to and conflict with each other, consist of the education/career theme on the one hand and the relationship/marriage theme on the other. These lines are presented as mutually exclusive, which is already revealed in her account of how she and her husband, whose families have known each other for generations, met as children 15 years ago at a festivity in Turkey. He sent her a little love letter, which she – an unknowing child, as she refers to herself as having been at the time – showed her mother:

She immediately took me away from there and took me home. Then my husband came to the door of our apartment building and sat there every day. When my mom saw him there, she took me inside and didn't let me go outside. Because my mom had one dream: "My daughter should study, reach a good place in her career, be successful, do great things".

From the very beginning, Yüksel's story of falling in love is linked to the story of her striving for an education and career, the former endangering the latter. The emotionally loaded term 'dream' is attached to career aspirations and not to the idea of a marriage, which already represents a positioning: she places herself as an individual, with her own path and ambitions, and not as part of a couple, at the centre of her story. This choice resonates with her self-portrayal as a professional, a positioning that has to be understood in its historical particularity in the Turkish context, where the figure of 'the new woman', equal, educated and employed, was promoted as part of the modernisation project during the founding of the Turkish Republic (Arat 1997; Kandiyoti 1997; Sarioğlu 2014).

A narrative develops around this positioning, one that meanders between her personal and professional life: her mother's attempts to keep her daughter's admirer away by confining her to the domestic space fails, as they move their encounters to virtual space, namely the social network Netlog. After six years of being 'actively in love [...] but without seeing, without touching, only by hearing his voice', he comes to visit for the first time after their initial meeting as children, and they confirm the relationship, continuing it for another nine years in this manner. In the meantime, she is accepted to a high school in another, larger city, a place that offers her new experiences and opportunities, culminating in a spontaneous job offer by the assistant manager of the bank where she had been a customer:

I said: "Me?" She said: "Yes. I saw a different light in you". She said: "You can do it, you can be successful". At first it was strange to me. She said: "You will be an employee at the bank". [...] I couldn't believe it; everything happened so fast. It really was the turning point of my life.

It is this moment, the beginning of her career, that she defines as the turning point of her life. This sets up the primacy of career matters over relationship matters, finding confirmation in the account of the following years of her life as a steep rise to higher studies and greater professional responsibilities, going hand in hand with her moving to bigger, farther-away cities – not only within Turkey, but also in Russia and the U.S., where she lived as a student for several months each. This career focus eventually resulted in a breakup with her boyfriend; because she had neglected him during that time, she argues, he had become engaged to someone else. When they meet at a funeral half a year later, he broke his engagement, proposing to get back together with Yüksel. She accepted the proposal:

In fact his engagement had been because of me. I accept that. Because he specifically told me: “I want to get engaged; I want something (formal) between us. How long can this silly, childish thing go on, calling each other ‘my love, my darling’ on the phone, etc.? I’m sick and tired of your ambition and your career goals, etc.” The typical man-woman conflict. Then he broke up with me.

Notwithstanding her constantly stressing her career orientation, she agreed to marry her boyfriend although she had not yet accomplished her career goals. This decision meant that she would probably not be able to finish her Master’s degree, because she had to interrupt it in order to attend the German class at the Goethe Institute. This is when and where the interviewer met Yüksel.

## 5. Positioning against the suspicion of being an ‘import bride’

Our respondent’s life story already demonstrates the important role that the categories of spatiality and mobility play in her biographical sense-making: her story is not only one of increasing geographical mobility, but also, and more importantly, one of ascending social mobility. This movement from the small to the big, from the remote, enclosed and confined to the openness and opportunities of ‘the world’, a term she uses often, is characteristic not only of Yüksel’s narrative account of her life, but also, and especially, of her account of her experience with the German class and her thoughts about cross-border marriages. These classed spatial imaginaries predominate in her explanation, functioning as landmarks in her boundary work.

