



Corç George Demir

Ancestral Junctionures

—
on the expansion of
ancestral mythologies

Ancestral Junctures – on the expansion of ancestral-mythologies
Reflective Documentation

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I hereby declare,

that I have independently written/produced the reflective documentation of my thesis in accordance with the principles of good scientific practice and have not used any sources and aids other than those indicated, that this reflective documentation has not yet been submitted in any form for evaluation, neither in Austria nor abroad, and that this version is identical to the online submitted and assessed version.

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A handwritten signature in dark blue ink, appearing to be 'Corç George Demir', written in a cursive style.

Abstract English

Ancestral Junctions – on the expansion of ancestral-mythologies

This doctoral thesis investigates the phenomenon of ancestral-mythologies and their influence on both individual and collective constructions of subjectivity. Utilising an autoethnographic approach, the study examines the processes through which genealogical narratives are produced, maintained and expanded. It critically engages with dominant understandings of genealogy that primarily define ancestry through biological family lineages or nation-state affiliations.

Through a multilingual exploration in English, German, Turkish and Arabic, personal experiences, memories and cultural narratives are employed as sources of knowledge. The thesis deconstructs and decentralises established ancestral mythologies while acknowledging their significance in shaping identities and forms of belonging. Rather than rejecting these categories of genealogy, it proposes an expanded understanding of ancestry by introducing and exemplary genealogical frameworks. In particular, labour- and queer-ancestry are explored as exemplary mythologies that challenge conventional notions of ancestry.

The written component is structured as a dialogue in which theoretical perspectives, multilingual quotations and personal narratives interact with each other. Complementing the textual research, a multi-part artistic installation materialises the investigation through emblematic objects and moving images. Drawing on the historical logic of the Wunderkammer, the installation assembles heterogeneous artefacts into a rhizomatic network in which meaning emerges through proximity and relationality.

The thesis argues that genealogy should not be understood as a fixed ancestry waiting to be uncovered but as a cultural formation that can be critically examined, questioned and artistically reimaged.

Abstract Deutsch

Ancestral Junctions – über die Expansion von Herkunftsmythen

Die vorliegende Dissertation untersucht das Phänomen von Herkunftsmythen und deren Einfluss auf individuelle sowie kollektive Subjektkonstruktionen. Ausgehend von einem autoethnografischen Forschungsansatz analysiert die Arbeit die Prozesse, durch die genealogische Narrative entstehen, Identitäten prägen und Zugehörigkeiten herstellen. Im Zentrum steht die kritische Auseinandersetzung und Dezentralisierung traditioneller Genealogiekonzepte, die Herkunft vorwiegend über biologische Familienlinien oder nationale Zugehörigkeiten definieren.

Durch eine mehrsprachige Untersuchung in Deutsch, Englisch, Türkisch und Arabisch werden persönliche Erfahrungen, Erinnerungen und kulturelle Überlieferungen als Erkenntnisquellen erschlossen. Die Arbeit dekonstruiert etablierte Herkunftsmythen, ohne deren Bedeutung für individuelle und kollektive Identitätsbildung zu negieren. Stattdessen expandiert sie den Herkunfts-Begriff um alternative Formen. Exemplarisch werden Arbeits- („labour ancestry“) und Queere-Ahnenlinien („queer ancestry“) als alternative genealogische Narrative untersucht.

Der schriftliche Teil ist als dialogische Form angelegt, in der theoretische Positionen, mehrsprachige Zitate und persönliche Erzählungen miteinander in Beziehung treten. Ergänzt wird die Forschung durch eine künstlerische Installation, die genealogische Fragmente mittels emblematischen Objekten und Bewegtbild räumlich inszeniert. In Anlehnung an die Logik der Wunderkammer entsteht ein rhizomatisches Netzwerk heterogener Elemente, dessen Bedeutung aus ihren Beziehungen zueinander hervorgeht.

Die Arbeit argumentiert, dass Genealogie nicht als statische Herkunft verstanden werden sollte, die es freizulegen gilt, sondern als kulturelle Formation, die untersucht, hinterfragt und künstlerisch neu imaginiert werden kann.

Ancestral Junctions – on the Expansion of Ancestral Mythologies

My name is Corç and I am German. No, this doesn't feel complete. My name is George and I was born in Germany but my parents are from Turkey. No, this also doesn't feel complete. My name is Corç, which is the Turkish spelling of the Christian Saint George because I was socialised in the Antiochene Orthodox tradition and I am a gay, queer, working-class artistic researcher and bartender, born in Cologne, Germany, to ethnically Armenian and Arab parents that immigrated from a region in Turkey, where they were born and raised, right at the border to Syria, where the border used to shift quite a lot and...

No, this still doesn't feel complete either...

This following PhD thesis explores the phenomenon of ancestral-mythologies and examines their influences on collective and individual subject constructions. Utilising an auto-ethnographic approach, an attempt is made to uncover the processes involved in the construction of such mythologies and expand them through personal experiences. Through a multilingual exploration, namely English, German, Turkish and Arabic, these personal experiences are examined, researched and communicated through personal ancestral languages. In the context of genealogy, the primary focus has been almost exclusively on biological family lineages or nation-statehoods. These ancestral-mythologies will be deconstructed and decentralised, though still considering their relevance to individual and collective subject formations. Instead, they will be expanded and two exemplary alternative ancestral-lineages will be explored as narratives of genealogy – labour-ancestry and queer-ancestry.

This text is as a dialogue in which, based on personal narratives and theories, multilingual quotes from the authors interact with personal anecdotes and experiences.

Understood as an extensive artistic research project, this work includes not only written but also visual elaborations of this expanded genealogical research. In this project, narratives of ancestral-mythologies are processed by means of a multi-part spatial installation. Using various genealogically collaged elements, an attempt is made to reconstruct this ancestral-research and uncover symbols of belonging. The installation consists of multiple emblematic objects and moving images, that call upon fragments of individual as well as collective ancestral-mythologies.

These components generate a network that mimic the historical practices of the *Wunderkammer*. Adopting its logic of accumulation and proximity, the visual materialisation assembles heterogeneous artefacts within a shared spatial structure. Meaning arises not from categorical

order but from tension between elements placed together. The resulting configuration can be described as rhizomatic, characterised by multiple entry points and shifting connections. Because “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance” (Deleuze; Guattari 1987: 25). This rhizomatic structure underlines the complex multiplicity of constructed ancestral-lineages and the subjects inscribed within them, establishing the central premise: Genealogy is not a stable ancestry to be uncovered but a cultural formation to be examined, questioned and artistically reimagined.

1. Ancestral Junctionures – A Prologue to the expansion of ancestral-mythologies

Where are you from? A question that doesn't necessarily attract much attention at first. Almost everyone has encountered it at some point, maybe on vacation or when meeting new people. However, only some people experience their response being dismissed and followed up with *Where are you really from?*. People who are not visually perceived as *belonging* to dominant societies, who are marked as *Other* are constantly confronted with this inquiry in their everyday lives. This question carries far-reaching implications and emotions, as it can be described as an externally attributed *Othering* (see Reuter 2011) – as not belonging within a social construct. These mythologies of ancestry imposed from the *outside* not only place marked individuals in, for example, *Other* geographical regions or religious communities but also burden them with projections of supposed *cultural Otherness*. The intentions behind the questions are not necessarily malicious, because *they were just curious. They didn't mean any harm. They have friends or holiday experiences and want to talk about them. It's okay to simply ask questions. They're just being attentive.* And that may be the case. Nevertheless, the initial impulse to ask is a marker of difference and, as a result, both a social and geographical positioning in a supposed *elsewhere*. In essence, people questioned are denied the right to be accepted as a legitimate and unquestioned part of their respective societies or communities and able to be considered as possibly being from the corresponding *here*. Opposing this and replying with *from here* or not responding to the question at all often upsets the questioners and can trigger reflexive justifications, exposing an emotional response that is seemingly driven by a wounded perception of self.

“Wenn sie fragen, nerelisin? Dann lautet meine Antwort: Ich komme aus Adana, gezwungenermaßen. Die Zunge meiner Eltern, [...] Mehr als große Sprüche klopfen ist mir nicht geblieben von hier. Wenn sie fragen nerelisin? Dann lautet meine Antwort: Ich komme aus Berlin, gezwungenermaßen. Der Uringeslank am Kotti, das Plätschern am Kanal”

“When they ask, nerelisin? my answer is: I'm from Adana, by necessity. My parents' tongue, [...] All I have left from here is boastful talk. When they ask, nerelisin? Then my answer is: I come from Berlin, by necessity. The stench of urine at Kotti, the splashing of the canal”

(Ozan Zakariya Keskinkılıç 2025: 160)

However, people who are being *Othered* also encounter this question from people who themselves are marked as *Other*. In contrast to questioners from dominant societies, the intention in such a situation is less to focus on differences but rather to create a sense of similarity through supposedly collectively experienced marginalisation and *being from proximity* to each other. However, this approach also presupposes that the person being questioned considers themselves marginalised and also locates themselves *elsewhere*.

Not everyone experiences these questions as exclusionary or discriminatory; some people, especially those who feel like they can clearly place themselves in a specific geographical location and identify with its dominant narratives, can actually react excitedly to answer questions about their backgrounds and enjoy talking about it. However, the constant reference to a speculated ancestry can force many people to continuously question and confront their own family histories and their places in societies. In some cases, these confrontations mean having to cope with traumatic pasts, with experiences of war and/or displacement, some may not know much about their own personal ancestral-histories, may not identify at all with the lineages attributed to them, or may not wish to be associated with or reduced to stereotypical images.

Where are you really from? refers, whether the inquisitor is aware of it or not, to a principle of descent in which belonging cannot be acquired but only possessed for generations. Even if a person would be able to pinpoint their ancestry across generations within one specific location, this does not automatically mean that they are confirmed to represent dominant societies' image and accepted as being a part of it.

“Manchmal kam es Alev so vor, als hätte sie keine eigene Geschichte. Die meisten Menschen würden sagen, der Plural sei Reichtum. Alev hatte manchmal den geteilten Eindruck. Der Plural war Defizit. Sie sehnte sich nach einer Geschichte. Nur einer. Einer Geschichte, die sich anderen direkt erschloss, einer Geschichte, die keine weiteren Fragen oder Erklärungen nach sich zog.”

“Sometimes it seemed to Alev as though she had no story of her own. Most people would say that plurality is a source of richness. Alev sometimes felt the opposite. Plurality was a deficit. She longed for a story. Just one. A story that others could grasp immediately, a story that didn't raise further questions or require explanations.”

(Leyla Bektaş 2024: 142)

The question *Where are you really from?* in actuality inquires, *What are you?*. It's an intimate exploration of identity, but one that rarely leaves room for a suitable and complex response. If one asks for biological family ancestors in order to sketch a supposedly naturalised image, there are already 4,094 possible individuals in the family tree of a single person over a period of about 400 years to whom they could refer to (Lyrical Zen 2019). Similarities in personality, morals or religious beliefs for example, are therefore nothing more than coincidences that are associated with the person questioned, regardless of historical or biological distance. This way, the idea of what family trees or nation-statehoods are or are supposed to say about the respective person is relativised and exposed as a selective mythology. Because no ancestors are discovered in the research, but rather narratives are constructed that enable us to make the ancestors our ancestors (see Elliott 2017: 77).

In fact, identity is a never-ending process of becoming – a process of changing identifications, not a single, complete, finished form of existence. A singular location in a singular nation-state, religious community or any other faction hence does not suffice to define a person's ancestries, let alone characteristics, experiences or memories. *Where are you really from?* locates people in a rigid construct, although everyone is part of several lineages and thus capable of creating and choosing their own subjectivities and aligning themselves within multiple compositions of ancestral-mythologies. So, each time the question is repeated and analysed, it opens new dimensions of exploration.

In an Instagram post about the existence and struggles of transgender people throughout history, performance artist Alok Menon wrote: "I get so annoyed when people dismiss trans and gender-non-conforming people as 'new'. We have been here since the very beginning – it's just that society has tried its best to disappear us. My transcestors would sometimes be arrested 20 or more times for existing in public" (Menon: 2021).

In their post, Alok not only aligns himself in a historical lineage, tradition and ancestry of transgender people, but gives them the title of *transcestors*. By combining the terms *trans* and *ancestors*, it becomes clear that these ancestors are merely one among many lineages they could have chosen from, focusing specifically on their transgender ancestry.

So, when Alok speaks of *transcesters*, would it not also be possible to speak of *queercesters*, *labourcesters* and any other *cesters*? But before speaking of all the possible *cesters*, what methods have been applied, for them to be explored, recalled, summoned and named to even be able to speak of them?

2. Where is it really from? – On the Method of Summoning

“Spirits and ghosts [...] show a close similarity of two forms of remembering: conscious recall on the one hand and non conscious, involuntary and even counter-voluntary summons on the other.”

(Aleida Assmann 2021)

Where do I come from, methodologically?

My artistic research lives in between the duality of written articulations and visual materialisations. In my practice, I expand, skew and collage the traditional rational academic and scientific methods of articulating research while complementing, diffusing and at times counter-acting methods and receptions of affecting artistic visual materialisation.

What is it though, that guides me to settle for that one visual reference and not the other; the other theory and not that one? Where are my written articulations and visual materialisations from? Where are they really from? In order to understand where these articulations and materialisations are really from, it is vital to look at what they have become so far.

“Bald war es Salome, wie sie mit todbringen-dem Reiz vor dem geilen Tetrarch angetanzt kommt; bald war es Judith, die stolz und triumphierend, mit lustigem Schritt, das Haupt des ermordeten Feldherrn zur Stadt bringt; dann schien sie sich unter der knabenhaften Gratie des kleinen Tobias versteckt zu haben, so wie er mit Mut und Leichtherzigkeit zu seiner gespenstischen Braut marchiert. Manchmal sah ich sie in einem Seraphin, der in Anbetung zu Gott geflogen kommt, und dann wieder in Gabriel wie er die frohe Botschaft verkündet. Ich sah sie als Brautjungfer bei dem Sposalizio in unschuldiger Freude, ich fand sie als fliehende Mutter bei dem Kindermord mit Todesschrecken im Gesicht. Ich versuchte sie wieder zu sehen, wie ich sie das erste Mal getroffen hatte im Chor der Dominicanerkirche, aber sie hatte sich verzehnfacht.”

“One moment it was Salome, dancing toward the lustful tetrarch with deadly allure; the next it was Judith, proud and triumphant, striding merrily as she brought the head of the slain general into the city; then she seemed to have hidden herself in the boyish grace of little Tobias, as he marches with courage and lightheartedness toward his ghostly bride. Sometimes I saw her in a seraphim flying toward God in adoration, and then again in Gabriel as he announces the good news. I saw her as a bridesmaid at the Sposalizio in innocent joy; I found her as a fleeing mother at the infanticide with the terror of death on her face. I tried to see her again as I had first met her in the choir of the Dominican Church, but she had multiplied tenfold.”

(Aby Warburg 2010: 202)

I have been describing my research practice as an examination of individual as well as collective subject-constructions, by using an auto-ethnographic approach, attempting to uncover social imbalances in order to provide marginalised positions with an empowering moment and transform and reshape positions of power. The specific tropes in my artistic and academic work that feed this self-definition, all run along the lines of migration, class, religion and queerness; whether exploring iconoclastic acts, migrating images, legislature on identification documents, habitus transformations or ancestral-mythologies. These four umbrella terms shelter my written articulations as well as my visual materialisations. In order to manifest my research, whether written or visual, the shapes they take on may seem associative (or at least they do to me at times); placing theories of social-, cultural-, visual- or post-colonial-studies for example next to song lyrics, memes, quoting pop-culture or visually collaging Christian iconography and global ancient artefacts with digital formal languages, referencing fashion(-histories)... They all find a different language of mine and I let them speak in the ones that I encounter them in.

In actuality these manifestations are anything but randomly associative. This rhizomatic system of references nourishes identities, whether my own, my visual or written work. Though the question pends: do I select them or do they select me?

“Vielleicht mach ich sie poetischer als wie sie wirklich ist – welcher Liebhaber thut das nicht – aber ich hatte den ersten Moment als ich sie sah, das sonderbare Gefühl [...] von »wo hab ich dich mehr gesehen«. Es ist uns als ob eine frühere Bekanntschaft uns von Anfang an verbindet, etwas (lache nicht) Mystisches, als ob wir einen teuern Freund, oder eine geliebte Stelle aus einer früheren Existenz plötzlich wiedererkennen.”

“Maybe I’m making her out to be more poetic than she really is—what lover doesn’t do that—but the moment I first saw her, I had that strange feeling [...] of »where have I seen you before«. It’s as if a past acquaintance has connected us from the very beginning, something (don’t laugh) mystical, as if we suddenly recognize a dear friend or a beloved place from a previous existence.”

(Aby Warburg 2010: 201)

While the written articulations and the visual languages take on different shapes of the same research, they both belong to my family of communication, which is derived from the visual studies’ concept of the *family of images*. Simplified, the *family of images* can be differentiated into two groups; while graphic and optical images appearing on a medium are considered

generally visible *material pictures*, perceptual, metaphoric and linguistic images are rather understood as *immaterial images*. In this logic, the generated material, the knowledge, the process and the act of research itself compose the mental image that later materialises (see Mitchell 2015: 30). So, the written way of communicating becomes an articulation of the image, a conscious recall, while the visual way of communicating becomes a picture carrying the image, an affect-based recall – the materialisation of my artistic research's spirits and ghosts. Born out of the same person, producing one or the other then relates to being possessed by either my artistic research's spirits or ghosts, that guide the materialisation process.

Direct and indirect social and visual imprinting throughout my whole life, all of my (inter-)personal encounters, experiences and memories have consciously as well as subconsciously influenced every decision on what and how to approach something within my artistic research practice. By that I am not stating that I don't have any agency in a supposedly pre-dispositioned decision making but rather the tropes and visual languages that instantaneously spark my interest feel somewhat familiar. A felt recognition that our paths have intersected before, which is how and why they keep my focus. When I decided on my first multi-year research project, examining different varieties of iconoclastic acts for instance, I was not only deciding on exploring what shapes, forms and purposes the destruction of images take on in a formal manner. I was also, if not mostly, uncovering the interconnectivity of how iconoclastic acts have brushed my life in encounters, experiences and memories, before I even consciously recognised our preceding ties. It is because of this inkling of familiarity, the recognition of this interwovenness slowly becomes apparent and seems to be threaded into every layer of my (inter-)personal and social imprinting.

When we first consciously met, it started out in 2015 with the media coverage of the so-called *Islamic State* destroying sculptures in a Syrian museum. Suddenly I am seeing iconoclastic acts in the presentation of artefacts in museums, in Hindu and Buddhist icon veneration, carving or writing names into a tree or hooking thousands of locks onto bridges, rubbing Giulietta's 14-year-old breast cast in bronze or a wild boar's snout, my own name, me touching and kissing Christian icons at the church I grew up in, the graffiti in my childhood's stairway, my tastes in music, film and television, my educational path in the context of my socio-economic habitus¹, the images people have of me as a marked immigrant man in contrast to my male queer gender performativity, the way to my physical body and me as a whole.

¹ "habitus – embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" (Bourdieu 1990: 56).

I tried to see iconoclastic acts the way we first met in the media coverage, but it has multiplied tenfold.

“remembering that the most powerful technology imaginable is something that we’ve already kind of found, and that’s story. [...] It’s healing medicine. If you think about it, where did it come from? [...] if there’s a famine, if there’s disease, if there’s war, if there’s some challenge the communities’ going through, what would happen is someone would put on a mask and perform a ritual, would literally give a performance. And what we’re doing in that moment is you’re channelling everyone’s experience, you’re reflecting the times that you’re in for the community. And what that means is, that you’re reminding us that actually, we’re not alone in that feeling. Sometimes a story can help reframe a problem, sometimes a story can help, show us a different point of view, if we’re going through a difficult time. But sometimes it just makes us feel less alone. [...] It reminds you actually, that we are one. The moments in life when my heart feels most pure, where I feel most kind of connected to whatever purpose or magic there is in this life is when I forget myself and anything that can diminish your ego in that way and make you connected to something bigger is a beautiful thing, so I hope we’re just mindful about the stories we listen to, because there’s a lot of stories out there that...you know, are telling us we’re not all the same and that we’re not all connected, but...I know that’s not true.”

(Riz Ahmed 2026)²

The storytelling of anecdotes has a deep-rooted connection to history and memory, grounded in the very origins of their linguistic forms. The word *anecdote* comes from the Greek term ἀνέκδοτα (anékdotá), which literally translates to *not published* or *not released*.³ This etymology highlights the essence of anecdotes as stories that were never officially documented or recorded in dominant histories but instead circulated in private spaces, passed from one person to another. They represent the unofficial, often intimate, side of history; personal memories, insights and reflections that were not considered part of the official narratives. In this sense, anecdotes are not merely casual stories but threads of lived experiences that, while perhaps overlooked or excluded from formal accounts, contain valuable truths about the human condition. They carry the weight of the unspoken, the memories that are not released into the public domain yet remain essential in understanding individual and collective histories.

