

Blaming Kehl: Muslim Turkish Men and their Moral Journey in the Franco-German Borderland

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Abstract

*Geographical space is more than a Cartesian plane where actors move across coordinates. It has a moral weight that renders each move subject to moral discourse. Yet, rarely does this premise prevent people from exploring spaces that are associated with anything wrong or bad. In fact, we continue to find people in places where they should not be, and doing things that are not just communally shunned but also personally acknowledged to be wrong or bad. Why is that the case? This paper draws on my ethnography on Turkish men who live in Strasbourg and socialize in its German neighbor, Kehl, to examine the role of space in the production of moral and masculine dispositions and practices. Approaching the Strasbourg-Kehl border as a moral boundary, I examine how crossing the border to Kehl constitutes an integral part of the journey that my interlocutors take in constructing their moral and masculine selves. In this journey, spatial transgressions are not diverted but embraced, and confronted. These transgressions also produce anxieties—mistakes which in moments of self-reflection lead to regrets. In such moments, two logics come into play: consequentialism and blame. The first builds on Islamic notions of fallibility and *nefs*, while the latter brings Kehl into the picture as a moral alibi—a space that takes blame for sins. The latter also helps others in the community who fail to prevent men from going to Kehl and transgressing moral boundaries to transpose culpability. In conclusion, I emphasize the need to consider the making and maintenance of masculinities and moralities in conjunction with the lived environments where such identities are formed and performed.*

[Morality; Masculinity; Borderlands; Turks in France, Germany; Migration]

Geographical space is more than a Cartesian plane where actors move across coordinates. It has a moral weight that renders each move subject to moral discourse. “The ‘where’ of the people, how they are situated in relation to others in geographical space and place,” argues David M. Smith, one of the pioneers of the moral turn in scholarship on space and place, “has fundamental implications for what might be the right or wrong things to do” (1998, 9). Many, including Turkish men in France and Germany, seem to take Smith’s premise to heart. Most of them would agree that home is the right place to be, or the mosque a good space to socialize, while considering coffeehouses and other leisurely venues as being bad and inviting sin. Yet, in practice, I would encounter these men in places where they should not be,

doing things that are not just communally shunned but also personally acknowledged to be wrong or bad. Why is that the case?¹

There is a rebellious element in spatially transgressive practices, which is often associated with manhood (Broude 1990; McDowell 2002; Morrell 1998), motivating me to explore the ways that masculinity implicates transgressions of a moral and spatial kind. My ethnography on Turkish men in Strasbourg and Kehl has left me with numerous stories that show how the production of Muslim male subjectivities in the Franco-German borderland involve transgressive practices that generate moral anxieties, both for the community as well as the individuals engaging in these practices. Yet, trespassing physical and moral borders is a given—an expected practice even, from young men just starting their journey toward becoming moral Muslims. Transgressions are not something my interlocutors try to divert. Rather, they embrace and confront them. For them, being a moral Muslim means not just following the commands stated in the Qur'an or preached by Islamic preachers, or *imams*, which would lead to living highly restrictive lives (such as that of Cebrail, whom I recount in the following pages) but also engaging in spatial and moral transgressions in their youth, and later thinking about the consequences of said actions and tackling the outcomes.

In recent years, excellent research has been done on the role of space in the making of moral subjectivities, and in particular Muslim/devout/pious masculinities (Gerami 2005; Ouzgane 2006; Samuel 2011; Kandiyoti 2016; Gökarıksel and Secor 2017; Khan 2018). This research complements what has long been analyzed within the context of Islamic female subjectivities (Ardener 1981; Bauer 1985; Göle 1996; Secor 2002; Mahmood 2004; Falah and Nagel 2005). I intend to build on extant research and intersect it with insights from my ethnography of two neighboring border towns. The data I present comes from interviews held with members of the Turkish community who adhere to the Hanefi school of Sunni Islam, which constitutes the majority denomination in Turkey. This is an important point to keep in mind as the theological teachings of Hanefi Sunnism differ from other schools and denominations, such as the Şafîî, another Sunni school of thought, or Caferi, Alevi, and Bektaşî, which are Shi'a branches of Islam. My analysis on Islamic morals therefore applies to the Hanefi Sunnis alone.

Border towns are spaces that produce “mobile” or “borderland” subjectivities (Saldivar 1997). Here, mobile denotes not only increased possibilities for physical mobility, which may be enjoyed by some and restricted to others, but also the kind of mobility where moral boundaries are transgressed (Vila 2003). Thus, this paper urges us to think of the practice of crossing the border from Strasbourg to Kehl as not only a geographical practice but also a moral one.

Strasbourg has plenty of its own vices. But its German neighbor, Kehl, is often considered the hub for evils that attract young and middle-aged Muslim men. Many of my interlocutors who live in Strasbourg frequent Kehl on a daily basis to buy cigarettes or to fill up their gas tank, both

of which are cheaper in Germany. But there is also fear that their trips may include a stop in other venues that Kehl is known for, such as shisha lounges, nightclubs, betting alleys, and gambling venues. With the exception of gambling venues, the rest can also be found in Strasbourg. Yet, it is Kehl that gets the blame.

That it is men who engage in these cross-border trips after work adds further nuance to my analysis and helps me to contribute to a larger discussion about how men form themselves in relation to and through Kehl, and how these trips lend themselves to a broader conversation on Islamic manners and morals, which my interlocutors are expected to abide by. In this conversation, Kehl, which is only a few minutes' drive east of Strasbourg, is brought up as a threat to the community's moral fabric. The many monikers Kehl has attained over the years reaffirm the understanding that Kehl is no mere neighbor. It is the swamp, the Sin City—a place where the Devil, the *Şeytan*, is ever-present.

I do not disregard the mobility of women in Strasbourg, but my focus is on men's mobility and leisure as they constitute the primary group of people to whom—as a male researcher—I had greater access. Moreover, much of my participant observation in Kehl took place in homosocial spaces—that is, venues frequented by men. Often times, while these men were outside, the women—their wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers—would be at home, socializing in each other's homes or going for walks around the neighborhood. It was brought to my attention that younger women did gather in outside spaces such as cafes and restaurants in Strasbourg and Kehl, but my data on such leisurely activities is limited. It would, however, be very interesting to read similar research conducted by a female researcher, to see whether such moral queries take shape among women as well, becoming part of the construction of pious or Islamic femininities in this borderland.

