Finding the Center:

Placemaking by Aleppian Migrants and Refugees in Berlin

By

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Abstract

In Berlin, refugees and migrants from Aleppo constitute the third-largest group of foreign-born residents. Most of them arrived after 2011, as the Syrian revolution was turning into a protracted armed conflict. Arrivals from Aleppo come from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Like Berlin, Aleppo has its *east* and *west*. Affluent Aleppians inhabited the western, well-serviced half of the city, which has remained regime-controlled throughout the conflict and as such has suffered less destruction and displacement. On the other side, eastern Aleppo – controlled by rebel groups between 2012 and 2016 – was where most informal settlements and the Old City lay. This half of Aleppo was devastated by aerial bombardment, and the vast majority of its residents were forcibly displaced. Many of them arrived in Berlin, as did western Aleppians who fled for safety and better opportunities. In this thesis, I ask: How did Aleppians of different backgrounds make place in their new home, Berlin? I attempt to answer this question using an ethnographic approach, for which I carried out one month of fieldwork in Berlin doing participant observation and 30 semi-structured and unstructured interviews. My analysis reveals that different Aleppians in Berlin engage in a paradigm of spatial relations that differs from the geographic structuring of Aleppo. In Berlin, the appropriation of space is now defined by both the complexity and scale of engagement with space. Residents from more privileged educational backgrounds and who speak better English (not necessarily German), and who are mostly, but not exclusively, from western Aleppo, have a wider and deeper access to space in Berlin. My thesis contributes to an improved understanding of urban spatial relations which redefines placemaking by migrants and refugees away from dichotomies of center-periphery, or east-west.

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badgered me to "finish your thesis!" Any mistakes or misjudgment in this thesis are, it goes without saying, my sole responsibility.

Table of Contents

List of figures

Note on transliteration

When rendering Arabic words into English, the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) Translation and Transliteration guide is broadly the transliteration method I have followed.[1] However, I have chosen not to apply special diacritics or characters, such as (') and (') for the sounds of *ain* and *hamza*, as they often result in confusion and further mispronunciation by non-speakers of Arabic. Colloquial spelling was chosen over standard (e.g., al-Hamdaniyyeh, not al-Hamdaniyyah). A silent "h" is added at the end to emphasize that the preceding "e" is not silent. For German, names containing umlauts (ö, ä, ü) have been kept in the original German form, rather than the Anglicized form. For instance, Neukölln is *not* rendered Neukoelln.

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[1] See IJMES Translation and Transliteration guide: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/information/author-resources/ijmes-translation-and-transliteration-guide

Chapter 1: Introduction

How do refugees and migrants relate to the place to which they have moved? The literature on the "right to the city" suggests that incoming migrants need to appropriate their new place of living (Kidder 2009). The transnational migration model suggests that an intersection of the conditions of the host country with the country of origin as well as other global nodes is what determines migrants' power and social relations (Caglar and Glick Schiller 2018). Neither of these two strands of literature places sufficient emphasis on the social, economic, and other differences among refugees and migrants that pre-date their arrival to their host context, and how these may influence their relationship to their new place of residence. Both of these major schools of thought about migrants and their new surroundings put aside the fact that, when migrating, people from the same country or even city do not present a uniform entity; instead, they bring with them a degree of social, economic and other conditions that they had in their home context. This happens, I hypothesize, without a dynamic, physical relationship with the place they fled, which the transnational migration literature often presupposes.

This thesis attempts to fill this gap by asking: How do pre-existing social differences among refugees and migrants affect their relationship with their current place of residence? For that, I use the concept of "placemaking": the way in which residents transform the spaces and places in which they find themselves into places in which they live (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995). Using placemaking as an analytical lens allows me to explore not only the forward-looking appropriation of the host city by refugees and migrants (which the right to the city literature would prioritize) or the continuous relationship of their home and host contexts (which the transnational migration perspective would emphasize), but it also invites an analysis of refugees' and migrants' past and the differential influence it has on their relationship to their new city.

My thesis investigates how refugees and migrants from Aleppo, Syria (particularly young men and women aged 18–40) make place in Berlin, Germany. Berlin has one of the highest concentrations of Aleppian[2] migrants in Europe; certain areas such as Sonnenallee in Neukölln Borough have become synonymous with Middle Eastern immigrants, with their restaurants, cafés, and other enterprises (*Reuters* 2018). In 2017, Aleppo City accounted for the third-largest group of Berlin's foreign-born residents (after Damascus and Stettin/Szczecin) – over seven thousand people (*RBB24* 2018). At the same time, a matrix of cultural and class divisions is inscribed spatially in Aleppo's structure and lived experience. These divisions were exacerbated by the 2011 conflict that further divided Aleppo's population of three million into a wealthier, better-serviced, safer west, and a less-advantaged and now heavily bombed-out east (A. Shaar 2018). Until 2011, these differences translated into significant economic inequalities, and an even more unequal access to education and formal cultural institutions (Zeido and Ibold 2019). These social structures seem to persist among communities of displaced Syrians in neighboring cities such as Gaziantep in Turkey, where, similarly to their hometown, Aleppian refugees with fewer economic means tend to live in historically less affluent neighborhoods of the east.[3] But the extent to which pre-existing social differences are reproduced in Berlin has not been described or analyzed in scholarly literature to date. A better understanding of the production of refugees' and migrants' economic, social and cultural patterns from their country or city of origin can inform our vision not only of the host place's space, society and policies, but also of the socio-spatial setup of their place of origin. Understanding the differences among Aleppians in Berlin can inform policy-makers and

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[2] For the demonym of Aleppo, I use *Aleppian*, both as an adjective and noun (pl. *Aleppians*). However, other demonyms are commonly used, primarily Aleppan, Aleppine, and Halabi (of Halab, the Arabic for Aleppo).
[3] Based on an interview I conducted in 2017 in preparation for my initial MA proposal with an Aleppian activist who had lived with his family in Gaziantep since 2013.

urbanists in Germany as well as in other contexts with large, seemingly homogeneous migratory populations.

To explore placemaking of Aleppians in Berlin, my research was guided by the following questions:

- What type of relations do Aleppian migrants form in non-formal contexts, situated in the city?

- What type of relations do the migrants form with the city's formal institutions?

- How do they move around the city, and why?

- Do they form relations in a small set of places or a large/diversified one?

- Do they feel a sense of belonging? How/How not?

My findings question the intuitive notion of a "center" of a city as a physical place used mostly by more privileged residents (Purcell 2003). Instead, I find that the center holds in many places across space in the city, such as in – and thanks to – public transport. Some Aleppian refugees and migrants feel out of place and de-centered in the physical center of Berlin, including the Arab-dominated areas, and feel more well-positioned in areas distributed across the city, such as public parks. I use the lens of Bourdieusian notions of economic and social capital to study the differences among Aleppians in Berlin (Erel 2010). I find that a mixture of factors influences Aleppian refugees' and migrants' placemaking in Berlin. These relate to the host country as well as to the migrants themselves. Specifically, I conclude that the German welfare state plays somewhat of an equalizing role in economic terms, though its importance should not be overestimated; on the other hand, the specific local real estate market in Berlin, as well as an intersection of social internalization–externalization forces, mitigate the equalizing effect by creating more and less accessible areas for new refugees and migrants. Beyond economic capital, I explore the role of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993; Erel

2010) for Aleppians' relationship in and to Berlin. A specific form of cultural capital, namely, speaking English rather than German, contributes to different ways of placemaking. Finally, I apply a transnational migration perspective to placemaking and propose that differences between individual refugees and migrants, even when they come from the same city, impact their placemaking at a transnational scale.

This master's thesis is the first to empirically study how this large and important group of migrants in a city – Aleppian migrants and refugees in Berlin – relate to their new city, by examining the differences between its members. It contributes to the literature on placemaking, which typically researches racially, economically, or otherwise disadvantaged communities, in that it includes members of a group who are not necessarily underprivileged, alongside its traditionally less advantaged members. This is a consequence of investigating a group that includes members from a wide range of social backgrounds and considering differences within the group seriously rather than studying a relatively homogeneous community. The thesis also expands the transnational migration literature by identifying specific forms of social capital and its configurations in a context where some elements of the transnational are suppressed. Additionally, it brings new empirical insights to the study of migration and linguistic capital by moving beyond the native-tongue – host country language dyad. Finally, the thesis develops the future-oriented literature on the right to the city by taking into account the past experiences and social characteristics that refugees and migrants bring with them to a new city.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: In the next chapter, I review the literature mentioned above and explain my theoretical choices in more detail. The following chapter explores the notion of the center from a placemaking perspective. Next, I analyze the different forms of capital and other social differences and their influence on Aleppians' placemaking in Berlin. I conclude with remarks on avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Despite the large number of Aleppian migrants in Berlin, there remains little scholarship focusing on life in less conspicuously Arab or non-predominantly Arab venues in the city. The most detailed literature to examine Syrian migrants' well-being in Berlin is Sofia Fernandez Rosso's master's thesis on the socio-spatial relations of refugee store owners in commercial streets in Berlin. Fernandez Rosso (2018) observed that, despite the regulations and support that helped improve the "feeling of home" among incoming migrants in Sonnenallee, there remains a need to promote their integration into society, since the feeling of being an "outsider" still prevails. Her research hinted at the role that "hyper-diverse" entrepreneurship may play in reinforcing migrants' relations with the host society. However, her research does not focus on people who share the same city of origin, such as Aleppians, but on people from the wider Levant region. Furthermore, other contexts of social relations in the new urban environment remain to be investigated. Nevertheless, a socio-spatial analysis of refugee and migrant communities can flesh out the configuration of geographical and social relations in the context of place, space, and borders.