2 Ahmed, Riz [@rizahmed] (2026): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DWGpy6zCE09>

3 See: <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Anekdoten>

And it is exactly this understanding of the storytelling of my anecdotes, my ghosts and spirits, hidden away, unseen, unheard, unread that I release, that want to emerge in my artistic research practice. They interact and communicate in different languages, depending on what identity fragment is momentarily guiding.

The methodical vehicle I allow them to travel to the surface on is autoethnography. A method that blends personal storytelling with cultural analyses, allowing me to explore my personal experiences while situating them within broader social and cultural contexts. As Douglas and Carless (2013) explain, auto-ethnography “entails the study of one’s own experience in a way that connects the personal to the cultural” (Douglas, Carless 2013: 13). This approach emphasizes self-reflection and the use of personal stories to illuminate larger societal issues, offering a way to engage with my subjective experience while contributing to a collective understanding. “Auto-ethnography involves a process of self-reflection, in which the researcher examines how their own identity, experiences, and emotions shape their understanding of the world” (ibid.: 15). This method challenges traditional boundaries between the personal and the academic, allowing for a more intimate and holistic form of inquiry that recognises the importance of individual voice in scholarly work. Through autoethnography, I can not only explore my own experiences but also critically examine how these experiences relate to wider cultural narratives and systems of power.

Every trope I have worked on so far has turned out to be tightly interwoven into the tapestry that tells the stories of my (inter-)personal encounters, experiences and memories, mostly decided on without me being fully aware of the profundity, at first at least. It almost seems like I am tracing the thread or rather multiple threads that connect me to previously heard, read, lived and felt fragments of said tapestry that unravelled over years, decades and centuries. By reeling up these strands one by one through my artistic research practice, I am able to uncover the interconnectivity of all these tropes, finding similarities in a variety of individual and collective encounters, experiences and memories. This intertwining carries the holistic transformatory potential that I am seeking out through and within my practice. By reaching for the past, to make sense of the present, projecting into an imagined future and vice versa, with everything flowing into and through each, fragmenting a linearity.

The hook that the first thread catches onto is the inkling of familiarity, the recognition of a previously met image that multiplies into almost every imaginable fragment: *das Nachleben*.

The afterlife. It keeps me on the hook with a certain affectedness, friction and stubbornness that doesn't let go and (re-)appears in a multitude of imageries, theories and locations.

"I'm a thread in a rug pulled from under me."

(Riz Ahmed 2020)

To conclude the question *where are my written articulations and visual manifestations really from?* the answer might be: everywhere, all at once. Grown out of a continuous push and pull of situated encounters, experiences and memories that seek me out just the way I do them, guiding me through the peaks of conscious decision-making and the gaps of unconscious revisitations. It's as if they're hidden in plain sight, approaching me and waiting for me to do the same from an oppositional location, outside and in between of dominant narratives, constantly shape-shifting until we recognise each other from a past life. By allowing these references to enter my written articulations and visual materialisations, I simultaneously am creating and gaining access to my individual and personal algorithm. This individual algorithm allows me to uncover, unfold, write, update, rewrite, connect and intersect my ancestral-mythologies through multiple entryways.

Following, these intersecting entryways into my algorithm of ancestral-mythologies will be elaborated on. In synchronicity, (inter)personal methods, mechanisms, structures, voices, references and anecdotal storytelling, I will unravel how (my) ancestral-mythologies are constructed.

Starting out with an introduction into the mythologised nature of ancestry, a close examination through anecdotal storytelling is applied. First, calling upon biological family histories and the interwovenness within mythologies of nation-states, reliques contained in names and religious affiliations. This will be followed by proposing labour as an ancestral-lineage, tracing back the historical and regional significance of Cologne's hospitality traditions, personified in the *Köbes* and expanded upon through experiences of work and kinship among colleagues. Thereafter, queerness will be introduced as a rhizomatic ancestry, build up on anecdotes of childhood, becoming by reaching and living outwardly, finding chosen family, exploring sexuality, followed by revisitations and revisions of intersections. Lastly the exemplary expansions will flow into an inter- and rewoven tapestry of ancestral-mythologies.

3. Where are you really from? – Mythologies of Ancestry

World-famous drag queen RuPaul once said: “We’re all born naked and the rest is drag” (RuPaul 2023). Yet, as much as I would like to imagine for every person to have the same start in life and to be able to construct their own roles in a self-determined way, like a drag persona, from the very beginning, I see the external pre-constructions through social structures just as strongly: yes, every outfit is a costume, every space we move through is a stage and every interaction is a play, but *born naked*?

Before birth, gender categorisations are made and names are usually chosen according to the ascribed gender. Visual markers, such as skin tone, facial features or hair colour, the family context one is born into – whether, for example, with high or low economic capital, with or without a history of migration, a certain political or religious socialisation, the national context in which the person grows up; all these attributes dress us before we can even begin to think about our performative roles of identities.

“If you ask the average person who they are, they’ll give you their name. They’ll say: ‘I’m Bob Proctor’, but I’m not. Bob and Proctor are two words. My parents gave them to me. They’re called names but it’s not me. It’s my name. Well, then somebody will say: ‘Well this is me’, but this isn’t me either. It’s my body. Like you never phone down here to the studio and say: ‘Body won’t be in today, it’s sick’. We don’t say: ‘am hand’ or ‘am leg’. It’s ‘my hand’, ‘my leg’, ‘my body’, ‘my name’. Who am I? We live simultaneously on 3 planes of understanding; we’re spiritual creatures, we have an intellect and we live in physical bodies. But because we lack awareness or understanding of who we are, we’re totally locked into a physical world and we let things outside of us control us.”

(Proctor Gallagher Institute 2015)⁴

To proclaim our own identities, we are conditioned to refer to our names and physical bodies, which are then extended to our biological families and the metaphorical body of a nation state. While one’s name and physical body usually are referred to in order to manifest a current individual state of being, biological families and nation-states mostly refer to a past that is supposed to be reached back for in order to place oneself in a collective lineage. The biological and genealogical, mortal and immortal bodies merge into one another and sustain each other, through which we reach for socially constructed categories and attributes that make it possible to place each other within certain ancestries.

4 Proctor Gallagher Institute (2015): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E44kFkyI_Y8

An illustrious family lineage is undoubtedly easier to reach back to than that of farm workers or ordinary people. Most historical people were desperately poor. Their short, hardship-filled lives made little impact and are therefore difficult to research. There is only scant information about the countless disadvantaged people. Thus, the vast majority of ancestors sink into the sea of oblivion.

So, what about all the ancestors, whose traces cannot be found in the illustrious archives? Who remembers their lives, which have not been documented and therefore have no historical identity?

“Weißt du, wie es ist, wenn dein Körper alle Erwartungen unterläuft, wenn du aussiehst wie ein Fremder und sprichst wie jeder von dort, und wenn du aussiehst wie einer von hier und sprichst wie ein Fremder? Hassan, weißt du wie es sich anfühlt, der Grammatik deines Körpers zu misstrauen? Wenigstens führst du keinen Kampf gegen deine Haut, deine Haare, deine Zunge. [...] An keinem Ort dieser Welt bleiben mir die Fragen erspart. Immer gibt es etwas, das mich verrät, immer bleibe ich ein Dritter im Leben der anderen.”

“Do you know what it’s like when your body defies all expectations, when you look like a stranger and speak like everyone from there and when you look like one from here and speak like a stranger? Hassan, do you know what it feels like to distrust the grammar of your own body? At least you’re not fighting against your skin, your hair, your tongue. [...] Nowhere in this world am I spared the questions. There is always something that gives me away, I always remain a third in the lives of the others.”

(Ozan Zakariya Keskinkılıç 2025: 182/183)

Genetic makeup itself does not determine a person’s identity but it does determine many aspects of a person’s personality traits, be it height, hair colour, skin tone or any other physical characteristic that influences how others perceive them and, at least to some extent, how they perceive themselves. The importance of these physical markers, which have little to nothing to do with self-presentation, in everyday life is well known though the body is largely constituted and marked by social affiliation and physical appearance is often produced by social factors and by social perception. Me being a queer man, socialised in western Germany in the 1990’s, living in Europe and visually marked as an immigrant, I am easily dressed in all kinds of negative stereotypes the second I enter spaces, public or not, inhabited and frequented by mostly non-marked people. Whether conscious or not, living in these circumstances all my life, they do have a massive influence on my personality and self-presentation.

Do I want to disrupt or be accommodating? Do I want to dress myself in one stereotype or the other?

Markers of difference from dominant societies of all kinds, not only construct an *Other*, they also define a *Common*. Through these categories groups are drawn as rigid and unchangeable and staged as monolithic identities that construct a supposed *Inside* and *Outside* impermeably. Even though these constructs have far-reaching real political, cultural, social, psychological and emotional consequences, like discriminatory law enforcement, disenfranchisement, exclusion, hatred or shame, they are themselves nothing more than artificial, decorated images, “trimmed for a certain consumption [and equipped for] social use” (Barthes 2010: 252). They are mythologies and their use is to socialise in a simplified way: German or not German, White or not, male or female, religious or not, gay or straight, English speaking or not etc. In his book *Mythologies*, French philosopher Roland Barthes describes myths as “a system of communication, a message. [As] a way of meaning, a form [...] neither to be defined by its object nor by its matter, for one can arbitrarily endow any matter with meaning” (ibid.: 251). And it is precisely this arbitrariness that allows an artificially constructed *Us* and *Them* to be drawn along any lines of difference, because “from the ‘nature’ of things [a myth] cannot emerge” (ibid.: 252). If, therefore, a person’s ancestry is inquired and, in addition, the perception exists that it is a matter of a person who lives *with us*, it becomes clear that “‘Heimat’ [...] in Deutschland nie einen realen Ort, sondern schon immer die Sehnsucht nach einem bestimmten Ideal beschrieben [hat]: einer homogenen, christlichen weißen Gesellschaft, in der Männer das Sagen haben, Frauen sich vor allem ums Kinderkriegen kümmern und andere Lebensrealitäten schlicht nicht vorkommen” (Aydemir; Yaghoobifarah 2019: 9)⁵.

Who is granted the opportunity, and it is an opportunity rather than a right, to be recognised not only as part of a collective, but also as an individual person, to be considered legitimate and to have their stories told?

A popular argument to consolidate the mythology of *being German* as naturalised is, for example, the description that all those who are blond and blue-eyed, are simply German and all those who do not fit this description, are questioned for even being German at all. And yet everyone is aware that not every person who can locate their own family history exclusively,

⁵ “‘Heimat’ [...] has never described an actual place in Germany, but has always referred to a longing for a particular ideal: a homogeneous, Christian, white society in which men are in charge, women are primarily concerned with having children, and other realities of life simply do not exist”

since time immemorial in Germany and is accepted as German is also blond and blue-eyed. The “knowledge contained in the mythic term [is] confused, a knowledge consisting of fuzzy, unlimited associations. One must emphasise this openness of the concept; it is by no means an abstract, purified essence, but a formless, unstable, nebulous precipitate; its unity and coherence are above all functionally conditioned” (Barthes 2010: 264). In the case of physical appearance of dominant societies, the constructed collective self-image is sometimes demarcated against blond and blue-eyed minorities and sometimes extended by brunette and brown-eyed *Germans*. The function here seems to be the privilege of interpretive sovereignty and the maintenance of dominance. Thus, when as migrant-marked people are also *from here*, the self-image of dominant societies is destabilised and forces them to “explain and justify their own identity [and they are then] confronted with the threatening throwing back of the gaze [...]. Via this thrown-back gaze, [the respective majority] anxiously observes its own identity, which never shows itself to be so stable,” as it is given (see do Mar Castro Varela; Dhawan 2015: 227).

Constructed nation-states or social affiliations, namely ancestries, therefore produce themselves in the demarcation and negotiation with the selected *Other* and expose themselves in their fragility through the ephemeral nature of their mythologies. The criteria through which such negotiations take place are situationally flexible and in most cases, it is not I or the person being negotiated who determines the definition of these criteria.

Constructing or perpetuating ancestral-mythologies can take a range of shapes on a wide spectrum of intentions. Whereas groups that have become socially dominant can protect their privilege and dominance through the mythologies they construct of themselves and others, independent myth-making for marginalised groups seems to be motivated by empowering their own narratives of history and working through collective experiences.

Looking at Beyoncé’s 2020 visual album *Black Is King* as an example, the singer not only attempts to negotiate the consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting diaspora of formerly enslaved people and their descendants, she also constructs a highly aestheticized pan-African mythology. She stages herself as a connecting link; as mother, as queen, as ancestor and legacy at the same time. By blending Christian and pre-colonial iconographies in a homogenised socio-political and nation-state landscape, Beyoncé invokes a communally royal ancestral lineage and draws on the idea of a *Promised Land* (see Farago; Friedman; Kourlas; Morris; Pareles; Tillet 2020). The way this pan-African place of longing is pop-culturally reappraised follows a tradition of African-American representations of the African

continent and is sometimes described as *Wakandafication*⁶, in reference to the fictional kingdom of *Wakanda* from the 2018 film *Black Panther*. However, a similar version also appeared 1988 in the form of the kingdom of *Zamunda* in *Coming to America* and a lot more before and after. “Because everyone’s [...] ancestors double each generation heading backwards into the past, roots-seekers face many choices, whether conscious or not, about where to focus their genealogical research” (Elliott 2017: 76). On one hand, this focuses on the construction of a common geographical place of origin for the diaspora, which on the other, contrary to the realities of life for many Black people, is part of an empowering fictitious royal ancestry, free of discrimination and in a position of power. For “genealogy may involve a ‘politics of identity’ for the individual, but when millions become involved as participants and observers, it also becomes about ‘the politics of heritage for the nation at large’” (ibid.: 76).

“Mein Leben hat sich durch das gesammelte Wissen einerseits komplett verändert, obwohl es andererseits genauso geblieben ist, wie es war.”

“My life has been completely changed because of the accumulated knowledge, yet at the same time, it has remained exactly as it was.”

(Hape Kerkeling 2024: 350)

What a joyous journey to have experienced, uncovering an ancestral-lineage that allows us to position ourselves within a history, shapes our contemporary place in society and gives direction toward a projected future. It is an intimate moment of self-creation, self-recognition and self-mythologisation on the basis of other’s narratives that we want to or feel aligned with. But what comes after this realisation? To what extent does it really change our lives, when we see a fragment of ourselves in a completely different light while the rest mostly stands within the same spotlight? What ancestral narratives do we fill the other parts of our identity with? What parts do we allow to enter our mythologies and what parts are we explicitly leaving out?

What happens if one does not align themselves with the people who have come before or if one’s political views, careers or sexuality distances one from them? What if one makes every effort not to resemble them in any way, does one nevertheless become what they were? Can

6 Nibwene 2020: “Wakandafication of Africa is the selection of desirable fictitious and real cultural elements, and their presentation in mainstream media as African and not as parts of different cultures in the continent. Wakandafication perpetuates the misconception of Africa as a country with a homogenous [sic!] culture and capitalizes on the pan-African idea that Africa is or should be one.”

we still assume that our being retains the social and biological markers of what our ancestors were?

In order to sketch out a comprehensive picture of one's ancestries, each and every possible interconnection would have to be examined. But instead, everyone includes some lineages while excluding others, living within the mythologies they have created of themselves. For a variety of reasons, some people feel more connected to one parent's side of the family than the others', constructing their narrative of ancestry around the one they prefer. Another version can be, distancing oneself completely from a family narrative and presenting oneself as someone that has outgrown a dominant ideal, political view or religious belief, as someone that has broken a generational cycle. One narrative that has shaped individual and collective historiography in post-war Germany since 1945, for instance, is that most people are either completely unaware of their family connections to the *Third Reich* or actively position themselves against their family's involvements. Because in many cases such a narrative is undesirable. The focal point is the *Redemption Arc*.

"First of all: we can only feel guilt for something we did." "We did take 3 million people out of Africa." "No, you and I didn't. I can lament what some of our ancestors did, I can't feel guilty for it." "So you're telling me, with a straight face, you don't take pride in Britain, in us defeating the Nazis in World War II? You've never taken pride in that?" [...] "Uh, uh, I take pride in it. I admire the fact of what my..." "How can you take pride in it? It's not us." "Well, no of course, I can't claim the credit of having done that because I didn't, my parents did." "But we as British people, take pride." "Only indirectly." "So why can't we take guilt indirectly?" "Uh, uh, uh, be... be... because you cannot be guilty for something you didn't do. You can be responsible for the effects. You can't be guilty for it." "But you can take pride in something you didn't do?" "Uhm, metaphorically. I, I, I prefer to use the word 'admiration' now." (sholamos1 2025)⁷

Just as a personal mythology is selective, so too is that of a nation-state or religious community tailored to serve an explicit purpose, because a nation refers to a group of people who believe that they share a history and that this history is important to them. It is less important whether this shared history is objective, i.e. whether it really happened, than that it is subjectively perceived as such by the majority of people. It does not even have to be real. This definition can basically be applied to any group and illustrates the artificial and constructed nature of collective ancestral-mythologies.

⁷ @sholamos1: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DSMcSPDkhE>

For marginalised people whose reasons for being *othered* cannot be located in real or imagined geographies or are not tied to a still existing group of people or illegalised, but who share common experiences, pop-cultural discourse can be used to construct other spaces for their mythologised ancestral-lineages. The 2012 film *Cloud Atlas*, directed by the Wachowski sisters and Tom Tykwer, for example, offers a space for negotiation in which an alternative method of entering ancestral-mythologies is exemplified. In *Cloud Atlas* they attempt to conceive an alternative human history within six episodes across different temporal time-lines. Inspired in parts by historical events and fictional visions of the future, a narrative has emerged that constructs a communal and cohesive historiography independent of categories such as gender, race or nation-statehoods. A reincarnation idea serves as a link, in which the protagonists assume different gender, national, ethno-cultural or socio-economic identities from one timeline to the next and thus produce a holistic image of ancestry and continuity, which offers the possibility of entering multiple ancestral-lineages.

“Diese Monumente bürgerlicher Ordnung und Alteingesessenheit sind für sie die Möbelstücke oder Mausoleen der eigenen Familie. [...] Sich der Stabilität zu verschreiben, ist für sie ganz natürlich. Sie schließen von der Vergangenheit auf ihre Zukunft.”

“These monuments of bourgeois order and longevity are for them like furniture or mausoleums of their own family. [...] To devote themselves to stability comes quite naturally to them. They draw conclusions from the past about their future.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 179)

Reflecting and revisiting the past are inseparable, they belong together and are intertwined. When dominant societies reproduce their own narratives and retain their exclusionary strategies, a certain sense of comfort in supposedly knowing what the future holds for them is being passed on through time. What happens though, when the certainty that was passed on from the past was not stability but instability? This circumstance can generate a particular urgency within the *outsiders*, to construct and find this security and comfort through ancestral-mythologies individually. This creates an incredibly fruitful rupture: the gap, the joint, the fold, the empty space, the blind spot, a clean slate, the unknown and unnamed, and therein lies immense potential for expanding our conception of how to look at expanded ancestral-mythologies and the narratives they can create, represent or be. Suddenly an ancestral-mythology simply becomes one possibility among many to patchwork yourself and this arbitrary constructedness opens up a new potentiality.

“Erikson tells us that generativity is about ‘establishing and guiding the next generation,’ although he adds that generativity is ‘meant to include . . . productivity and creativity’.”
(Walt Odets 2020: 141)

When unlike in illustrious families, no houses are inherited, no archives can be found in the drawers and cupboards of such houses, and such heirlooms are a prerequisite for discovery work (see Eribon 2017: 150). So, the discovery of these kinds of traces of fragmented archives requires a certain ingenuity and exploratory spirit. Recognising the possibilities of being able to align oneself within multiple ancestral-lineages and deciding on what even can be perceived as an ancestral-lineage, exposes the fundamental definition of ancestry itself:

Since ancestral-mythologies are arbitrarily applicable, they in themselves are not factual identities but rather fields of research, tools, methods to create mythologised identities. And it is this recognition that can lead to a sense of self-importance and accountability in one's own role of being an ancestor to future generations.

“We are all patchwork quilts of strengths and vulnerabilities. If the elements of nature are fabric swatches we are handed at birth, our nurture influences how we stitch the swatches together to make the quilt.”
(Walt Odets 2020: 120)

What follows is an attempt to quilt my anecdotal swatches into a more coherent tapestry of my ancestral-mythologies.