The production of Kehl as a leisurely space circumscribes moral and masculine dispositions, and underlines the complex ways in which Islamic masculinities are produced in this borderland. In their reflections on the moral composition of Muslims, my interlocutors would commonly agree that they should be spending time at home with family members, or in mosques with other Muslims, rather than visiting shisha lounges, nightclubs, betting alleys, casinos, or “bistro-casinos” in Kehl.² This acknowledgment, however, is rarely put into practice. On paper, the discrepancy between discourse and practice may seem to reveal a contradictory logic, where these men act in ways that confront their conviction. Yet, for my interlocutors, the path to morality is laid with contradictions, making it not a linear but a digressive journey. Most men engage in such digressions rather than follow a rigid moral path as described in the Qur'an or preached by the imams. “Mistakes are to be made,” Süleyman Bey will remind us in one of the stories that follow. “They are necessary to grow up, and have something for which a man could later repent.” Certainly, not everyone embraces their mistakes with the same openness. The story of Cebraïl, for example, provides an example of a young man who refrains from sin (Alyanak

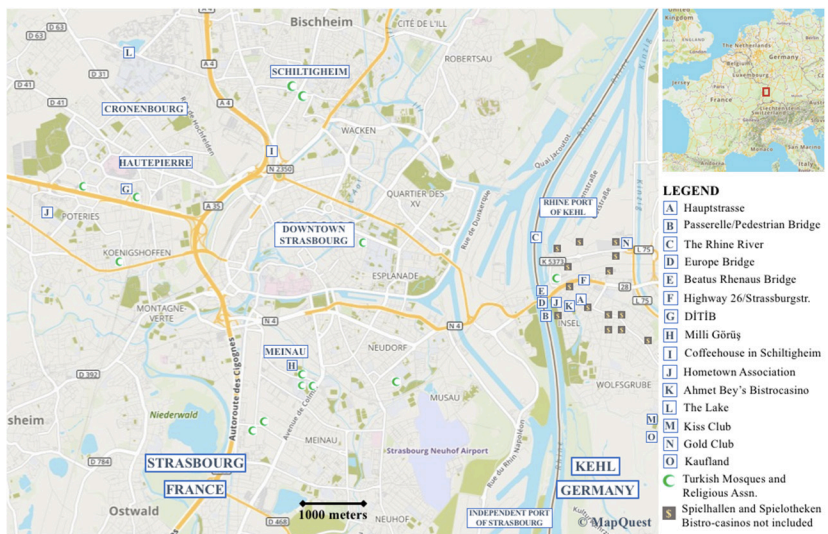
et. al 2018). So, why do other men not follow the examples set by Muslims like Cebrail, by limiting their spatial and moral transgressions by way of avoiding spaces that are inviting of immoral or sinful behavior? And how do they confront the anxieties that these transgressions generate? I find part of the answer in a what Robbins (2004) describes as a consequentialist logic. The other part has to do with Kehl, which, as a moral alibi, helps to transpose sins from the individual to a space. I will explain what I mean by these terms later in this paper.

Kehl circumscribes moral and masculine dispositions, and underlines the complex ways in which Islamic masculinities are produced

Transgressions, however, are not individual acts alone. They are also perceived to be committed communally. Mistakes affect not only those who partake in them; they also encompass actors close to those who engage with said mistakes in the first place. My interlocutors' trips to Kehl, and their "sinking" in the "swamp," bring in other actors such as wives, fathers, close friends, or community leaders like imams into the picture. These actors are expected to dissuade their peers from committing sins by checking on each other and helping them avoid "losing their path." When such checks do not produce favorable outcomes, and men continue to visit Kehl, those close to them also have to share the burden. To evade this burden, they transpose responsibility onto a space they deem guilty of moral transgressions. Like the men who frequent Kehl, they, too, blame Kehl.

Locating Kehl

For most Turks in Strasbourg, Kehl constitutes a key part of daily life. Aside from taking weekend strolls on its main street, the Hauptstrasse [A]³, or the river walk by its recently built bridge, Passerelle des Deux Rives/Brücke der zwei Ufer [B], many attend the beautifully decorated Kehl mosque to perform religious rituals, stop by its tobacco shops and gas stations to buy cigarettes and gas at a discount, visit ice cream shops and restaurants for snacks and Turkish delicacies, and shop at its supermarkets.



Yet, key texts on Turkish migration to Strasbourg, which discuss the binational character of this European capital (Western 2007) and draw attention to the transnational ties that shape daily life and politics in the city (Brabant 1992; Brabant and Sahli 1992; Selimanovski 1992; Tapia 1994; Tapia 1996), omit a critical engagement with Kehl. At best, Kehl is spoken of as a convenient stop for cheaper cigarettes and higher quality auto-repair services (Western 2012, 90), or as a cross over en route to the Frankfurt airport (Ibid, 154). I see at least two reasons behind this omission. The first has to do with a lack of comparative local perspective in migrant incorporation (Schiller and Çağlar 2009), where movement across different European cities is rarely problematized. Instead, research retains its focus on migrant incorporation in specific locations, and neglects the ties that migrants maintain to the various cities they travel to. This leads scholarship to reproduce the very approach it critiqued in the first place—methodological nationalism—and analyze migrant movement only across sending and receiving contexts. However, my interlocutors do more than engage in trips between Turkey and France. Many of them travel around Europe—to various German cities across the border such as Kehl, Offenburg, Saarbrücken, Karlsruhe, and Mannheim—in search of economic and leisurely opportunities.

The second reason is temporal and has to do with Kehl's recent rise to prominence as a leisure town. Initially founded as a fishing village by the banks of the Rhine [C] in 1038, Kehl has retained its importance for successive French and German emperors for both its defensive and commercial value. It obtained city status in 1774 (Kehl Marketing). Although Kehl was repeatedly annexed by French and German Empires, and lost much of its population to outmigration during the Second World War, in 1953, it became part of the Federal Republic of Germany, and since then has served an important role as a port city. In 1960, the Pont de l'Europe/Europabrücke/Europe Bridge [D] was built, replacing a temporary bridge built in 1951, with a border post on the German side used for border control, which, though unoccupied, is preserved to this day. Prior to the Schengen Agreement, inhabitants of Strasbourg were required to obtain a visitor's pass and present it at this checkpoint. Today, border police are still present on the Europe Bridge, but passport controls are rarely conducted.