Central to this thesis is the concept of placemaking. Originating in the fields of urban planning and urban design studies, placemaking refers to "the way in which all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live" (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995: 1). Because of its emphasis on the agency of inhabitants and communities, the concept has been intimately linked with the politics, history, and cultures of ethnic minorities and marginalized communities (Hayden 1988). In a recent paper, Hunter and colleagues (Hunter et al. 2016) develop the notion of "black placemaking", which brings attention to "the agency, intent, and even spontaneity of urban black residents – across genders,

sexualities, ages, classes, and politics – in creating places that are sustaining, affirming, and pleasurable".

In their focus on "endurance, belonging, and resistance" of disadvantaged communities, Hunter et al. (2016) continue the "right to the city" tradition in urban studies (de Certeau and Rendall 2011; Harvey 2008), who conceptualize the city as a site of resistance to oppression (often to neoliberalism and capitalism). Applied to migration, the right to the city scholarship stresses the need for the appropriation of the new place of living by migrants (Kidder 2009; Harvey 2008). It has little interest in their past experiences, focusing its decidedly forward-looking analysis of migrant and refugee life purely on the urban context of the city of destination. Because of its focus on the dyad between oppression and resistance, the right to the city literature tends to implicitly view residents as primarily reactive subjects of oppressive hegemonies (Massey 2005). In contrast, placemaking as a concept treats the communities as the central actors in their own relation to their environment.

In this thesis, I embrace placemaking precisely for its ability to give agency to inhabitants. I do not necessarily focus on oppression and resistance, nor do I *a priori* view Aleppians in Berlin as a disadvantaged minority. Rather, I employ placemaking analytically (similarly to Lombard 2014), in order to explore how individuals from a specific group relate to and construct meaning in the city in which they live. The flexibility of the concept allows me to explore multiple facets of my participants' lives in their new city while emphasizing the relational element of the link between them and the city.

Placemaking is similar to Caglar and Glick Schiller's notion of *emplacement*, which they define as the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016). While the varied literature on placemaking tends to adopt a local

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focus, emplacement takes a transnational perspective. In the case of Aleppians in Berlin, it puts individuals' relation to a city in the context of transnational migration as well as of their relation to their country or city of origin. It suggests that the power and social relations of migrants are governed by the conditions of neither host country nor the country of origin alone, but by an intersection of both as well as other global nodes (Caglar and Glick Schiller 2018). The transnational migration model recognizes differences in the economic and social circumstances of new immigrants but is predominantly concerned with migrants who can maintain some strong ties with their home cities, including through regular visits in the form of circular migration (Glick Schiller 1997). It accounts little for forcibly displaced people – the refugees – who are denied a physical connection with home – at least until these bridges with home are reopened.

With war and forced displacement in particular, some elements of social, economic, and other forms of capital appreciate while others lose value. Economic capital, or wealth, is clearly of great importance to refugees' and migrants' lives in a new place. In a sense, it is a prerequisite for them to arrive at their destination. Those who did not already possess sufficient economic capital in Syria have a harder time financing the journey to Europe. However, once in Berlin, the German welfare state, as well as the city's real estate price regulation and other factors, act as a mitigating force to the all-importance of economic capital.

Other forms of capital therefore emerge as differentiating factors between individuals. Crucial to my research project is Bourdieu's discussion of cultural capital, or the "performative capacity of symbolic forms and their multi-level implication in social struggles over and across social divisions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013), and its later extension by Umut Erel (2010). Erel identified types of cultural capital that are specific to migration and which "[re-configure] intra-migrant differentiations of gender, ethnicity and class". In *Symbolic Capital and Social*

Classes, Bourdieu (2013) argues that social groupings and classes take shape at two levels: That of material possessions, and that of a shared system of knowledge and acceptance (doxa) of the stratification that this knowledge engenders. With the shock to the financial distributions produced first by the war, and, more importantly, by the welfare system in place in Germany, classes have become less discernible than in Aleppo by means of material possessions, but rather observable through education, culture, and lifestyles. These, in turn, manifest in complex ways that can persist materially and are able to be captured through interactions in and with space. The question is, of course, how symbolic capital manifests itself in the context of migration. Erel (2010) argues that migration changes migrants' cultural capital in a process of layering power relations of either the country of origin or the country of migration, rather than merely reproducing it. A transformation of the power conveyed by specific kinds of social capital can therefore be expected in a migration context. For instance, refugees' or migrants' personal or professional networks within the ruling class or local dignitaries and notables in their home country may lose some importance in a new country. As I show below, however, differences originating in Aleppo continue to play a large role in Berlin.

An important element of social capital is linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1977), which "includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso 2006). Linguistic capital is often discussed in migration studies in relation to learning the language of the host or receiving country as a determinant of integration success or retention of "heritage language" in second-generation migrant communities (see Gruszczyńska 2019). The role of linguistic competences beyond migrants' mother tongues and the language of the host or receiving country is rarely explored in detail. As I show in chapter five, however, linguistic capital for Aleppians in Berlin goes beyond Arabic and German. In fact, knowledge of English emerged as a key form of cultural capital for the process of placemaking in the city.

A vast, multidisciplinary discussion on the boundaries between migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers recognizes that the relationship between the categories is complex and not always as clear cut as evolving legal definitions would presume (Gill and Good 2019). However, this debate is not central to this thesis. During the years directly preceding my fieldwork, virtually all Syrians became eligible for political asylum and as such could potentially easily obtain refugee status. Nevertheless, many of them lived in Germany under work, student, or other visa categories. To respect the porousness of the categories in which my participants may have at various times found themselves, this thesis uses the double term of "migrants and refugees" or "refugees and migrants" throughout its text.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This thesis uses a mixture of qualitative research methods to study the placemaking of Aleppian refugees and migrants in the city. During a month-long fieldwork trip to Berlin in April 3–30, 2018, I conducted participant observation and interviews with Aleppians living in Berlin. Participant observation allowed me to be with my participants in places of leisure and other public places, and in some cases in their places of residence. This allowed me to gain insight into the meanings they ascribe to the areas of their lives that are of interest to this project by empathetically sharing their world (Platt 1983). I took daily field notes of my interactions, conversations, and observations, either during the interactions (such as in the case of semi-structured interviews with experts and non-experts alike) or upon reaching home (Musante (DeWalt) and DeWalt 2010); I sometimes used my notebook and at others took out my laptop and typed up live as I listened. Eventually, my fieldwork diary amounted to just over 30,000 words.

During my time in Berlin, I stayed at a German friend's place in the Neukölln district, a mere two blocks away from the so-called center of Arab life in Sonnenallee. This allowed me to have repeated interactions with my interlocutors in varied contexts: I observed and spoke to other Aleppians and Berliners both individually and with their partners, at public events, while a guest in their homes, or during and after my (semi-)formal interviews. In a sense, I too have found myself among the new Aleppian arrivals to Berlin: I studied German in my free time with the help of the Duolingo smartphone application, set German as my Facebook language, and started looking for a German language course in Berlin. I navigated Berlin's streets and public transport system, which allowed me to compare my experiences of space in Berlin with those I had had in Aleppo and other cities in which I have lived, including Istanbul and Budapest. For instance, upon having frequently arrived late to events and meetings, I would

make the first-hand observation that "getting places" in Berlin appears to take more time than in Aleppo, as the city extends over a larger surface area. Importantly, I actively participated at Syria-related events during, as well as prior to, my fieldwork. In 2017, as part of my professional role with the CEU-hosted research project, The Aleppo Project, I co-organized two workshops on Aleppo targeted at Arabic speakers who had a connection to Aleppo, and even considered eventually relocating to Berlin. In that sense, I could empathize with my participants through direct sharing of participatory experience as well as observing their lives and talking to them.