4. Where am I really from? – The Familial and the National

An oval shaped golden shield containing a field of eleven thousand black drops, a deep red lace doily and the outline of Cologne's Chorweiler district. The main figures centred on the field are a truck carrying olive branches, two golden pairs of barber's scissors and a golden cross. A crest of one violet and yellow forget-me-not blossom adorns the shield on top. On the left, the shield is supported by a German Shephard wearing a golden collar, on the right it is supported by a reared-up horse with a red mane. Below the shield two golden scrolls carry the names "Demir" and "Aydın". A golden banner placed above the shield bears the Motto in Arabic: "ابن الكلب"

Biological families, nation-states and religious communities often present themselves as natural formations, as if they had always existed the way in which we encounter them. Yet all three rely on inherited narratives, repeated rituals and collective agreements that construct a sense of continuity across generations. Surnames, languages, customs, citizenships, moral values or religious traditions situate people within supposedly coherent ancestral-lineages long before they are able to position themselves consciously in relation to them. Through these structures, individuals are placed within stories that have come before and are expected to continue after them. Mythologies of the familial, the national and the religious begin to overlap and stabilise one another, generating ideas of ancestry and legitimacy that often feel unquestionable precisely because they are embedded in everyday life. However, much like the question *Where are you really from?*, these frameworks rarely remain fixed and instead reveal themselves through constant negotiations, contradictions, questions and reinterpretations.

Questions about names, geographical or religious ancestries suddenly open discussions about migration, borders and collective memory. Family stories carry traces of political violence, displacement and silence, while religious rituals and communal practices simultaneously serve as spaces of familiarity and mechanisms of social expectation. Even within the same biological family, the same nation-state or the same community, entirely different relationships to belonging can emerge. The following chapter therefore traces a series of anecdotal fragments in which family histories, national narratives and religious socialisations continuously intersect and disrupt one another through dialogical dances around ancestry, inherited names and national affiliations, migration histories, liturgical practices and the lingering tensions between individual self-positioning and collective ancestral-mythologies.

4.1. of family trees and severed branches

“Ein komisches Gefühl, wahrscheinlich, weil das mein Heimatland ist.“ [...] Ich habe mit dieser Herkunftsmystik nie wirklich etwas anfangen können. Sie speißt sich aus einer Psychologie der familiären Tiefe oder einem Phantasma der biologischen Transmission, das mir fremd ist.”

“A strange feeling, perhaps because it is my homeland.“ [...] I have never really related to this mythology of origin. It feeds on a psychology of familial depth or a phantasm of biological transmission that is alien to me.”

(Didier Eribon 2016: 58)

Until I was seven, my family, me, my sister, mother and father, lived in Cologne's Chorweiler district, on the fifteenth of twenty-three floors in a concrete block of apartments. After that, we moved to Cologne's Ossendorf district, to the first of four floors in a small social housing estate. As a child, the move felt like an upgrade; no more lifts, no graffiti in the hallways and, above all, my sister, who is a year older than me, and I were allowed to play outside without our parents' supervision. Previously our parents hadn't allowed us to go out by ourselves because they were worried we might join youth gangs or come into contact with drugs. Searching online for both neighbourhoods, you'll find keywords like 'problem area', 'ghetto' or 'asozial'⁸.

My sister and I were always made to feel that Chorweiler was just a temporary destination, only a stepping stone until my parents found someplace more *family-friendly*, because to them, *we were not like the others*. Looking back, however, the social reality was quite different. We actually did live in those neighbourhoods with a bad reputation, the kind that still make people jump up. We didn't wear the most expensive clothes, didn't go to the theatre or museum and weren't politically active. I grew up trilingual: Turkish when I was being lectured, Arabic when I was in trouble and German for the rest of everyday life. The use of all three languages, however, was not very refined and filled with regionalisms in all of them. After school, my sister and I had to make our own meals and usually just watched TV. My parents' working hours and financial situation didn't allow for elaborate meals during the day or afterschool activities. They had always worked, my mother as a hairdresser and my father as a truck driver.

⁸ see: "Asoziale" im Nationalsozialismus. Wissenschaftliche Dienste. Deutscher Bundestag: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/478780/946af6a53de4beedba650bf537254942/WD-1-026-16-pdf.pdf> (last accessed: 22.05.2026): In everyday language, the term asozial is still used today to disparage people whose living and behavioural patterns are, according to dominant opinion, regarded as deviating from generally accepted social norms and as socially maladjusted. The term asozial was neither coined by the National Socialists nor used exclusively by them as a socio-political or criminal-policy categorisation of individuals and social groups. The National Socialists thus deliberately adopted and intensified the exclusion, stigmatisation and sanctioning of groups classified as asozial that had already been prevalent prior to 1933. The vastly heterogeneous list of individuals and groups gradually declared asozial underscores the plausibility of the thesis that the lack of precision in the definition of asozial inherently leads to a tendency to arbitrarily expand the scope of the accusation of Asozialität against affected individuals. Today, within some stigmatised groups, the term asozial is in part also undergoing a new, empowering reappropriation, similar to the formerly exclusively degrading term queer, which is linked to a positive reinterpretation of self-definition. This self-empowerment through the term is rooted in an awareness of external attributions and the discrimination that accompanies them and demonstrates control over one's own self-representation.

“›Mama, jetzt setz dich doch mal zu uns!‹ ›Ja, gleich‹, [...] ›Ach, ich habe gar keinen Hunger, ich habe schon beim Kochen gegessen.‹ [...] Sie schien auf eine Weise sie selbst sein zu wollen, wie Sartre sie in *Das Sein und das Nichts* mit Blick auf den ›garçon de café‹ beschreibt, der die Rolle des Kellners nur für die Blicke der anderen ausfüllt.”

“›Mum, come and sit with us!‹ ›Yes, in a moment‹, [...] ›Oh, I'm not hungry at all, I've already eaten while cooking.‹ [...] She seemed to want to be herself in the way Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness* regarding the *garçon de café*, who fulfils the role of waiter solely for the sake of others' gazes.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 140)

Though both of my parents worked a lot, my mother has always been caring present in our lives. She spent every free minute she had with my sister and I and was very adamant for us to be polite and well-behaved kids.

Some people in our surroundings wanted to look in accordance with their social circumstances but for my mother it was always important to project an image that went beyond that. Whether it was on my first day at school, at our weekly church service or in everyday life. She was meticulous about ensuring that my sister and I looked neat, appropriate for the occasion and above all better than *the others*. As a hairdresser she often said that she had to look good, because nobody would want to have their hair cut by someone with messy hair. It comes with the job she said. For as long as I can remember, my mother has worn a lot of make-up, jewellery, bright colours and patterns. I've seen her natural hair colour about as often as I've seen the distant relatives I've never met from her stories. She didn't want to look as though she or us children lived in Chorweiler or Ossendorf, and I think that was an early introduction for me to constructing my identity through clothing. I could *pretend*.

My sister never wanted to pretend, nor did she have to. We're very close in age, which is why we sort of grew up like twins and that's how we behaved at times. Since I was the younger one, when we were little, I pattered behind her, copying every move she made, adapting her taste in music when we were tweens and simply idolised her. The only period we were not as close was a few years as teenagers, finding our own places within ourselves and in the world. But at that time, she moved more freely within our familial social circles than I ever could. She embodied my family's idea of the perfect girl: conscious of her appearance, polite, witty and self-assured. I was a quiet and reserved child, within the family, the school playground or the housing estate. It felt as though there was no place for a boy who had no desire to play football, get into fights or do any of the other stereotypical *boy stuff*. My sister loved wear-

ing both dresses and trousers, get into fights and putting on make-up. Whatever she chose seemed perfectly fine to my family. Especially to my father. She was the daughter he always wanted. I was never the son he wanted.

“Ein zweites Kind, ein Sohn, sollte die Lösung sein. [...] fest steht, ich bin der Versuch einer Versöhnung, die ein Versuch geblieben ist.”

“A second child, a son, was supposed to be the solution. [...] One thing is certain: I am an attempt at reconciliation that has remained just that.”

(Necati Öziri 2023: 269)

According to my mother, I was the son that was supposed to reconcile their marriage early on. *Just another child, maybe a son will calm him down.* My father was a stereotypical man, who liked to play football, gamble, drink with his friends, flirt with other women and hard physical labour. As a truck driver, he was absent a lot of my childhood and on the rare occasion he was there, he'd rather spent his time with his friends at the Turkish men's café around the corner. We couldn't connect around much and he never really wanted to.

My life's *destiny* of reconciling their marriage did not work out. At all. My parents divorced when I was around twelve years old and unsurprisingly this was one of my childhood's happiest moments. After their separation, my father was even more absent only this time I welcomed it, because I no longer had to face his criticism for my *unmanly* demeanour and the lingering unwantedness. This absence grew to not being in touch for a few years, during which he seemingly tried to desperately contact me. At nineteen years old I tried to reconcile our relationship. And the second I did, his desperation for wanting to be in my life vanished. He liked the mythology of wanting to be a present father but did not actually know or want to be a present father in his gay son's life. So, when he got sick and died while I was in my late twenties, we had not spoken for a decade and his branch was completely severed from my family tree.

At some point during that time of no contact, he sent me Facebook friend request that I didn't respond to, which to this day, even after his death, is still pending. A ghostly reminder from beyond history of the empty space of fatherhood he left.

*“Mother, make me, make me a big tall tree. So, I can shed my leaves and let it blow through me.
Mother, make me.”
(Florence and the Machine 2015)*

This vacant seat of fatherhood has been inhabited by many people throughout my life; with artists, writers, directors, designers etc. that I have never personally met as well as friends, my boss at my first job, professors, artists etc. that I have. All co-guiding me through life. Within my biological family structure, this empty space has been overflowing filled by two incredibly strong and independent women in my life: My mother and sister. Growing up, there has always been a sense of us against the world, caring for each other through the hard times and the good. Melting my ancestral-mythologies of fatherhood, motherhood, sisterhood and any other interconnectivity into one sheltering hood of guidance, critique, love and support. A kinship that steps outside biological family structures, gender and social norms, temporal, physical and geographical proximities.

4.2. of a territorial setup

“Ein Nationalstaat beruft sich auf die Idee einer homogenen Nation in bestimmten Grenzen. Wie lässt sich eine Nation definieren? Was zeichnet sie aus? [...] Für den Politikwissenschaftler Benedict Anderson ist Nation aber letztlich immer nur eine Vorstellung, eine ›imagined community‹. Die Mitglieder dieser politischen Gemeinschaft kennen sich Anderson zufolge nicht, zumindest ist ihnen nicht die ganze Gemeinschaft bekannt, und dennoch gehören sie in ihrer Vorstellung einer Schicksalsgemeinschaft an, einer Nation, geeint durch Sprache und Grenzen. Die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit hat damit jedoch kaum etwas zu tun, selbst wenn dies immer wieder suggeriert wird.”

(Olga Grjasnowa 2021: 44-46)

“A nation state is founded on the idea of a homogeneous nation within defined borders. How can a nation be defined? What characterises it? [...] For the political scientist Benedict Anderson, a nation is ultimately nothing more than a construct, an ›imagined community‹. According to Anderson, the members of this political community do not know one another, or at least they are not familiar with the entire community, and yet, in their imagination, they belong to a community of destiny, a nation, united by language and borders. Social reality, though, has little to do with this, even if this is repeatedly suggested.”

For as long as I can remember, I have been asked about my *origin* or that of my parents or grandparents or great-grandparents. When someone from dominant society asks me, *Where*

are you really from?, the expected response is a non-European nation in the WANA (Western Asia and Northern Africa) region: Turkey, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq etc. etc. These assumptions are based on me having dark hair, dark eyes, a beard or simply the fact that the person asking me categorises me as non-*white*. If, contrary to expectations, my response is *from Cologne* or *from Germany*, a kind of dialogical dance commences, which, depending on the conversation partner, can go in one of two directions: either the generational timeline is scaled back with each further step and almost archaeologically, first to my parents, then to my grandparents and finally to *my ancestors* or an exasperated *You know what I mean!* is uttered.

If I stick to my response even after this dance, it is almost always perceived as aggression or offense, which seems to result from not living up to their expectations and not wanting to go along with the flow of a conversation that I cannot control, or the geographical and associated supposed cultural attributions they make about me. However, the intentions of the questioners have little to do with my willingness to answer, because the power to decide how much and whether I want to reveal anything personal at all, in a conversation in which expected differences are used as small talk prompts, is in my hands and I weigh this up for myself depending on the situation. But that wasn't always the case.

“And the diaspora: a container to be emptied, its contents spilling out, useless like poetry. Go back to the national state that claims you (there better be one, of course). You: a story too complicated to recall, and nobody likes feeling stupid. Pure blood and pure storytelling. Simple plots, beginning, middle, end, as if written by AI or an out-of-work screenwriter.”
(Enis Maci)⁹

As a child, I didn't fully understand the rules of this dialogical dance involving the question *Where are really you from?* and the expected response but I felt a constant anxiety, a tension as if I was being subjected to a test. To quickly relieve this tension and satisfy my counterpart instead of myself, I replied for most of my childhood and youth with: *My parents are from Turkey*. The reason I live in Germany at all and am perceived as an immigrant in my everyday life is because my family left the villages of Samandağ and Vakıflı in the far south of Turkey in the mid-1960s as so-called guest workers under the recruitment agreement between the Federal Republic of Germany and Turkey.

9 Maci, Enis [@enis_maci] (2026): <https://www.instagram.com/p/DUX4VbrjCY0>

Samandağ, Vakıflı, and the province of Hatay, to which the villages belong, are all historically significant in the demarcation of modern-day Turkey as a national state. While Hatay was part of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 20th century, France occupied the region after the Ottoman defeat in World War I and placed it under French-Syrian rule. Between 1938 and 1939, Hatay was an independent republic for ten months before it was officially incorporated as a province into the newly formed Turkish state (see Jäschke 1940). According to my family's stories, they already lived in the region during the political changes and border fluctuations, so that *from Turkey* seems geographically and politically insufficient as a response.

However, I also encounter people with a Turkish geographical family history asking me about my *origin* or that of my parents when there is a presumed connection to the Turkish language or the nation state. The question *Nerelisin?* assumes a geographical location in Turkey and asks more specifically about the region as the starting point for the ensuing interaction. These situations also trigger a dialogical dance that can cause at least just as much uncomfortable tension as the other dance does and in these cases, too, there are two routine steps of communication: If I don't want to engage in conversation in the first place, I often pretend not to understand the question, meaning the Turkish language and I use the multiple national assignments, *from Turkey, from Syria, from Iran*, etc., to prevent a deeper conversation about my family's region of origin. However, if I respond to the question and reply *Hatay*, I am faced with a tumultuous choreography that, after an expected moment of kinship on the part of my conversation partners, is subsequently embroidered with an emphasis on differences. The reaction is usually: *Oh, so you're Arab or Alevit!* – in any case, not a supposedly *real Turk*.

“Endlich Türkisch lernen. Alev stellt sich vor, dass es wie von selbst funktionieren wird, so wie mit den anderen Sprachen, die sie gelernt hat. [...] Die ganze Familie lobt ihre Fortschritte, nur Alev denkt immer wieder an das türkische Sprichwort *bir dil, bir insan*. Eine Sprache, ein Mensch. Ihr kommt es so vor, als wollte der Mensch mit der türkischen Sprache sich einfach nicht in ihr entfalten.”

“Finally, learning Turkish. Alev imagines it will just come automatically, just as it did with the other languages she has learnt. [...] The whole family praises her progress, only Alev keeps thinking of the Turkish proverb *bir dil, bir insan*. One language, one person. It seems to her as though, person with the Turkish language, simply doesn't want to unfold within her.”

(Leyla Bektaş 2024: 205)

The reason for the dismissal of my *Turkishness* is the historical settlement of the region, an influence that still extends into the present day. Alongside Rome and Alexandria, the city of Antioch, now Antakya in the province of Hatay, was one of the largest in the Byzantine Empire. Because all migrants were granted Byzantine citizenship, a large number of different groups settled in and around Antioch, including Hellenistic-Macedonian Greeks, people from Syria and Rome, Jews and Christians from the ancient world, and Arab-Alawite Muslims¹⁰. Over the centuries, this led to the groups becoming more convergent in their religious and secular practices, as well as in their linguistic traditions, with the result that Hatay is still considered one of Turkey's most heterogeneous regions in terms of religious communities and spoken languages (see Şan 2019). Unlike in the predominantly Turkish-speaking Sunni regions of the country, Hatay is home to comparatively large communities of Arabic-speaking minorities such as the Arap Alevileri (Arab Alevi) or Nusayris, Rum Orthodox Christians and Catholic Armenians. The latter are particularly closely associated with my grandmother's birthplace of Vakıflı, which is considered the *only Armenian village in Turkey*.¹¹

Belonging to a religious and natio-ethno-cultural (Mecheril 2002) minority, or at least being attributed to one, seems to imply immediate exclusion from the mythology of a Turkish dominant society in this dialogical dance around *origin*, the implications of which only became apparent to me later in my own family history.

While Germany celebrated its *Sommermärchen* in 2006 amid a flood of black, red, and gold and rediscovered a national pride it had thought lost (see Czollek 2018), I found myself, for the first time, consciously drowning in doubt about the statement *my parents are from Turkey*. When my older sister put up a Turkish flag in her room during the Football World Cup in 2006, I became acutely aware that my mother did not identify at all with this nation-state. She tore the flag off the wall in a rage and asked what this country had ever done for us and whether we didn't know that our grandparents and great-grandparents had been persecuted in Turkey. And no, no we did not know that, or at least not in detail. Many descendants who suffer from transgenerational trauma describe a heavy atmosphere of silence hanging over the

10 Schaefer (1907): "There were Macedonians and Greeks, native Syrians and Phœnecians, Jews and Romans, besides a contingent from further Asia; many flocked there because Seleucus had given to all the right of citizenship. Nevertheless, it remained always predominantly a Greek city"

11 A Google search for "Vakıflı" provides almost exclusively results for articles that refer to the village as either Turkey's only or last Armenian village. Furthermore, the village promotes itself with this title on its own official website.

family that they cannot make sense of (see Roig 2021: 359). And so, I, too sensed the presence of a heavy veil my family had cast over fragments of our family history, which my mother finally tore down that day.

“Restrictions imposed on freedoms in the East formed perhaps the leading cause of the persistence in protecting identity. Perhaps, the call to prayer they heard five times a day in a Muslim country was also a call to Armenians that exclaimed, ‘You are an Armenian and a Christian,’ and this was a stimulator with an impact that should not be underestimated.”
(Hrant Dink 2014: 22)

I knew that my grandmother had grown up in Vakıflı, but for a long time I wasn’t aware of what that actually meant for her, her parents and her grandparents, because it was never really discussed. As the daughter of an Armenian Christian family, both Catholic and Rum Orthodox, the stories from my mother’s childhood in Turkey often included little anecdotes disguised as jokes, such as how she and her friends would make up rhymes in Arabic that mimicked and mocked the imam’s call to prayer or how they played a sort of hide-and-seek in which the Muslim children searched for the Christian ones. In retrospect, however, these anecdotes reveal much more about this part of my family history than I ever imagined; they speak of solidarity and rebellion in the face of oppression, displacement and genocide.

The Armenian Genocide was of fundamental importance to the founding of the Turkish Republic (see Akçam 2004: 17), and this historical event was shrouded in silence within my family’s ancestral-mythology in order to *protect us children* as my mother said. Because of their religious and ethno-cultural identity, my family fell into the constructed enemy stereotypes of the emerging state. These images were used to create the Turkish national-mythology of a homogeneous society in opposition to *the Other* and to violently enforce the perceived right to land, property and identity. In the first parliament of the young Turkish Republic, a member said: “You know that the issue of deportation caused an uproar around the world and we were all accused of being murderers. We knew, before it was done, that the world public would not accept this. Why did we resign ourselves to being labelled murderers? These are things that happened only to secure something that is sacred and worth more than our lives: the future of the fatherland” (see *ibid.* 2004: 11). Consequently, the silences embedded in my family’s ancestral-mythologies not only reflect personal individualised trauma but the enduring afterlife of the Turkish nationalist violence, so proudly enacted for the *fatherland*.

“One must accept that the presence of the paranoia felt towards Armenians served as fundamental mortar in the construction of Turkish national identity...The Armenian, the most distant and deepest other...The removal of this paranoia or taboo, in fact, contains a meaning that could rattle, and even cause this identity to collapse, because this taboo is located precisely in the foundation of the structure of identity.”

