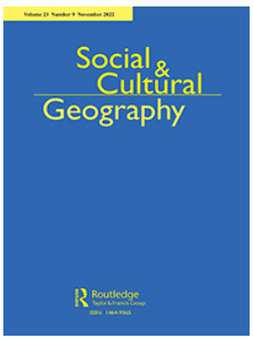

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# 'We love it here and there': Turkish Alevi older migrants' belonging to places

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates belonging among Turkish Alevi older migrants during their stays in the origin country. The few studies that cover belonging among older migrants primarily examined belonging within the confines of host countries. As substantial amounts of time are spent in origin countries, migrants' life worlds are thus only partially studied. Furthermore, the importance of context for belonging is thereby insufficiently acknowledged. Antonsich's (2010) framework inspires this investigation, distinguishing place-belongingness and politics of belonging. Based on observations and 21 interviews with older Alevi migrants in Turkey, we show that the autobiographic story is particularly useful to study older migrants' belonging, that minority identity shapes belonging, and that the location of the interview matters for the types of narratives collected. This study thereby adds to literature on belonging among older migrant populations, to understanding of the complementary nature of place-belongingness and politics of belonging, and to scholarly acknowledgement of the importance of context for belonging.

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place-belongingness; politics of belonging; older migrants; Turkish migrants; context

## Introduction

In response to a demand for low-skilled workers in Northwestern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, many young labourers migrated to European countries. Plans on leaving for home as soon as financial objectives were achieved vaporized, though often leaving a strong wish to return some day (Buffel, 2015). Hence many migrants stayed and grew old in European societies. Accompanying their attachment to the host country, origin countries remain an existential point of reference (Bolzman et al., 2016; Buffel & Phillipson, 2016; Zontini, 2015). Accordingly, parts of older migrants' lives take place in the origin country: physically when visiting there (Baykara-Krumme, 2013), virtually when using information and communication technology (Hunter, 2015), or emotionally when imagining and longing for it (Ganga, 2006). These multistranded border crossing connections are termed

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'transnational' (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). In this paper, we aim to further understand what lies at the 'other end' of the transnational experience for older, first-generation migrants. Thus we ask: How is a sense of belonging to places negotiated and experienced while visiting in countries of origin?

The few studies that specifically investigate how older migrants belong to a plurality of places are conducted in host societies (Hunter, 2016; Mellingen Bjerke, 2017; Palmberger, 2019). In doing so, these studies miss a substantial part of the social space in which older migrants are ingrained, providing little understanding of the lived experiences in countries of origin. With this paper we aim to start closing this gap by studying belonging as it is experienced in the origin country, when visiting from the host country. Obviously, what is missed in the origin country is different from what is missed in the host country. For instance, one may miss the hills and the good climate of the origin country, but once there the convenience of amenities close-by or the presence of children and grandchildren may be missed. Moreover, these missed objects, people, smells, sights and situations may carry different meanings and weight due to the change of perspective (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, 2018; Tiaynen-Quadir, 2016). Being in the host country may evoke feelings and expectations regarding the origin country and vice versa that are intensely felt from a distance, but not (or overshadowed by others) when actually *being there* (Stock, 2014). Furthermore, the way that people belong to places relies on people's changing social positions, dependent on context (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is with this in mind that we present the case of Turkish Alevi[1] older migrants, who hold a minority position in the origin country as Alevi, as well as a minority position in the Western-European host country where they reside as Turkish migrants. For them, a sense of belonging may have different meanings in different geographies: some parts of their belonging may surface strongly when in the origin country, others may lose significance. Aim of this paper is to explore how being in the origin country plays out for how belonging is experienced and narrated.

## The study

We conducted fieldwork in 2018 in Orun,[2] a rural Anatolian village in Turkey. Orun is home to around 2000 permanent residents and can be characterized by its long history of exchange with Europe through migration. Like other places in the region (Öztürk et al., 2013), Orun swells to 6000 residents in summer, when European migrants come to the place they were born and raised. We stayed with residents of Orun – on a separate floor of their house – through May 2018. This allowed for an opportunity to not only interview older migrants there, but also to observe and experience how life is encountered in Orun and thus to gain deeper knowledge into how older migrants' belonging is lived. Field notes were taken and analytic memos written that helped put the information of the interviews into perspective and enabled reflexivity vis-à-vis the data and interview strategies (Saldana, 2013). Recruiting informants was done by snowballing and with the help of the village mayor. In total, 21 informants were interviewed, ten men and eleven women. They migrated from Turkey at age 27 on average. All lived in urban residential areas of Western Europe, mostly Germany, and had previously worked in low-skill sectors or spent many years unemployed. More socio-economic information on our informants can be found in Table 1. Since their migration they have visited Turkey, often biennially or