In total, I conducted over 30 interviews, including with 22 Aleppian men and women from different parts of Aleppo who had arrived in Berlin between 2012 and 2016, two German partners of Aleppians, and several German and other European researchers and practitioners who work with Syrian civil society or heritage groups. The interviews were unstructured, semi-structured, or structured, depending on both the occasion and my relationship with the interlocutor in question. For instance, I used a structured approach to the interviews (see Appendix 1) conducted at a camp, or *Heim* – a place where refugees (both people whose status has not yet been recognized, and those with recognized refugee status who cannot find housing) are given residence. Most interviews were conducted in person and in Arabic, but some were in English, which I translated into English after the fieldwork; to accommodate the preferences and availability of my interlocutors, three took place on paper, one via a Facebook Messenger text conversation, and one via a Facebook Messenger voice call. To encourage openness and protect the confidentiality of my participants, I did not record any interviews. Instead, I took detailed notes either on paper or on the laptop. As a result, all quotes presented in this thesis are paraphrases of Arabic or translated from English or German. All participant names are pseudonyms.

I gained access to my interlocutors via a range of outreach methods. First, I relied on my pre-existing in-person and social media networks of young and middle-aged Aleppians in Berlin. Second, I conducted four interviews at a *Heim* (in addition to at least three interviews with former Heim residents, who referred to the Heim), which allowed me to identify interlocutors outside of my pre-existing networks and helped to reduce selection bias. For the same reason, I also participated in three "refugee walking tours," organized by Multaka (an initiative of the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin), Refugee Voices, and Querstadtein, and guided by Syrian refugees who had arrived in Berlin since the start of the war in Syria. To my disappointment, none of the tour guides were from Aleppo – they were all from Damascus. However, they provided me with a carefully thought-out insight into places of meaning to Syrian refugees and how they relate to space in Berlin.

Nearly all my participants were between 18 and 40 years old, which is largely representative of Aleppians in Berlin. This is in large part due to my methods in identifying participants. As can reasonably be expected, and as was also later pointed out by some of my participants, age is an important factor in the lives of refugees and migrants,[4] including in their use of space, just as in non-refugee populations, e.g., children or older people typically do not use space in the same ways as working-age individuals. My participants can therefore be expected to have a different relation to space and place than other age categories of Aleppians in Berlin.

Questions of gender are interspersed throughout the thesis and not treated as a separate topic, even though such a treatment would doubtless yield important results. As a male researcher, gaining access to female-only spaces for the purposes of participant observation or

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[4] One participant remarked that age is "a major factor in classism", specifying that refugees and migrants aged 18–25 have much better opportunities. Another mentioned that refugees and migrants who came to Germany as minors face specific problems when they reach adulthood: they are "lost", since the state is no longer fully responsible for them and they lose access to guardianship, social counsellors, schooling, etc.

even formal interviews was somewhat difficult for me, hence the majority of my participants were men. The recognition of ethnographic and participant observation research as a gendered enterprise is typically discussed in the context of female researchers being denied access to male worlds (Warren and Hackney 2011), although researchers in practice recognize the sensitivities of male researchers seeking to recruit female study participants, which is especially salient in research on Muslim or other conservative contexts. Eventually, I conducted interviews with women in writing and voice call on Messenger, after the end of my stay in Berlin. The ratio of men to women among the Aleppians I interviewed became 15:7.

Interviews with both Aleppian and non-Aleppian participants and community members serve to paint a Geertzian "thick description" of the daily interactions and symbols utilized in the various forms of relations (Geertz 1973). Using a thematic approach, i.e., without the use of any specific qualitative analysis software, I analyzed interview data as well as data derived from participant observation. My analysis then follows an abductive approach. Following Musante DeWalt and DeWalt (2010), I indexed themes, including, for instance, the key topic of placemaking, derived a priori from my theoretical approach. I also coded salient themes raised by my participants, for example the role of language.

Finally, to support my primary data, I maintained a heavy online presence on Facebook, which has helped me to identify and learn about salient themes in the lives of Aleppians in Berlin that complemented my in-person fieldwork. I joined numerous Facebook pages and groups with titles such as "Berlin: the capital of Syria"[5] and "Ask Berlin,"[6] and attended Facebook events related to specific places in Berlin. During and prior visits to my fieldwork, I made use of these groups for my own personal queries – such as where I might find a German

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[5] https://www.facebook.com/syamend93/
[6] https://www.facebook.com/groups/ask.Berlin/

language course – which allowed me an additional element of participant observation. In terms of the events in which I participated, Facebook's "view Past Events" feature, together with suggested links to other groups or events, often allowed me to better piece together my activities in Berlin and complemented my observations

Self-situating and positionality

Doreen Massey prefaces a section of *For Space* (2005, 105):

> Whether it be poring over maps, taking the train for a weekend back home, picking up on the latest intellectual currents, or maybe walking the hills … we engage our implicit conceptualizations of space in countless ways. They are a crucial element in our ordering of the world, positioning ourselves, and others human and nonhuman, in relation to ourselves.

I am an Aleppian who has organized and participated in academic and other Aleppo-related activities in Berlin, and who has family and close friends residing in Germany. I have even considered moving there and consulted with a friend, an asylum lawyer, whether I could become a resident. Both Berlin and the study thereof have been instrumental to my career. As a researcher focused since 2015 on Aleppo's urban and social textures and intangible cultural heritage, and as someone who has been in exile since 2012, observing and participating in an emergent Aleppian / Syrian community in Europe becomes an opportunity. As an Aleppian, I have also been "studied" in Berlin: I volunteered to be subject of an artistic experiment. Damascene playwright Mohammad al Attar created an exhibition / art installation where visitors could listen to narratives from ten people from Aleppo, including myself, as they talked about their city. I could not attend the premiere, but I received in audio recorded reactions by the visitors.

The case could be made for my thesis to be called "Munich" or "Hamburg" – following in the footsteps of Arthur Phillips' novel, *Prague*, which is set in Budapest. I was drawn to Berlin by the many initiatives about Aleppo led from there – projects, talks, conferences, and

museum sections. But as my interlocutors told me, Arab Berlin is dominated by the Palestinians and Lebanese. Syrian Berlin is dominated by the Damascenes. Throughout my fieldwork in Berlin, I kept thinking I should have done my research in Munich or Hamburg, where the network effect and similar industrial-merchant nature attracted more Aleppians. In fact, three of the Aleppians I talked to did not want to come to Berlin but were sent here after they made their asylum claim in Germany. Ashash went to Hamburg but was transferred to Berlin. Salah wanted to go to Sweden but his uncle, with whom he was travelling, got caught in Berlin so he ended up staying with him. Ahmad wanted to go to Cologne, but he was sent to Berlin. All considered, I, for one, certainly connected well with Berlin. I also noted feeling happy and welcomed there, by my interlocutors for this research, as well as Syrian, German, and other Berliners I connected with. As I reflected in my fieldnotes, "it could be that people are tired of life here and are happy to see an 'outsider insider'. Outsider: because I live in Budapest, a place no body envies me for, but also insider as a Syrian sharing a political, human, national, ideological, cultural causes with them." My position as an insider outsider is expressed through my politics that I have expressed in public outlets, including talks, panels, and protests, such as a *#SaveAleppo* protest in Berlin in 2016, where I was introduced to one of the speakers, a young Aleppian architect and activist with whom I shared concern for Aleppo – its people and places – as the city was being pounded by regime forces.

Chapter 4: The center holds some

As it is a challenge to make place in a new space which would satisfy the social needs of refugees and migrants, the question of the most available space gets tied to questions of the geographic center, as a site where a higher aggregation of needs can be met. But refugees and migrants often have their pre-imagined thoughts about ideal space. Not all imaginations are tied to the physical center, as these ideals get transferred to Berlin, yet clash with a new reality. In this chapter I paint a collage of the Aleppos and Berlins the informants in my study shared with me.

Aleppo

Space in Aleppo is uneven. Historically located almost entirely to the east of the Queiq river, Aleppo has expanded in all directions since the 19th Century. Most of its wealthy inhabitants have since moved into modern, European-inspired apartment buildings and houses, in the vicinity of and westwards from the Queiq (Zeido and Ibold 2019). This transition was largely planned or supervised by successive Aleppo municipalities, beginning in the late Ottoman era. In the north, east and south of the Old City, however, a growing local population, further bolstered by rural migration, have chosen to make their homes via auto-urbanism, in the absence of – or a significantly delayed – response from municipal planning and regulatory authorities. These areas, including the Old City that they engulf, correspond roughly to what is known today as eastern Aleppo, and it is specifically these parts that rebel groups opposed to the regime of Bashar al-Assad managed to capture and hold onto from mid-2012 to late 2016 (Tokmajyan 2017). The western neighborhoods have long had better amenities and services, a significantly higher real estate value, and higher levels of education and income. Although there is no evidence that, before 2012, residents of eastern Aleppo were more supportive of the Syrian uprising and protest movement for dignity and rights that rocked Syria in March 2011,

eastern Aleppo became a space for civil society organizations and mobilization and bore the brunt of Syrian and Russian aerial bombardment that left around 25,000 locals dead and the entirety of eastern Aleppo's 1.5 million-strong population forcibly displaced (A. Shaar 2018), an estimated 300,000 of whom have since managed to return. Of the others, thousands have taken or been given refuge in Berlin, joined by yet thousands more from western Aleppo, many of whom left the city fearing persecution and mandatory military service and/or in search of education and other opportunities in Berlin.[7]