(Hrant Dink 2014: 36)

Although I was familiar with reports of executions, deportations and the annihilation of entire communities in Turkey between 1915 and 1916, it was only from documentaries and literature, so it felt removed from my personal ancestral-mythology. In addition it remained a mystery to me how it was possible that the residents of Vakıflı, and consequently my great-grandparents, not only survived the genocide but continued to live in Vakıflı, this *last Armenian village in Turkey*. A piece of the puzzle was provided by the German cleric Johannes Lepsius in his *Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey* from 1916, in which he notes the following: “From villages near Suedije at the mouth of the Orontes, a group of 4,058 people, including 3,004 women and children, managed to flee to Musa-Dağı. They were picked up off the coast by a French battleship and rescued to Alexandria” (see Lepsius 1916: 137). Musa-Dağı is a mountain peak not far from Vakıflı and Samandağ. Yet the pressure of the Turkish state narrative, which does not recognise the genocide and sanctions those who do, is also evident in Vakıflı’s self-portrayal on its own website, as this part of the village’s history is completely glossed over and begins with Hatay’s incorporation into Turkey in 1939. It is vaguely stated that today’s residents belong to the 70 families who decided in 1939 to remain in Vakıflı, even though they were offered the opportunity to emigrate to Syria, for reasons that are not specified with no mention of anyone who might have returned.

“Turkey Armenians still live with Turks; Armenia Armenians are neighbours with Turks; yet the majority of Diaspora Armenians are a fair distance away from Turks. It is this, the distance in their acquaintance with Turks, that leads to the differentiation in the trauma their identity suffers.”

(Hrant Dink 2014: 23)

While researching this part of my ancestral-narrative for the first time in 2019, the veil of silence within my family was ever so slightly lifted when my mother’s cousin and I met, after not having spoken to or seen each other in around 20 years. She confirmed my suspicions that our ancestors, our great-great-grandparents were indeed among the 4,058 people who

fled to the mountain peak, were subsequently rescued by the French Navy and did return to Vakıflı.

Accessing and working through my family's personal stories is complicated, not only because of the silence of entire generations and consequently the lack of knowledge among the following generations regarding their experiences during the genocide, but also due to the factor of time. Since I only learned about this part of my family history fairly recently, there are hardly any family members left who could serve as witnesses. But my access to any official family documents regarding this aspect is also extremely difficult on a state level. Access to the Turkish government's online database, launched in February 2018, which makes genealogical documents freely available to its citizens, could possibly be revealing. I recently obtained a Mavi Card¹², a residence and work permit for people who either previously held Turkish citizenship themselves or whose parents did, which gives me access to the database. But I face a personal dilemma, do I even want to be part of a nation-state that I hardly identify with or have any emotional ties to, let alone support its politically and religiously conservative agenda? Additionally, regarding the handling or denial of the genocide, the question arises as to which documents are even accessible and in what form.

Given the government's strong influence on the flow of information, there are doubts that certain data or documents may be inaccessible or even censored in order to uphold the prevailing national mythology that no genocide ever took place. This is certainly what Germany has done, for even during the war, censorship was imposed on all reports regarding the deportation and murder of the Armenians. When the diplomatic documents were made public, those pointing to German responsibility were either quoted only in part or not at all (see Akçam 2004: 10). A potential honest responsibility on Germany's part could have a big influence on the international handling of this genocide because they have a range of primary sources at its disposal, since the most detailed documents on the genocide are held in German archives (see Akçam 2004: 9–10).

12 Hanewinkel (2012): Legally, the immigration of highly qualified people of Turkish descent is made possible primarily by the option for former Turkish citizens or their descendants to apply for a so-called Mavi Kart (Blue Card). This grants them extensive rights, such as the right of residence, the right to practise a profession, and the right to purchase property, without the restrictions that apply to foreign nationals. Holders of the Mavi Kart are therefore largely treated on a par with Turkish citizens. Restrictions apply only with regard to the right to vote and the right to hold public office. These rights are reserved exclusively for Turkish nationals

After years of constantly being asked about my *origin* and that of my family, by now, I've come up with a variety of responses that I can rattle off with ease depending on the situation. The short versions are *from Germany, from Cologne, from Turkey, or from Hatay*, while a longer version is: *I'm from Cologne, but my parents are from a region of Turkey near the Syrian border, where the border has shifted back and forth over time. That's why my family speaks Turkish and Arabic.* But even for the more detailed version, which ultimately still leaves many gaps, there is hardly any room in most conversations for an adequate contextualisation of all the political and personal or structural and individual dimensions.

"I do not think I have a home there anymore.' [...] He smiled. 'Why, you will go home and then you will find that home is not home any more. Then you will really be in trouble. As long as you stay here, you can always think: One day I will go home.' [...] 'Beautiful logic,' I said. 'You mean I have a home to go to as long as I don't go there?' He laughed. 'Well, isn't it true? You don't have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you never can go back.'"

(James Baldwin 1956: 111)

My parents felt similarly when they immigrated to Germany and found a sense of community within their Rum-Orthodox congregation in Cologne, which consists largely of people from Hatay. Within this community, as a heteronormative married couple, they were free from the marginalisations and interrogations of everyday life. They were an active part of the community, extremely socially popular and well-connected, which is why my sister and I, too, were intensively socialised as part of the church community until our early teens. And even within this narrow frame, defined by lived regional, religious, linguistic and cultural characteristics, I was confronted with questions about my belonging. *Ent Ibn meen?, Whose son are you?* As many first names and surnames are shared within the community, the expected responses are not simply the parents' names. In fact, the question is not just about the parents but about a sort of complete family tree encoded in nicknames. Using these nicknames, which have been passed down through generations, the community can not only determine direct family ties but also immediately recognises which village the grandparents and great-grandparents grew up in and what relationship those families had and, in some cases, still have with one's own. However, these names were not chosen by the families themselves. They are more similar to affectionate nicknames, which can be sweet, teasing and sometimes very obscene.

And so, when referring to my maternal lineage, my response is: *Ana ibn el Selva Sikeci*. *Sikeci* is, in this case, a Turkish term pronounced in Arabic, which refers to my great-grandparents as *The Fuckers*. This nickname is a reference to the eleven children they had and the joke about them doing nothing but having sex. When I respond according to my paternal lineage, the answer is: *Ana ibn el Ilyas Husni*, which translates to: *I am the son of Ilyas the Beautiful*. Exactly where the nickname *Husni* comes from is unknown, but it is well known that my father's family definitely was never described as being particularly *beautiful*. Hence, I assume that the name has a teasingly sarcastic origin.

According to my entire family I apparently belong to a different lineage completely. All my life they have called me “ابن الكلب” – son of a dog, Hundesohn, a lovingly teasing nickname a lot of boys get from elders.

Because of the nicknames and the stories they imply about life together in a bygone era and village communities left behind, a sense of familiarity is created, without the need to establish a direct genetic relationship, that is rooted in shared experiences, languages, customs and stories. For this reason, my family ancestors do not identify primarily with a specific nation-state, but rather with a religious community, both in Turkey and later in Germany.

4.3. of a child named

“Der Name ist das Bindeglied zwischen meinen genealogischen Wurzeln und dem zerschnittenen Foto.”

“The name is the connecting link between my genealogical roots and the cut-up photograph.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 36)

The fact that I carry the name that I do, often causes a lot of confusion, for a variety of reasons. Whether it's because of the Turkish spelling *Corç*¹³ or the fact that, given my appearance, my name really is *George*. Even as a child, the different pronunciations and spellings of my name were omnipresent and because of the constant focus on the issue, I developed an awareness at an early age that was initially accompanied by shame and later by self-empowerment. The influence that one's own name has on the construction of one's individual identity is enormous, and when this is called into question due to othering processes, for example, because

13 The pronunciation of the Turkish spelling “Corç” is the same as that of the English “George”. When I am specifically referring to the Turkish spelling, I will use “Corç” below, whilst “George” is used in all other cases. I myself use both spellings of the name and find that the “George” version flows more naturally when written.

of diacritical marks, it can be perceived as an attack on this construction: *a being different* that is projected onto the bearer of the name from the outside.

“Also Leute verstehen glaub ich wirklich nicht, was für ein struggle ich mit meinem Namen in diesem Land hatte, hier auf dem ich stehe. Mein Name ist: Xhemajl. Wird ausgesprochen ‘Dschemajl’, da ‘XH’ ein eigener Buchstabe im albanischen Alphabet ist. Sprich ‘XH’ wird ‘DSCH’ ausgesprochen und dann ‘-emajl’. JEEETZT könnt ihr euch ja genau vorstellen, wie mein Leben seit Geburt an in diesem Land aussah, was mein Name betrifft. Ich wurde als E-Mail Adresse genannt. Die Leute waren nicht so ‘Ksemajl’, die waren ‘Xmail’. Ich wurde einfach als E-Mail Adresse gemobbt.”

(Xhemajlmo 2023)¹⁴

“I don’t think people really understand what a struggle I’ve had with my name in this country, the one I’m standing on right now. My name is: Xhemajl. It’s pronounced ‘Dschemajl’, as ‘XH’ is a separate letter in the Albanian alphabet. So ‘XH’ is pronounced ‘DSCH’ and then ‘-emajl’. NOOOOW you can imagine exactly what my life has looked like in this country since birth, as far as my name is concerned. I was called an email address. People weren’t so much ‘Ksema-jl’, they were ‘Xmail’. I was basically bullied for being an email address.”

Whether at school, at doctors or government offices, the incorrect pronunciations and spellings of *Corç* often drew unwanted attention to me and were almost always unpleasant. These situations were particularly formative at school, as my name was not only mispronounced, misspelled and actively mocked by my classmates, but also by teachers. Because of the diacritical mark, an error message frequently appeared in class registers, which is why the error *Sonderzeichen* appeared in full after my name instead of a ç. One teacher even refused to call me by my name and, despite my protests, decided to rename me *Sonderzeichen*. Later on, I realised that the diacritical mark is also missing from my official identification documents, my passport, ID card, health insurance card, etc., meaning that my name is consistently misspelled. To avoid these constant conflicts and misattributions, both on a personal and institutional level, I decided to use the spelling *George* almost exclusively, in the hope that at least the incorrect pronunciations and spellings would stop. But even this regularly leads to confusion when my written name is linked to my appearance. Even when I introduce myself to people, the reaction is often: *But that’s not your real name, is it?*

14 Morina, Xhemajl [@xhemajlmo] (2023): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0109w0MLKs>

Even when traveling to Turkey, where *Corç* is at least pronounced correctly straight away, I often find myself being questioned by border police officers about why my name is *Corç* at all. Although my physical appearance leads people to intuitively perceive me as Turkish, this also goes hand in hand with the assumption that I am Muslim and must therefore have a Muslim name. Even as a child, I was directly approached and questioned by these authorities about this, so that my mother, visibly annoyed and extremely self-assured, had to intervene time and again and confront the police officers: *Biz Hristiyan'ız! We are Christians!* The possibility that my name might actually be *George* seems so far-fetched to many that I regularly have to justify my name, and only when my Christian upbringing is mentioned is my name accepted as genuine.

4.4. of liturgical belonging

As unusual as the name *George* may seem to many in predominantly white settings when associated with visibly as other marked men, it is a very common name in the Orthodox community that I grew up in. My grandfather, my cousin, various church members and many Christians in WANA region bear this name. All named after one of the most important saints in Christianity: St George.

I myself grew up in the oldest and largest congregation of the Patriarchate of Antioch in Europe, with almost 3,500 members, a circumstance which meant that I encountered Saint George constantly in my childhood. He was mentioned in almost every prayer and appeared as part of the iconostasis, a wall adorned with icons in Orthodox churches. At every service, his image stood directly before me, with his spear, his armour and his thick, wavy hair. The icons of saints that I typically encounter in Europe are mostly modelled on dominant society, a white Jesus with dark blonde hair and blue eyes or a blonde St George with an almost translucent, ivory-like skin tone. Byzantine icons, too, are modelled on the dominant society of the WANA region; however, visually I fit into this majority, which meant that I recognised myself in the icon of St George facing me as if in a kind of distorted mirror image. At an early age, I began to identify myself with his image and this identification was greatly encouraged, endorsed and, to a certain extent, even imposed upon me by religious traditions and the church community. This constructed sense of identification reached its annual peak at and around Easter. On Palm Sunday, the children of the congregation carried crosses decorated with flowers into the church and then placed them before the holy images of the iconostasis. Whilst most laid their crosses down before the depictions of Jesus or Mary, I was

always urged to place mine before that of St George, as a ritual of veneration for my ancestor, to align myself within his ancestral-lineage.

This constructed mythology of a certain identification with this saint meant that I began to feel a sense of familiarity with depictions of St George from an early age. Even years after leaving the Church, this identification persists, manifesting itself in a certain childlike excitement at every icon of St George I come across, as if my name were printed on a can of Coke or a key ring. Taking pleasure in encountering one's own name is nothing unusual, for a sense of self-awareness derives from an identification with the name given or chosen by oneself. However, at church such encounters do not necessarily foster a *recognition of oneself* but rather a *recognising oneself in a saintly figure*, which leads to the mythology of a subject construction that is directly embedded within the religious collective ancestry, rather than an individually self-empowered identity.

4.5. The Familial and the National

Christianity is based on an unquestioning belief in phantasmagorical stories about figures whose very existence has not been fully proven to this day. Members of the Antiochian Church live according to the words, traditions and rituals based on millennia-old ideologies and encourage the identification with and emotional connection to their mythologised saints, to the point of treating them as equals. Whilst these mythologies serve to foster identification and a sense of community, they are maintained in a rigid and unchangeable manner. Aligning oneself within the traditions of imagined characters of the past appears to be a cornerstone of the church and could also, outside an institutionalised religious community, offer a space for the empowerment of one's own ancestral-mythologies.

To return to the question *Where are you really from?* and my reluctance to answer it simply with the knowingly satisfactory reply *Turkey*, it is precisely the details I have outlined that cannot be conveyed adequately and accurately in a few words to do justice to the images evoked by the short answer *Turkey* or *from here*. But even if I were to try, it often quickly becomes clear that the person asking is less interested in the accompanying background information, which prevents a simple labelling, than in the brief keywords needed to carry out that very categorisation. In addition to the positioning of the *Other* outside the *Here*, the incorrect positioning of the *Other* is presumably another reason why I struggle with such a response. A third and further reason for this is the questioning of the main basis for the con-

structed sense of belonging or not-belonging. Why should my grandparents' geographical ancestry have more influence on me and my personal identities than my age, my gender or my religious socialisation, which, given my Christian socialisation within Germany's dominant Christian society, should not represent any form of otherness?

"No siblings grow up in the same house. No siblings have the same parents. No siblings have the same family. No siblings have the same childhood. [...] The parent's lives might be different. Then, each child will evoke a different response from the parent. [...] children are born with different temperaments. Which is they experience the world differently. So even if I could be the same parent to all my kids, which I couldn't be, they'd still have [...] different parents because they would experience me differently."

(gabormatemd 2025)¹⁵

When expanding on the image of the *same house*, the *same parents*, the *same family* and the *same childhood* to the *same nation*, the *same government*, the *same city*, the *same neighbourhood*, the *same religious community* it becomes clear that not only different people experience these frameworks differently, but it also exposes these exact frameworks as much more fluid. Every country was a completely different one in the past and will be a completely different one in the future; conservative or liberal governments can focus and pass different laws; cities can expand; neighbourhoods can get gentrified; religious communities can reform and biological families can grow or fall apart. It is undeniable that everyone experiences these changes, some more extreme and apparent than others, others may access dominant voices when they used to be in a minority and vice versa. Only aligning oneself within national, religious or biological familial ancestral-mythologies therefore incorporate entirely differently narratives, even when naming the *same house*, one is referring to different versions.

"He might not be your child, but there is a you-shaped space in him that no one else can occupy, just as there will always remain a Mamu-shaped gap inside you."

(Santanu Bhattacharya 2025: 283)

15 Maté, Gabor [@gabormatemd] (2025): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNRLiUhixek>

“Um Teil einer ›Profession‹ oder eines Milieus zu sein, muss man seinen Körper und seinen Geist unweigerlich den expliziten oder impliziten Voraussetzungen einer Welt unterwerfen, die existierte, lange bevor man in ihr nach einem Platz zu suchen begann, und die uns diesen Platz nur zu dieser Bedingung anbietet. Sie zwingt uns, den ausgewiesenen Weg Schritt für Schritt zu gehen, Riten und Rituale zu durchlaufen, Gepflogenheiten aufzusaugen und uns allmählich in die Gruppe derjenigen hineinzuarbeiten, die von den Neuankömmlingen all die Dinge einfordern, die man zuvor selbst erfüllen musste.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 119/120)

“To be part of a ›profession‹ or a milieu, one must inevitably subject one’s body and mind to the explicit or implicit requirements of a world that existed long before one began to seek a place within it, and which offers us that place only on this condition. It forces us to follow the designated path step by step, to go through rites and rituals, to absorb customs and to gradually work our way into the group of those who demand of the newcomers all the things that one previously had to fulfil oneself.”

Historically it was common for descendants to inherit their family’s occupations, a practice rooted in systems of hereditary professions and matrilineal or patrilineal inheritance. This tradition often structured the social and economic fabric of communities, where skills, trades and social roles were passed down through generations, preserving family legacies and maintaining continuity within specific occupations. Today, this history continues to echo in both apparent and subtle forms, influencing modern dynamics around family, profession and legacy. Among many reasons, industrialisation and migration fractured these hereditary pathways, allowing (or forcing) individuals to craft their own labour-ancestries. Today, while echoes of the past remain, professional identity is shaped more and more by personal choice, ambition and socio-economic circumstance. Yet, in forging new careers, individuals not only create their own occupational heritage, passing down knowledge and aspirations to new colleagues but decide on what occupational lineage, heritage and tradition they want to ascribe themselves to. This shift transforms the notion of labour-ancestry from a fixed family destiny into an evolving narrative of somewhat self-determined ancestry.

5. Where am I really from? – Requiem for a Lohnarbeit

A round shaped yellow shield containing a field of a white, blue, red, yellow and green Vichy-checked-pattern. The main figures on the field are one centred golden embellished cocktail-shaker and three martini glasses filled with cosmopolitans. To the left a lily-crown containing used cigarette butts, to the right a bow-crown holding two beer bottles. A crest of one silver corkscrew adorns the shield on top. On the left, the shield is supported by a rat, on the right it is supported by a blue deer. Above the shield two blue scrolls carry "Reh 2010-2022" to the left and "Loop 2023-2025" to the right. A blue banner placed above the shield bears the Motto in German: "auf hoher See und vor dem Köbes sind wir alle in Gottes Hand".

“Etwas Neues zu schreiben heißt immer auch, einen Bezug zu großen, inspirierenden Autoren zu entwickeln. Sie vererben uns eine Art zu lesen, sie haben eine Arbeit der Aufklärung und Erklärung geleistet und, sehr wichtig, ihre Gesten haben eine autorisierende Wirkung auf uns.”

“Writing something new always means developing a reference to great, inspiring authors. They pass on a way of reading to us, they have done a work of enlightenment and explanation and, very importantly, their gestures have an authoritative effect on us.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 61)

During a panel discussion on cultural appropriation at the very beginning of my artistic studies in 2015, I said something along the lines of *every text I read, every image I see and a consequent incorporation of those into my work, whether visual or theoretical, is to some extent a collaboration*. Ideas can be published, expanded upon, refined, revised, reframed through different lenses of time and experiences, published and then read by new people who repeat this cycle of collaboration, handing down the histories of what’s come before. A lot of my academic ancestors of thought happened to fold right into the gaps and ruptures that my biological father left behind in my life or rather I wanted him to fill but he couldn’t. So, people like Didier Eribon or Walt Odets became father-like-figures. Figures that I rewrote my own ancestry with, creating a redemption arc for my biological father. Aligning oneself within a tradition of thought, creation, handcraft or any other line of work to some extent settles into or at least influences a person’s construction of identity or traits.

When talking about one’s occupation the terminologies used are quite similar to talking about ancestral-narratives of family histories or nation-states. This linguistic connection is especially apparent in German: *Ich komme aus der Kunst, Ich komme aus der Gastro* or *Ich bin Friseurin, Ich bin LKW-Fahrer*. *Coming from* and *being* are usually used as markers to describe aspects of one’s identity and by using this terminology in describing one’s occupation, they are incorporating their work as part of their identity and align themselves within a certain ancestral-lineage. If it’s an idealised job that people identify with on a personal level or a necessary line of work for financial survival, every occupation carries a history, traditions and those who have come before, inaugurating the newcomers. Training for a job, in a traditional craft, an academic discipline or any other profession, always requires a certain introduction into how things are being done. This can be specific to one particular establishment or historically within a field of work but in every case, you are entering a lineage of traditions, gestures, movements, processes that are being handed down from one generation to the next.

5.1. of alcoholic warfare and storytellers

*“auf hoher See und vor dem Köbes sind wir alle
in Gottes Hand”*

(Köbes Brauhaustour Köln)¹⁶

Who serves what and to whom, in what vessels and attires, in what environments, under what circumstances, in what ways, in what traditions and with what social impacts?