**Table 1.** Characteristics of informants.

| Pseudonym | Sex | Marital status | Age | Official country of residence | Education | Former employment in official country of residence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Erdem* | Male | Married | 78 | Germany | Lower | Construction; automotive |
| Mehmet | Male | Married | 73 | Germany | Lower | Construction |
| Seyda | Female | Divorced | 72 | Germany | Not educated | Cleaning |
| Filiz* | Female | Married | 65 | France | Not educated | Never employed |
| Berat | Male | Married | 63 | Germany | Lower | Home appliances manufacturing |
| Meryem* | Female | Married | 70 | Netherlands | Lower | Cleaning |
| Emine | Female | Widowed | 77 | Germany | Not educated | Home appliances manufacturing |
| Eray | Male | Married | 73 | Germany | Lower | Construction |
| Yavuz | Male | Married | 72 | Germany | Not educated | Construction; automotive |
| Gizem* | Female | Married | 71 | Belgium | Not educated | Never employed |
| Havva* | Female | Married | 68 | Germany | Not educated | Cleaning; home appliances manufacturing |
| Halil* | Male | Married | 76 | Netherlands | Lower | Automotive |
| Cem | Male | Married | 66 | Germany | Secondary | Construction; automotive |
| Deniz | Male | Married | 78 | Germany | Lower | Home appliances manufacturing |
| Yigit | Male | Married | 70 | France | Secondary | Textile |
| Semiha* | Female | Married | 76 | Germany | Not educated | Textile |
| Pinar | Female | Widowed | 83 | Netherlands | Not educated | Cleaning; chicken factory |
| Dilek* | Female | Married | 77 | France | Not educated | Never employed |
| Cansu* | Female | Married | 73 | Germany | Lower | Employed, no information on which industry |
| Derya* | Female | Married | 76 | Germany | Lower | Employed, no information on which industry |
| Adem | Male | Married | 84 | Germany | Lower | Construction; paper mill |

* Other people, usually the spouse, were present during entire/parts of the interview

less, for two or three weeks at a time, but their planned or early retirement marked a new phase in visiting frequency and intensity: they now visit Turkey every year for months on end over the warmer seasons.

Interviews were conducted by the lead author with the assistance of a research assistant (Aylin[3]). Aylin self-identifies as Alevi, is fluent in Turkish and Dutch, and was born and raised in the Netherlands. Her Turkish parents migrated to the Netherlands in the 1970s and identified as Alevi. There were numerous differences between the lead author – who conducted the interviews – and the research informants, for example, in terms of language, age, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status. However, informants sometimes also testified to a shared identity when referring to a common background as residents of Western Europe, and, for instance, things like 'knowing' that politicians bicycle to work. Some sense of 'togetherness' thus existed which seemed to enhance mutual trust. Aylin further acted as a 'cultural broker' between informants and the lead author (Jones & Boyle, 2011), which the following example illustrates. Some political assembly took place in the town hall during which a confrontation between the Sunni governor and Aylin occurred. Afterwards many villagers (including migrants) came up to us to praise Aylin having been brave enough to speak up against the governor. This set the tone in terms of politics and helped let the villagers feel we were 'on their side'. In this way Aylin had removed political distrust among informants and enabled us to sense, navigate and interpret the sensitivity of the political situation.

After transcription the data was firstly coded inductively; in a second round it was coded more deductively, meaning we organized codes, categories and subcategories into the conceptual framework of belonging that we entered the field with. Combining these

strategies allowed a good grip on the data. It revealed how, in a more generic sense, informants talked about belonging, which themes were dominant and how these connected to each other, while providing insight into exactly how these factors were lived in informants' stories.

In this paper we delve into older Alevi migrants' belonging to places, and seek to understand how being in Orun – their place of birth – affects their narrations and experiences of belonging. Before presenting our findings we discuss the relevant concepts and literatures.

## Conceptual framework

This paper is inspired by the work of Antonsich (2010), who focuses on 'territorial belonging' captured in the everyday claim 'I belong here'. This particularly suits the present research aim, as we are interested in how older migrants, living their lives across borders, belong to different *places*. Antonsich trails the work of Yuval-Davis (2006) and Fenster (2005) in arguing that there are two analytical levels from which to approach belonging. The first is 'place-belongingness' (p. 4): belonging as a personal, intimate experience of feeling 'home' and 'safe'; ' … "home" stands for a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment' (p. 6). The second level is belonging in a more relational form: politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Discourses of 'we-ness' and 'other-ness' are constructed here, and membership to social groups granted and denied (Anthias, 2008; Fenster, 2005). Politics of belonging is about who belongs to what group in what place and who has the power to decide that. This makes it context-, meaning- and time-related (Anthias, 2008). For example, in the wake of 9/11 suspicion of Muslims was rife in the Western world. Antonsich (2010) posits that studies on belonging should consider both dimensions because they complement each other. Place-belongingness does not come about in isolation but is conditioned by contexts in which certain discourses prevail. Moreover, studying politics of belonging without acknowledging the personal experience of place-belongingness assumes that belonging is merely the product of discourses on inclusion and exclusion. We concur with Antonsich and emphasize that the two dimensions we use to study belonging are intersectional, complementary and sometimes overlapping. Below we elaborate on the two dimensions and show how they may be relevant for Turkish Alevi older migrants.