Kehl has long been a gateway between France and Germany, but more recent developments have helped foment the transnational ties that bind it to Strasbourg. Since the Schengen Agreement came into effect in 1995, a number of trans-border agglomerations known as Eurodistricts have been established in the European Union (van Houtum 2000). One of the first was the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict, which encompasses over 950,000 inhabitants in eight cities located at both sides of the Rhine, including Strasbourg and Kehl (Reitel and Mouillé 2015). In official French and German accounts, the Eurodistrict is celebrated for encouraging trans-border exchange, cooperation and integration, and attracting investment

for cross-border infrastructural projects such as a pedestrian bridge built in 2004, a rail-bridge renovated in 2010, and a tram line built over the Beatus Rhenaus Bridge [E], which was opened in 2017.⁴ But in accounts provided by Turkish inhabitants, these ties also bring a heightened proximity to a space that they consider morally polluting.

Today, Kehl is recognized as one of the central hubs for gambling across the Franco-German borderland.⁵ As Strasbourg takes stricter measures to limit on-table and machine gambling to spa-resorts, Kehl fills this void (Centre Européen de la Consommation 2019). With factories moving their production lines overseas, many of the lots that were previously part of the industrial complex north of Highway 26/Strasbourgstrasse [F], the main highway connecting Strasbourg to Kehl, now accommodate large casinos, betting alleys, and nightclubs.

The transformation of Kehl into a city known for its nightlife and gambling scene has also gained media attention in recent years. An article published in *Politico* coined the term “Strasbourg’s Tijuana” when describing Kehl, with the author highlighting it as the main destination for European parliamentarians who gather for their monthly meetings in Strasbourg’s European Parliament.⁶ Another, in the French weekly *L’Express*, called Kehl “Strasbourg’s casino.”⁷ Yet another, this time on a regional TV station, *France3Alsace*, called attention to all-nighters in Kehl’s casinos, which are open until three am on weekdays and five am on weekends.⁸ In these accounts, Kehl is rarely mentioned as a stopover for food or groceries. And rarely is it spoken of as part of Germany. Instead, it is described as Strasbourg’s problematic appendage, which feeds on constant demand from the inhabitants of Strasbourg as well as neighboring French towns such as Bischheim and Erstein. It is likely that future research on migrant incorporation in Strasbourg will focus more on the Kehl connection.

A City That Steals Husbands

When I first began my fieldwork in July 2013, my focus was solely on Strasbourg; however, I realized that omitting Kehl would mean ignoring a variable that played a central role in shaping my interlocutors’ daily routines. One encounter was key to this realization. Within my first week after arriving in Strasbourg, I headed to Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği (DİTİB—[G]).⁹ Located in the city’s Hautepierre *quartier*, a migrant-populated neighborhood northwest of Strasbourg, DİTİB was one of the two mosque associations listed on Google—the other being Milli Görüş [H].¹⁰ Attending activities such as the daily *salats*, the prayers that some Muslims attend communally in mosques, as well as the *Cuma*, the communally prayed Friday salat, I could meet a range of Turkish men, and later reconvene with them in their workspaces, homes or at venues outside.

On my way to the premises, I saw a woman in her fifties, wearing a long mantle and a headscarf, trudging a few steps ahead. A Turk, perhaps.

As a male researcher, I knew that including women in my sample could be tricky as female socialization—especially among conservative Muslims in Turkey—commonly took place in female-exclusive spaces. The situation was not different in the diaspora. Mosque associations, which would normally be attended by male members of the congregation for not only religious rites but also to socialize, organized special days—*matinéés*—dedicated to women, which I was told not to go to.¹¹ So, I acted on the idea of taking a detour from my initial plan to have a quick conversation with her.

“*Selamun Aleyküm ablacım* [older sister]. May I help you carry your bags?” I asked, hoping that my friendly gesture, which is expected of younger Turks, would not be ill-conceived.¹² Startled by my intervention in Turkish, she asked me who I was. I told her that I was from Turkey, but not from central or eastern Anatolian highlands like most Turks in Strasbourg. I knew that a large majority of Turks came from rural Anatolia, and in particular, three cities: Kayseri, Konya and Sivas. Those who have been migrating since the mid-1960s, and especially starting late 1970s and early 1980s also included Kurdish families from the southeastern province of Kahramanmaraş (de Tapia 1989, 2009). As a young man from Bursa, a city of over three million located within a three-hour drive south of Istanbul, I was somewhat an outsider to the Anatolian peoples and cultures. I had also lived half my life outside of Turkey and was then a graduate student in the United States, meaning that unlike my research subjects who built more or less permanent lives in my research site, I was only visiting Strasbourg in search of a research topic. I mentioned that the study would focus on the leisurely activities of Turkish men in Strasbourg. Men such as her husband, for example.¹³ I explained that in order to recruit research participants, I was on my way to DİTİB. But I would also welcome the opportunity to talk to her if she had a few minutes to spare.

While my invitation was turned down, the encounter left me with advice that would guide my fieldwork. If I wanted to know where the Turkish men were, I must not go to a mosque but instead visit the coffeehouses, and the *makinelere* [slot machines] in Kehl. I could even encounter her husband there, she added, because Kehl had stolen him from her.

What she meant by that became clear in days to follow. Car rides, which were offered by men with the intention of showing me around, would often skip Strasbourg and take me straight to Kehl. Kehl seemed to play a central role for these men, but at that point, I was neither aware of the transgressions this border town enabled, nor had a clue about its role in shaping my interlocutors’ moral journeys. In my subsequent visits to Kehl, I could not escape the sheer presence of two venues: kiosks/*tabacs*, which are small shops that mainly sell alcohol and tobacco products, and casinos/*bistro-casinos*. Along with coffeehouses, most of which also accommodated in-house slot machines, these venues were filled with Turkish men, just like the older sister

If I wanted to know where the Turkish men were, I must not go to a mosque but instead visit the coffeehouses, and the makinelere [slot machines] in Kehl

told me. Gambling, moreover, was not limited to casinos. Most *imbisses* (fast food shops) and restaurants had neon signs indicating the presence of a room dedicated to slot machines. Some were run by Turks, such as Ahmet Bey, whom I introduce in the following pages. It was astonishing to see a seventy-five-square kilometer border town with a population of thirty-five thousand inhabitants, which is roughly one tenth the population of Strasbourg, accommodate twenty-eight *Spielhallen* (casinos), 122 “bistro-casinos,” and 671 slot machines, eventually forcing the state of Baden-Württemberg to pass legislation in 2017 administering a five hundred-meter rule for the establishment of new ones. Journalists noted that twenty-six of the twenty-eight casinos already operational in Kehl did not meet this standard.¹⁴ But the state was hesitant to enforce the rule on existing casinos because in Kehl alone, these establishments brought in 2.8 million Euros in tax revenue.