The act of gathering, preparing and serving food and drinks as communal hospitality, to nourish one's body and soul through ancestral recipes, traditions and communities is essential to the human condition. Whether influenced by biological or chosen family structures, socio-economic class, political beliefs, religious or perceived ethno-cultural affiliations, geographies or nation-states. The wide variety of ways in which people come together, what they consume and how they consume is inherently shaped by the fragments of their socialisations and has therefore always posed a threat to dominant societies. Divergent affiliations must consequently be regulated and controlled. In these deeply spiritual and complex ancestral practices that connect, transform and hybridize histories, lies the potential to transform and reshape dominant narratives of ancestral formations.

When I was seventeen, I unknowingly became a descendant of an ancestral-lineage of labourers, thinking I was only starting a job to finance my teenage lifestyle. Somewhat known as a *club-kid* in my hometown of Cologne, Western Germany, a friend offered for me to work at his bar that he was about to open, hoping for the flamboyant hip youngster that knows all the other hip youngsters in town, to bring in a certain type of costumers. I was young and needed the money, so I said yes, completely unaware of how this was going to change the entire trajectory of my life and reveal character traits in myself I didn't know existed.

As a bartender and waiter in Cologne I was initiated into the traditions of the so-called *Köbes*, the centuries old tradition of servers of the Rhineland area.

16 Köbes Brauhaus Tour: <https://www.koebes-brauhaustour.de/brauhaustour-koeln/>

There are two main myths on how this job and its name came about:

One of the claims is, that the *Köbes*, the Cologne-dialect version of the name Jakob, owes its name to Jakob Fischer, who, in the early nineteenth century, allegedly had an argument with one of the archbishops at the time. One archbishop was responsible for opening an *Altbier* brewery in Cologne. A kind of beer that was and still is very much connected to the city's rival, Düsseldorf (another mythologised *us* and *them* that still persists today). With the *Kölsch* brewers contesting this felt betrayal, they went on a collective strike and stopped delivering *Kölsch* to the archbishop until the *Altbier* brewery shut down again. So, the cleric came up with the idea of organising a drinking contest; the best *Altbier* drinker from Düsseldorf was to compete against the best *Kölsch* drinker from Cologne. It is said that Jakob Fischer supposedly stepped up for the Cologne cause and won, resulting in the *Altbier* brewery being shut down again and in honour of this heroic act of alcoholic warfare, the servers were thus named after him and called *Köbes*.

Another myth is that the name *Köbes* derives from pilgrims returning from their journey along the Camino de Santiago to Santiago de Compostela, the *Jakobsweg*, in Spain. They supposedly earned their travel money in Cologne's breweries and talked about their long journeys while serving their guests. Traditionally, the *Köbes* is grumpy and borderline rude, though always with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour. Their attitude is explained by the fact that these ancestral servers, having themselves returned from pilgrimage, did not know who the supposed higher-ups in the social hierarchy of brewery guests were and thus treated everyone equally.¹⁷

17 The Früh Kölsch brewery being the biggest and most prominent one, has the most dominant voice in constructing the *Köbes* myth. Almost every historical reference I found refers to their website and explanations on how this title came to be. See: <https://www.frueh.de/frueh-erleben/typisch-koeln/koebes/>

5.2. of trays and traditions

“One of the entries in this glossary is heroism, defined as ‘botulism’. And hero, in Woolf’s dictionary, is ‘bottle’. The hero as bottle, a stringent reevaluation. I now propose the bottle as hero. Not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else.”
(Ursula K. Le Guin 1986: 166)

I’ve always felt more connected to the second myth; the traveller, the storyteller, the one that treats everybody the same, regardless of social hierarchies. Though, remnants of the alcoholic warfare waging Jakob Fischer can show up from time to time.

The storytelling pilgrim archetype of the *Köbes* is the labour-ancestral-mythology I recognise within myself the most. The stories I’ve collected inhabit every fragment of my gastronomical containers, whether within the first bar in Cologne or the second one in Vienna that I have worked at. The bottle of the *Kölsch* glass, my wallet, holding little gifts, souvenirs, notes or drawings given to me by colleagues and guests, the vodka bottle, the shot glass, the cocktail shaker in which spirits, alcoholic drinks and anecdotes are mixed and shaken up together to form new narratives; expanded to the bottle of the bar, the counter, the team as a container for the renegotiation of individual and collective experiences and memories, for the rehearsals of new ones; Cologne as the bottle of the venue and the tradition of the *Köbes* as the encompassing container of a shared ancestral-lineage.

Being initiated into the ancestral-lineage of the *Köbes* at the age of seventeen, I was immediately introduced to a specific set of 4 rules that had been handed down for centuries:

I. We are a Wirtshaus, not a Gasthaus. We, the Wirt, are always right, not the customers, Gast.

“the customer is always WRONG ive never known a more incorrecd group of people than the customer”
(*iamtwfaf* 2024)¹⁸

For us to always be right requires, first and foremost, an idea of who this constructed *we* is and an agreement on what *right* looks like. It’s about creating a shared identity and negotiating how the space should feel like. It’s the responsibility to guide the time spent together between

18 Shakari, Hannah [@iamtwfaf] (2024): <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3INr35OS4F>

servers and customers and since we, the servers, are in charge of drinks, the music and who and what is being served, it is ours to determine.¹⁹

The burden of accommodating difficult or uncooperative guests is one that is prevalent in a lot of hospitality jobs, undermining the workers at the cost of a certain sense of dignity, just to not offend, get a bad review, lose money for the establishment or worse, not getting any tips. Wages in the hospitality sector in Western Germany and Austria are fairly well paid so that we are not as dependent on tips as servers in North-America for instance, which gives us an advantage in dealing, or rather not having to deal with, rude customers.

An interaction with an U.S. American customer

Her: A beer.

Me: Please and thank you...

Her (immediately offended and in an angry tone): Wow. How rude! You better not go the States! Especially the South. We are very big on hospitality and you could never pull something like that! So disrespectful!

Me (very calm): I guess your hospitality and respect only goes one way in the South.

Her (still angry but now somewhat passive aggressively pays her beer, rolling her eyes and handing me a semi-big tip compared to the price of her beer): Here you go.

Me (still very calm): Thanks, but keep your change. You can buy your way out of respecting someone in the South.

Getting some people to say *please* and *thank you*, can sometimes feel like exhausting missionary work, just to spread the good word of a minimum effort of politeness. So, the differentiation between a *Wirtshaus* and a *Gasthaus* opens a space that has the potential of reconstructing hierarchical dynamics in a way that empowers us to hold on to our agency as workers and most importantly as humans. So being aligned within the ancestral-mythology of the *Köbes*, commanding and dominating the space while interacting with guests is so deeply ingrained in the narrative, that is not just tolerated by the customers but even expected from them, resulting in an awareness on their part, of the existing power dynamics in our space.

¹⁹ Following, when I talk about a *we* or *us*, I'm referring to the ancestral-lineage of servers as a communal *we*.

An interaction with a customer and his wife during a football World-Cup viewing

Me (I'm serving tables, trying to navigate through the maze of a huge crowd of people on the terrace, people are standing everywhere while I'm balancing heavy trays full of beer-jugs and -bottles back and forth, shouting one of my catchphrases through the crowd): DURCHLASSEN BIDDE! DANKEE!²⁰

Him (standing in my way, already annoyed that I have to squeeze through with my heavy tray rolling his eyes): Ugh.

Me (having to go back forth multiple times): DURCHLASSEN BIDDE! DANKEE!

Him (visibly annoyed): Ugh. Can't you walk somewhere else?

Me (overwhelmed by the masses, starting to get annoyed): No, I cannot. You're right in my way this whole time. Stepping aside a little bit could really help. Thanks.

Me (having to come through again, with him still in the same spot): DURCHLASSEN BIDDE! DANKEE!

Him: (still visibly annoyed): Yo! I can't move anywhere else! At least try not to scream every 2 minutes!

Me (scarily calm, already contemplating how to teach him a lesson): I'm so sorry. I'll be quieter.

His wife (noticing a glimmer in my eye, already sensing my upcoming revenge, very quietly): Shh! Stop talking to him like that.

Me (carrying a tray of 10 huge beers-jugs, standing right next to him without him noticing, almost inaudibly whispering): I'm so sorry, Sir but could you please let me through?(I drop the whole tray all over him, almost cartoonishly-fake-sorribly-smiling): I tried being more quiet. Well, I guess there might be a reason for me to scream every 2 minutes.

His wife (visibly upset with her husband): I told you not to talk to him like that! This is what you get for being so inconsiderate! (looking over to me) I am so so sorry for his behaviour!

Me (delightedly smiling): Oh, no worries. DURCHLASSEN BIDDE! DANKEE!

Serving guests on the floor, you're able to move through the space at least trying to physically avoid uncomfortable interactions. While bartending though, you are fixed to the narrow space behind the counter, exposed to any confrontation without being fully able to escape. Numerous times I've been snapped or waved at, talked to way too close, grabbed or asked *where I was really from*, training me in patience, quick-wittedness and most of all setting boundaries. Though, there is a profound difference in being impolite or inconsiderate and

20 Almost growling in a Cologne dialect: "Let me through please! Thank you!"

aggressive or dangerous. So apart from being able to make drinks and carry trays, hospitality workers also have to be security guards.

An interaction with a guy and his group of friends

Me (behind the bar asking a group of people what they wanted to drink)

Him (after placing the group's order): You're really playing for the other team, aren't you?

Me (kind of confused): Excuse me?

Him: You're really fruity is what I'm saying.

Me (annoyed but still trying to be polite for some reason): Alright, man. Anything else?

Him (noticing my annoyance and trying to be funny): Don't be mad and suddenly act like a little faggot. Haha.

Me (fully enraged, slamming his beer bottle on the concrete counter, accidentally smashing it): What the fuck did you just say? You're not getting a single drop here. Get the fuck out.

Him (noticing his whole group being shocked about what happened): Dude, I was just joking. I'm sorry!

The rest of the group (pulling him away and trying to reason with me): We're sorry about him. He's really not like that. He has gay friends, too. He was just joking. Please can we just have our drinks and forget about it?

Me (even more annoyed by the whole group trying to argue with me instead of him): None of you are getting anything anymore. Get out. If you want to complain do not even dare to complain to me. Complain to him. He ruined your night, not me. Hold him accountable, not me. Now get the fuck out.

(They all leave visibly annoyed.)

But not every interaction goes as smoothly, with them only trying to argue and somewhat peacefully leaving in the end. On several occasions physical altercations have been unavoidable in order to remove someone aggressive and ensure the other guests' and our safety. Most times this could be handled by calling the police but in a lot of cases we feel like we must evaluate the long-lasting impact that legal intervention could have on their lives.

An interaction with a person under the influence during a daytime concert of an 11-year-old child at the bar

While I was turned away from the door for a second, a man that was heavily intoxicated slipped inside and sat on the floor right in front of the stage where an 11-year-old girl was

singing *Let it go* with other kids and their parents in the audience. The second I noticed him, I was trying to observe his behaviour before intervening, because I did not want the girl on stage nor the other kids witness any aggressive interaction.

Him (visibly on some drugs, yelling, clapping in the middle of the song)

Me (immediately rushing inside and very severely whispering to him): Come to the front with me. Now. There are kids present.

Him (incapable of rational judgment pulling away from me): Noo! I'll be quiet.

Me (still not completely convinced but trying to stay calm, whispering): Ok. Stay but be quiet and behave!

Him (groaning, yelling, clapping)

Me (running right back to him, still whispering trying not to make a scene): I told you to behave! There are children here. You're scaring them. You're coming with me now and you're leaving.

Him (still groaning and yelling): Nooo! Leave me alone!

So, I had to grab him by his arm, simultaneously collecting his jacket and bag and physically remove him from the bar. All while that little girl was visibly scared but kept singing *Let it go*.

These situations are just two of countless examples of what servers have to deal with on a daily basis in the hospitality industry. Not all of them this extreme and some worse than that. Having the agency to decide how these interactions are being handled, not only requires the capacity to assess people and their behaviours in different states of consciousness but it needs a certain sense of support by and trust in one's colleagues. The responsibility of guiding the shared time and space together also implies the ability to recognise when certain people do not want to follow the rules agreed upon that night. This not only puts the constructed *we* to the test but also creates an *other* that is different from *us*.

II. Keep the drinks coming.

“creating among the people at the bar, a troupe, who would now play various roles in a play they knew very well. Madame Clothilde would demur, as, indeed, she instantly did, but only for a moment; it turned out to be champagne. She would sip it, making the most noncommittal conversation, so that she could vanish out of it a splitsecond [...]. As for the boys at the bar, [...] Their only means, practically at least, of conveying their affection for Giovanni and me was to relieve us of these two old men. So that there was added, to the roles they were about to play, a certain, jolly aura of conviction and, to self-interest, an altruistic glow.”

(James Baldwin 1956: 54)

Originally, the beer coaster was placed on top of the *Kölsch* glass to prevent anything from falling into the beer and to keep the *Kölsch* fresh for longer in the brewery. This gave rise to a unique custom in Cologne that is still practised today in Cologne bars: the number of *Kölsch* consumed is noted with a line on the coaster.

This way, both the guest and the *Köbes* always know exactly how many *Kölsch* have already been served. And that's necessary, because at the bar you don't order your beer, you're served it. As soon as the glass is empty, the *Köbes* brings the next freshly drafted *Kölsch* to the table without being asked. Only when the coaster is placed on the glass is it over. This simple sign means that no further *Kölsch* is desired. The *Köbes* then knows immediately that they don't want another one. A ritual that is handed down for generations and as much a part of Cologne's bar tradition as the beer itself.

An interaction with two guests during a Jam-packed hip-hop night

Guests: Can we get two Cosmopolitans, please?

Me: How about two bottled beers?

Guests: Um...but we want Cosmos.

Me (smiling): I don't think. They come in those annoying fiddly glasses. If I made you two, you'd completely spill them the second you turned around and I'd have to annoyingly make them all over again. You will have the beers and it's gonna be a much more fun night for all of us.

Guests (confused but realise that was not an offer but a statement): Uhm...I guess we'll have two beers then?

Me (still smiling): Two beers? Great choice! Coming right up!

Guests (the second they turn around they recognize the benefit of having the beers instead of the cocktails, they feel like there's friendly banter happening and for the rest of the night only want to place their orders with me and tip me very generously each time)

Every now and then the drinks have to keep coming in a more secretive way. Taking care of guests sometimes requires a different kind of awareness, not necessarily for the space or the atmosphere but picking up on certain cues that are highly individual. Some people do not drink alcohol and feel uncomfortable to admit or have other needs. Having a server and/or bartender be familiar with those, whether for one night only or over a longer period, can make a special or complicated order so much easier, faster and more comfortable for all parties.

An interaction with a secretly pregnant woman

Her (seated in the midst of her group of people, whispering to her partner secretively, telling him to order a non-alcoholic drink that looks like an alcoholic one)

Me (overhearing this exchange)

Group: May we get a round of vodka shots for everyone?

Me: Sure thing. (Pouring vodka shots for everyone, except for one water shot, bringing it to their table, placing every glass in the middle apart from hers, I'm handing it right to her, winking and mouthing that it's just water)

Her (visibly surprised): Haha, thank you soo much!

(With every single order that was made by the group I made sure that her drinks were marked in some subtle way for her to know which one was hers and I kept all the drinks coming.)

III. Put on the show of your life.

"Every table is like a new performance. An opportunity for a performance, you know. I didn't have to like be myself. I could be whoever I wanted to be and then try to get as much money as I could. It was like a game. I like those kinds of games."

(Aubrey Plaza 2019)²¹

As a *Köbes*, one of the most important responsibilities is to be able to guide the bar's atmosphere; from the music that is being played, to the mood and the character that is being

21 Plaza, Aubrey [First We Feast] (2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS68LmqFVeA>

presented to the guests. Taking charge of a room full of people requires the ability to project a sense of confidence that manifests one's role in this performance that is being put on each night. Being perceived as unsure or in a bad mood can impact the whole atmosphere and influences how the night unfolds. If we're annoyed, so are the guests and if we're having a great time, so are they. So apart from having to be able to make drinks, carry trays and be a security guard, bartenders also have to be DJs, actors and entertainers in general.

The easiest and most common play to put on, is to create inside jokes on the spot with certain guests, making them feel as if they are somewhat a part of what's going on behind the bar, the in-crowd. A more advanced version of a performance, I perfected with one of my colleagues, was to divide the crowd between him and myself, creating a sense of solidarity between each side and their servers while inciting competition with the other side and their server. This way, we created temporary armies that was entertained on one hand, while competing on the other to see who the faster, funnier and better server can be. We smack-talked each other and their guests, with them doing the exact same thing. Who the winner was, was measured by who got the bigger tips, which eventually ended up in our pockets equally anyway. The legacy of Jakob Fischer's alcoholic warfare.

We had so many nights, with the bar packed to the limit and great music playing, when the whole team, usually around 3-5 people, completely stopped every single order or whatever we were doing and just jumped onto the bar to dance, drink shots and celebrate ourselves. People being confused at first, trying to look up and talk to us. While realising that any kind of negotiation was in vain, there was nothing else for them to do other than surrender and join us in dance and euphoria. After a few minutes of celebration, we jumped back down and picked everything up where left it.

One specific shift during a Christmas bank holiday in 2014, low traffic was expected at the bar. That night it was only two of us working, serving the few tables and making the drinks, when, as we were starting to slowly close up, group after group after group started to come in. Both of us being from Cologne, we've known or at least have crossed paths with almost every single person entering, because holiday season in Cologne means homecoming season and suddenly the whole bar was full of people we went to school with, partied with, studied with, hooked up with, got into fights with or dated. We knew exactly what to do: since we were about to close the bar anyways, we locked the doors, made this a private event and because we all listened to similar music when were younger, my colleague and I started DJing back to back, one putting on songs from the 2000's, while the other made drinks and vice

versa. They were dancing, we were dancing, they were drinking, we were drinking. This supposedly very quiet night, within minutes turned into one of the wildest nostalgic private parties, that people still talk about to this day.

“No,’ said Guillaume, to whom leaving the bar, at the moment, would have seemed like being driven from the promised land, ‘let us first have a drink, here at the bar, with Madame.”
(James Baldwin 1956: 54)

We all know the privilege of feeling chosen as guests, when we get along with the servers and they allow us to stay after or while closing. And the reason this makes us feel chosen is because there is an awareness of how exhausted and tired they must be after their shift and being approved presence, sharing this exact space alongside them is a gesture of approval, an invitation to a sacred space, bestowed upon us by the ones in charge, boosting our egos. The moment the bar is about close, quiet washes over the space, that only seconds ago was filled with people and deafeningly loud music and chatter. Now it's only us, the doors are being locked, we open our (almost) afterwork beer, the last remaining guests that we got along with and our friends are getting ashtrays placed on their tables, from time to time a quiet knock at the doors by friends coming by after partying or servers from other bars that just finished their shifts – The Promised Land.

IV. We are a family, so we take care of each other.

“The truth would seem to be [...] that all these groups of people lie under an enchantment. The hostess [...] is a witch who lays her guests under a spell. In this house they think themselves happy [...]. It is all an illusion (which is nothing against it, for illusions are the most valuable and necessary of all things, and she who can create one is among the world's greatest benefactors) [...].”
(Virginia Woolf 2000:139)

As *Köbese*, some of people's most emotional and almost spiritual transcendent memories are experienced in a space that we are in charge of. And though we guide them and perform to create these moments, most of the time we only facilitate and are not really a part of them. We play roles, put on illusionist theatre productions. By being on the stage that is the floor or the bar and upholding this illusion for a whole shift, the *Köbes* inhabits a special position in this theatre. Almost like a priest, looking in from the outside, observing while being more

than immersed within the fabric of the experience simultaneously. Very rarely, serendipitously intimate moments happen though, when this illusion, this theatre production's curtain between guests and bartenders lifts and unveils deeply emotional human interactions.

"I feel like everyone should work in a pub at least once. In pubs you get to meet like everyone, literally everyone, because it's just such like a hub of...oh my god, I sound so cringe, being like 'it's such a hub of life', but also, it is kind of true. You see kind of everything. You see like the best and the worst of people. And you can see that, like in ten minutes on a shift, you know, you can have someone come back go 'Ahh that drink's shit', and chuck it at ya. And then five minutes later you're like having like a dead deep conversation with like, a nice old man. [...] If they don't have anyone else at home, you become people's someone and at the end of the day, like a lot of the time people just need a friend. [...] People just sort of brush off hospitality work [...]. I don't really think people pay enough attention to how important people who work in places like pubs and restaurants actually are, because you matter to people. That came across a lot to me in the pub, like you become someone to these people, and you matter to them and they matter to you. I don't think I expected it to be as deep as it was. When I left, I was actually like, I was as sad about leaving there as I was about leaving home. You get so used to seeing these people all day, every day and then it's like, you leave and you're like, you've got no idea what they're doing with their lives now."