Although the term was previously rarely uttered, *eastern Aleppo* had existed before 2012. As an adolescent, I remember hearing from my mother about how the family of a potential suiter for one of my sisters eventually decided against paying us a visit to ask for her hand after they learned that we lived in "al-Ahyaa al-Sharqiyyeh", or *the eastern neighborhoods*.[8] Eastern Aleppo was also more socially and religiously conservative. The Old City within it was a space where centuries-old traditions were maintained to a high degree and organically developing neighborhoods to the south and east carried similar social neighborhood features. Women who did not wear the hijab were viewed as different and made to feel as such, and pressured to wear it, as indeed happened to my own sisters (A. A. Shaar 2015).[9] A young Palestinian–Aleppian journalist whom I interviewed via Facebook Messenger and who goes by the online moniker "New Berliner Sahar", recounted to me how she moved to the rather conservative neighborhood of Saif al-Dawleh in southern Aleppo when she was a teenager. She did not wear the hijab, which kept her out of touch with her neighborhood. Her only place outside of it was the Aleppo Music Institute in the al-Jamiliyyeh neighborhood in central-western Aleppo. Becoming a student at the University of Aleppo in western Aleppo would

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[7] As I explain in Chapter 2, not all Berliners who hold Syrian citizenship are refugees or arrived as asylum seekers.
[8] From the age of ten I lived with my family in Qadi Askar, a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Old Aleppo.
[9] Please see the comment by my sister, Lara, in this reflection by my father on the family's relocation to the Old City: https://www.thealeppoproject.com/the-traditional-aleppian-house-my-perspective-and-that-of-my-family-members/

later liberate her spacially. It was then that she began to go "around and about" in Aleppo, not only in the university area, but also to the increasingly popular al-Hatab Square in the westernmost part of Old Aleppo, and to the theater, where she was also an actor. Saif al-Dawleh became to her, as she puts it, "just where my place of residence was".

Sara, a Romanian–Syrian filmmaker from Aleppo, has made Berlin her home, but she likens the city to a blouse which, no matter how worn-out it becomes, remains the only piece of clothing that makes one feel "mfarfed" – i.e., comfortable in space, or "breezy". Sara grew up in the al-Muhafaza neighborhood in western Aleppo, one of the leafiest and most upscale in the city, where many of her relatives also lived. It was there that she felt most at home, sometimes in the company of friends whom she would meet in their houses or her own, or at the neighborhood's quiet cafés and trendy restaurants. She remembered that there existed enormous differences between eastern and western Aleppo, both economically and culturally. She observed that one "wouldn't usually cross to the other side." However, she did cross over, particularly as the Revolution opened up space across the city and people gathered together to protest. She said:

> I do not know anything about Aleppo, unfortunately. I only discovered it when I started going to protests, such as in Qadi Askar, al-Sweiqa, and at Bilal Mosque in Salaheddin. For one protest, I was obliged to wear the hijab because I was hearing complaints such as, 'Why is she not wearing a *manto* [long coat]?'

But western Aleppo, too, can be oppressive and conservative, at least for someone from eastern Aleppo. "In Aleppo," Ahmad told me, "I felt most comfortable in al-Myassar – our 'Haretna al-Shaabiyyeh' (Quartier Populaire)". He has large tattoos on his arms. The first time that I saw Ahmad was on the metro line 7 that runs to Neukölln. Given his tattoos and afro-like hair style, I was initially shocked to overhear his broad Aleppian accent. I knew then and there that I wanted to interview him, but I did not wish to impose. As luck would have it, I was fortunate to cross paths with him once again at a talk about war crimes in Syria. The talk was presented

in English, which he did not speak, just as he did not speak much German, as he later told me. I interviewed him on a subsequent occasion in the room in which he lived at the time, which was located in the small apartment of a German activist who had relieved Ahmad from a long struggle to find accommodation. It was Ahmad's host who had suggested that he attend the talk. While he might not have understood much of the content, he did end up meeting someone from his own neighborhood: me. Ahmad grew up in al-Myassar in eastern Aleppo, but he is originally from my adjacent neighborhood of Qadi Askar. Just as Sara's relatives stayed close to each other in al-Muhafaza, Ahmad's family likewise did not venture far afield.

Ahmad's tattoos would have been unusual anywhere in Aleppo. He covered his arms much of the time, but "it was more tolerable in al-Myassar because that is my district and people knew I had a tattoo and made their peace with it." In other parts of Aleppo, such as the religiously mixed al-Nayyal district in Central Aleppo, which he used to frequent with friends to play the popular multiplayer video game, Counter-Strike, they would typically always be asked to pay upfront before being allowed to play. This was not the case in Qadi Askar or al-Myassar, which suggests that they were mistrusted outside of their own neighborhood. He went on to explain that his physical appearance was used as a reason to detract from his safety and security:

> But the tattoo used to annoy me from time to time. There was always the possibility that I would be arrested and imprisoned for three months, as per the emergency law. There used to be arrest campaigns from Damascus every couple of months. They would make us spend 15 days blindfolded under the al-Malaab al-Baladi stadium. They would do that indiscriminately to anyone who was "mhabheb" [took drugs] or had tattoos. But why did they do that to us in Aleppo? In Latakia it would be normal for you to see tattoo [parlors], even in the street. And in Damascus that wouldn't be an issue, perhaps because it's the capital. In Aleppo, security occurred because of the people themselves, not because of the regime. For example, if I were drunk, I would instinctively turn away my face [from women to avoid offending or harassing them].

Salah, whom I interviewed at the Heim, also felt most comfortable in his home neighborhood of al-Meridien in western Aleppo. Again, like Sara, this applied to both public

and private spaces. He would spend time at the al-Meridien Park, meeting friends, having "our coffee", as he termed it. He was not particularly fond of Aleppo's largest and most central park, the Public Park, because it was too crowded. Rather, he preferred to frequent "breezy", uncrowded areas: "Our areas are empty, calm, and there's nobody. There is fresh air. You sit in the house garden and smoke your shisha."

Differences across space in Aleppo were not absolute. As Aleppian–Berliner entrepreneur and active community member, Laith, stated, it is very common for a person living in al-Furqan in western Aleppo to own a business in al-Qaterji in the east. Additionally, social differences in Aleppo do not revolve simply around class: The northern neighborhoods of al-Ashrafiyyeh and Sheikh Maqsoud, inhabited by the economic middle and lower-middle classes respectively, bring conservative Arabs, with their hijabs and niqabs, cheek by jowl with less conservative Kurds, who might have no better social, economic, or social standing, but differ tremendously from a cultural perspective.

Additionally, as workshop attendees in the Aleppo Sitting that I co-organized in Berlin in 2017 asserted, the younger generations related to Old Aleppo much as tourists would, but that was a sign of a shift in their relationship to that part of their city, away from a feeling of complete distance. There was certainly a sense that there was little social mobility, which was reflected in limited special mobility. As social scientist Lisa Jöris, who is conducting research on Aleppo at the Leibniz Center for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin, observed, "In Aleppo people were often stuck where they lived". Finally, Aleppos are not only varied across interlocutors but also as would be related by each of them at different times. Reem, who studies and works in Berlin, but who is not formally registered as a refugee, described to me how she felt about Aleppo when she went to visit in 2017: "Aleppo is no longer the same. I didn't feel at home there anymore." Doreen Massey asserts that space must be recognized as temporally

dynamic (Massey 2005). Aleppos of the past remain very relevant for refugees' and migrants' experiences of placemaking in Berlin.

Berlin

"Berlin fawwalet" – Berlin got full!

In my first hour in Berlin for the fieldwork, on the bus from the train station (Berlin Haubtbahnhof) to get to the place of my friend and host in Neukölln borough of Berlin, many of the passengers, who I assume were locals, looked familiar, like they could be from al-Hamdaniyyeh, the neighborhood I was born in. Across from me sat a middle-aged woman who started to speak with a strong Aleppian accent: "Wallah ghab ala albna!" (By God, our hearts are suffocating!). Her daughter was standing next to her. The bus was too full. They start to speak in Arabic to an Iraqi man who was sitting next to her. I join the conversation later. She did not know where Budapest is. When I said it is in Hungary, she told me she came through the other route after they had closed Hungary: Croatia. She volunteered more information: "people talk about the fingerprint. I didn't have to give my fingerprints anywhere except in Greece for the *kharta*.[10] She was heading to "Sharea al-Arab" (Arab Street), a nickname many, especially Arabs, give to Sonnenallee Street in Neukölln (see Figure 1), and was asking where to get off. She has the "blue pass" (the refugee travel document). Although my residence status in Budapest was not as a refugee, we surely managed to discover a couple of things in common. She was wondering how to get the visa to Turkey to see her mother whom she had not seen in 2-3 years. Two years earlier, I had been denied a visa to Turkey to say goodbye to my mother who was leaving for Canada.

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[10] Arabized Greek word for *card*, the main document asylum seekers obtain in Greece.