### *Place-belongingness*

Scholars of belonging agree with Antonsich (2010) that different aspects can influence the first dimension of belonging – place-belongingness – such as cultural (i.e. food habits or language use (Chapman & Beagan, 2013)), social (the personal ties that bind one to a specific place (Buffel & Phillipson, 2016)) and economic factors (i.e. owning a house in the origin country (Baykara-Krumme, 2013)). Past experiences, celebrations and memories are captured by what Antonsich (2010) calls the autobiographic factor, connecting life histories to place. We elaborate on this autobiographical factor as older people tend to reminisce and recollect memories (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014), making the autobiographical factor particularly relevant for the current study. In this regard, in his famous work on older[4] people's attachment to place, Rowles (1983) speaks of different types of

attachment that can be captured by the notion of *insideness*. As we will show, his insights are also meaningful for the study of older migrants' belonging. Autobiographic insideness, he maintains, is an important lens through which to study older people's affiliations with place, because of its three main characteristics. First, there is a certain *taken-for-grantedness* to people's connection to places: people hardly ever communicate overtly how or why they feel they belong to a certain place. They 'just' feel a strong affinity, regardless of its convenience or proximity to others, it is simply there. However, when probing deeper this taken-for-grantedness is caught up in lived experiences, memories and involvements in a place, which can be exposed when asking about autobiographical details. Second, autobiographic insideness can capture the different forms a place has taken, which can span an entire life course. The example Rowles (1983, p. 305) himself gives is telling: 'the same location may be remembered as a wooded lot where a woman stole her first kiss, a grocery store built sometime later where she worked for several years, and as an abandoned fire-gutted building in the present.' In this fashion, a personal history can illuminate which and how places have evolved and how these developments impacted on human involvement in such a place. Third, autobiographic insideness enables disclosing that attachment to places is essentially self-created and to some extent even fictional. Life histories help understand people-place relationships in the way such stories reveal memories and narratives that may or may not resemble documented and official histories. Autobiographic memories are constructed imaginaries, often invented to fit into a coherent pattern that reflects images of the past (Rowles, 1983).

## *Politics of belonging*

A politics of belonging, as defined by Antonsich (2010), is also useful for understanding Turkish Alevi older migrants' belonging. This second analytical dimension distinguished by Antonsich acknowledges that prevailing ideas and discourses on inclusion and exclusion also affect the extent to which one feels as belonging to a place.

To understand present-day Alevism, knowledge of the history of nation-building in Turkey is helpful. Preceding the founding of the Turkish Republic by Atatürk in 1923, Turkey was home to an ethnically mixed population that predominantly adhered to Islam. The new nation was built on the premise that differences in ethnicity should not matter for citizenship as long as Turkish inhabitants endorsed 'Turkishness' as the founding principle of national identity (Shankland, 2003). Turkey officially became a secular country, in which state and religion were separated. However, to provide citizens with a sense of solidarity, and to establish social and cultural norms regarding inclusion and exclusion, Sunni Islam practices were formalized and actively promoted as 'Turkishness' (Kocan & Oncu, 2004). In sum, two strands of national identity were offered: secular Turkish and Sunni Muslim (Shankland, 2003), thus formally acknowledging minority Alevis as full citizens of the state based on their Turkishness yet in practice not granted equal rights as Sunni. Alevis were not considered 'proper Muslims' and their territories were marked as the world of 'the other', hence they were compelled to practice their beliefs in secret and hide their religious orientation (Erol, 2010). Partly because of this history, the Alevi identity is not straightforward or absolute (Hopkins, 2011). Alevi subgroups possess their own interpretations of being Alevi, crosscutting language, ethnicity and place of origin in

complex ways, but what many people share as the heart of Alevism can somewhat resemble the basic principles of humanism (Hopkins, 2011; Shankland, 2003).

In contemporary Turkey the societal position of Alevis is perilous and Sunni Muslim values have become the main defining element of what the nation 'is' (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). Alevis feel marginalized and threatened in Turkish society. The Stockholm Center for Freedom (2021, October1) reported that eight out of fourteen religion- and belief-based hate crimes in Turkey in 2020 targeted Alevis (while five targeted Christians and one targeted a woman wearing a headscarf). Alevis fear a loss of freedom to express their opinions and generally vote for opposition parties (Aktürk, 2018).