### 5.1. De-nationalisation of belonging as ‘classisation’

In her argumentative strategy, Yüksel first challenges the spatial category of the nation-state as an adequate basis for determining the admissibility of people to Germany, proposing the category of education instead. What kind of boundary work is at stake here? One of the first crucial spatial categories we come across in Yüksel’s narrative is that of the nation-state – unsurprisingly so, as it is the basic spatial category in cross-border marriages, bringing together border and boundary. In the case of marriages between a German partner and a partner from a non-EU country, the national border is regulated through, among other things, a language test. To Yüksel, however, the importance of this category seems misplaced, and she suggests an alternative selection criterion, drawing a different boundary through the group of candidates for a residence permit in Germany:

I mean, there are people who worked all their lives, studied and dedicated their lives to school [...] who can have really good jobs at really good places in Germany. But there are also the kind of people whose lives revolve around getting married and having children. I think there should definitely be a distinction between these two types of people. Not separating people, just the schools they went to, the education they attained, etc. I think there should somehow be a distinction on this basis. OK, we're citizens of the Turkish Republic or other countries. I just get upset about this. I don't approve much of this.

Yüksel meets the rigid nation-state-based classification with sharp boundary-making of her own, based on class, dismissing the former classification as arbitrary. Therefore, what appears as a concession – being Turkish – is actually an objection that takes the following form: 'OK, we're all non-Europeans, but ...'.

A classed notion of education allows her to posit a defining characteristic that is, at first sight, less random and essentialising than nationality and based on personal merit. She proposes that German authorities grant residence permits to people on the basis of their skills, rather than other factors such as whether they have a German spouse or even their origin, as she claims later in the interview. With her proposal, she challenges the existing border regime for being highly generalising with regard to how it considers people from third countries. Her imaginary of a different spatial order speaks of the frustration caused by the fundamental legal division upheld by Europe towards so-called third-country immigrants. In countering the nation-state-based category of a 'Turkish cross-border wife' with an alternative category based on skills and education, she employs a class-based neoliberal myth according to which people are categorised on the basis of their qualifications rather than on where they were born.

We should note here that European border regimes in general and the German one in particular do take into account the qualifications of visa candidates, allowing persons from certain professions and with a certain income, commonly referred to as highly qualified, to enter the EU without having to fulfil a language requirement (BAMF 2015; Grote 2017). However, this is not the legal path to Germany on which Yüksel finds herself. The interview data does not indicate why Yüksel has chosen family reunification rather than a student visa as the vehicle for migration. As we will return to later, one reason may be that she does not aspire to such a move for her studies, but for the sake of the relationship and can no longer postpone it.

## ***5.2. Of immobile and mobile 'mentalities': women of the village, the city and 'the world'***

As Yüksel's narrative proceeds, she re-spatialises her classed self-positioning not on the basis of nation-state hierarchies but on a distinction between the village and the city – more precisely, on a person's proximity to the metropolis of Istanbul, as she states after the interviewer's further question of whether she thinks educated people should be permitted to skip the test:

Definitely. I mean educated people ... I mean what's the reason? For instance, I look at my classroom. All their life – I'm giving an example: someone who has never been to Istiklal Street, someone who has never been to Istanbul in their life and someone who travelled the world, we're in the same category.

Her example links implicit yet vibrant allusions to Europeanness and cosmopolitanism – as identificatory rather than political or institutional notions (Woodward, Zlatko, and Bean 2008) – to education, for Istiklal Street, with all its shops, cafés and people not only lies on the European side of Istanbul, but also represents modern urbanity. Yüksel reveals her association of both the urban and the European space with modernity and cosmopolitanism many times during the interview, including when she refers to why a match between a partner from Turkey and a partner from Germany (which she often points out is a European country) cannot work – after having claimed an exception for herself:

There is a serious cultural difference. [...] I wish you could interview everyone in our classroom so you could understand it better: there's a huge gap between someone living in Germany and someone who comes from a village. [...] This girl hasn't seen anything in her life, hasn't sat down in a luxurious place to have a tea. But moving from here to Germany ... [it's] like a 180-degree shift. You'll be able to see how difficult it is to go, how wrong it is. I'm opposed to this, I'm totally against it. In my opinion, this is indeed a huge problem. Because I look at my friends [classmates], at the very least even the places we sit down in our daily lives are normally very absurd for them. They're so anxious: "Did I hold the glass wrong? How did I drink from the cup? How did I hold the fork?" [...] I can't believe it. I mean, how can a person like that make it with a guy who was born and grew up in Germany?