Borderland Morality

So far, my analysis has focused on the production of space (Kehl) as an element that generates moral anxieties. In this section, I would like to qualify what I mean by the term “moral,” and talk about the shape Islamic morality takes in my field site.

Conversations on morality are often anchored in moral universals. The line demarcating what is good and right or bad and wrong, especially in official accounts preached by religious servants such as imams, refer to universal doctrines stated in holy texts like the Qur’an. In these accounts, Allah’s word is taken as the ultimate guide to regulate practices regardless of where Muslims live. Acknowledging that particular challenges may rise as Muslims expand beyond their Islamic lands, “the dar-al-Islam,” Muslims are asked to overcome these challenges by sticking to moral universals, transforming the new lands they inhabit (Yapp 1992).

Yet, morality, in practice, works outside this realm of universals, and demands an emphasis to local specificities to discuss the different forms Islamic thinking takes in different sites. This is what John Bowen calls a localizing approach to Muslim identities, that is, “paving the path to understanding how putatively universal claims are made and taken up in specific cultural and physical terrains” (Bowen 1998, 261).

Within the context of Muslims, morality is generally considered aspirational, to live life as “good Muslims” who do the good and right deeds and avoid the wrong, bad or sinful ones (Siddiqui 2012). One principle, known as *hisba*—a Muslim’s obligation to command good and forbid evil (Cook 2003)—serves as a guiding principle in demarcating the licit from the illicit, and good deeds from bad ones. In practice, however, morality is often navigated in a state of in-between. The boundaries demarcating the moral and the immoral are fluid,

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navigated in practice, and evaluated through lengthy discussions amongst individuals and institutions (Bowen 1993; Lambek 1993). Morality is an “unsystematic conglomerate of different moral registers that exists in parallel and often contradict each other” (Schielke 2008, 530). Similar to the young Egyptian men whom Schielke writes about, some Turkish men with whom I fasted during the month of Ramadan or attended Friday and post-fasting *Teravîh* salats could also be found in front of slot machines or en route to venues where intoxicants may be consumed, and norms dictating male-female encounters transgressed. In discourse, these men would speak of aspirations to be good Muslims, but in practice, they would go astray and chase the illicit. The ambition to live moral lives, then, entails a journey filled with “ambiguity” and “conflicting demands,” moral compromises, and failures (Simon 2009, 38; Janson 2016, 269). Morality is flexible, especially in matters pertaining to leisure and fun (Deeb and Harb 2013).

While this flexibility is an integral part of Muslim subjectivity, it is also a contentious one. This contention is not something my interlocutors avoid but rather something they embrace and confront. Most of my interlocutors would agree that sins are integral to the making of Muslim selves, and repentance is an important institution they adhere to, which explains why even those who engage in illicit practices often continue to pray regularly, as Janson’s Muslims in West Sumatra do, or fast during Ramadan, an imperative that Schielke’s interlocutors ardently follow. Most of these practices are also spatial, though few scholars point out the role space plays in shaping leisurely practices. One exception is Deeb and Harb’s ethnography of southern Beirut, which shows how different neighborhoods are conceptualized as places that are dangerous ones that must be avoided (Deeb and Harb 2013). Another is Gökarıksel and Secor’s ethnography of young Muslims in different cities in Turkey, where cities such as Istanbul are conceived as being more welcoming of transgressions, while cities like Konya, a conservative staple, are seen as being restrictive of transgression (Gökarıksel and Secor 2017). A similar logic applies to my own fieldwork in Strasbourg. While most of my interlocutors were aware that they should work toward avoiding places where they may be tempted to consume alcohol or engage in *zina* (sexual affairs outside of marriage), they also argued to be fallible. They considered themselves at the mercy of their *nefs*, the body/soul that is constantly tested by its carnal and material needs—a theme they must have heard regularly in Friday sermons or at other religious gatherings. Mistakes, they added, were to be made in one’s youth in order for an individual to come to his senses and find the right path. And with the exception of *şirk* (idolatry), all sins would be forgiven by Allah so long as the believer repents.

Most imams would find this reasoning problematic as there is no certainty regarding the resolution of sins. While they would acknowledge that certain instances, such as war or famine, may force a Muslim to knowingly engage in haram (a situation discussed under Islamic legal terminology of *darura*), in the case of leisure, they would be

expected to resist worldly temptations. They would add that one could die a sinner this very moment and never find the chance to repent.

In Islam, there is no worldly arbiter like that of a priest in Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and no practice involving mediated repentance like the sacramental confession (Asad 1993, 97). Allah is the ultimate arbiter who will weigh one's good deeds against sins and come to a judgment regarding the punishment and rewards in the afterworld. An imam only serves as an adviser, reminding Muslims of what constitutes a sinful practice by referring to the Qur'an and the *hadiths*, Prophet Muhammad's commands, which are compiled in numerous books by earlier jurists in Islam. How, then, do my interlocutors come to a resolution on continuing to sin while knowing their actions are punishable by Allah?

Allah is the ultimate arbiter who will weigh one's good deeds against sins and come to a judgment regarding the punishment and rewards in the afterworld

The answer lies in two underlying logics. The first logic, which is deontological (Robbins 2004, 2010), entails an individual adhering strictly to the right and wrong as stated in the Qur'an, and with some reservations, in the *hadiths*, in order to avoid morally ambiguous situations. The young imam apprentice, Cebrail, whom I describe in another text, recounts his struggles to retain his purity amid what he considers a morally polluting space (Alyanak et. al 2018). Cebrail feels a sense of anxiety as he walks through the university district, which is where his mosque/flat is located. The idea of encountering young and intoxicated men and women in his walks after morning prayer frightens him. He tries to limit these encounters by pacing his walks as he cannot avoid the district altogether. However, even in his limited encounter with "pollution," Cebrail acknowledges the presence of moral conundrums, and prays and repents, hoping that Allah will absolve him of any sins he may have unintentionally committed. In other Islamic contexts, attempts to avoid sins lead to the refashioning of spaces, such as one's body (the uses of the headscarves in Gökarıksel and Secor 2012; Lewis 2015) or neighborhood (establishing "Shari'a Zones" in Pieri et. al 2014, opening up new mosques in Sunier 2012–13; Desplat and Schulz 2014), and building "moral communities" structured around the Islamic law commonly known as *sharia* (Werbner 1996; Henkel 2007; de Koning 2013; Gökarıksel and Secor 2017).