An ethnographic study on the Turkish-speaking community of London shows that this perceived threat is not limited to Alevis actually living in Turkey (Cakmak, 2021). Migrants from Turkey claimed that their security concerns are the main reason why they would not permanently return to Turkey. Moreover, the Alevi community in Melbourne, Australia, faces multiple forms of discrimination (Hopkins, 2011). Alevis receive ill treatment by many Australians who pejoratively refer to them as 'Turkish' and 'Muslim'. At the same time they are marginalized by the majority (Sunni) Turkish population in Australia, because of their Alevi-ness. The Alevi experience in migration countries is therefore characterized by a sense of 'in-betweenness' (Ghorashi, 2004).

Scholars have shown that migrants' belonging to their country of origin is affected by their minority or majority group status (Al-Rasheed, 1994; Cakmak, 2021). Minority groups are hesitant to unequivocally call their origin nations their 'home', as they feel their position there is questioned and threatened. How Turkish Alevi migrants experience their Alevi-ness in the origin country, and thus 'politics of belonging', is a subject of the current study, in addition to how other factors – particularly the autobiographical one – feed into place-belonging (Antonsich, 2010).

### *Localized and translocalized belonging*

Belonging also occurs at different geographical scales: it may be attached to one's flat or house, neighbourhood, region or country (Antonsich, 2010; Morley, 2001). In that regard, some have argued that in an increasingly mobile and interconnected world, with a waning relevance of time and place, the significance of specific localities should not be neglected (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011). Underlying the connections between places of origin and host countries are, in fact, people's situatedness and embeddedness in certain *specific* locations (Brickell & Datta, 2011). Belonging is thus not bound to national geographies and, as we will show, takes on much more confined forms.

Anthias argues for a translocational lens in belonging research that acknowledges intersectionality, transnationality and different localities and spaces (Anthias, 2013): such a perspective opens up possibilities to transcend people's essentialization based on their ethnic, migrant or gender status, taking into account their transnational lifestyles which incorporate different places of significance. In this paper we will focus on the intersection of different locations and different meaningful elements of people's lives, to investigate how belonging takes shape.

Tangible, material objects and environments play a role (Boccagni, 2016) in specific localities. For instance, Baldassar et al. (2007) find that migrants long for physical elements of the places of their past, like breathing air or touching soil. Similarly, Buffel and

Phillipson (2016) show that older migrants alter their physical environments in the settlement country to nourish their belonging, for instance, by establishing a mosque in the neighbourhood. Hence the physical make-up of places appeals to a sense of belonging. As we will see, the intersection of belonging and a localized, materialized manifestation of belonging play an important role in older migrants' belonging discourses.

## Normalized belonging to two places

Informants did not explicitly express preference for or a stronger belonging to either Turkey or their host country in Western Europe. They often remarked '*We love it here and there, we don't differentiate*' (Derya) or *'It doesn't matter whether I stay here or there'* (Havva). As soon as spring starts, older migrants head for their Turkish residences, and as it gets colder in Turkey they return to Western Europe. This yearly routine of travelling back and forth and feeling at home in both places has become *normalized* – or, in the words of Rowles (1983 p. 304), 'taken for granted'.

This was also evident when we attended a 'welcoming party' – a small meeting initiated by friends, relatives and acquaintances to welcome the pensioners 'home'. Though this 'homecoming' was marked with a get-together, what stood out was the casualness with which people who had not seen each other for months greeted each other. Informants were not asked how their time in Western Europe had been, and sometimes they would not even be talked to at all, as attendees were more keen to speak to each other (Klok field notes, 2018). Our observations demonstrate how a transnational lifestyle is the norm. One last hint of taken-for-grantedness is that informants often used the phrase *'we were born and raised here'* when asked what they loved most about Orun. When asked what exactly they meant, they often repeated themselves to make themselves understood and applied their experience as universal to all of humanity, like Meryem did:

*Your thoughts are here. Even if it's only short. The birthplace of man is the land of man. It occurs in my dreams. [. . .] Our childhood took place here.* (Klok interviews, 2018)

The salience of being 'born and raised' somewhere in order to belong, despite not having lived there permanently for decades, was self-evident to them. This reveals that informants' ways of living and belonging run counter to what nowadays seems to be public opinion, namely that migrants' first, most important and 'natural' link is the one that ties them to their origin country, and that their loyalties lie there (Ghorashi, 2016). They are therewith denied belonging to multiple places. In contrast to this optic, older migrants disclose that for them, belonging to *both* countries is much rather the 'natural order of things'.