The urban life, in her imaginary a life of luxury, of going out to eat and drink in fancy public places, is presented in stark contrast to the life of the majority of her classmates, 'the villagers', as she refers to them. She places a great deal of emphasis on this contrast, placing herself on the positively evaluated side of that boundary. She highlights a different boundary between herself and the other students in the class, based on education and spatiality, concretely urbanity, which should, in her eyes, be the only issue determining accessibility to Europe.

Later in the interview, when she is asked about her thoughts on leaving Turkey, her positioning vis-à-vis the country, after being limited to its urban parts, shifts away from it altogether. She disavows her national belonging:

I think great things about it! [Laughter.] Anyway, I tell my parents: "I was born in the wrong place", I say. I've never felt Turkish. The blood in my veins may be Turkish, I can wave the red flag, I'd sacrifice my life for Turkey, but I've never felt Turkish.

She ascribes chaos and violence to Turkey, and offers these as reasons for her feeling of not belonging, as she illustrates mainly with anecdotes from her daily struggle with Istanbul traffic and public life. To understand these ascriptions of chaos, we need to keep in mind recent events such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the series of bombings in large cities that had occurred only weeks before the interview.

When Yüksel denies her Turkishness, though upholding a sense of nostalgic patriotism, she defines spatial belonging as a subjective quality. Consequently, when moving to Germany, she will not, as an urban and therefore global citizen, have trouble adjusting to the new place, unlike her classmates. On the contrary, she will be moving to the place where she truly belongs.

In this culturalising and classed argument of de- and re-spatialised belonging, she uses alternative spatial boundaries to those imposed on her. In her view, the crucial difference is not between people from Turkey and people from Germany, but between villagers on the

one hand and inhabitants of the city and of Germany on the other. According to this logic, it is not the national border that determines whether a cross-border marriage will work out, but the ‘cultural’ boundary between people ‘from Germany’ and those ‘from the village’. The selective splitting of Turkey’s urban parts from the country as a whole and their characterisation as Western, leaving Turkey to be represented by its rural areas, is a discursive representation that reaches far back in Western self-imaginaries (Hall 1992).

But Yüksel’s self-positioning as modern and urban has to be understood not only in terms of these global spatial hierarchies, but also as part of a dominant local/national modernity discourse, which is based on a similar spatial dichotomy of rurality and urbanity (Arat 1997; Erman 1998; Sarioğlu 2014), but which demarcates spatial hierarchies within Turkey.

As we learn later in the interview, Yüksel herself is ‘originally from a village too’ but claims to have left her village mentality behind, a transcendence she does not award to those women she frames as typical cross-border spouses, stating that they, no matter how long they live in Germany, will fail to ‘improve their mentality’. For Yüksel, an individual does not dissolve their mental ties to their village of origin simply by moving to the city. Instead, one must ‘really want to improve’, and therefore to move (on) not only physically, but also ‘mentally’. Once more, she employs a classicising sense-making strategy that legitimises (im)mobility on the basis of one’s level of education, which again is presented as a matter of personal ambition and merit.

The mostly negative portrayals Yüksel draws of her classmates and her self-presentation as a modern, urban professional construct a spatialised and classed hierarchy between supposedly typical cross-border spouses and herself, an exception to the rule. But this hierarchy is not only produced through the intersection of place, mobility and class. Gender also plays a role, as her description of who exactly these people are reveals:

I describe them as people who dedicate their lives to silly things, who have five or six children, who stay at home, who cook for their husbands, who stay within walking distance of their house, who go at most from Hamburg to Dusseldorf to visit their relatives. [...] I describe them as people who continue their unnecessary silly marriage. I know many people, both from my hometown and [...] the language course, who have only one dream: to go there, join their husbands, have kids.

In her interview, Yüksel refers exclusively to women, even though the questions are phrased in gender-neutral terms (in Turkish, personal pronouns are not gendered). This reveals how profoundly gendered Yüksel’s experience is: it is self-evidently female and cannot be thought of outside this gender framework. For this reason, and because of the central place that gender identities in general and the condition of women in particular occupy in contemporary discourses about modernity and re-traditionalisation in Turkey (Kandiyoti 1997), the second part of this case analysis focuses on the category of gender. Yüksel’s use of the figure of the village woman is part of the dominant gendered modernity discourse, rather than simply a personal idiosyncrasy.