The second option is consequentialism, where an individual engages with practices that are transgressive or morally dubious, and lives with the understanding that come Judgment Day, he will face the consequences of his actions. Many Muslims I encountered in Kehl can be categorized as consequentialists in that they willingly engage in morally transgressive practices. However, when asked to reflect on their leisure choices, they first share their regrets and then seek moral culpability elsewhere—in their weak will, which they find at the mercy of the *nefs*; in other people, who they may consider to be

bad influences; or in spaces like Kehl, to which they would ascribe a morally corrupting nature.

It is within this conjuncture that Kehl matters. It plays the role of a moral alibi that transposes moral accountability on to a space considered morally polluting. This is not a practice unique to my interlocutors, or to the Franco-German borderland. Strip clubs in a southeastern American town (Frank 2002), a southern neighborhood of Beirut that offers alternative modes of leisure (Deeb and Harb 2013); border towns such as Detroit-Windsor (Karibo 2015) and El Paso-Ciudad Juarez (Vila 2003), which are famed for their sex work, heroin scene, or illegal migration; or an entire continent such as Europe, which some Muslims associate with the “dar-al-harb,” the abode of struggle/war (Henkel 2004), are also blamed for enabling practices considered illicit or immoral. Roxanne Doty’s research on the US-Mexico border underlines this logic. She shows how the Sonoran Desert, which covers parts of the US-Mexico border, is seen as a moral alibi that takes responsibility from individuals and directs it to a space known for its harsh conditions: “The natural geography of migrant crossing areas provides a convenient moral alibi in terms of where to locate responsibility for the deaths. State officials can simply let ‘nature take its course’” (Doty 2011, 608). By blaming the desert, responsibility for violence is deflected from policies enacted by state officials and border reinforcement units. In his ethnography, Jason De Leon also uses Doty’s theoretical intervention, and approaches the Sonoran Desert as an agent where “people and objects don’t act in isolation, but instead have complex relationships at different moments across time and space that sometimes create things or make things happen” (De Leon 2015, 39). Humans, De Leon continues, are not “the sole agents responsible for action... agency needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic and ongoing process” (Ibid, 42).

For both scholars, the Sonoran Desert has agency, which is blamed for the failures of others. For those living on the American side of the border, including border patrol, death is not an outcome of state policies but a doing of the desert. While my paper does not deal with people dying as they cross borders, the narratives I have collected resonate with these arguments. The spatial emphasis by Doty and de Leon helps me to shape the argument that within the context of moral culpability, the borderland assumes a key function, reminding us that sins are not only committed by individuals but are also contingent on the spaces where they are committed.

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Losing Your Path in Kehl

One late afternoon, I was in a coffeehouse in Strasbourg’s Schiltigheim neighborhood [II], where I was approached by Süleyman Bey.¹⁵ A man in his early fifties, Süleyman Bey was

*morally
polluting*

born in Turkey but came to Strasbourg as a labor migrant in the 1980s. Hard work and honesty, he claimed, eventually paid off, leading him to manage his own construction firm. He came to this coffeehouse regularly not only to chat with others but also to provide temporary job opportunities for the unemployed Turkish and Arab men who frequented this place. Somewhere during our conversation, I mentioned that I was conducting research on men's night lives. His response was that he had none to recount anymore. Back in his youth, the situation was different, but nowadays, he was mainly occupied with work. He did have a story to tell, though, which had to do with his son, who frequented shisha lounges in Kehl.

Unlike coffeehouses, which are usually filled with older men, shisha lounges in Strasbourg and Kehl provide an alternative mode of socialization for younger men who want to avoid nightclubs either due to a heightened sense of religiosity or out of fear of being seen by their relatives or fiancés. Yet there is more to Kehl's shisha lounges than smoking the water pipe. Contrary to Strasbourg, shisha lounges in Kehl are more spacious, open past midnight, and in addition to shisha, provide opportunities to listen to live music, meet women, consume alcoholic beverages, and play the slot machines, thus blurring the line between a place where one goes to smoke and where one goes to party. Going to Kehl is also a somewhat prestigious act, as evident by the pictures and stories of time spent in such venues these men share with one another, making their peers witness to their transgressions. They do not speak of their practices as moral failures unless pushed to reflect on them in such terms (which, as an anthropologist, was often my task). Rather, they regard them as youthful rebellion—the kind that, as described in the introduction, is often associated with manhood in the making.

Süleyman Bey was aware of what went on in these shisha lounges, but he did not want to restrict his twenty-something-year-old son's freedom. As he explained, he, too, had been young once, and committed his share of mistakes. Mistakes, he added, that were better made while young—things for which a man could later repent. What Süleyman Bey underlines here is a logic where transgressions are not avoided but embraced and confronted. It is also no coincidence that older men tend to frequent the mosque, and avoid spaces (including coffeehouses, especially after they visit Mecca for the purposes of *haji*, the Islamic pilgrimage) that would be inviting of sin. Even Süleyman Bey himself made it clear in our conversation that he came to the coffeehouse not to play the card games or gamble but only to chat and socialize—he considered himself past the age where he had the luxury to make mistakes.

Some mistakes, though, have grave consequences. One drunken night, returning back from his favorite shisha lounge in Kehl, his son totaled Süleyman Bey's Mercedes. The son came out of the accident unharmed, but, soon after, he stopped going to Kehl. Instead, he

now smoked shisha at a hometown association close to their flat in Hautepierre [J].

In recounting this story, Süleyman Bey was not angry with his son. Rather, he considered Kehl responsible for facilitating transgressive behavior. “Kehl appears weird to me,” he argued. “The venues there, the places... they make me sad. Go to the casinos. See the filth in those places. I do not like the environment/ambiance [*ortam*] there. The youth who goes there, and my son went there too for a while... they lose their path. And that bridge [Europe Bridge]... that’s problematic too. I do not want to see people in their most wicked state.”

Süleyman Bey acknowledged that his son had made a mistake—one beyond tolerable limits. But rather than hold him accountable, he blamed the city. The *ortam* in Kehl was responsible for his son’s misdemeanor. Culpability was transposed onto the bridge that connects Strasbourg to Kehl, a town that is detested for making young men lose their path.