At the same time, it is naive to assume that these belongings go unchallenged, that they cannot cause friction at times or instigate simultaneous feelings of belonging and non-belonging. Our data reveals that this happens in at least two ways. First, as captured by Gizem when she says: *'You go there [Belgium] because you miss your children, and you come here [Orun] because you miss your village.'* Gizem thereby unfolds what is true for so many migrants: whenever they are in one of the two places that feel like home, they miss objects and people in their 'other home'. A duality of resources and references rooted in two countries (Bolzman et al., 2016) means that it is complex

to 'fully be' only in one place. Either physically or in their imaginations, migrants are always in their other home too. This can feel as 'double presence' or as 'double absence' (Sayad, 1999; Urry, 2007). There is a second way in which belonging may be questioned and ambiguous. As explained above in the theoretical reflections, Alevis' belonging is often a case of in-betweenness: in Western countries because of their actual or perceived identities as Turkish and Muslim, while in their origin country as Alevi in Sunni majority Turkey (Aktürk, 2018; Hopkins, 2011). Informants so often claiming that both countries are important to them, that 'we love it here and there' and that 'it doesn't matter whether I stay, here or there', may thus also mean that they feel just as home, and just as *not at home* in the one as in the other. Normalized belonging is hence not unidimensional and simple, but imbued with contrasting and conflicting meanings.

Specific places and events in migrant autobiographies demonstrate their place belonging, such as attending school, playing outside, helping parents with farming stock, and food preparation. Asked what the places where these happenings occurred mean to him now, Berat confirms that they are very important and that he still visits them:

> *Sometimes I go to the school that I went to as a child and drink the water there. Every time I go to the cemetery, I also pass by the school because it's on the same road. [. . .] The people from that time are no longer here, they live in Europe or have passed away. It is no longer possible to see each other . . . We no longer find that atmosphere*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

Telling is that he visits the cemetery. Like others, he goes there first thing when he arrives in Orun, he 'pays a visit' to the people of his history and acknowledges that the lives of those buried there are ingrained in the history of Orun and his own. It also brings him feelings of sadness and discomfort, because he misses these people, which shows that normalized belonging can be simultaneously joyful and painful.

Informants likewise make use of personal histories to express belonging to their Western European country. Though all informants are currently retired, memories of their former employment provided them with a deep sense of belonging to their host nations. Yavuz recollects:

> *We spent our youth there; Germany is my second homeland. [. . .] I made my living there. God gave us food and drinks there. We went there to work*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

As working was their sole reason to go to Europe, it is not surprising that this was a defining development in their lives. Like Yavuz, many informants equated working with 'youth' and 'living life' in general. These accounts were often accompanied by statements about how many years they had already been living in their Western European societies, and used as an explanation for why they deemed them as 'home'. Where many expressed the anxiety and hardships they went through in the first years after arrival in the host country, they are now settled – they speak the language (at least to some degree), their children and grandchildren were born and brought up there and call it home, they have neighbours and friends, they own houses and know their way around. The finding that tangible cultural factors, like language and food habits, did not seem to have an impact on their feelings of belonging also speaks to that. Over the years, people found their way around practical obstacles or means to fulfil preferences. Older migrants

thus reveal how their feelings of belonging to places is rooted in their personal histories (Rowles, 1983).

## Imagination and confrontation

What it means to belong to Turkey was highly localized for our informants, with imagination about times and places playing an important role. Derya shares what she likes about Germany:

> *In my own country here [Turkey], I can't sleep if I don't lock the door. You cannot go out at night and visit someone, that's not possible. Imagine meeting a bad person who could bother me. [. . .] But in Germany, I can go wherever I want all day, no one says anything about it. In Germany, when you queue up at the supermarket with lots of heavy stuff, Germans say: "Do you want to go first?" You cannot find that kindness here [in Turkey]*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

We asked whether she was speaking about Turkey in general or about Orun specifically: *'I'm talking about Turkey in general, in my Orun nothing like this would ever happen.'* With 'my Orun' Derya claims belonging to Orun, but with the rest of that quote she distances herself and Orun from Turkey, testifying to a very local place-belonging.

This belonging does not go unchallenged though. When we ask Derya about her encounters with fellow villagers, she reports that they would ironically call her 'German', thereby implicitly devaluing her 'Turkishness' and questioning her belonging to Orun:

> *I'm bothered by it. After all, I have come here to my house. If someone says this [Alemanci, meaning German], I don't like it very much. I don't have that in Germany. Nobody says, "Hey, you're a Turk, go back to your [country]"*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

We want to highlight that Derya uses her homeownership as a justification for being in Orun *and* belonging there. Others also used similar rationales, like having a Turkish residence permit. For instance, also in relation to villagers calling her German, Havva says: *We are used to it. [. . .] I have my passport so it doesn't affect me either*. To navigate exclusionary practices informants employ personal objects in this way, which gives them a sense of belonging. This showcases how a personal and private feeling of belonging – their house, which they own and where they feel comfortable – is used to withstand an interpersonal and social dimension of belonging (Antonsich, 2010).

Derya's words about Orun and Germany are also illustrative of other dynamics at play which show how the interview location – Orun – is important. First, being in the origin country can be a confrontational experience, in terms of how reality relates to the 'imagined' origin country. Imagination from a distance – the host country – gives way to a nostalgic and romanticized image of the origin country (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, 2018). There is less space for imagination when the origin country is closer, the image gets distorted. Our informants' experiences with exclusion in Turkey may be foregrounded in comparison to exclusionary experiences in their Western European societies as a result of the origin country's 'closeness' at the time of the interview.