## 6. The classroom as border space

We met Yüksel at a turning point in her life, when a lot had changed and more was about to change. But it was not only at a challenging and difficult time that we met her, but also in a challenging and difficult place. To understand her biographical narrative and

positionings, therefore, it is crucial to not only look at space in terms of spatial imaginaries, but also consider the specific place in which she has the experiences she interprets during the interview. So what kind of place is the classroom at the Goethe Institute? And how does it play into Yüksel's boundary work vis-à-vis her (female) classmates?

### **6.1. A classroom 'we' against generalisations**

At the beginning of the interview, before portraying her classmates negatively, Yüksel describes the classroom as a place of solidarity. Regardless of their differences, they share the experience of having a long-distance, cross-border relationship and dealing with the challenges that come with it. These challenges consist partly of paying for and attending the German course, which for many people entail a long and expensive journey and finding and/or paying for accommodation, learning the language – which for some people even means learning how to read and write first – and, finally, paying for the test fee and then attending and passing the test. In addition, they consist of having to face stereotyped assumptions about who they are and what their marriage motives might be. To Yüksel, it is obvious that these women, herself included, implicitly stand accused of a sham marriage. This negative image, as the following quotation makes clear, is revealed in their class routine and lead to Yüksel's defence of her classmates, as she positions herself within a classroom 'we':

There are people from all classes, all races, all nations. We all have different perceptions and we're all there for the same reason, to join our spouses, merge our lives with theirs. That's why [...] I think this exam is truly very unnecessary. I believe in my heart that ... . Honestly, I don't at all believe that any of the people who come to this language course got married as a formality. Everyone is very sincere and warm, very nice and kind.

In order to understand the classroom as a particular place, the acknowledgement of this feeling of solidarity as a reaction to the dominant boundaries is important: they all have to undergo the same process, master the same challenges, face the same negative preconceptions, all of them on the precarious side of the classroom, across the teacher's desk – a group of adult, married people seeking to join their spouses in Germany who have been turned into 'school children' again by the German state. Thus, this feeling of degradation is often described by many of our interviewees in Turkey and Kosova, whether or not they endorse the language test, as 'being forced to learn by Germany', an anonymous, abstract and far-away but powerful spatial entity that defends its borders by keeping them apart from their spouses. Interestingly, this defence of the German border happens on Turkish territory, which spatio-symbolically makes the classroom a sort of exclave: before these individuals even set foot on German territory, German legislation grabs a hold of them in the classroom, where they have to prove themselves worthy of a life there.

### **6.2. Struggling with German, just like 'the villagers'**

While Yüksel positions herself throughout her narrative as different from her classmates, as the educated one who needs much less time and effort to understand the teacher and even assists her, she eventually reveals that she too has great difficulties in learning German:

I find it hard to understand German. But if it were maths, the teacher would explain, I would write down the answer and directly tell it to her. [...] I find this hard, really hard. I go home and tell my husband: “I couldn’t ask because I was ashamed. Can you explain to me if there’s a logic to this?” He says: “Darling, please forget maths, there is no logic. You need to memorise the structure. You need to memorise”. But my brain isn’t open to memorising. I find this language course really hard, incredibly. I don’t let my teachers know, but I know that I have difficulty. [...] That’s why I find these language courses very unnecessary. [Silence]

Yüksel’s sudden confession is a striking narrative turn that sheds light on her strong positionings vis-à-vis her ‘villager’ classmates. Not only is she herself also from a village, but, even though she left the village and its ‘mentality’ to become an educated urban professional, she struggles significantly with the demands of the course, not unlike the rest of her class. There is one difference, however: to her, learning is supposed to come easily. Both the shame she feels about her struggle and the way she makes sense of it indicate how strongly this difficulty affects her, causing a rupture in her self-image, which she tries to repair by emphasising the lack of logic to the language, stressing her ease with maths.