Figure 1. Street sign for Sonnenallee, appended in calligraphic Arabic with "Sharea al-Arab Sonnenallee" (Arab Street Sonnenallee). Photo by the author, 8 April 2018.

I explained why I was in Berlin and that I am generally interested in life in the city and potentially moving there. She discouraged me from it. I did not write in my fieldnotes why that was, or maybe she got off the bus before she could tell me, but in the words of social scientist Amr, "Berlin fawwalet" – it got full! Amr himself grew up in Aleppo and after the war left with his family, first to Leipzig, and then with his German partner to Berlin. This feeling that Berlin no longer feels spacious was felt by many others of my interlocutors. Khaled, who I had taught English in Aleppo now lived in Berlin but was studying in Frankfurt am Oder near the Polish border. It was not his plan to study outside Berlin, but he was very satisfied it turned out that way. "Berlin is too crowded, as are its universities where there are too many students to engage efficiently with faculty." Khaled also stopped going to *Arab Street* because it is

22

too crowded and quite dirty and chaotic. When I arrived in Berlin four years ago, I was shocked with the type of people who live here. I thought to myself 'where were those people back in Syria?' Back in Aleppo, I sort of lived in a bubble. Only the revolution connected me with the rest of Aleppo. I did not use to play in the street where I lived; rather we spent time in western Aleppo districts.

It was in fact in a western Aleppo language center where I had taught Khaled. He was my brother's classmate in another western Aleppo school. Now, for his shawarma, Khaled goes to Jamal al-Sham fast food place in Frankfurterallee, historically in East Berlin. I join him there one evening and it indeed felt cleaner, less crowded, and fresher.

Despite her resentments about Aleppo as a whole place-society configuration, Sahar now in Berlin finds herself bonding with Aleppians, with whom she can remember places where they had the best falafel, such as al-Faihaa Falafel in central Aleppo, which she could not do with Damascenes "who'd end up talking about Bab Touma," a major leisure and food area in Old Damascus. Sahar feels more Aleppian in Berlin: "I always loved Aleppo a lot, but the society there was something else". Decoupled from each other, Aleppo and Aleppians now each gain new meanings. Sara, who felt only Aleppo could give her a feeling of spaciousness and comfort, as explained above, misses Aleppo very much:

> After I left Aleppo, I started to miss anything that would remind me of it, but I have a feeling that the areas here that have an Arab majority are but a distortion of Aleppo; every time I see Shawarma with pomegranate molasses I get nervous and feel it chokes rather than relieves. My trips to the Arab areas are frequent because of my friends who are there, nothing else.

For many Aleppians' taste, Sonnenallee / Arab Street might be over-saturated, but it remains a place that occasionally brings them together or with other Syrians, Arabs, Germans, and others.

East Berlin, West Berlin?

I meet Laith and Sami in a Syrian restaurant in Sonnenallee that Laith liked. They provide me with very nuanced insight about spatial relations among not only Aleppians in Berlin, but also older Berliners. Laith observed that despite the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the distinction

23

between East Berlin and West Berlin is still etched in the minds of Germans. Syrians are influenced by them. But according to Sami, this is something Aleppians brought with them, too. His relatives in Aleppo ask him if he lives in East or West Berlin, hoping it was the latter, which they imagine as more upscale. I can relate to Sami. When I lived in Istanbul I was asked by family and friends in Aleppo and exile if I lived in "east" or "west" Istanbul, or the European and Anatolian sides as people in Turkey refer to them. Although social stratification along East and West Berlin holds to a degree, the differences are not as big as in Aleppo and are related to other features, such as the dual presence of services on both sides, such as, as Laith observed, museums for the same specialization on each side of the city, or traffic light details and streetlighting color, as observed in satellite images (see Figure 2). Areas such as Neukölln straddled both sides of the city, but now hold a location not very far from the physical center of the city.

Figure 2. Berlin lights at night. NASA/ESA, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Center and periphery

Does the center hold? In an earlier trip I made to Berlin for a conference, I stayed at the place of my friend Hazem in a quiet suburb in southwest Berlin. When I met him again for my fieldwork, he had moved with his girlfriend to Wedding borough. I congratulated him on the move. I thought his former place was too far from the center. It took me one to two hours to go to the conference venue in Mitte, having to change public transport three times. But he thought that was fine. This is Berlin. Later, his girlfriend jokingly but excitedly shared with me that as a result of a recent rearrangement of the municipal districts in Berlin, Wedding, where they now lived, had become part of Mitte, the downtown borough of Berlin. This might indicate a sense of social mobility brought after years of stay in Berlin, as well as teaming up with a partner. In Amr's view, most people with less privileged backgrounds are now in the suburbs. The same applies to new arrivals, which Amr believes could be a matter of correlation, not just causation. That is, new arrivals are of lower social class and less education and find it difficult to make their place closer to the physical center of the city. As he observed, many Syrians now live in Spandau at the far western edge of Berlin, because it is cheaper, more available, and simply less wanted. The same applied to Lichtenberg in the east, which he considers provincial. As such, for the rather young demographic I studied, the suburbs are less favorable. However, as I argue below the center remains as wide as Wedding and Neukölln, and not all centers are created equal or is where home is.

You might feel out of place in the place you are in physically. You are decentered in the center. "I hate al-Hermann," told me Ahmad, referring to Hermannplatz in Neukölln, at the northern tip of Arab Street, where he lived. Hermannplatz is the main transportation hub in the area, and as such is sometimes used a shortcut for Arab Street:

I do not go there except for necessities. I can't stand the racketeering of the Hezbollah people and their sheltering behind 'the Resistance' [against Israel]. I can't stand the red flags [of the Syrian state/regime]. Arab Street is the street I have hated the most!

Salah, who I visited in the Heim, also wants to run away from the crowds, as he used to in Aleppo. When he was in Aleppo, Salah grew up in a leafy suburb in western Aleppo called Jameiyyet al-Muhandiseen and he preferred to hang out in the quiet Meridien Park. When I asked what place he disliked the most in Berlin, he said it is the Warschauerplatz/strasse area in central Berlin. It is "the city of alienation and loss. There are constant fights, drugs, and shouting. If you go there, they cling on to you [to sell you drugs]. The police are always standing there, and people there are worn out. But Berlin has many classy areas. I have been to every nook and cranny."

Housing and accommodation was a recurrent issue among Aleppians in Berlin, as well as among all Berliners. A protest against rent hikes that I attended was widely announced and drew thousands of people (see Figure 3). This is in line with Çağlar and Glick Schiller's (Caglar and Glick Schiller 2018) insistence on "domains of commonality" and "sociabilities of emplacement" of refugees and migrants with the local population, instead of on differences. Berlin's real estate market has become a site of competition, not just among residents – native and migrant – but also transnational capital looking for a spatial fix (Harvey 2001). The resistance to gentrification highlights the common plight of residents and facilitates "sociabilities of emplacements".

As Lisa Jöris explains to me, in Berlin where you live ties to your social status. Nevertheless, there is constant change and mobility, unlike what she learned of Aleppo before the war. A crucial moment is the place you are assigned upon your arrival as a refugee; "it really defines your situation." Basel explains that housing options for refugees are limited in both county (German: Landkreis) and area (capped at 50m^2). Additionally, the landlord's perception of the prospective tenant is crucial. In some neighborhood anyone can find rent.

Youssef, an architect from Damascus asserts, "it is not all about money. Marzahn [in East Berlin] is cheap but avoided by all Syrians because of the high level of racism there."

Figure 3. "Stop Mietenwahnsinn" (stop rent madness) graffitied next to pro-diversity slogans at a protest against rent hikes in Berlin. Photo by the author, 14 April 2018.

All the different centers

Divisions among Aleppians by places of leisure exist. According to Amr, they spend time in several place types in Berlin. Some only pass time in Wedding, Neukölln, and Kreuzberg. Others have access to posh clubs in areas such as Potsdammerplatz and OstKreuz. Neukölln is always a prime example because of its food places, famous among which is Azzam. A more hip area is Gesundbrunnen in Wedding, where a lot of young and educated people now live, including many of Amr's friends. The area is famous for its "aswaq shaabiyyeh", or popular markets, as well as restaurants and cafes. Wedding is very ethnically diverse with many foreign-born Germans and their families living there, primarily Turks. Finally, in malls, many jobless Syrians goof around, especially minors.

But one type of places unites most Aleppians. When I asked informants about places in Berlin that are their favorite, or where they spend leisure time, parks featured highly. Ashash prefers the gardens at Kladower Damm, whereas Salah prefers Treptower Park on the Spree River, where he goes to chill and occasionally rent a boat and go on a tour. Aya, a microbiologist and single mother who lives with her sister – both came to Berlin as refugees – also finds leisue at Treptower Park. She would go from her home in Neukölln, put her daughter behind her on the bike, and ride there to take a boat trip. As I observed, parks in Berlin are utilized to the full. I went with a German friend and asylum lawyer on a long walk and rest in Mauerpark and we passed through hundreds of individuals and groups resting, chatting, and barbecuing in the park (see Figure 4). We also mazed through a flea market set up there. In Tempelhof, the cold war era airport-turned-park, in which a makeshift camp was set up for a period of time before my fieldwork, thousands fill the space on weekends and warm days to barbecue, ride bikes and do community gardening (see Figure 5). Arab migrants and refugees, including Aleppians, had their strong presence there.