Related to this first point is the second way in which the location of the interview played a role. Being in Turkey more poignantly brought out 'Alevi identity' among our informants, because it was exercised in an environment (wider Turkey) they experienced

as hostile. Because Alevis are a religious minority in Turkey, Alevi migrants' relationship to the origin country is complex: although they may feel they belong to Turkey, wider Turkey is also a place where a significant lack of belonging is experienced (Aktürk, 2018). Eray also testifies to this:

> *I can't just have coffee at a restaurant with a woman, at liberty. A woman can't have tea here [in Turkey], but in Germany she can. [. . .] There we live in freedom and modernity. [. . .] I can give my opinion there with much more freedom, it's much more democratic there. For [Orun] it also goes that I can express myself freely, but as soon as I'm outside [Orun] I can no longer express my opinion freely*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

This way of belonging/non-belonging came up frequently and spontaneously. Sometimes it was very explicit, like in the quote above, at other times it was more implicit. When asked to elaborate, the topic would be dismissed, as in 'you know what it's like here'. The intersection of the location of the interviews – hence space for imagination – and having a minority identity brings out a remarkable type of narrative in which wider Turkey is contrasted with Orun and Orun is experienced as similar to Germany. Although in its Western European context Alevism may be experienced in a less contested manner than in Turkey, its perceived Muslim-ness – at least on a macro level – surely induces discrimination and exclusion (Ehrkamp, 2007). However, this is not what being in Orun foregrounds: what it does foreground is that 'the rest of Turkey' is a hostile environment for Alevis. Minority migrants such as Alevis are thus always in an in-between position in both their real experiences and in their imaginings of belonging (Ghorashi, 2004).

The exceptional position of Orun in relation to wider Turkey stems from the socio-religious character of Orun and its residents. Orun 'is', in the words of my informants, 'Alevi' and to a certain extent 'Western European' – which started when *they* left for Western Europe. Mehmet shares with us:

> *I had the Alevi house of worship [cemevi] built. There is a fountain at the entrance of the village, which I built. We, those who live abroad, built the school from the ground up, and contributed to the supermarket, the town hall. You render services to the village where you were born and raised. We contribute a lot*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

Orun's character and history is thereby tied to their own histories. People feel familiar and 'at home' there. Deniz refers to a funeral we attended, together with practically the whole village, to underline the solidarity among Orun's people, in contrast to life outside the village.

> *Did you attend the funeral? If you were there, you could see that the villagers at engagements, weddings and funerals are always one and together, there is no quarrel, no strife. If they are angry, they only stay angry for a short time. But if you leave the village here, to another village, you could get a bullet in the head*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

This once again highlights how belonging for these Alevi migrants is narrated in local terms. Moreover, it reveals that life outside of Orun – in Turkey – is also very much *imagined*, as older migrants from Orun rarely leave their Alevi village and actively distance themselves from the rest of Turkey (like Derya also shows in her narrative of wider Turkey). By making their own histories part of Orun's identity as Western European and contrasting life within Orun with life outside, they create and construct their realities about Orun to fit their narrative about the village and, ultimately, about themselves (Rowles, 1983).

Imagination also plays a role when we delve into another space that informants express a sense of belonging to, when they articulate a temporal home, located in the past (Fenster, 2005; Rowles, 1983). Mehmet contemplates: *'It's not like we're very attached to this place anymore. It is rather the missing of the past.'* Orun's significance for Mehmet's sense of belonging is mainly located in the past, when many of the people he grew up with were still there (as Berat also mentioned, above) and the way of living was different. Although Mehmet explicitly refers to times past, informants would also mention the past more implicitly. For example, while discussing differences between Western Europe and Turkey, informants would gradually narrate how respect and sociability have made way for rudeness and withdrawal. For instance, we asked Mehmet what he would bring from Turkey to Germany if possibilities to do so were unlimited (vice versa he said he would introduce biking and other hobbies like gardening because he finds retirees should stay occupied in order not to get old and sick).

> *I don't have a hobby from Turkey, what I see here . . . culturally there isn't really anything. [. . .] You had solidarity here, in the past, people helped each other. But that's not there anymore. Today's generation has completely abolished it, it no longer exists. It still exists in my generation and my family . . . But with the new, younger generations, this solidarity . . . no longer exists*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

Next to being in-between places – which leaves room for imagination – the past too can be imagined and romanticized (Palmberger, 2019; Rowles, 1983). We should be hesitant to interpret this as migrant-specific. Many older people, not just migrants, reminisce about times past. This serves to attribute meaning to life and make sense of important life events (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014).