The classroom functions as an equalising place that, to some extent, levels individual differences, both positive and negative: it both fosters a sense of solidarity with her classmates and poses a threat to her (gendered, classed and spatialised) individual self-image. It is precisely this threat of being labelled an uneducated ‘export (house)wife’ from the village that Yüksel repeatedly challenges. As a result, the classroom becomes a place that threatens her identity as an educated, independent woman, as she experiences the same frustration, pressure and dependency as everyone else in her class.

### **6.3. From mobile cosmopolitan to migrant wife?**

In switching from one status (as a student) to another (as a wife) within ‘mobility regimes’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), Yüksel has to deal with the negative significations and evaluation that come with both (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Amelina 2017). While earlier in the interview her mobility was – apart from her family’s relatively well-off socio-economic situation – derived from her academic and professional work, the legitimisation for her aspired mobility now comes from her personal relationship with her husband. When student mobility was something that allowed her to pursue her career goals and, arguably, avoid or defer the loss of individual freedom that marriage would bring, the type of mobility she is applying for now is only possible if she, at least temporarily, gives up those goals and invests her time and energy into fulfilling the family-reunification requirements. We can even ask whether this long-term long-distance relationship did not have its advantages for Yüksel, who claims not to prioritise professional achievement over marriage. For a time, her cross-border relationship allowed her to focus on pursuing spatial and social mobility without having to take a definitive step in terms of her relationship, a focus that the family-reunification route no longer makes possible.

It is against this biographical background that her need to distance herself clearly from the supposedly typical cross-border wife becomes intelligible – an image that our interviews in Turkey and Kosova show to be omnipresent in the institutions and processes surrounding the family-reunification-related language-learning apparatus. As mentioned earlier, it is in the classroom that these gendered and classed stereotypical assumptions

touch upon the people involved not individually, as when, for instance, obtaining a form from the embassy, but collectively, as a group whose defining characteristic is the simultaneous physical presence of its members for a common reason. As we have shown above, the classroom setting effects a certain equalisation, which both fosters a strong sense of solidarity among course participants and poses a threat to their self-image as individuals. It is precisely this threat of being labelled ‘uneducated export housewives from the village’ that hangs over the classroom as a collective, and which triggers strong individual boundary work in an attempt to restore one’s sense of individuality.

## 7. Concluding remarks

In this article, we have examined the positioning strategies of a spouse confronted with the European border regime and one of its particular elements, the classroom where Yüksel K. has to learn German in order to obtain a visa and eventually join her husband.

Yüksel’s spatialised and classed boundary work vis-à-vis the other women in her class can only be understood through their gendered intersection with her biography and experiences of this particular type of border regime. Moreover, this experience cannot be understood adequately without analysing the places where it occurs. Yüksel’s strong positionings and recourse to alternative hierarchies are a reaction to a situation in which she is vulnerable and her self-image is attacked, all coming together in the classroom context: in her role as a third-country migrant, her self-image as a modern, urban, mobile professional is threatened by the highly gendered dominant image of the ‘Turkish import bride’, while in her role as an educated person she is strongly challenged and frustrated by the process of learning German. Thus, Yüksel is exposed to a specific net of implicit and explicit limitations and expectations that result from a complex inter-relationship between the categories of gender, space and class. This case study demonstrates how the language requirement, instead of, as claimed, protecting women like her from gender inequality, builds on and reinforces transnational inequalities. The oppressed, Oriental, uneducated ‘import bride’ appears as the ‘other’ and marks the boundary to the spatial (self-)imaginary of the European receiving country, serving to legitimate its global border politics. The fact that this institution is externalised, i.e. set in the territory of the country of departure, further strengthens its power to control these so-called third-countries’ territories and their citizens’ mobility. From afar, these individuals are asked to integrate into German society and demonstrate their integration through a language test. This creates pressure and frustration among course participants, who are confronted with generalising negative preconceptions, paradoxically challenging their individuality in the process of requiring them to demonstrate that they are ‘not like the other women’.