(aview.fromabridge 2024)²²

I remember an interaction with a man coming into the bar, right after I opened the doors and as I was in the middle of setting up. He ordered a beer, sat down and stared at it for quite some time without even touching it. To my question about why he's not drinking his beer, he told me about him having been sober for a few years and the reason he was thinking about having a drink in that moment was because his grandmother was on her deathbed and he was summoned to say his goodbyes but too afraid to go. For whatever reason he felt like opening up to me and for whatever reason I was open to engage on a real level and put down my illusionist role. This grown man, around my father's age when he died, told me about her raising him after his parents passed when he was very young and started crying. As I was trying to console him in his fear and grief, I took aside his beer, dumped it and encouraged him to go and see her. He asked if we could hug and so we did. While we were hugging, he thanked and told me that I reminded him of his estranged gay son, who cut ties with him, because he wasn't ready to accept him for being gay. Having had a similar dynamic with my own father,

22 @aview.fromabridge (2024): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8rAZssleOo>

who I wasn't able to resolve any relationship with even to his death, this stranger and I related to each other in a way that transcended the bar setting. We unexpectedly became reflections of one another; brought together by the undrunk beer I served, never to see each other again.

These rare moments of lifting the veil of performativity with guests sometimes can grow into more than just one moment. Especially with regulars, coming in at the end of every of their workday or on weekends, to wind down, have their regular meetups with their friends or date nights. The number of couples I saw have their first dates, while I was serving their tables and coming back for their second and third, end up in a relationship, getting married and having children. The space and I became part of their life stories, their ancestral-mythologies that they're telling their kids. They kept coming back, updating me on every major event, introducing me to the children as babies, I've seen them grow up, let them run around behind the bar as I was opening up in the afternoons, them growing up with me, knowing me, my name and being excited to tell me about their first day of school, gifting me paintings they made of them and myself.

And as in life, so in death.

There were these two best friends, Markus and Marcus, a.k.a. the Marcküsse, coming in every single day after work for years, sat at the same spot right at the bar, drinking the same beers. We saw each other more often than we saw our families or friends, we became a huge part of their lives and they of ours'. We've met their friends, their spouses and their children, some of them our age. Until one day Markus came in by himself. Distraught. None of us knew that Marcus was suffering from cancer and in his grief, Markus came to the place that reminded him of his best friend most, sharing his loss with the people that have known both of them in their happiest moments. All of us sat with him and consoled each other, a loss that affected everyone. This person that we shared our time and space with almost every day for years passed. That week, his whole family came by to not only let us know about his death but to grief together at this place and with the people that reminded them so much of him. So, when it came to planning his funeral, his family had no doubt in mind, for the funeral reception to be held at the bar, explicitly asking for Marcus' favourite bartenders to be present. We were accepted as part of his closest family and friends. After Marcus' passing, Markus kept his routine of coming to the bar, seated at the same spot, drinking the same beer, only from that point on by himself.

5.3. of shared shifts and shared lives

“Mir schien, ich hatte endlich, nach langer
Suche, meine biologischen Freunde gefunden.
Besser kann man die Idee, dass selbstgefundene
freundschaftliche Beziehungen stärker als ange-
borene sind, nicht ausdrücken.”

“It seemed to me that, after a long search, I
had finally found my biological friends. No
better way to express the idea that self-found
friendships are stronger than the ones we are
born with.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 105)

Nights with low traffic are the worst. We are mostly just standing around, while our energy levels drop, which is why the quality of service slowly deteriorates. Every bartender and server prefers a busy night because time flies and, best case, you enter into a symbiotic workflow with your co-workers. This symbiotic interactivity deepens over time, putting the entire team into an almost trance-like state where routine gestures and movements, such as the specific way you begin to twirl a bottle opener, make noises to yourselves, take bottles out of the fridge, shake cocktails or stack the glasses, hand each other drinks or utensils without ever asking for anything and anticipate each other's movements, wants and needs, turns into an intricate intuitive ballet in which everyone moves around and through each other without any verbal cues. You become an organism, knowing the individual characteristics of each cell and its role within the collective being.

Though, this illusionist ballet can feel like transcendent floating sometimes, it is incredibly difficult to hold this state for the entirety of a whole shift. The illusion is bound to rip from time to time, whether because of inconsiderate guests, the changing of a keg, restocking of bottles, the spilling of a drink, a tense interaction or frustration with each other or just the overwhelming wave of stress. Acts of mutual care cement each other's commitment to this communal dance in moments of ruptures. Whether it's the jumping onto the bar to dance, handing each other unsolicited shots while yelling our codeword “Telefon!”, a firm hug, sending someone out for a cigarette without them asking for it so that they can relax for a minute, to blowing air kisses or a quick, consensual, smack on the butt. These moments of recognition and reconnection are an integral part of upholding the being part of a single organism, while in the midst of it. The mutual care does not only happen during working hours though. The moment when every last guest or friend has left, everything is cleaned, money is counted and tips are distributed, when it's only us left, with no responsibility left taking up space in the back of our minds, that is the moment of ultimate intimate connection. None of them, guests or bosses to perform for anymore but be our exhausted selves together.

Our usual end of work wind-down was a dramaturgically perfected ritual:

We all collapse into the sofa

We talk, giggle and recap the night

Someone brings over a tray of beers and shots for everybody

Residual energy, conserved in the depths of our bodies starts to reemerge

Someone puts on a playlist of songs, each one dedicated to a person

We sing along, celebrating every single person, giving them centre stage

We drink together, we talk to each other, we dance together on the dancefloor or on top of the bar, we argue with each other, we smoke together, we dress up in towels and trash bags, we cuddle with each other

In short: We reaffirm our kinship

The team you share this performance with, work with on a regular basis or even just for one night, becomes your *chosen family* with whom you spend most of your time, created by an intimate bond of extreme stress, exhaustion and euphoria. This kinship sometimes only lasts for the period of working together and sometimes for the rest of our lives. My closest friends, the ones I undoubtedly call my family, I worked with for years. We shared the most extreme positive as well as negative experiences together, took care of each other, stepped in for a shift if someone felt off, stepped up if someone needed help, enjoyed each other's companies, held one another and lived through intense situations, whether work related or private, in a short amount of time. Extreme situations let your emotional guard down and you experience and get to know the person on a deeper level. Driven by a common goal, getting through a shift as unscathed and enriched as possible, creates intimacy very quickly.

Some stayed an integral part of my life and with some I only stay in touch sporadically. But in any case, the second we see or talk to each other the time, space and intimacy we shared sits so deep inside each and every one of us, that we instantly click back into our connection, just like every close-knit family does.

“Orlando? (if that is one’s name) meaning by that, Come, come! I’m sick to death of this particular self. I want another. [...] Orlando? Still the Orlando she needs may not come; these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs. Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of wine – and so on; for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him – and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned at all.”

(Virginia Woolf 2000: 212/213)

As someone that worked at the same bar for twelve years, starting from its inception, I saw co-workers come and go. And when you spend such a long time in a place, you start to notice specific shifts in dynamics and how things are handled with each new constellation and each constellation we call a generation. These generations have their own particularities, are influenced by the ones before and shape the ones coming after. Every time I visit the bars that I worked at, I am astounded by and incredibly grateful for what I encounter. Specificities that I introduced years ago, still being intact, like the way the glasses are stacked, the garnish is cut or the order of bottles. Most importantly though, I am amazed by the legacy I have left in the way the new generations still interact with guests. A legacy that I was introduced to and refined as the first generation at that bar, lives on in the latest one. Recognising parts of myself in people I have never met before, having left a mark and because my legacy was carried onward and, to my surprise, tied to me as a person. They all know about me, know about the interactions I had with guests, know about my attitude at work, know about the relationships I witnessed, know about the care I offered and the kinships I’ve been a part of. My influence is still being kept alive, whether orally or physically.

I have become an ancestor to the generations that followed me, by following the ancestors that came before me.

6. Where am I really from – Fashioning Queer Threads

A heater-shaped golden shield containing a field of pink and blue honeycomb pattern. The main figure on the field is one centred blossomed and one bud of a green carnation. A frontal facing lavender-coloured crown with a yellow wig as mantling adorns the shield on top. On the left and on the right, the shield is supported by one limp-wristed hand each. Above the shield two lavender-coloured scrolls carry the names: “Aviance, Baldwin, Casady, Charles, Eribon, Ersoy, Gaga, Ghesquière, Hesse, Hilton, Johnson, Kardashian, Kerkeling, Knowles, LaBeija, Loth, McQueen, Müren, Pollard, Pugh, Richie, Rivera, Swinton, Virgin, Wilde, Woolf”. A lavender banner placed below the shield bears the Motto in Turkish, German and English: “İbne Schwuchtel Faggot”.

Which traditions, historical figures, cultural products, time periods, kinships, historical events, spaces, stylistic expressions, rituals, practices, languages, experiences or people can make up a queer²³ ancestry?

“Was er heute ist, das haben andere vor ihm und für ihn erfunden. Er denkt an die Leben derer, die ihm in der schwulen Historie vorangegangen sind: Oscar Wilde, der für seine Kühnheit einen hohen Preis bezahlen musste, die Transvestiten, die wegen ihrer Frauenkleider verhaftet wurden, und all die anderen, die sich der Ordnung und ihrer Macht widersetzt haben.”

“What he is today was invented by others before him and for him. He thinks of the lives of those who came before him in gay history: Oscar Wilde, who paid a heavy price for his audacity, the transvestites who were arrested for wearing women’s clothes, and all the others who defied the establishment and its power.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 252/253)

Queer narratives historically have been cast aside and placed in somewhat of an *in-between* by dominant-heteronormative history-writing. At the same time, this *in-between* can be perceived as a loophole, a gap with the potential to generate a space where one’s individual queer ancestral-narratives can emerge. Unlike narratives of biological family, national or labour ancestry, a queer ancestry is not traceable in the same linear way. Experiences, references, performativities, theories, people and ideas enter, influence and shape one’s queer identity in a more scattered way, which generates a highly individual rhizomatic network of an ancestry rather than a traditional lineage per se. And this layered and intersecting rhizomatic ancestry requires an almost archaeological excavation to uncover retroactively.

23 The terms *gay* and *queer* are often used interchangeably, but they carry different historical, political and personal connotations. *Gay* generally refers more specifically to a homosexual sexual orientation, most commonly describing men who are emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to men, though it can also function as a broader umbrella term for homosexuality overall. *Queer*, by contrast, functions less as a fixed sexual identity and more as a critical and political term that resists rigid categorisation. Today, *queer* can include non-heterosexual sexualities, non-cisgender identities and broader refusals of (hetero)normative expectations surrounding gender, sexuality, relationships and family structures. While *gay* often describes *who* someone is attracted to, *queer* can additionally express a relationship to social norms, politics and identity itself. Aware of the differences between these two terms, in the following chapter I will use *gay* when talking about sexuality and *queer* when talking about a broader structure.

“Queer people don’t grow up as ourselves. We grew up, playing a version of ourselves that sacrifices authenticity to minimize humiliation and prejudice. The massive task of our adult lives is to unpick which parts of ourselves are truly us and which parts were created to protect us.”
(someasiandude 2023)²⁴

In a predominantly heteronormative global society, having the privilege of being exposed to openly and visibly queer stories of joy and acceptance growing up, is a rather rare experience that can create a skewed timeline of becoming for queer adolescents. Unlike most straight-identifying young people, queer kids today, for now, do not get to have the same access to an exemplified guideline of first early childhood exchanges of innocent love, first relationships as teenagers, their first heartbreak in school, date around a little, get married, have children, have grandchildren. But this uniformly constructed and mostly inaccurate agenda is exactly and solely just that, a guideline. Pinpoints of what people that have come before deemed striving for, following a path history and peer-pressured from beyond time.

6.1. of a booted childhood

Like a lot of queer kids growing up, I was forced to hide away certain parts of myself that were breaking out of heteronormative idealised gender mythologies. I was told that I was too soft, cried too much, too much of a *mama’s boy*, not as physically active as other boys, not interested in the *right* things, not gesticulated properly, not walked manly enough... and the list goes on. The issue is that ideas of the *right* masculine performativity vary from context to context. Between class, jobs, urban or rural places, religious communities or nation-states – what a man is supposed to behave or look like according to dominant voices is highly fluid and therefore not as monolithic as it is being presented.

“If there is a central issue from my childhood that we have to talk more about, it is the feeling of disappointing my father, a feeling I have never surmounted. I’m still tangled up in it. It was who I was that was the disappointment to him – something I was first aware of at the age of four or five – and there was never anything I could do about it. Even at that age, I can remember being self-conscious about how I walked, which was more like my older sister, Sally, than another boy.”
(Walt Odets 2020: 41)

24 @someasiandude (2023): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxrgzT8NrBb>

Looking back, a few of my earliest memories of being around my family feel very contradicting. While I remember being cuddled with a lot, placed on tables to dance and sing or asked to tell jokes, basically being my family's entertainment at every function and be celebrated for it, I also remember being scrutinised for the same things I was, just moments before, applauded for. I noticed the looks, remember the physical corrections of my stance by grabbing my hip and centring it, the whispering conversation my family members had when I was around. Revisiting my childhood always carries a sense of heavy looming suspicions about my being, even within my fun and light memories.

I was a very quiet melancholic child, I loved to stay inside and I could just be by myself for hours, drawing and delving into my vast imagination, making up scenarios and reenacting scenes from my favourite films; most importantly *The Last Unicorn*. The 1982 animated fantasy film that tells the story of a unicorn, believing it is the last of its kind, that embarks on a quest to find others like her, focusing on the emotional journey of the outcast, while decentralising the narrative of the heroic saviour knight riding his horse to kill a dragon. This aesthetically soft, dark and melancholic fairytale deals with feelings of isolation, persecution, outsiders banding together, reflexions on transformations, mortality and the experience of never being able to completely fit in, even with the ones that you ought to be a part of. Watching *The Last Unicorn* as a child, I was not able to pinpoint or articulate why this film resonated so deeply with me but I knew instinctively: this has something to do with me.

My father, though he let me watch it, was not accepting of my *soft and feminine* reenactments of the unicorn's voice and movements. He was a stereotypical man; the kind that drives trucks for work and loves to watch and play football. When I was really young, he played a lot of football with his friends and their sons but never asked me once to join. I did not like playing football but sensing his blatant disapproval and embarrassment of my not-being-like-the-other-boys and his refusal to make an effort to participate in what I enjoyed, made me feel unwanted and hurt. At the age of four or five, I remember distinctly going up to him and saying: "I don't like football but if you want, I can join you, your friends and their sons playing sometime." His reaction to my attempted compromise was cold and he pushed it to a yeah-maybe-in-the-future-sometime. I tried to connect, give him a chance to spend time with me, his son, and got rejected. From that moment on I never offered to play with him again, so we never did.

One of the most striking moments of empowerment and consequent rejection I remember from my childhood was around the same age of around four. This elderly woman, Eva, reg-

ularly took care of me and my older sister, while both my parents were at work. One day, Eva was asked to take me shopping for rainboots that I needed for kindergarten. At the store she let me roam freely and told me to choose whichever pair I liked. In my memory there was this beaming light coming off one specific pair: pink *Power Ranger* rainboots, that looked like cowboy (or rather cowgirl) boots with a tiny heel. I fell in love instantly, telling Eva that these were the ones I needed to have. Smilingly she knelt down, looked me in the eyes and told me that if these were the ones I wanted, of course I could have them, but she also explained to me that the other kids might look at me differently, because this style was mostly worn by girls. With a resounding yes-I-know-I-don't-care-I-want-them-I-need-them, she told me they looked wonderful on me, went to the cashier and bought the pink plastic *Power Ranger* cowgirl boots with a heel. Never in my, at the time very short, life have I felt happier and more in charge of myself. Until we got home. First, my mother saw the boots and though she tried to pretend to be happy, I could sense her panic about telling my father. When he saw the *disgraceful footwear that this German grandma forced me to get, trying to turn his son gay*, my mother reared up between him and myself, trying to soothe his anger and aim for a compromise. After coming to an agreement, I was allowed to wear them once that evening on our balcony, where no one could see me and for them to be returned the next day.

“[Wir] sind die Söhne von Müttern. Die Männer, mit denen wir in Berührung kamen [...], sorgten dafür, dass wir Angst bekamen, vor der Berührung mit Männern und anderen Jungs, vor der zu zärtlichen, zu denen selbst eine feste Umarmung gehörte, weil man sonst als schwul galt, genauso wie vor der zu harten, weil überall die nächste Prügelei wartete. [...] Ihr seid vielleicht abgehauen, aber wir konnten euch nicht entkommen. Ihr wart beides, weg und trotzdem da.”

“[We] are the sons of mothers. The men we came into touch with [...] made sure we became afraid, of the touch with men and other boys, afraid of the touch that was too tender, which included even a firm hug, because otherwise you were considered gay, just as we were afraid of the touch that was too hard, because the next beating was waiting around every corner. [...] You may have run away, but we couldn't escape you. You were both gone and yet still here.”

(Necati Öziri 2023: 198/199)

Being directly shamed or rejected for my not masculine enough behaviour was one thing but within my family, almost exclusively my father's side, indirect shaming was also signalled. Apart from tangible comments and corrections, the way men on my father's side of the family interacted with and talked to each other were just as significant in suggesting what was

different about me. How they talked about certain male celebrities, being too groomed, too well dressed, too gay. There was also a fight between my father and uncle that still echoes through my memories. During a heated argument they had, I don't remember what it was about, they started to throw around insults. *Schwuchtel*, *Arschficker* and *Schwanzlutscher* were the ones that burned themselves into my mind. *Faggot*, *Assfucker* and *Cocksucker*. So, when I started school and encountered these exact insults, I knew immediately what they meant.

6.2. of signals across the playground

"The young learn largely from their own experience – rather than from the often-questionable wisdom of elders – and working with young men in therapy, I see how they go about building adult lives: each man does it as if it had never before been done."
(Walt Odets 2020: 104)

Growing up in an environment, seemingly deprived of any queer representation, I always felt like experiencing every confusion, longing, feeling of inadequacy, loneliness, being plucked out from somewhere else and placed here for the first time in history. Retracing this memory and the feeling of being isolated is confusing, from my current perspective. Because I did have elders, people that have come before, that I could have turned to for guidance, yet still I was wondering: "I must know if I'm the only unicorn left in the world. Suppose they're hiding together... somewhere far away. What if they're waiting for me?" (The Last Unicorn: 00:11:03–00:11:15). My mother had a quite a few gay friends but I was never secure enough to approach them about any questions that I might have had. Quite the contrary. I remember clearly, hiding away in my room every time they came over, too scared to be seen, recognised and exposed and they, too, never approached me with any suspicions. Now looking back, I'm thankful to my mother's friends for not confronting me. I now know that they talked to my mother about their suspicions of me being gay, with a clear denial on her part – I was simply artistic.

In my early thirties I had an inkling about one of my sister's friends possibly being gay and while everyone tried to ask my opinion on their speculations about his sexuality, I never once approached him directly. Instead, I tried as hard as I could to project an open space for exchange, if he, or anyone else, felt the need to talk. Only after him coming out he wanted to talk through some things with me and I

was available to provide every knowledge I gathered throughout my own journey, appreciative to have become a juncture in his network of queer ancestry.

Isolating oneself from the ones you're too scared to recognise yourself in is a survival mechanism, driven by shame and fear that I related to. In my case, throughout my school years I tried to keep a distance to other kids that were bullied for not being enough of a boy or a girl, too femme or too masc. "There is no movement of yours that has not betrayed you. A pace, a glance, a turn of the head. [...] Even your way of standing perfectly still..." (*The Last Unicorn*: 01:10:30–01:10:46). Instead of banding together, creating a community of outsiders, we completely ignored each other, as if the mere recognition of the others' existence could expose us to even more scrutiny. So, I isolated myself even further. No lesson learned from *The Last Unicorn*.

Until I found a friend outside of school with the same interests and a similar demeanour and we instantly became best friends. We were around eleven years old, lived in the same neighbourhood, listened to the same music, watched the same TV shows and movies, loved to dance and most importantly went to different schools. Since we only met outside of school, we could pretend to each other and to ourselves that all the bullying at school was not happening. Both being called *gay* was something that we were attacked with, something we had to fight against and therefore, something we did not want to be. We created our own little safe haven, where we could define what feminine or masculine was, the right or wrong behaviour. We could be whoever we wanted to be and though there was an awareness, we had an unspoken mutual understanding, not to comment on each other's behaviours or directly naming anything.

Worse than any of the bullying at school though, was the betrayal of him shattering our sacred unspoken bond. The last time we spoke to each other, was a summer day on the playground. We were playing with the other kids in the neighbourhood. Suddenly he started imitating my gestures, my walk, the way I spoke, calling me a girl, mocking me in front of everyone else. Everything inside of me broke. I will never forget his triumphant cackling with the others, while I stared at him with my eyes welling up. The shame I felt in that moment was worse than anything I ever experienced up to that point. Numb, I dropped the ball I was holding and silently walked home, fell into bed, buried myself under my blanket and sobbed for hours.