## Material belonging

Belonging not only occurred in words, emotions and feelings, we also found very tangible and material expressions of belonging. For instance, informants often insisted on giving us a 'guided tour' through large, beautiful and privately owned houses and gardens or invited us there when the interview took place elsewhere. This enabled us to signal the important, intertwined role of economic and social factors in Turkey in providing belonging. Physically being in migrants' houses offered the opportunity to see abundantly decorated, uninhabited storeys on top of the informant's own living space (Klok field notes, 2018). These are for visiting children and grandchildren, whom they cherish dearly and are an important source of belonging (Filiz states: 'I belong to my children'). However, they never stay long enough, if at all, to fully take advantage of the facilities. Halil says:

> My kids don't even come here. The grandchildren don't know it here either. Only the youngest son's great-grandchildren say: "You should have taken us once". They don't speak Turkish, only Dutch. [. . .] A son of mine hasn't come for years. My daughter doesn't come either, she only goes to Antalya. [. . .] I'd be happy if they came, but they don't. (Klok interviews, 2018)

Although houses are an important factor to feel at home, these same houses testify to progeny visiting them less in Orun than anticipated (Klok field notes, 2018); this compromises belonging. To further place this finding in perspective we want to raise awareness for the *materiality* of belonging this research signifies (Boccagni, 2014; Van der Horst,

2008). The way in which houses expose familial relationships shows that these material infrastructures are not merely the background against which home and belonging are experienced, they also contribute to social dynamics (Boccagni et al., 2020). Indeed, the empty rooms and stories are a painful reminder of the children and grandchildren not visiting, contributing to the sometimes-distressing complexities of living a family life across borders. As Halil (above) puts it: 'They don't even speak Turkish', which displays an alleged lack of interest and estrangement between him and his great-grandchildren.

The material aspect of belonging also surfaced when we discussed life histories, which were frequently called upon during the interview. As a result of our data collection taking place in Turkey we were better equipped to put into perspective and interpret the places and specific contexts mentioned. This allowed us to ask follow-up questions, which encouraged informants to elaborate, like Berat when he refers to specific places in the village:

> *There was a park near the clock tower. My father's house was in that park. But the municipality's zoning plan was changed and then a park was created. In return [. . .] we got a piece of land near the school. But I grew up there in that old house*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

As it was quite pretty and unique to the area, the clock tower was a specific feature of Orun people were proud of, plus a clear landmark we found useful when asking for directions. Our familiarity with that specific landmark allowed Berat to elaborate on which places were significant to him when growing up, and thus reveal the autobiographic insideness (Rowles, 1983) he had developed over the years. This in return enabled us to observe some very telling non-verbal communication – like Berat's twinkling eyes and his constant smiling when he discussed these places (Klok field notes, 2018), showing how they provided him with a sense of joy and belonging to Orun.

Next to the clock tower, the *cemevi* – an Alevite house of gathering or worship – was also a significant physical feature of Orun, which distinguished it from non-Alevite villages in the surrounding area. Like the majority of Alevis, informants and other villagers did not abide by the 'pillars of Islam'. This also meant that instead of attending mosque for the daily prayers and weekly communal prayer, they participated in *cem* ceremonies, communal gatherings led by *dedes* (Es, 2013). The cemevi carried significant symbolic meaning for the villagers and formed a clear marker of their Alevi-ness: they referred to it quite often (like Ali, above), were proud to have one, and were eager to show us around. We found the cemevi also formed a physical representation of the in-betweenness Alevis are confronted with (Klok field notes, 2018). On the one hand, they were deprived of such a meaningful symbol of their belonging in their Western European countries. On the other hand, in Orun, regardless of their own cemevi and their own ceremonies, every Friday they would hear the call to prayer of Sunni Muslims attending mosque. This concretizes the two-tiered exclusion Alevis are faced with in both the nations they call home. There are no cemevis to go to in their Western European home country, and though they had a cemevi in their other home it was hardly acknowledged by the Turkish state. Ironically, this sense of exclusion was reinforced by a call to prayer on Fridays.

A last material aspect of belonging was significant in the importance of the physical environment for belonging. Many informants mentioned their physical surroundings when asked about the sources of their belonging. Seyda:

> *The nature and the climate here mean a lot to me. In Berlin you live in a closed-off place. I can say that here the nature is more beautiful and richer, different*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

Previous research has put forward that migrants construct the origin country as a 'healthy place' in which they lower the amount of medication they take (Mellingen Bjerke, 2017; Van der Horst, 2008). Our research confirms this finding. In response to the very first question: 'Which things in particular do you look forward to when coming here to Orun?', Mehmet replies:

> *The soil, our lands, our people and the weather. When I'm here, I'm not on any medication. [. . .] We grow our own vegetables. These are the things we come here for*. (Klok interviews, 2018)

While informants' Western European houses often lack gardens, they associate their gardens in Turkey with health benefits because they grow their own 'biological' fruits and vegetables there. Informants very often referred to their gardens, where they felt at home and safe – as in: healthy. Not only did we observe that houses of both migrants and the general population were surrounded by large grounds to which extensive time was devoted (Klok field notes, 2018), we were also offered fresh food, organically produced in informants' gardens, and water straight from garden wells. This revealed the salience of having a garden in Turkey, and its importance in providing its owners with a sense of belonging.