This narrative exemplifies how sins are made sense of—not through referencing the moral standing of the individuals committing them but seeking meaning elsewhere, such as Kehl. Transposing blame from a son guilty of a crime to a border town known to bring out the worst in men and lead them astray. Yet, here is the caveat: this act of going astray is part of the journey to making moral men. Though some men, like Cebail, choose to avoid going astray by following a deontological path to morality, others, like Süleyman Bey and his son, embrace transgressions by crossing geographical and moral borders. Had Süleyman Bey’s son not had that accident that night, he likely would have continued to cross the border to Kehl, to his favorite shisha lounge, regularly returning home intoxicated. But the accident led to him taking certain measures. The son did not stop frequenting shisha lounges altogether. Instead, he opted for a safer choice, and a safer space, which was provided by a hometown association in their neighborhood.

In both Süleyman Bey’s story and my encounter with the older sister on my way to DİTİB, something additional stands out. While it is clear that identifying a space as the source of sin helps to deflect problems that would otherwise be ascribed to individuals, it is no random individual or any Muslim male. The protagonists of both stories are not some distant relatives.¹⁶ For the older sister, it is her husband who gambles in bistro-casinos and coffeehouses; for Süleyman Bey, it is his son who used to hang out in shisha lounges. And for others, whom I will introduce in the following pages, it is family members, close friends, *imams*, or students who attend *sohbets* (religious conversation circles). This suggests that transgressions are rarely about the individual alone but also those closest to them. When a man prefers to spend his time and money outside of the home, one of the questions asked is either what or who it is at home that he is escaping from, or what kind of friends he hangs out with. Masculinity, as Farha Ghannam (2013)

describes in her ethnography on Cairo, is relational. Manhood is constructed through men's relationships to their friends and families, and in particular, to their sisters, mothers, or wives. When a man makes a mistake, all eyes turn to his family and friends. Blaming men for moral failures also means blaming others for allowing such failures in the first place. When they fail to prevent that, they also become culpable for their moral shortcomings. But when Kehl is portrayed as an enabler of sin, it serves the role of a moral alibi, an agent through which blame is diverted from the individuals committing said sins as well as those closest to them.

Those Godforsaken (Slot) Machines

Unlike döner kebab shops in Strasbourg, their counterparts in Kehl, known as *imbisses*, offer customers more than a cheap fast-food option. Contrary to French law, Germany allows small restaurants to accommodate up to three slot machines in-house, which affords them rooms allocated to machine gambling.¹⁷ These restaurants, also known as *bistro-casinos* in English, or *Automaten-Bistros* in German, were frequented by many of my interlocutors. They're places where a quick bite could eventually turn into an all-nighter and many Euros spent on gambling.

A resident of Kehl, Ahmet Bey emigrated from Turkey in 1991. Upon arrival, he started working at a factory, which he continued to work at when we met in 2016. Recently, he rented a *bistro-casino* next to the *Hauptstrasse*, Kehl's main street for shopping and dining. While the place was officially run by his wife and older son, he frequented it on his days off and after work. If turned profitable, he considered leaving his daytime job to turn it into a full-time family business.

Adjoining the dining space with tables, chairs, and gyrating vertical meat skewers, the *imbiss* had a small room packed with three slot machines, which was customary in Kehl. Yet Ahmet Bey did not like the idea of having them since his wife helped take care of the place, and his children brought school friends in for a quick bite. The idea of them getting addicted to machine gambling was a risk he despised. He also did not want other parents to know that their kids frequented his *bistro-casino*. Yet, Ahmet Bey had to run it as he needed the money to pay the rent and turn it profitable. Each month, the machines alone brought in approximately eight thousand euros, four thousand of which he could pocket after taxes and usage fees. He likely made more money from the machines than kebabs sold. Nonetheless, he did not want to retain an identity associated with gambling. "Kehl was not used to be like this," he argued: "Back then, in early 1990s, this place was a lot calmer. Those things inside (the slot machines), those Godforsaken things (*Allah'm belalari*), were not as prevalent. Nowadays, Kehl is Las Vegas."

When I asked him why he did not get rid of the slot machines, Ahmet Bey explained that he had a contract to abide by. But he made it clear that the decision to rent the bistro-casino was not his alone. It was predicated on Kehl, which he spoke of as a force dictating his actions. “Those Godforsaken things” were a part of Kehl, which could not be avoided. Running a bistro-casino made him complicit in the act, making him a Muslim who profited from a sinful practice, enabling others. Like Süleyman Bey, he was no longer a young man who could afford making mistakes, for mistakes affected his family and tarnished his identity as a moral man. One solution was to not profit from the slot machines. But due to both his contract and financial constraints, that could not be entertained. Another was to deflect blame and declare Kehl guilty of the crime.

“In Berlin, there are maybe twenty million people. You find twenty-five hundred machines there at most. Here, there are thirty-five hundred. And Strasbourg and its vicinity has maybe two million people at most. All of them come here. Kehl alone probably has five times the revenue of Strasbourg.” While Ahmet Bey’s account includes exaggerated numbers (the population of Berlin is roughly four million, and the estimates for slot machines in Kehl are around 650¹⁸), his point is that these bistro-casinos served as Kehl’s cash cows. Hence, a city that has far less population than the German capital has almost one tenth the number of gambling alleys (305 to twenty-eight casinos, with another ninety closing shutters in Berlin¹⁹) and one fifth the number of slot machines (671 to approximately four thousand machines²⁰).

As analogies like Las Vegas suggest, trips to Kehl are never only about visiting a border town. Kehl has a moral weight of its own. In conversations over nightlife, my younger interlocutors would use the terms “no limit,” “Sin City,” and “*la vie du Diable*” (life of the Devil) to describe Kehl. I have also heard of Kehl being referred to as the swamp, or *bataklik* in Turkish. Some described going to Kehl as sinking, as in a swamp. During a conversation at a coffeehouse in Kehl, I was told that it was “a swamp... the center of fun, drinks and gambling.” Among the group of men sitting at my table, one argued that if one were to get rid of slot machines, not a single person would stay in Kehl after seven pm. The problem, another added, was that it was mostly foreigners like himself who were in Kehl to gamble. Another man listening to our conversation agreed: “Kehl is where all of Strasbourg’s dirt comes to wash away.” It is a place “where the sewage flows.”