In order to distance herself from the negative national and gendered ascriptions that are mobilised through the family-reunification process, Yüksel draws on an alternative set of dichotomous spatialising imaginaries at the local level: the village and the city. She positions herself within the latter in two ways. First, she equates Europe, and Germany in particular, with modernity and women’s emancipation. Second, she builds on the dominant discursive distinction between rural and urban Turkey, challenging the negative national ascriptions that she faces during the Goethe Institute’s Pre-integration Course by mobilising local spatial belongings. Hence, her reproduction and challenging of global spatial hierarchies and boundaries are interrelated in a complex spatialised positioning strategy.

As we have shown, this strategy can only be understood through a de-centring analysis that includes the transnational, national and local discursive categories involved.

The other cases from our research in Turkey and Kosova demonstrate that the need to prove 'being different' and reclaim a sense of individuality is not particular to Yüksel, but a structural challenge visa applicants are facing. The border-regime apparatus, which combines language testing with the socio-spatial arrangements of the classroom-collective and implicit negative nationalising generalisations about cross-border spouses, puts great pressure on visa applicants and causes a need to distance themselves from those prevailing (stereo)typical figures. Although the national context of Turkey differs from that of Kosova, the positioning strategies of our respondents in these different places are similar. Our respondents often mobilise alternative boundaries on the basis of gendered, classed and spatialised distinctions, claiming to represent a 'different' Turkey or Kosova than the one in stereotyping discourses – one composed of a different social class (the highly educated, more mobile and economically better off), a different socio-spatial unit (cities) and a group with different gender norms ('modern').

The interview situation to which we subjected our respondents in general and Yüksel in particular is also implicitly incorporated into the border-regime apparatus because, regardless of its de-centring intention, the inquiry originates from a Western institution. Furthermore, it offers a way to reflect on and process these experiences, but it is also in danger of reproducing the images it wishes to challenge, as it focuses on the respondents' specific role as a cross-border spouse to Germany, leaving out all other possible focuses. This increases the likelihood that Yüksel will dwell on the aspects of her story that foster her self-portrayal as a career woman, striving for all the things that are opposite to the prejudices the interviewer may have about her when asking her questions about her life, her marriage and her German course.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the classroom and the discursive, legal and institutional border-regime apparatus into which it is incorporated have to be understood in their particularity. A previous Moroccan case study has demonstrated that this apparatus, outsourced to the countries of departure and thus seizing aspiring migrants long before they get to Germany, selects rather than integrates these applicants, contrary to the claims of the state institutions involved (Gutekunst 2015a, 2015b). This study strongly confirms these findings through an in-depth analysis of the concrete socio-spatial conditions constituted by Germany's border regime. Yüksel's 'mobility as individual merit' arguments appear as effects of a neoliberal European migratory regime, which classifies sending countries into desired and undesired, thus legitimising the (im)mobilisation of the migrants in question. This global spatial hierarchy does not allow for much differentiation on the basis of spatial or classed distinctions, including the alternative categories our respondent adduces against the nationalising imaginaries of the typical 'Turkish import bride'. As we have shown, this highly gendered and culturalising imaginary is omnipresent in the Goethe Institute classroom, revealing that the function of this border regime is to legitimise a global hegemony on mobility control. Our respondent's positionings can be seen as a reflection of this two-faced neoliberal migration regime: she feels she belongs to the highly mobile, highly skilled modern urban Turkish elite but finds herself shoulder to shoulder with the 'village housewives' against whom she positions herself so decidedly.

## Acknowledgements

We would especially like to thank Yüksel K. and the other respondents for sharing their stories. We also owe great thanks to Ceren Topgül for interviewing Yüksel K. perceptively and translating the manuscript with care. We would also like to thank the participants of the ‘Cross-Border Marriages: Intersecting Boundaries in Transnational Social Spaces’ workshop held in Neuchâtel in 2017, and especially the discussant Katharine Charsley for insightfully commenting on the first version of this text. The anonymous reviewers’ comments have also helped improve the text. Furthermore, we thank our colleagues at the Laboratoire d’études des processus sociaux for their critical discussion of this work at a Work in Progress Session. We would also like to thank Daniel Moure for his English revisions, which have contributed to the work’s clarity and elegance. And last but not least, we thank Zeynep Sariaslan for commenting on this paper thoroughly and critically, and particularly for her suggestions on literature regarding Turkish modernity discourse.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Project no. 100017\_143179).

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