After that day, we never spoke again and he eventually moved away.

More than fifteen years later, I stumbled upon his profile on social media. Turns out, he became a beautician, has had a lot of plastic surgery done and most importantly is married to his husband. Personally, his treason is something that has impacted me greatly and I will never forget it. But what I started to understand as I got older was, that this act of betrayal was his only imaginable way of survival. Not only distancing himself from me but actively defaming me in front of others, to him was a form of self-preservation. Making them side against me, gave him social leverage in the playground hierarchy and by boldly stepping forward he achieved exactly that. He levelled up, at least one level right above me, just for him to be on the bottom of the pack, when I wasn't around. But even this state was better than where he was before. So, to him, it was worth it.

6.3. of practicing oneself

“Ein schwules oder queeres Leben zeichnet sich gerade durch die Fähigkeit – oder Notwendigkeit – aus, andauernd zwischen den Welten, zwischen den Räumen und Zeiten hin- und herzuwechseln. Von der normalen in die nicht-normale Welt und zurück.”

“A gay or queer life characterizes itself precisely through the ability – or necessity – to constantly switch back and forth between worlds, between spaces and times. From the normal world to the not-normal and back.”

(Didier Eribon 2016: 208)

Switching from elementary to secondary school, for whatever reason, I had high hopes for the bullying to stop. Especially because I was about to go to the Gymnasium. The highest of the three-level German school system. Growing up in a non-academic working-class environment, being the first in my family and our neighbourhood to go to the Gymnasium, I was under the delusional impression, that higher educated kids might be more considerate – they were not.

Overwhelmed by all the insults and daily harassment, my grades plummeted and I was faced with the decision of whether to repeat year eight at the Gymnasium or continue seamlessly at but downgrade to the Realschule. I nervously decided on the latter, because on one hand I wanted to escape the battles with my classmates, while on the other, I was influenced by the elitist Gymnasium notion that the Realschule was only for the poorly educated; and if I wasn't accepted at the Gymnasium because of my sexuality, how much worse would it be at the Realschule? But here too, I was simply *the faggot*. With the two major differences being that I had my grades completely under control again, which suddenly gave me a foundation

from which I could respond to the constant insults, I might have been the *faggot* but at least I had my grades under control.

The second difference was that I started to live out my first big love: fashion. I started to dress more consciously. Wearing things that I was bullied for one week and a big celebrity everyone loved wearing it the next. When I graduated Realschule as top of the year, during the ceremony my biggest bully's mother excitedly came up to me and told me the most surprising thing. At home, her son apparently couldn't stop talking about how well he thought I was dressed, how every week he asked her to buy the shoes, the pants, the shirts or accessories that I wore. And she thanked me for my influence on him.

Afterwards I continued my school career at another Gymnasium. With increased self-confidence, I entered a new environment with the chance to present myself as a new person. And I think this final change of school perhaps prepared me for my future life as a queer person in a revolutionary way. I wanted a radical transformation, completely reinvent myself. And so, I did.

In my search for my new role, I needed a kind of compass, a guide to rebuilding myself. And before I found the role models, I would shape myself after, I decided, consciously or unconsciously, to orient myself along what I was not. I found my direct counterpart in personified form – my father. To me, my father embodied everything I wasn't and did not want to be. He was machismo, harsh and crude in his language and gestures, unconcerned with his appearance and above all, had a hostile attitude towards queer people. Looking back, the desire to be different from my father ran through every stage of my life. Even as a child, he essentially served as a kind of compass and I always moved, consciously or unconsciously, in the opposite direction. Even when I started smoking, it had to be the sensitive intellectual French red *Gauloises* in contrast to the *Marlboros*, which my father smoked: rough, dirty, manly and giddy up on that horse. I started using the English writing of my name. *George* seemed more cosmopolitan, international and I felt it fit me and my aspirations better. I wanted the name change to free me from who I was before, my father's legacy of *Corç* just like *Gauloises'* marketing slogan: *George. Liberté Tourjours.*

Though I now feel like I am so far removed, that he can no longer even be located on my compass. Only physical similarities occasionally place him back on my map and with that comes a kind of resentment about the kinship. All the attributes I associated with him became

something abhorrent, something I did not want and of which I was never to be a part. The perfect guide to my transformation into queer life.

6.4. of dressing the part

“Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them: we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, [...] even in her face.”

(Virginia Woolf 2000: 132)

Throughout my pre-teens fashion has been my secret refuge, my very own hiding place that no one could access and consequently destroy. My childhood drawings transformed from my favourite TV show characters to fashion illustrations to whole collections of designs. Pokémon to Prada. Obsessively reading fashion magazines and watching runway shows not only became an escape from the harassment I was exposed to in my everyday life but it became a gateway into histories, personalities, styles, divergent gender performativities and sexualities that opened up my mind at hyper speed. Switching secondary schools for the first time didn't really give me the confidence to dress differently, it was rather a feeling of resignation, of whatever I do they'll bully me anyway, so why not. Without consciously realising it, I was un- and discovering parts of my queer ancestral-mythologies.

Designers like Nicolas Ghesquière, Alexander McQueen, Gareth Pugh and the most influential to me, Hedi Slimane. Creative director at *Dior Homme* Hedi Slimane presented an androgynous look for men that I've never seen before but immediately strived for; tight pants, button up shirts, leather jackets, pointy leather boots worn by tall, skinny, young, hairless, withered and white – Indie Sleaze.²⁵

My style change was sudden and a complete diversion from the street style sneakers, baggy pants and wide t-shirts I wore before. The first time I wore *Converse Chuck Taylors*, I had to

25 Schütz, Violaine (2026): “Back in the days, social networks like Myspace, Tumblr and the party photo blog Cobrasnake were everywhere and people would wear T-shirts with holes, spun tights, dirty baller flats, leopard prints, skinny jeans, thin scarves and tiny tank tops. But also pointed boots and thin scarves. The idea was to look like you came out of a concert or an after-party, wearing make-up that was often dripping and the attitude of the rock stars of the 1970s and 1980s. A climax of the style of that era? The Dior menswear shows by Hedi Slimane and the collections of American Apparel [...], April 77, The Kooples and Cheap Monday.” (<https://numero.com/en/fashion/after-the-y2k-trend-the-indie-sleaze-style-of-the-2010s-is-back-in-fashion/>)

brace myself before leaving the house, very aware that this will draw more focus than usual. And it did. But I never felt more like myself, so I walked differently, spoke differently, expressed myself differently and couldn't care less about what all of my bullies said or thought, because in the end it all stayed the same. I grew into a more confident teenager and for the first time I noticed looks directed at me on the streets that were filled with appreciation, acknowledgement and approval. Other like-minded people recognised my references, complimented me and I was able to make friends in and outside of school.

“Minority groups naturally strive to define themselves, for the individual’s self-identity is partly built on that definition. Young men are – in a way that older men circumvented with ready-made community purpose – thus required to build from scratch meaningful communities that provide a sense of self rooted in a sense of belonging.”
(Walt Odets 2020: 161)

Finding like-minded people was hard for someone that felt out of place and isolated. Fashion not only was my escape from reality but became my entry point into a shared reality I didn't know existed. With the rise of social media, I was able to construct a persona online that felt closer to my internal reality than anything else. I could present myself in a way that felt more coherent with how I presented myself in real life, so my fashion transformation was very much driven by this newfound appreciation I got online. The recognition I got on social media mainly came from other boys my age. We connected through groups dedicated to Hedi Slimane, posted photos of our outfits and started chatting.

There was this one exchange in particular with another boy, living in another German city, that helped me come to terms with my sexuality and I helped him with his. For months we wrote to each other every single day. We started out chatting about the latest *Dior Homme* collection, about music we were listening to like *Cocorosie* or this new artist coming up called *Lady Gaga*, reality TV-shows like *The Simple Life*, skinny jeans, new boots we got and somehow very slowly and very carefully talked about our private lives. The both of us had similar experiences at school and at home and we recognised our shared melancholy in every sentence. Messages got longer and we expressed more of our emotional worlds, our speech patterns changed and we ended up composing long heartfelt poems for each other. Without ever explicitly saying that we were both gay, we found a way around it transforming these chats of revealing ourselves into a Y2K version of handwritten letters out of all the romantic

novels we read at the time. But “All the boys I have ever loved have been digital. [...] I move him with my thumbs” (Owen Pallett: He Poos Clouds). And at some point, our communication slowly got lost in the sand. The chats are gone, we never met, I don’t remember his name but I will always remember finding the first person of my queer kin.

Meanwhile at my last secondary school, in full fashion transformation, there was a girl two grades above me that, every time I caught a glimpse of her in the hallways, I was in awe. She had the most incredible sense of style I ever saw in real life. One day, she walked past me, complimented my outfit and kept walking. This happened a few times and before I knew it, we were best friends. She worked as a model, was openly bisexual, just as obsessed with the same designers and music as I was and loved partying. We talked for hours on end about our favourite runway shows, our favourite models, imitated their walks, our favourite editorial photoshoots, exchanged our issues of the latest fashion magazines and I was so enamoured with her, that I just knew: I’m in love with her. I gathered all my courage and professed my love to her. She thanked me and laughed. Noticing how hurt I looked, she hugged me and in a warm loving tone said: *Honey, I think you might like boys. I think you’re gay.*

And for the first time I was called *gay*, without it being an insult, without it feeling like an attack, without me rejecting it. Everything I deep down knew about myself suddenly bubbled to the surface and for the first time in my life I audibly said: *Yes! You are right! I am gay!* It was a revelation that made all of me burst with life. I started going out partying with her and met more and more queer people. Models, musicians, photographers, designers, DJs, visual and performing artists, heirs to wealthy families. I became part of the bohème that I always read about and fantasised to be a part of someday. I entered a lineage of people like the *Club-Kids* of New York or the *Blitz-* and the *Boombox-Kids* of London. Just like RuPaul said: “We as [queer] people, we get to choose our family, you know. We get to choose the people that we’re around. [...] I am your family. We are family here” (RuPaul’s Drag Race 2013). And finding his historical and contemporary ancestors, this shy, lonesome and melancholic little boy transformed into a known club kid on Cologne’s scene. At fifteen.

“Queers have long been collectors because they are not the subject of official histories and thus have to make it themselves, collecting materials that others might see as marginal.”

(markzipan 2023)²⁶

26 Cvetkovich, Ann [@markzipan] (2023): <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqbpah4BRwc>

At fifteen, everything happened very quickly with my privileged, predominantly white, mostly older, wealthy and new, if not even my very first, group of friends. Suddenly, my queerness was being performed publicly and melodramatically: through the way I walked, spoke and dressed. My previously secret passion for fashion and art had now become a career. I took all the money my grandmother had so tediously saved up for me to get my driver's licence and travelled to fashion weeks in London, Paris and New York as a styling assistant. I just had to fit the role and I did. I got to know more and more influential figures in the fashion and art world. I even got to meet Hedi Slimane at a party.

Being surrounded by all these older people that were way more knowledgeable about all the things I thought I knew, wanted to know about or have never even heard of, I realised that I finally found my elders, my ones that came before, my kin. And I wanted to soak up everything I was subjected to. Before, I read J.D. Salinger and Anaïs Nin, quoted the most obscene passages from Henry Miller in bars, devoured Hermann Hesse and identified with *Narcissus and Goldmund*, the *Steppenwolf*, Greek mythology, the Italian Renaissance. After entering this new passage of my life, I was introduced to so much more explicitly gay and queer books, movies, art and aesthetics. Liza Minelli in *Cabaret*, *Maurice* by E.M. Forster, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, Tom of Finland, *Tod in Venedig* by Thomas Mann, films by Visconti, Pasolini, Greg Araki, John Waters and Divine, Gilbert & George, Andy Warhol and his *Factory*, David LaChapelle and Amanda Lepore. I was eager to collect everything they mentioned and couldn't stop consuming every single thing. I was starved for queer content and my new environment was showering me with exactly that. All these references sketched out an image of what a queer life is supposed to look like, what a life to strive for.

“Bringt die Verinnerlichung und Verkörperung einer sexuellen Ordnung in ähnlicher Weise einen sexuellen Habitus hervor wie die Aneignung einer sozialen Ordnung den Klassenhabitus?”

“Does the internalisation and embodiment of a sexual order give rise to a sexual habitus in a similar way to how the appropriation of a social order gives rise to a class habitus?”

(Didier Eribon 2016: 22)

And though, I was immersed in this queer life, finally connecting to queer lineages and being surrounded by queer ancestors and peers, something felt off and was missing. Constructing my queer mythology around sexually promiscuous wealthy white aristocracy, not only through the narratives I was uncovering for myself but through my chosen family and

community I inhabited, only made the gaps, the in-betweenness, I kept finding myself in, so much more evident. We not only lived in completely different class habitus' but they've also had vastly different lived experiences and references, opportunities and privileges to draw from. A few years later, this divergence of a class, interwoven with a sexual habitus, ripped wide open. So much so, that I lost touch to most of them because of it.

I started to feel like an outsider within my own lineage of outsiders and "the simple feeling of difference – often experienced as outsidership – can inhibit [...] productivity. If outsiders do not feel productive within their peer milieu, they must find personally meaningful, independent forms of productivity. Some gay boys do this with academic accomplishment, creative pursuits, or other expressions of talent that more conventional boys avoid" (Odets 2020: 135). Not being able to do unpaid internships any longer, having to work a paid job in order to survive, because of it, not participating in as much hedonism and decadence, being in a monogamous relationship, starting my academic trajectory and wanting a slither of general safety and structure in my life, collided with essential parts of their queer mythologies. And though I aligned myself within many aspects of these mythologies, some were so tremendously different from what was possible for me or I wanted.

This has led to a search throughout my life for more and different queer lineages to explore that lasts to this day. And although I share many rituals and traditions within the queer communities that I inhabit now, I feel like my queer expression is under inspection most of the time. They're either super femme or incredibly butch presenting, with little wiggle room in between. The ancestors I feel more connected to vary depending on my mood, the spaces that I enter, the people that I am with and especially whether I feel comfortable or not. These varying degrees of ancestral expressions of languages, traditional garments etc. come with certain expectations from the outside regarding my interests, be it the music that I listen to, how my trajectory in life has been, to my sexual preferences.

Being visually marked as a non-white man while being queer comes with a whole other set of preconceived notions in predominantly white queer communities. Biased ideas about what my behaviour could be, the tone of my voice, my interests as well as my sexual preferences are more than often expressed and the reality is either met with a feeling of disappointment or a euphoric interest, just in the way someone might be interested in a unicorn, fascinating but somewhat out of place.

Whereas predominantly non-white queer spaces oftentimes express other biased ideas regarding my external representation of expected intersectionality. I was called too Eurocen-

tric presenting, straight presenting, not representing my supposed national ancestry through visual codes or language.

“It’s funny, in German, ‘quer’ means from the side, like at an angle. And I guess that is what ‘queer’ always should be. It should challenge a certainty, and a sort of single reading of the word.”

(Showstudio 2023)²⁷

In my early thirties I was excited about my very first Pride experience. I wanted to make sure that I felt as good and comfortable as possible, which to me means a white tank top and black shorts. When I arrived at a friend’s place, I was met with a dozen other queer people, all getting ready to step out into the streets and be – proud. Everybody was either dressed up in fetish gear, jockstraps, nipple-pasties, a sea of rainbows, national flags or nothing at all but glitter. And though no one explicitly told me that I was inappropriately dressed or that I didn’t belong, I was asked multiple times when I was planning to change outfits. Suddenly I was on the fashion outs, and “As you know in fashion, one day you’re in. And the next day, you’re out.”²⁸ Feeling the pressure to adapt, I added a gemstone here and there and let myself be doused in glitter, suddenly overcome by something other than pride. There are multiple reasons as to why I went to Pride properly for the first time in my thirties, with the biggest being a feeling of not fitting into this glittery sex sea of rainbows that it was presented to me as. So, encountering these exact emotions in this environment, where everybody knew the codes, traditional garments and rituals of preparation, I couldn’t connect to this lineage.

Throughout the years, I’ve encountered different normativities in different queer communities in the way one’s queerness is supposed to be expressed. The way nation- or hetero-normative societies can make one feel like they’re not *right* enough, queer-normativities can reproduce the exact same sentiment, with dominant voices constructing dominant narratives to strive for in order to fit in. And these can vary from queer community to queer community with the only overlap being diverging from heterosexuality. And it seems like, “today’s gay communities – still living in [highly stigmatising societies] – are surprisingly divided on what it means to be gay and live a gay life” (Odets 2020: 76).

27 Tillmanns, Wolfgang [@showstudio] (2023): https://www.instagram.com/reel/CwA0QYiKj4_

28 Klum, Heidi: https://www.imdb.com/de/title/tt0437741/quotes/?item=qt0496908&ref_=ext_shr_innk

6.5. of desire without maps

“Having found their first experience of social currency in their sexual desirability, too many men are left feeling that the only interest another man might have in them is sexual.”

(Walt Odets 2020: 23)

This divide on what it means to be gay and live a queer life, a lot of times, is most apparent in my experience of physical sexuality. My social currency has never been my sexual desirability. Since I spent most of early life not really socialising with others and instead enveloped myself in gathering narratives and building a world of my own, my social currencies have always been my conglomerate of interests and the ability to relate them to everything and everyone. I never thought, people attached too much value to my physical desirability, if any. When I entered the social stage of my teenage years, I was surrounded by Eurocentric beauty standards for men. Everyone I was surrounded by, read about or watched on screen was tall, skinny and most importantly white with hairless bodies. And if they did have hairy bodies, they were muscular and stereotypically masculine. “Gay men are preservers of the masculine principle; gay men see the beauty. [...] Just to open any gay newspaper and you can see these gorgeous images that have a history. These hunks going all the way back to Greek art. I mean, the whole art tradition is preserved in gay male culture.”²⁹ And I did not fit into this image of gay ancestry, whatsoever.

This non-existent representation in my formative years, wanting to fit into what I thought my community deemed desirable, skewed the perception of my own body-image. It did not even cross my mind that anything physical I had to offer could be currency. So, while everyone around me was exploring and living out their sexual desires, I observed and stayed celibate.

A friend of mine at the time, older, gay and the head-bartender at one of my favourite places, once pulled me aside while we were hanging out after closing. Apparently, everyone was talking about my virginity, asking why I lived celibately and if I even was at all. His direct, open and honest approach, created a warm and safe, almost parental atmosphere. When I made myself vulnerable, opening up about how everyone around us looked, how I compared myself to them and how I was insecure about and afraid to be rejected because of my body-hair, he smiled, hugged me tightly and said in this typical *Köbes* way: *Oh, so you think people expect you to be smooth like dolphin with a beard like this?* He continued to tell me about all the people that were into me, asking about me and were trying to figure out if they had a

²⁹ @gayswhomemewell (2023): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cy3rUx2NcR1>

chance, feeling insecure themselves, thinking I was just not interested in them. For my elder to have the sensitivity to reach out, understand, validate and contextualise my feelings and perception was life changing.

Shortly after our exchange I entered my first relationship that lasted twelve years and was monogamous. Because it happened so quickly afterwards, I again, did not feel the need to sexually appeal to anyone else.

So, by the time I was single again in my early thirties, a lot had changed. The massive expansion of social media and technology offered accessibility to all kinds of body types as well as dating apps, which did not exist before. Being confronted with and evaluated by my physical desirability for the first time as an adult instead of my teens, relativised the worth of it as social currency immensely. I felt more comfortable in my body but most importantly I felt more secure in who I was as a person and what I had to offer. My sexual and social queer-currency's value is based on relating to people through deep emotional and intellectual conversations first, which consequently produces physical attraction to me.

Although, the excitement about exploring other and new traditions and rituals of connecting was undeniable.

6.6. of revisitations

“Ich liege also neben diesen Körpern, die in gewisser Weise die Erben dieses Texts, seiner Zeit, seiner Gefühle sind, der Politik aus dieser Zeit [...] Ich finde den Text gut, richtig gut, und dann gibt es diese Stellen, die ich schrecklich finde, die ich abstoßen muss [...].”

“So here I am lying next to these bodies, in a manner of speaking the heirs to this text, its time, its feelings, the politics of that time [...] I think the text is good, really good, and then there are these passages that I find dreadful, that I have to reject [...].”

(Kim de l'Horizon 2025: 71/72)

The excitement about my new single life and re-exploration coincided with the excitement about the beginning of my PhD research. And it was exactly this excitement, that made me want to reread all the books and rewatch the movies that were so important and I loved so much, when I exchanged my first Y2K love letters as a preteen. Hopeful, I uncovered my queer ancestors' relics; *Tod in Venedig*, *Maurice*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Nostalgia washed over me, it was like reuniting with some old friends, that have shaped, who you are now but you haven't talked to in decades. And sometimes life just happens; they change, you change and suddenly you recognise parts of one another, that shockingly repel you.