Metaphors like dirt and swamp describe a kind of relationship with space that cannot be captured otherwise. They are speech acts “that encourage some thoughts and actions and discourage others, and this has geographical implications. Many metaphors are distinctly geographical acts that encourage spatial thoughts and actions while prohibiting others.” (Cresswell 1997). Metaphors do not only describe Kehl; they also transform it into a prohibited place. Yet, despite these depictions, they fail to dissuade my interlocutors from spending time

there. Instead, many continue to cross the border and visit venues where they sink their time, money, and in the case of Süleyman Bey's son, nearly sink themselves. By way of crossing the border, they willingly cross moral boundaries, which they acknowledge is a practice from which they should refrain. But they add that their transgressions are an expected part in this journey, and that mistakes are to be made. As a young man once told me, "Gençliğimizi yaşamalıyız." Youthful years have to be lived, and piety can wait for old age. It is no coincidence that it is older men that fill up the mosques, not young ones. And when I reminded them of examples like Cebail, they would refer to the consequentialist logic (that Allah is the ultimate Judge) and their fallible nature (*nefs* is too strong), which is preyed upon by the city of Kehl. They agreed that Kehl was the swamp that needed to be drained. And as the following story illustrates, if it cannot be drained, then it should be avoided. However, few seemed to choose that path.

Taming the Nefs

So far in this paper, I have described the ways that moral transgressions, which are central to the making of Muslim male subjectivities, are spatially circumscribed. For my interlocutors, the border separating Strasbourg from Kehl is as much a geographical one as a moral one. This was a point well acknowledged by religious authorities in Strasbourg. Many of them took on the responsibility of encouraging men to limit these border crossings.

During a Friday night *sohbet*, the DİTİB imam leading the conversation circle cautioned the young men in attendance to be careful of places that their *nefs* would take them. Using the analogy of a horse, he argued how an untamed horse would take its rider to places out of his control. He acknowledged that Muslims were never fully protected from temptations, and praised the young men in attendance for being on the right track, as the alternative to coming to the mosque was to be elsewhere, such as Kehl, and its nightclubs and gambling alleys. The way to tame the *nefs* was by coming to the mosque and uttering Allah's many names (*zikir*) on every instance.

Most of my interlocutors must have heard similar words from the imams in the mosques they attended, as it is a topic commonly discussed in sermons, including the widely attended Friday *vaaz* and *hutbe*. As mosque is the primary space for socialization in Europe, especially for children, those born in France must also have listened to similar advice given in other mosques. However, once they get their driver's license, many, it seems, opt for venues in Kehl rather than the mosques.

These changes, however, do not reflect an abrupt aberration in one's life trajectory; rather they describe a moral journey that involves the mosque as much as venues in Kehl. The making of moral masculinities ebbs and

flows—moments of sinning, and repenting, nights spent at shisha lounges and nightclubs, and also in mosques attentively listening to imams.

During a late-night gathering at the parking lot of a lake [L] close to Strasbourg's Cronembourg neighborhood, I was chatting with two Strasbourg-born youths about temptations of the nefis. "In the Qur'an," argued Kerim, who was attending university, "it says that a man's nefis is tested by three things: women, gambling, and alcohol." His comments came in response to his friend Tarik, who had previously talked about his ambition to put aside his past life by praying regularly and wearing the *cilbab*, a long robe. Tarik considered himself at a juncture in life that entailed marriage. His intention was to "marry a clean girl," meaning a Muslim girl who preserved her virginity until marriage. To do so, Tarik had to reflect on his own behavior. He had to avoid places such as Kehl's famous nightclubs, Kiss [M] and Gold [N], where he had previously met women with whom he has had one-night stands. The change he sought also demanded a re-evaluation of his entourage: "What is important is having good friends. By hanging out with friends who do not go to nightclubs but instead spend time in each other's houses or public spaces, like the park we are in or the mosque, those who do not frequent the mosque start going to the mosque again. Others," he continued, "want to take you to Kehl, to shisha cafés and night clubs.... [To them] you have to say, you guys go ahead, but let me get off at Kaufland (a supermarket in Kehl [O])."

A few weeks later, when I went back to the lake, only Kerim was present. Tarik was in Kehl, falling back into a life which he, only weeks back, argued to have very much despised.

My conversation with Kerim and Tarik is reminiscent of narratives told to Banu Gökarıksel and Anna Secor. In their research on devout masculinities and moral geographies, the authors show how moral discourse among young men differs depending on the cities in which they live (Gökarıksel and Secor 2017). In a more conservative city like Konya, options for leisure are limited, while in a metropolitan center such as Istanbul, they are diverse. Hence, for men in Konya, "a piercing or simply walking with a girlfriend becomes a problem... public displays of sexuality, including homosexuality are transgressions [associated with] Istanbul.... This has to do with the diverse opportunities offered by Istanbul, which lead to a plurality of lifestyles and spatially varying normative regimes." (Gökarıksel and Secor 2017, 10–11). In Kerim and Tarik's narrative, too, moral geographies matter. Both consider being in a place not inviting of sin and with like-minded friends to be imperative if one is to retain moral purity. With its diverse possibilities for leisure, however, Kehl is an inviting city. Regardless of his intention to limit his exposure to Kehl, and to tame his nefis by visiting the mosque, Tarik, the man who at one point chose to wear the jilbab and grow his beard in accordance with Islam, was back in Kehl.

The path to making moral masculinities is not linear but riddled with many digressions. Tarik's ambition to marry a "pure" Muslim and to lead a moral life is interrupted by the attractions that Kehl offers. His friend, Kerim, too, was once a frequenter of Kehl, but he stopped, not just for moral

These changes, however, do not reflect an abrupt aberration in one's life trajectory; rather they describe a moral journey that involves the mosque as much as venues in Kehl

purposes but to continue his education. Whether he stayed on track and graduated or fell back onto Kerim's path, I do not know. But these detours are integral to the making of moral masculinities. "Going astray" or "losing the path" is part of the moral journey. And Kehl plays a central role in it.

The discussion between the two friends also indicates the role of others in assisting an individual on his moral journey. The entourage, as Tarik argues, matters for it keeps him focused on living a moral life. While Kehl is a space that encourages sin, friends, too, can play an enabling role by taking him there. Kerim does not consider himself to be such a friend—he avoids nightlife by focusing on his studies and smoking shisha on his balcony or by the lake. But despite limiting his outside life to shisha in a public park in Strasbourg, he failed to keep his friend away from Kehl.

Conclusion

Geographical space bears a moral weight, which renders each move subject to moral discourse. Thus, in the case of my interlocutors, going to Kehl meant more than crossing a physical border between France and Germany; it was also a moral boundary into the realm of sin—the place where *Şeytan* is ever-present. Yet, despite the negativity ascribed to Kehl, my interlocutors continued on crossing the Europe Bridge and spending their afterwork hours in casinos, bistrocasinos, betting alleys, and nightclubs.