Figure 4. Mauerpark. Photo by the author, 8 April, 2018.

Figure 5. Barbecues and bikes at Tempelhof. Photo by the author, 15 April 2018.

But some historical places have their strong presence here too. Both Sahar and Aya found familiarity in Hackeschemarkt. Since not many shops in Berlin are run by Aleppians,

Sahar gets an Aleppo-like feeling from a place that is by no means exclusively Aleppian or Syrian or Arab. The architecture is enough. Its old-style market, with its arched facades, is reminiscent of Aleppo's souq (central market).

Finally, while Berlin suffocates Ahmad with its German language paperwork, it gave others space for expression and activism. Zsuzsa, my Hungarian friend from MigSzol (Migrant Solidarity Group) who now lived in Berlin, found it interesting when she went to a protest in Berlin with an Aleppian man who at some point during the protest told her, "Is that it? Don't we now run away?" He was used to the way things were in Syria, where you have to run for your life the moment the protest starts, in what is called in Syria "muzahara tayyara", or flight protest. I could relate to that feeling that you can take the space to freely express yourself. I was in Berlin in 2016, when the Syrian regime launched a months-long siege and bombardment campaign to retake Aleppo. A group of Syrian and other activists organized a protest in front of the Bundestag to "Save Aleppo" and I was given a chance to speak. The protest brought together people of all walks (and classes) of life, Aleppians and non-Aleppians. For many, similar events were a space of expression that would have been impossible in Aleppo.

"Einsteigen bitte!" – Get in please!

Berlin has a complex transportation network that efficiently connects odd parts of Berlin together. In some sense, this renders the geography of the city as no longer a matter of physical proximity or distance, but of how connected some areas are to others, such as via public transport. The distinction becomes in what these transportation lines connect, and who uses them. Laith offered a very ethnographically rich description of which I captured some aspects:

Each line has its type of people who use it (including Syrians):

a. U5 (underground line) → eastwards: everybody is wearing the same style. Same jacket. A somewhat aggressive demeanor. Some are obese. Kids are shouting and crying.

    b. U3 → Kudem: west Berlin. Government employees. Also the same brand of jackets as each other. Their kids do not cry. They take their bikes up with them.
    c. Netto: connects east and west.
    d. The U8 and U2: connect East Berlin to West Berlin. Used by people from multiple ethnicities.

As I was taking notes by hand and did not interrupt the conversation, I surely missed a description of other lines, so I somewhat complement it by my own notes:

    e. "The U1 was quite white. It's dotted by some posh, retro stations, one of which has an 'Austrian Bakery'."

    f. Most importantly, the U7: it connects Neukölln with central and western districts as far as Spandau, and to Rudow at the southern tip of Berlin. Really crowded, with all kinds of people: Arabs, liberal men and women of all colors and classes, and old brown men."

Public transport in Berlin is subsidized at different rates to different people. This offers refugees and migrants great mobility within the city at a low cost. Public transport, especially as I observed it on metro U7 becomes a place, or a set of places, rather than mere space to be traversed. Like me, Ahmad was so bemused by "einsteigen bitte", the recorded male voice at the underground station instructing passengers to enter the carriage before its doors close. He recorded it and played for me a remix of it that he made with an app on his phone. But Ashash feels alienated with how complicated the network is, saying, "here, you keep running: 'which U-bahn, which bus'. And if you're late, you're late. You can't take a taxi." This is in contrast with Aleppo and his easy commute to the central district of al-Jamiliyyeh which had it all for him, food, café, entertainment. Salah shares Ashash's feeling "I prefer transport in Aleppo – no S-bahns [city trains]. Everything was close, even though the population was not much smaller." This is likely due to Berlin's spread-out space, compared to densely populated Aleppo. However, Ashash caveats those parts of Aleppo were very hard to navigate, such as

al-Sukkari neighborhood in southern Aleppo, where "it takes you half an hour to find a house," which is due to its winding streets and the lack of official street names and house numbers. But al-Sukkari is where his grandparents lived and the fountain water cooled the hot days, so it remains his "favourite place" – even though it was al-Jamilieh where he spent most time.

Aleppo, Berlin, and transnational placemaking

Intuitively, the assumption that the closer to an abstract center refugees and migrants are, the better "integrated" they are, is easy to make (Purcell 2003). In transnational migration theory, the center is no longer the geographic center, measured by its physical distance from places of power. Rather, it is some ability to navigate a multitude of locations (or localities), regardless of the closeness to the city center of the migrant's accommodation and workplace. Everyday practices are constitutive of the global "transnational spaces" (McEwan, Pollard, and Henry 2005). For Aleppians in Berlin, this would mean some degree of relationship across Germany, Syria, and the places of exile of their families and social network, such as in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. For paperwork in Germany such as for work and marriage, most refugees and migrants need to or are required to maintain their Syrian passports and visits to the Syrian embassy in Berlin. Some send remittances to family. Few attempt to visit their homes in Syria for multiple reasons, or see family in neighboring countries, and even fewer have attempted to fully return to Syria. Due to international sanctions on Syria and the war, which affected air travel, going to Syria is often done through Lebanon, which often denies Syrians entry or instructs airliners to prevent them from boarding flights headed to Lebanon. Reem complained that while some Syrians can visit Syria, which she, too, eventually did, she once could not even go to Beirut (a necessary stop en route to Syria since the war). She lost 700 Euros on plane tickets because of conditions regarding entry stamps in passports that Lebanese authorities impose on Syrians but not on Lebanese nationals. In this regard, the ability to make place and

access space is not restricted to the city and country in which refugees and migrants live. It is also inextricably linked to their ability to move transnationally.

In conclusion, the ability to navigate comfortably through space in Berlin relies in part on living close to one of the many central neighborhoods in Berlin. However, it was there were some of the Aleppian Berliners I spoke to felt most decentered. The physical center in the city then becomes, first, less relevant compared to secure housing and parks that offered peace of mind. Second, it becomes subordinate to another type of geographic center – one that is brought about by connectivity, such as via public transport, which itself becomes places of central importance in the social life of refugees and migrants. The transnational scales add to their lives other complicating layers which permeate their social lives and their general mobility, spatially and economically. In the following chapter, I discuss some of the key ways access to central rights and services is influenced by factors of social capital possessed by refugees and migrants.

Chapter 5: Money, languages, politics

For the Aleppians in my study, finding their place in Berlin crucially reflected the differences of their social classes from before their arrival to the city. As with any deeper understanding of class, the differences were not all due to the economic capital that refugees and migrants had in Syria. Rather, the new environment, the German welfare state, and the support and rules aimed specifically at refugees acted to some extent as levelers of pre-existing economic inequalities, though money continued to play a role. Class differences emerged through social and cultural capital, most tellingly linguistic capital. Transnational placemaking depended on a number of factors, including notably political activities and the gender of my participants.

Economic capital: "If you have money, you can spend it"

One of the most pressing parts of placemaking for migrants and refugees is finding housing. Here the German system of placing refugees in a given administrative area (*Kreis*), and supporting them with rent until they are employed played some equalizing role. Samer, summarized the Berlin situation:

> Housing is a big problem in Berlin, you don't much get to choose where to get rent. From when you are in the camp, they call you suddenly in area X, and you sort of have to take it regardless of where. When you don't have your own space, you don't have your peace of mind, your headspace. And that's the problem in Berlin.

As Basel similarly observed:

> After all, you as a refugee don't have the options. You're stuck with what's on offer. The Job Center[11] decides which housing unit is okay, the decision is not in the hand of the refugee. The unit can't be over 50 m^2 and it can't cost more than 400 Euros monthly. It also must be within the same Kreis, except in some exceptional cases.

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[11] The Job Center is the state institution that supports citizens and residents with finding jobs as well as until they find a job.

He continued: "There's no class division among refugees in this regard. Everybody is dependent on the Job Center. In some neighborhoods anyone can find rent." This suggests that class differences among refugees are perceived as relatively insignificant, which is also the stance of the German welfare state. Basel reiterated that reliance on financial support for the the umployed, which most refugees initially are, crosses financial classes:

> The Job Center assumes that you are penniless. The rich and the poor are not leaving the Job Center as long as they are unemployed. The rich one does not declare his money, so that he doesn't lose the assistance.

Fixed-amount financial aid provides a social security safety net but does little to attenuate wealth differences among refugees. As Laith noted: "The aid is equal, but if you have money, you can spend it." He noted that the ability of the dependency on the Job Center to maintain economic equality might be short-lived: "after a while, the privileged refugee started to show off to others."