Though I still have very fond memories of engaging with these of my ancestors, they wrote from a perspective that did not include me at all. Other than being queer, I myself had close to nothing in common with their mythologies. They became a reflection of what and who I was surrounded by at the time of exploring my sexual habitus for the first time – the privileged white upper class. This initial confusion prompted me to reexamine and revisit possible queer ancestral narratives I lost along the way.

“First, because of long-standing developmental histories of trauma and isolation in a world of stigmatizing families and communities, many young gay men have nothing to reconnect to. They must find authentic connection for the first time in their lives.”

(Walt Odets 2020: 209)

By consciously reconnecting, returning, revisiting, re-examining my early childhood for possible queer ancestral lineages, I stumbled upon relics that I forgot I was even connected to. As I was constructing my father’s mythology through my perspective, I categorised everything connected to him, to be the furthest away from any slither of queer references. But by actively excavating narratives, I had to revise parts of his and my mythology.

We were a family that watched a lot of TV together, with my father mostly being in charge of what was on. So, it was mostly lots of martial arts movies, action packed with guns everywhere. But the television screen turned out to be somewhat of a portal into my family’s buried queer references, when memories started coming back of us watching a Turkish late-night cabaret show almost every weekend: *Huysuz Show*, *Huysuz ve Tatlı Kadın*, *Huysuz Şimdi Hostes*. Huysuz Virjin was the stage name of Turkish drag artist Seyfettin Dursunoğlu, who was regarded as a nationally renowned showbiz icon, comedian and the hostess of her own late-night shows. And this grumpy virginal glamorous old school insult comic drag queen was an integral part of our time spent together as a family and I was obsessed with her as a child. She had on all kinds of Turkish celebrities but I distinctly remember my favourite: Bülent Ersoy. One of the most famous singers of traditional arabesque Turkish music since the early 1970’s, always exaggeratedly flamboyantly dressed, huge hair, heavy makeup, a very controversial figure and a transwoman. As a child, seeing these two together going at it with insults and funny banter, singing and just being fabulous, I was transfixed.

When my mum and I watched my parents’ wedding VHS tape a few years ago, the time capsule portal that was our TV surprisingly unearthed another queer ancestor, that accompanied most of my childhood. And when I watched them have their first dance, the dictionary

of love was read backwards once more and I realised, we cannot be separated.³⁰ The song they first danced to, *Biz ayrılmayız*, was written and performed by another icon of traditional Turkish music and pop-culture, the *Sanat Güneşi* himself: Zeki Müren. A poet, actor, composer and singer, Müren is another one of these flamboyantly dressed gender-bending personalities, that I was exposed to a lot, because my parents were big fans and listened to their music. Big quaffed hair, lots of jewellery, heavy makeup, feathered boas, capes, fans, headpieces, high plateau boots, dresses, bodysuits – an apparition in a sea of sparkling sequins.

And though my parents were big fans of Huysuz Virjin, Bülent Ersoy and Zeki Müren, enjoyed their work, were entertained by them and exposed me and my sister to them, they never really contextualised any of the hetero-divergent parts of their beings. I distinctly remember both my parents always misgendering Bülent Ersoy, talked about Huysuz Virjin's supposed wife and children and generally ignoring Zeki Müren's play on gender expressions through fashion. It was something to be consumed, an entertaining freak-show that happened far away, in an imaginary land called showbiz. Still, I recognised parts of myself in them and that I did in fact have something, more ancestors to reconnect to.

6.7. of bubbles and stubbles

"A black gay person who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he's black or she's black. The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live."

(James Baldwin 2014: 66)

Asking myself, why exactly I lost these ancestors along the way in my process of embodying my sexual habitus and not others, like *The Last Unicorn* for example, the answer is very much connected to not being a part of a predominantly white society and its effects it had on me "I must face the Bull again and discover what he has done with them, before I forget myself forever" (*The Last Unicorn*: 01:00:39–01:00:45). Similar to rejecting Turkish and Arabic as languages, in order to fit in more and try to present myself as acceptable to dominant German society, I subconsciously rejected Huysuz Virjin, Bülent Ersoy and Zeki Müren as ancestral lineages, in order to keep up a predominantly white mythology, that I was taught to strive for. I have always been confronted with stereotypes others impose onto me. First and foremost, I am perceived as a

30 "Aşk lügatı yine tersten okundu ve anladım ki biz ayrılmayız" (Müren, Zeki 1989)

man, marked as an immigrant by dominant society and the associated stereotypes: dangerous and aggressive. The question of my sexuality only arises later. While initial encounters are often tinged with negativity and caution, my homosexuality can transform these interactions. Due to stereotypical assumptions about gay men, I suddenly no longer pose a threat. Because apparently gay men are soft, funny, friendly and therefore definitely not a threat.

Being forced to change or revise my behaviour, to accommodate my father's expectations about my being gay or society's expectations about my being non-white or a combination of both, turned out to be an almost impossible task, no matter how hard I tried.

Even before I knew about my own queerness, have ever heard about homosexuality, not to mention a supposed sexual habitus, I was always immediately identified as an effeminate kid. People, whether other children or adults, always seemed to know. And since "There is not a single gay man alive [...] who has not sometimes felt self-conscious or fearful about [being identified or recognised as gay] or touching a lover in public" (Odets 2020: 225), everyday life can sometimes be a struggle. On a daily basis I am confronted with, almost only, men that, the second they recognise me being queer, feel the need to demonstrate their masculinity by spitting on the ground, grabbing their crotches or they simply puff up their shoulders and start walking exaggeratedly manly. It seems like they are so consciously aware about their meticulously constructed male gender performance, that they instantly notice any slight diversion. Apart from those kinds of demonstrations of their wishful dominance, being called a *faggot* is another regular way of reassuring their masculinity. Compared to other, more physical altercations I have had though, relatively safe. But visible or presumed queerness does not only put one in danger. Sometimes it can also create safety.

Security checks at airports are a real ordeal for people who look like me. "TSA always wanna burst my bubble. Always getting random checks when I rock the stubble"(Swet Shop Boys 2016: T5). An experience I had at the New York airport illustrates this shift in perception and interaction depending on queerness quite well: After landing in New York City, I was taken out of the security check queue and had to wait, together with other exclusively non-white men, to be interrogated in a large room. It was obvious on what basis we were selected for these not so *random checks*. The officer responsible of carefully recording my replies to his straightforward and highly sophisticated interrogation-techniques needed to know where I worked, if I was a terrorist and, most importantly, who the woman was I was travelling with.

The border police officer insisted that I was in a romantic relationship with her. The second I objected and told him that I was gay, the interrogation ended instantaneously and I was suddenly *free to go*. In his opinion, my now known sexuality made me harmless, as apparently no one had ever heard of gay terrorists. Suddenly, the very thing, that puts me in danger otherwise, was the exact thing that testified my innocence. I swallowed my anger and confusion towards this *random check*, thinking just because of my sexuality, suddenly I couldn't be a terrorist? After being held up for several hours, the officer sent me off to enjoy my trip with a lovely: *I think we're done here*.

6.8. Fashioning Queer Threads

"I feel like, it's gay people, always having to pick up the heavy backpack of someone else's problem with our gayness. Being gay is very easy until straight people make it hard. It wasn't hard until you showed up and said you had a problem with it, bitch."

(goodchildrenpod 2024)³¹

Exploring and constructing one's queer ancestral-mythologies, just like every other ancestry, is an act of self-discovery and self-creation. It is made more burdensome by carrying the heavy backpack of someone else's problems with queerness, the weights and obstacles dominant societies put in place.

But while trying to fashion one's own queer narratives can be arduous under the weight of this backpack, the re-examination and research of personal ancestors is being carried and collected in multiple bags. Whether it's our own backpacks, tote bags or the 2004 *Balenciaga City Bag*, queer ancestral-mythologies are hidden and tucked away in the folds of all these bags of stories, experiences, references, encounters and circumstances, shuffled from one bag to the other, getting lost along the way and reemerging unexpectedly, transformed by residue lying on the bottom.

31 Mattel, Trixie [@goodchildrenpod] (2024): https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6d_DdUOkwF

“homosexual is not a noun. It might be a verb. Transitive. It is certainly an adjective but it is not a noun. If you ask the question, it means you don’t know anything about the human experience, where it can take you, what it can do. You know, and if you categorize the world in that way, then you lock yourself out from so much. Well, all I know about human life, I don’t know much. [...] But I don’t know, all I know about human life is, if I love you, I love you. And if I love you and duck it, I die.”
(danceinstituteofwashington 2024)³²

And perhaps this is exactly what a queer-ancestry ultimately is: not a stable lineage one simply inherits but an endless process of gathering and (re)tracing fragments, rehearsing gestures, revisiting ruins and learning to recognise oneself in the scattered reflections left behind by others. Some ancestors arrive loudly and immediately, others remain buried for years beneath shame, language or survival, only to suddenly re-emerge through a song playing in the background, a pair of boots, a drag performance on TV or the memory of a body moving through space in a way that resembles one’s own. Queer life, then, becomes less about arriving at a fixed identity than about continuously rearranging these collected remnants into something liveable. A mythology stitched together from contradictions, omissions, desires and projections. And maybe this constant reshuffling, this inability to settle into one singular coherent narrative, is not a failure of queer ancestry but precisely its defining condition.

There are moments in which these lineages feel almost tangible. A glance exchanged in the street, someone recognising your references, your gestures, your softness, your rage. A feeling of suddenly being located within a lineage of people that extends backwards and forwards at once. But there are just as many moments where this connection dissolves again. Where one becomes too queer, not queer enough, too feminine, too masculine, too migrant, too white, too working class, too academic, too visible or not visible at all. Queer ancestry offers the possibility of returning to the search again and again. And perhaps this repeated returning, these constant revisitation of the self through others, is its own ritual practice.

What remains are traces. A melancholic child reenacting *The Last Unicorn* in secret. Glitter rubbed onto bare skin before Pride. Cigarette smoke curling through nightclub bathrooms. Long deleted messages between lonely teenagers trying to invent a language for themselves. Huysuz Virjin laughing on a flickering television screen. A father’s silence. A mother’s fear. A friend’s betrayal. A stranger’s recognition. None of these fragments alone explain a queer life.

32 Baldwin, James [@danceinstituteofwashington] (2024): https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7z_jj8RvN2

But together, layered unevenly upon one another, they form a map without clear borders, directions or destinations.

7. Where are we really from? – Rewoven Tapestries

“If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again—if to do that is human, if that’s what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.”

(Ursula K. Le Guin 1986: 168)

Whether biological family, national, labour or queer ancestral-mythologies, a part of being human lies in the act of collecting, storing, contextualising and embedding oneself in the search for a communalised past, in order to be able to place oneself in a larger context of human history. There is then the possibility of creating alternative mythologies, in which past histories can be made present, the narratives fixed from *outside* can be overturned and reprojected into a future. In short, trying to uncover where you come from, who you are right now and where you are going is a journey everybody shares.

Ancestral-mythologies are nothing more than bags of useful, edible, beautiful trinkets collected in bags, baskets or whatever carrier containers fits best in a specific moment in time, that can be transformed into anything and everything at any given moment. And it is these exact constellations of trinkets and containers that make up a person. Another person might carry a similar bag or a completely different one, until you realise everybody simply carries fragments in bags, individually tailored and customised. Multiple containers, containing multiple fragments, fragmented across multiple spaces, spaced out into multiple timelines of ancestral-mythologies of past, present and future, that can be accessed by unearthing the ancestral-technology of storytelling.

But this technology, this method of producing ancestral mythologies is highly ambiguous. “On one hand it’s connected with an idea of truth, on the other hand it’s connected with an idea of invention, imagination, lies.”³³ It is this ambiguous method of ancestral-mythologies being written through storytelling, whether written by a family, a nation, a workplace, a sexual habitus, an individual or any other author, that creates a multiplicity of mythologised

33 Sontag, Susan [@250wpm] (2024): <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2STUV8unP8>

identities. Ancestral-narratives, just like every other story, can only arbitrarily be endowed with meaning precisely because of their ambiguity, even within the *same* framework, the *same* house. And since a mythology cannot arise from the nature of things, a fantasy is fabricated that, simply because it is born, becomes truth to one and simultaneously becomes a fantasy to others.

“Meine ›Genealogie‹ ist grau, sie ist anonym und stumm... Vielleicht war sie aber auch aufgebracht, revolutionär, vom Willen beseelt, große Geschichte zu schreiben, bevor sie sich, bis zum nächsten kollektiven Wutausbruch, wieder der Härte der täglichen Arbeiten unterwarf. Meine Genealogie ist die Genealogie der Unterdrückten.”

“My ›genealogy‹ is grey, it is anonymous and silent... Perhaps it was also upset, revolutionary, animate by the will to write great history, before submitting once more to the harshness of daily labour until the next collective outburst of outrage. My genealogy is the genealogy of the oppressed.”

(Didier Eribon 2017: 167)

These fantastical enigmatic stories of ancestry are not only ambiguous between different people but also within a single one. They are fluid and change constantly, not only regarding their meaning but their very existence ebb and flow into and out of our lives and our need for and the relevance we ascribe to these mythologies swell up and calm down. There needs to be an incitement that generates a reason to look for ancestral-narratives, that momentarily might hide in subjugation to hard physical labour or in transitional geographical or emotional states for example. The desire to go on a quest to unearth them, derives from confrontational feelings of something lost or something gained, feelings that boil down to the questions of *Where do I come from? Who do I belong to? Where will I go? Who am I?* So, we go and look for the answers to try to fill the rupture with stories – ancestral-mythologies.

These ruptures, gaps and folds open up a fruitful potential in constructing one's identities, making us scour every possible bag we've ever encountered for leaves and branches of lineages for us to align ourselves within. We incorporate these narratives into our personal mythologies and make them our own. But “Wem gehören diese Geschichten, hast du mich gefragt. Ich weiß nicht, ob sie überhaupt jemandem gehören. Sie gehören *zu* uns, aber sie gehören uns nicht” (Bektaş 2024: 310/311)³⁴. We don't own them, instead, we rather move

³⁴ “Who owns these stories, you asked me. I don't know if anyone owns them at all. They belong to us, but they don't belong to us”

through them and collect fragments, some actively, while some just attach themselves to us, and figuring out which ones we want to incorporate into our personal narratives, which ones we want to discard and some, we are not even aware of. Autonomously constructing one's ancestry requires an eagerness to transform through a close archaeological examination.

"it was kind of reverse engineering, as in, he tries to see his life as one of many, part of a pattern, so that what happened to him doesn't feel exceptional any more."

(Santanu Bhattacharya 2025: 50)

And this close archaeological examination, this transformation is kind of a reverse engineering of fragments we want to incorporate, update, reject or explain. But most importantly, we want to feel like being a part of something bigger than our individual selves. Ancestral-mythologies give us a sense of belonging and a headstart to human interactions and since we want to be a part of many, we want to see ourselves in histories and leave legacies. Even if we could be forgotten as individuals, we might at least be remembered as part of a collective. Most people in history are lost to the sands of time and when during one's own lifetime dominant voices try to overwrite, disregard or question your existence, the necessity for aligning oneself becomes a sort of survival strategy. So, being questioned about my very own belongings; not enough like my family members, not Turkish enough, not Armenian enough, not Christian enough, not wealthy enough, not queer enough etc. is what incited my dissecting of these patterns of ancestries. Deconstructing already applied lineages of mine, reconstructing them by looking for more differentiated strains and more in general. Reverse engineering these lineages and generating a new tapestry of ancestral-mythologies I feel more represented by.

"Für all die vielen ›Ichs‹, die man analysieren muss, stellen sich die gleichen Fragen: Wo liegt ihr Anfang? Wie weit reichen ihre Vergangenheiten und Geschichten zurück? [...] Reicht die Erfindung des Selbst unendlich weit in die Tiefen der Zeit zurück?"

"For all the many ›selves‹ that one has to analyse, the same questions apply: Where lies their beginning? How far back do their pasts and histories reach? [...] Does the invention of the self reach infinitely far back into the depths of time?"

(Didier Eribon 2017: 253/254)

The question about how far back in time we can, should or have to look for our ancestral-narratives lead back to the question in the very beginning: *WHERE do you REALLY*

come from? *WHERE* is an inquisition about a geographical locatedness, wanting us to disclose one single location that the inquisitor is satisfied with, not the one that might be real. Whereas *REALLY* in this context implies a want for something real, the truth. And since stories, namely ancestral-mythologies, are a highly ambiguous form of communicating truth and fantasy simultaneously, it is up to us to endow this realness with fantasies and these fantasies with realness.

How far to go back consequently is determined by the mythologies we seek to construct. Operating under the assumption of people *coming through* rather than *coming from*, the temporalities as well as geographies and communities of our ancestries can thus be ruptured into a multiplicity of narratives, reaching back as far or recently as desired. “The pursuit of history is only for those who have a stake in the future” (Bhattacharya 2025: 246). And the very act of looking back, no matter how far, is in itself an act of creation. A creation of multiple histories, ancestries, identities and futures, of oneself and for generations to follow.

“Orlando? (if that is one’s name) meaning by that, Come, come! I’m sick to death of this particular self. I want another. Hence, the astonishing changes we see in our friends. [...] Orlando? Still the Orlando she needs may not come; these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs. Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of wine – and so on; for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him – and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned at all.”

(Virginia Woolf 2000: 212/213)

When I’m writing up the multiplicities I inhabit and embody every single day of my life – my ancestral-mythologies – I can’t help but feel like “when communication is established they fall silent” (Woolf 2000: 216). It seems like unearthing my personal *coming through anecdotes* about my biological family, nation-states, labour and queerness suddenly speak of an isolated individualism; simply a person that is connected to a collection of stories, when in fact everybody is and when distilled to its essence, everybody has lived multiple lives during their lifetimes; *little melancholic Corç, fashion-obsessed George, the child of immigrants Corç, the religious George, the faggot George, the barkeeper George, the artist and researcher Corç/George etc.* But all of these multiple variations have come through histories, experiences, memories, have

encountered people and references that are older and more significant than the individual manifestations they take on momentarily during our lifetimes. They collectivify.

It is these mythologies that we create, that not only define us but connect us to each other, to something lived, that is bigger than the individual. So why connect through only one or two ancestral-mythologies, when we can connect through so many more.

“Heute habe ich gedacht, wir sind gar nicht von Gott. Wir haben uns nur ausgedacht und uns erfunden. Da war ich ganz ruhig und hab gesagt: Bis hierher bin ich gekommen, und hab getan, was ich kann.”

“Today I thought, we’re not from God. We have just thought ourselves up and invented ourselves. And I was very calm and said: I’ve come this far, and I’ve done what I can.”

(ROSE 2026)

The greatest fantasy of all dominant ancestral-mythologies is the insistence that people come from one place, one lineage, one truth, one language, one body, one God, one nation, one desire, one history. But nobody actually comes *from*. We come *through* ruptures. Through families, misunderstandings, projections, performances, translations, fantasies, lies, reinventions and inherited fragments we spend entire lifetimes rearranging into something viable. The very act of demanding a singular ancestry already exposes the violence of the question itself. Because no human being is singular. We are accumulations. Carriers of contradictory histories, incompatible desires and unfinished narratives that continuously bleed into one another.

The longer I searched for *where I really come from*, the more impossible the question itself became. Because every answer generated another rupture, another contradiction, another lineage branching into countless others. Biological ancestry dissolved into the national. National ancestry dissolved into religion. Religious ancestry into queerness. Queer ancestry dissolved into class. And underneath all these layers there was never a singular mythology waiting for me but only more stories, more references, more fragments, more selves multiplying endlessly through time and space. Not roots, but routes. Not belonging, but constant negotiation.

To search for ancestry is not to uncover some untouched authentic core hidden underneath layers of time but to realise there never was one to begin with. There is no original self, waiting patiently at the centre of the labyrinth to be uncovered. There are only stories. Stories repeated so often they become truth. Stories denied so violently they become silence. Stories

inherited, discarded, rewritten and performed until they materialise into supposed identities that feel stable enough to move through the world. But even these identities remain temporary containers. Bags filled with references, memories, losses, gestures, languages, bodies and desires that constantly leak into one another. We do not find ourselves at the end of the excavation. We fabricate ourselves through the excavation itself.

And maybe this is the answer to the question: *Where are we really from?* We are from everybody and nobody. From what was buried, hidden and what survived. From what was carried across borders, whispered across generations, hidden in plain sight, lost in translation and violently erased. We are from all the people who invented themselves because the world refused to imagine them otherwise. And if ancestral-mythologies are inventions, then so are nations, genders, classes, religions, borders and every other story pretending to be natural.

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