In my attempts to explain why these men did not give up on their excursions to Kehl altogether, my argument focused on the role of transgressive practices in the making of Muslim masculinities. Trespassing physical and moral borders though a troubled, self-contradictory, and anxiety-producing practice was integral to the journey these men took in constructing their moral selves. Anxieties were not something they avoided but rather embraced, and confronted. Being a moral Muslim man meant not just following the commands stated in the Qur'an or preached by imams; it also meant engaging in spatial and moral transgressions, and confronting the outcomes—making morality a non-linear journey filled with many digressions.

Though my interlocutors were expected to make mistakes throughout this journey, said mistakes also brought about a sense of anxiety. In moments of self-reflection, they regretted the choices they made, and, as in the case of Tarik, even tried to come clean. Sins became things they claimed they wanted to avoid but either could not or, in the end, did not actually want to. Part of dealing with this conundrum was by reflecting on the *nefs*, and the fallibility of human nature. The other was Kehl, which was depicted as a moral alibi, a space given agency, to transpose moral culpability and guilt associated with their practices. This, however, was a logic employed not just by the men who crossed borders but also by others in the community, including wives, close friends, or imams. As sins were conceived of as being

Geographical space bears a moral weight, which renders each move subject to moral discourse

committed communally, with others being expected to prevent men from engaging in immoral practices in the first place, these actors also gave agency to Kehl by blaming it for their own shortcomings.

My analysis focused primarily on men's practices, in large part due to gendered norms prevalent in the population I study. While I have made attempts to include more women into my sample, my requests for interviews were often turned down. I was also discouraged from participating in venues where women socialized. However, my lack of focus on women does not mean it is only men who socialize in Kehl. I have often heard of Turkish women profiting from Kehl's nightlife—less in coffeehouses and bistro-casinos, which are largely homosocial spaces, and more in the nightclubs and *türkü* bars, which are live music venues that play a central role in Alevi socialization. They, too, must have crossed the border in both physical and moral senses, and dealt with the consequences. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain in-depth data on female socialization in Kehl.

Extant theories on morality and masculinity tend to retain their focus on the individual, and, with some exceptions, leave aside the role of other agents in shaping moral and masculine dispositions and practices. Space is one such agent that shapes the field in which these dispositions and practices are cultivated. As this paper has illustrated, Kehl is central to morally charged conversations on men's leisure. It is an agent that members of the Turkish community formed themselves. The transgressions it triggers are inherently masculine, and moral, as they play an important role in shaping men's moral journeys. And each time these men hit conundrums in their journey, Kehl came into the picture. Rather than assume responsibility for their practices, it was the city of Kehl that was put on trial. Rather than individual will and self-restraint, it was the vices associated with a specific place.

These findings should serve as a reminder that the making and maintenance of masculinities and moralities is not limited to a discussion on individual practices and dispositions. It also warrants an exploration of the specificities of the lived environments where identities are formed and performed.

Notes

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experience. I can only hope that I provide a vivid account of your lives, with all their moments of joy and heartbreak.

² Bistro-casino refers to small fast-food restaurants, known in German as *imbisses*, which also have a room allocated to machine gambling. The concept does not exist in France due to French gambling laws.

³ The letters in brackets refer to specific locations on the map (Image 1) that accompanies this article.

⁴ “Objectifs: “L’Eurodistrict/Eurodistrikt Strasbourg-Orteanu: un territoire de projets, de rencontres et d’échanges.” <http://www.eurodistrict.eu/fr/objectifs>

⁵ Kehl has a reputation for being the gambling center for southwest Germany, owning the moniker “El-Dorado.” Löhnig, Frank. “Im Kampf gegen die ‘Einarmigen Banditen’ ist die Politik gefordert,” *Badische Neueste Nachrichten*, 12 January 2020.

⁶ Palmeri, Tara. “Welcome to Strasbourg’s Tijuana.” *Politico*. 25 October 2016.

⁷ “Kehl, le casino de Strasbourg.” *L’Express*. 27 February 2015.

⁸ “Les nuits blanches des bandits machots de Kehl.” *France3Alsace*. 2012.

⁹ DİTİB is the diaspora extension of Turkey’s highest authority in religious affairs, *Diyanet* (Presidency of Religious Affairs).

¹⁰ Milli Görüş, a Turkish Islamic movement particularly prominent in Turkey and Europe since the mid 1970s, was one of the first Turkish associations to be established in Europe. Fatih Camii, the first mosque to be opened in Strasbourg’s Esplanade neighborhood in 1979 was operated by Milli Görüş. Today, the congregation gathers in the Eyyub Sultan Mosque, which is located next to the eastern France headquarters of Milli Görüş in the Meinau neighborhood.

¹¹ It is no coincidence that most research on gender in the Turkish context is conducted by female researchers.

¹² Selamun Aleyküm is the Turkish transliteration of the Arabic greeting “As-salamu alaykum,” or “Peace be upon you.”

¹³ With the exception of a few university students, one of whom I introduce later in this article, my sample includes young and middle-aged Turkish men of working-class backgrounds. Those who are employed engage in menial labor and work primarily in construction sites, auto-repair shops, Turkish markets (known as *exports*), bakeries, and restaurants (known as *snacks*). Some were born in France, while others came from Turkey either at an early age or through labor or marriage arrangements.

¹⁴ *FranceBleu*. “Toujours autant de salles de jeux en Allemagne près de Strasbourg, malgré une nouvelle réglementation.” 27 September 2017.

¹⁵ In Turkish, Bey and Hanım are customary ways to refer to men and women. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

¹⁶ I would like to thank Alize Arican for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁷ The law was recently amended to limit the number of slot machines to two per imbiss, which led to more imbisses with slot machines to open up in Kehl. “Neue Verordnung schränkt auch Kehler Automaten-Bistros ein,” *Baden Online*, 5 November 2019.

¹⁸ “Les francais flambent a Kehl,” *Dernier Nouvelles d’Alsace*, 30 October 2018 (Pietre 2018).

¹⁹ “Weniger Spielhallen in Berlin,” *Berliner Woche*, 27 February 2020 (Kiefert 2020).

²⁰ “Im Kampf gegen die ‘Einarmiger Banditen’ ist die Politik gefördert,” *Badische Neueste Nachrichten*, 12 January 2020.

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