One significant way of spending extra money was to engage so-called commissioners: brokers who would, for a fee of about 3,000 - 8,000 Euro assist Syrians in finding new housing to rent. This was public knowledge among migrants and refugees. One commenter in the Yalla Berlin Facebook group, for instance, posted that the profiteers demanded 5,000 Euro to help him secure a rental contract. As noted by several informants, the need for money to pay for commissioners pushed some families living in the Heim to do undeclared work, "in the black", given that finding official work is difficult "in the beginnings". Sara, the architect, remarked that in addition to financial necessity, "not all people bear to stay at home and do nothing". She explicitly linked undeclared work to refugees' and migrants' limitations in movement around Berlin: "The majority of those who work in the black happen to do so at acquaintances or Arabs and consequently the mobility gets limited to the Arab areas." Getting money fast can also relate to transnational places beyond Berlin. Laith observed that those who have family in Syria or in neighboring countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, are forced to find work immediately.

They are forced to settle for worse options, including in housing. They cannot work out a strategy to improve their standing. Economic capital, either of one's own or of one's family who would therefore not depend on family members in Germany, therefore, directly influences refugees' and migrants' chance to develop and implement longer term plans.

Notably, paying money to commissioners was one of the ways to leave the Heim, where all refugees regardless of their wealth were initially housed by the German states while waiting for papers or to find rent. My informants often described the difficult conditions of the Heims which made staying in them undesirable: The Tempelhof Heim, located at the park and site of the disused airport, consisted of tents (heated in the winter). Showers were accessible only once a day through a truck that would pass by the residents. "Germans" control gender ratios in the Heims, as told me one former Heim resident. Some are for "families". Others have more single men. Still Hijabi women had to hang their scarfs to create privacy. Many residents would not have internet access and the general atmosphere was often described to me as "very bad" and negative. I have heard multiple stories of refugees who could not bear living in the Heim. One example was of a "posh" man from New Aleppo who, in the words of Khaled, "couldn't take it" to live the same Heim conditions as those from a "lower class", and as he had money, he left Germany for Sudan, where Syrians did not need a visa to enter. I later heard a similar story about someone from Damascus. Politics is not fully decoupled from my participants' class observations. Khaled expressed the opinion that such type of Aleppians is the same to think that lower class people ruined their comfortable life in Syria by their revolution.

The conditions in different Heims vary considerably. The one I visited in Charlottenberg, where I conducted four interviews, was a former state building and felt like a students' dormitory, with two to four people staying in a room. Invariably, the Heim remains a place to avoid, a transient space to enter and leave as fast as possible. The Heim is an obstacle to placemaking, as narratives of people being "stuck" in the Heim suggest. The actual

placemaking process in the city can only start once refugees and migrants find satisfactory housing. Samer explicitly called the length of stay in the camp to finding a place within the German society: "They ask you to integrate, when you are put in a camp with the same people for two years."

Laith enumerated three factors that help Syrians find good housing and therefore to make place in Berlin: "connections", money for commissioners, and the chance availability of state housing made possible for one or two years to residents in hardship who can obtain a housing entitlement certificate called *Wohnberechtigungsschein*, referred to with the acronym WBS, which after the fall of the Wall started to be offered, mostly in east Berlin boroughs.

Cultural capital: the crucial role of language

Education on its own did not seem to help refugees leave the Heim or find better housing. Laith told me the story of Ismail, a man with a college degree (two years, business management), originally from Jisr al-Shughour, a major town southwest of Aleppo. He was stuck in a Heim for two and a half years and eventually made his way to live in "the Eastern", as Laith said, referring to East Berlin – seen as less desirable than some other areas but an improvement from the Heim. Education, though, is part of the opportunities that are available to refugees and migrants, which are according to some of my participants linked with age. Young people, below 25, have greater opportunities than older refugees and migrants, including for pursuing education in Germany and finding a job.

Related to education is a specific form of cultural capital: linguistic capital. Speaking German is of obvious importance, as it facilitates communication with state institutions and is a prerequisite for finding some jobs. Somewhat surprisingly, though, it is not German that acts as a marker of social differences among Aleppian refugees and migrants, but English, which some refugees and migrants spoke from before they migrated. "Everybody is taking German

classes. Schools are available to all, so it's up to the person," Basel explained this phenomenon.

German was studied by few in Aleppo, mainly medicine and engineering students at the Higher

Institute of Languages at the University of Aleppo. Before the war, the Goethe Institute had a

presence in Damascus but not in Aleppo. This puts most newly arrived Aleppians on a

relatively equal footing.

In contrast, English allows refugees and migrants to "immediately make friends" and

gives them a greater capacity of expression, both about their person and Syria, as Laith put it.

"English allows you a wider accessibility," Lisa makes a similar remark. Laith also notes that

(just as with money) "English helps you from the moment you enter Greece," alluding to the

migration journey common in the years prior to my fieldwork. Live events I have been to, as

well as the descriptions of Facebook events, are commonly written in three languages –

German, English, and Arabic, and speakers from other countries (such as myself) are often

invited to Syria-themed events in Berlin.

English in a way acts as an in-between step before learning German. Some driving

schools offer driving license courses and tests in English – and a driver's license, said Laith,

can help improve job prospects in Berlin. Similarly, at a minimum, English allows Arabic

speakers to decipher the Latin alphabet. Ahmad, whose literacy even in Arabic is limited, says

he cannot understand what places are. He does not understand the signs on shops in the street,

so nothing strikes him or stands out. In Lidl or Aldi, he says:

> It's not possible for me to take initiative and talk to the people. For example, in Lidl I
> went to buy clothes once. Those working there started to look and scrutinize. I get to
> the cashier, and if I stutter a second, I get Germans behind me nudging me. But I if
> were German it would be normal and accepted. People get offended until they see my
> tattoos, which is when they turn happy. But by just seeing the beard and hair, they think
> [I'm] still in the tent and on a camel.

While German is the language of the state, English is a language of choice and of social

relations in Berlin. Anne, the German girlfriend of Amr, expressed this observation: "it's such

a Berlin thing to speak English." She contrasted the ubiquity of English with Leipzig, where

the couple had lived and where German is dominant. Basel commented that "learning German is a matter of its own right. Many from various classes are learning it and, conversely, those who are not invested in it hail from different backgrounds." But to him, finding romantic partners and friends – in short, the micro-society that refugees and migrants are integrating in – is different because in these purely social relations, "sometimes they speak English to each other". In his view, English plays a role in one division between newly arrived Syrians:

> Clustering takes two shapes (for Syrian migrants and refugees): First, people who socialize with European groups – those who know English. These hold different thinking modes to the common people. Second, people integrating with the Arab components of Berlin, usually of weaker economic standing.

English, in his perspective, becomes a sign of cultural capital and a mind-set that instantly distinguishes those refugees and migrants who speak it from those who do not. His use of "European groups" also points to a certain degree of transnationality; unlike German, English provides access to an entire continent. In contrast, not knowing English limits where refugees and migrants can make their places. This can be seen in the story of the "posh man" who left the Heim in Berlin for Sudan. A chief reason for his choice of country was his lack of English language skills, limiting his options to Arabic-speaking countries.

Beyond Berlin

Finally, another set of factors differentiate the placemaking of Aleppian refugees and migrants in Berlin, from a transnational perspective. These factors do not on their own constitute a form of capital in the Bourdieusian sense, but rather are a mixture of demographic, legal, and social circumstances of the refugees and migrants, on the one hand, and of the wider society in Berlin and in the world.

The wider world in Berlin

The complex pre-existing ethnic and national makeup in the city influence placemaking by Aleppians. According to my host, Miriam, who lives in Neukölln, certain Berlin boroughs are dominated by certain ethnic groups, although they remain ethnically diverse. Turks have lived in Kreuzberg since the 1970s and belong to different sways of life. Some Turkish rackets operate here, and these are primarily nationalists affiliated with the Grey Wolves youth organization of the MHP party in Turkey. This pits them against Kurds who are national of either Turkey or Syria. Levantine Arabs, specifically Lebanese and stateless "Palestinian-Lebanese" who were given asylum in the 1980s dominate Neukölln and its Arab Street. Their rackets are mixed, with some affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah party, and often compete with the newly arriving Syrians who are then kept in check and often coerced to close their businesses. One such business was a Syrian gift shop that showcased items such as keyholders and scarves with the Syrian Revolution Flag printed on them. Another business forced shut was a beloved Syrian restaurant that became too much competition, as multiple interlocutors told me. Meanwhile, Palestinian, Lebanese and Hezbollah flags continue to dominate the visual space in Arab Street, in the total absence of the Syrian Revolution Flag. Hezbollah played a big role fighting alongside the Syrian regime and displacing millions from Syria, including thousands of stateless "Palestinian-Syrians". As Sahar, herself Palestinian-Aleppian explained to me, (Lebanese-)Palestinians came to Germany at a time when the society was not prepared for them. Now there is a little feeling of injustice seeing how Syrians are being celebrated and well treated, while they had had to endure harsher conditions making place in the city.

Turks maintain a heavy presence in Neukölln, too, with virtually no tensions with Syrian refugees. Conversely, I observed that Arab restaurants were significantly influenced by Turkish ones as they took on rituals such as offering on the house tea, using a samovar with two taps, and including halloumi cheese in their recipes – all habits that I had only observed

40

when I lived in Turkey. Russian racketeers operate in eastern boroughs such as Marzahn (and Marzahn-Hellersdorf), which are dominated by white people, including ethnic Germans, whose politics tends to oppose German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her pro-migration policies. As noted above, Aleppians in Berlin tend to avoid living in Marzahn, despite its more affordable and available rent.

Berlin itself can also be a transient place, as part of intra-European bureaucracy. Ferhad, who used to live in Turkey, is married to a British woman, but for years, the UK refused to grant him visa to join his wife. However, as the UK and Germany were both EU members, Germany "was obliged" to give Ferhad a visa when his wife moved to Berlin temporarily, and from Berlin, Ferhad said, getting a UK visa was much faster, though Brexit has surely changed these dynamics.

These complex links between new Aleppian refugees and migrants, Berlin, and the world outside the city echo the urgency of Çağlar and Glick Schiller's (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2015) for new concepts in urban and migrations studies which would capture the "complex, plural, heterogeneous, multidirectional relations and ties" (2015) between migrants and localities in a politically, economically, and culturally changing world.

Who can go to Aleppo

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Aleppians' ability to move across borders, including notably to Syria but also to other countries, can be limited. This mobility comes with multiple advantages: maintaining a connection with home, maintaining property use and value, financial savings via shopping for services wherever they are cheaper such as new glasses and dentals, and, for academics I know, gaining research access and an important perspective on the changes gripping places and society in Syria. Of course, such access to hometown in Syria

comes with its own "headaches", such as being perceived by exiles as having a political stance supportive or tolerant of the Syrian regime.

To start with, some were not even in Berlin out of their will, as I note in Chapter 3. Primarily, Ahmad wanted to go to Köln (Cologne), where he had friends, but when he got stuck in Berlin, he decided to return. As his neighborhood and city remain under regime control, from whom he fears persecution, he resolved to smuggle himself through Greece back to Turkey, where he had stayed before making the journey to Europe. His attempt failed and he lost dear money on plane tickets. Ahmad is clearly opposed to the Syrian regime, as I could see from slogans he had written on his guitar, but his fear ties to more than just politics. His neighborhood in Aleppo was rebel-held for over four years, through some of which he had stayed. His male gender, too, means not only that he would be subjected to more thorough investigations and harassment on political and security grounds (Motaparthy and Houry 2015), but also that he would be forced to serve in the very Syrian military that bombed his neighborhood and displaced him and his community. Military service remains a major obstacle for the mobility of many men aged 18 – 42. After 42, new Syrian laws allow the state to freeze the assets of draft dodgers, including any property they own in full or part (such as shared inheritance) or is owned by their spouse or children (Kayyali 2021). This prospect does not annihilate the role of economic capital. Men who are not politically at odds with the Syrian regime, but who want to avoid the mandatory military service can pay their way out of it through the official regime of "badal", or substitution fee for the military service, which can amount to USD 8,000. Women, on the other hand, do not have the burden of the military service. However, they can still be persecuted for their politics (or even perceived politics). Additionally, most refugees are not allowed by their country of asylum to go back home, except in exceptional cases, such as a three-day travel to see an ailing family member. Refugees who break these conditions could face their asylum status being revoked.

In sum, where you go, in Berlin and beyond, depends to some extent on who you were before coming to the city. While the German welfare state and regulations (e.g., the refugee distribution quota) mitigate pre-existing economic differences among refugees and migrants, they do not negate the importance of economic capital for placemaking. On the other hand, cultural capital, especially linguistic capital, exerted complementary influence on finding one's place in Berlin for Aleppian refugees and migrants. Finally, a complex set of factors, including gender and political activity, determines limits to placemaking at the transnational level, in that at least one important place remains inaccessible to all refugees and many migrants: Syria itself.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This master's thesis examined how Aleppian migrants and refugees made place in Berlin. It looked beyond groups sharing a common urban origin as a homogeneous social group and explored the differences its members brought with them from their hometown. By studying a group that encompasses underprivileged as well as relatively privileged individuals from varying backgrounds and in varying life situations who nonetheless share some key characteristics and experiences, it contributes to the literature on placemaking, which typically researches disadvantaged communities. The literature on transnational migration allows for an analysis of migrant relations as situated in differentiated global scales (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009). An expansion of the literature to look at migrants of a common geographic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds which are not necessarily homogenous in terms of economic and social class can further our understanding of processes of migrant emplacement. Further contributing to the literature, my thesis investigated placemaking in a context where major transnational factors are suppressed or reconfigured, primarily the ability to travel across urban scales. New empirical insights are brought that can contribute to theories of migration and linguistic capital. Finally, the thesis takes an approach that brings migrants' and refugees' past urban experiences into perspective along with their placemaking in the new city and beyond it.

There are big differences among Aleppians in terms of where they lived and spent time in Berlin, impacting and impacted by their preferences as well as obstacles they faced. As one Syrian urban sociologist I talked to observed, "generally Syrians are not concentrated in certain areas – there are no Syrian or Aleppian ghettos". Arab Street remains visited by many, but to varying frequencies. This cleavage is both a cause and effect. Some do not come merely because they live in some banished neighborhoods. Others because they are too cool for it. Aleppians in Berlin are not particularly happily settled. Many feel very unsettled, de-centered and unable to connect with space. This is especially visible through their references to Berlin

being too full ("fawwalet"). Berlin continues to attract, yet the grass is always greener "in the Netherlands", a feeling and urge to move out I sensed among some of my interlocutors. Former stays in camp continue to shape experiences and relation to space, including encounters with administration and bureaucracy, other Syrians that are different, and migrants of other nationalities.

On par with language, further research can be done on the connection between bureaucracy and placemaking. As one of my interlocutors expressed it, "bureaucracy is the biggest part of your life in Berlin. You are very much controlled by it. They told us once you learn the language you will find work. Done that. But now to enter the job market you must be qualified. Now I'm doing the qualification (*Weiterbildung*) because what I have in Aleppo can count as *Ausbildung*."

My research did not have a decidedly gender-specific focus. However, my insight pertains mostly to the lives of young Aleppian men in Berlin. Although Berlin is a space that is open and opening up to different gender identities, I was not the only man who needs to pay more attention to gender dynamics. On my last day of fieldwork, I went with my host to a workshop on intersectionality (of gender, race, ableism, and other social markers) that was part of a one-day festival organized by local organizations and the municipality in Neukölln. Out of around 15 participants, I was one of only two men and the only cis male person. To add to my male shame, I had to leave the workshop mid-session as I needed to catch one of the "refugee walking tours". Coming back to the festival later that day, I attended a music show by *DJabi*, a band whose lead was a hijabi girl of Western Asian origin. Further research can be conducted on the interaction between the agency of binary and non-binary gender migrant groups and the opportunities and challenges they face as they make place in urban space.

Finally, further ethnography of migrants and refugees in the online space, such as on social media, would yield important results. My interest and engagement in the happenings of

Berlin, before and during fieldwork, took shape partly on Facebook, as I "joined" events I was invited to. This inadvertently rendered me virtually a Syrian Berliner, at least temporarily. Social media websites such as Facebook can be investigated as transnational and transnationalist tools as well as spaces to make one's place in.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions (as used in the Heim)

The following are sample questions for a semi-structured interview for the study conducted by AlHakam Shaar on comparative urban (and transnational) space use between Aleppo and Berlin among Aleppians (aged 18 – 40). This research is part of a thesis for an MA Sociology and Social Anthropology at Central European University (CEU). AlHakam is also Holbrooke Fellow for the Aleppo Project, based at CEU's School of Public Policy.

All interviews will be anonymous and will be used solely for the purpose of this research. I will not ask your name, and it will not be written.

Residence:

1. Where in Aleppo did you used to live?

2. Where in Berlin do you live now?

3. When did you arrive in Germany?

4. (Where) did you live prior to coming to Berlin?

5. When did you move to Berlin?

6. Why did you move?

Job / education

7. What did you do in Aleppo?

8. Where (neighborhood) did you go to school (primary) in Aleppo?

9. Where was your work/study place in Aleppo?

10. What do you do in Berlin now? (Where?)

Places of activities

In Aleppo

11. Where did you spend your time the most when you were not at home?

12. Where did you spend most leisure time? (e.g., for food, parks, music / cafes, and bars).

13. What was your favourite place/area?

14. What was your least favourite place/area?

In Berlin

15. Where do you spend most leisure time?

16. What is a place / area you like the most?

17. What is your favourite place/area?

18. What is your least favourite place/area?

19. Do you spend most your time with Arabs, Germans, foreigners, or mixed groups?

    a. At work/study place:

    b. Otherwise:

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