From both the current study and previous research on older migrants' reasons to stay in Western Europe after retirement, we know that good-quality health care and having children and grandchildren nearby in case old-age care is required, are also reasons to be – or stay – in Western Europe (Böcker & Balkir, 2012; Bolzman et al., 2006). This in itself cannot unambiguously be considered a belonging-providing factor, but it does show that older migrants' lives are not only taking place across borders because *different* meaningful people, objects and conditions are situated in different countries, but that these various places can also carry significance for one and the same goal: growing old *healthy*.

## Conclusions

We investigated how belonging to places is experienced and expressed among first-generation Turkish Alevi older migrants during their stay in the origin country. We departed from the premise that context matters for how belonging is experienced, and employed fieldwork in Turkey. Antonsich's (2010) analytical framework for the study of belonging, distinguishing place-belongingness and politics of belonging, was used to inspire the analysis. Wrapping this investigation up, we want to draw three main conclusions. As a first conclusion, we found that indeed the location of the interview – context – played a role in how belonging was narrated and experienced. It did so in two important ways. First, this paper shows that being part of a minority in the origin country influences how one relates to the origin country and that it proves to be an active dimension in shaping one's belonging. Specifically, the intersection of having a minority identity and the location of the interviews revealed that, for minority migrants, the scale on which belonging is articulated can be particularly telling of their belonging to places. As Alevi, our informants felt at home in their Turkish village but not so much in wider Turkey, which discloses a very localized belonging (Brickell & Datta, 2011). Imaginings about their

Western European country of residence and confrontation with Turkey impacted their narrative about belonging and non-belonging (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, 2018). The in-betweenness that minority migrants experience in their multiple places of connection – both in their real experiences and in their imagination of belonging – surfaced by being in Turkey for the data collection (Ghorashi, 2016). Second, by being in Turkey we were able to witness the material ways in which belonging is captured. A house, for instance, was an important source of belonging, but we also detected how it exposed relationships with children (Boccagni et al., 2020) when abandoned, as fully decorated storeys were waiting for visiting children. Furthermore, the cemevi represented the materialization of both inclusion as Alevi in Orun and exclusion as Alevi in wider Turkey. Another finding on material belonging is the salience of a garden, and consequently the ways in which informants used it to improve their health. This research further refines the origin country as a 'healthy place' (Mellingen Bjerke, 2017; Van der Horst, 2008): not only is the climate or 'peace and quiet' in Turkey assessed as ameliorative for one's health, the cultivation of fruit and vegetables are also part of that.

Inspired by a translocational lens (Anthias, 2013), this research has thus shown the varied ways in which context matters for belonging. As such, being Alevi, a migrant, a parent, older and therefore more aware of health conditions, and engaged in transnational living all shape belonging to specific localities in older Alevi migrant lives. Thereby belonging not only concerns geographies but also the symbolic meanings that places carry in relation to their users' and inhabitants' lives.

A second conclusion we draw from this research is that, in our eyes, Antonsich's (2010) distinction between belonging as a personal affair (place-belongingness) and a relational one (politics of belonging) has proven fruitful. Belonging among migrants tends to be studied from the interpersonal perspective (Anthias, 2008; Ghorashi, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and perceived as an inherently social and relational affair, which our study also clearly demarcates as a crucial element to understand belonging. However, belonging can also be a very personal and private affair, not so much tied to positioning vis-à-vis some relevant other (Miranda-Nieto & Boccagni, 2020; Nowicka, 2007), as our study also clearly demonstrates. We find this in the autobiographic testimonies that show how childhood memories, people from the past and later life experiences are tied to specific places, in this way contributing to place-belonging. The two are not strictly distinct though. This research shows how personal and private place-belonging (in terms of normalized belonging as well as by owning a house and having a passport) can function as a protective mechanism against practices of exclusion, put forward by the politics of belonging. The politics of belonging affirm or contest belonging, as they are about inclusion and exclusion. Yet the personal dimension is much less prone to outside forces and discourses, thus providing a counterweight against the ill-effects of politics of belonging. We suggest that through processes of politics of belonging Turkish Alevi older migrants experience in-betweenness, while place-belonging potentially provides them with multiple belongings in multiple places.

A third and last main conclusion is that autobiographic insideness (Rowles, 1983) was a helpful perspective in exposing and understanding important dynamics in older migrants' belonging. Its relevance may be particularly significant for older people, as they have a tendency to contemplate the past to make sense of the here and now (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). We did indeed encounter a lot of taken-for-grantedness

in the interviews and were able to open this black box by going into people's histories. Next, although it was less prominent in the analysis, by means of personal pasts we showed how places changed and proved to be meaningful in place-belonging. A last yield of autobiographic insideness was its capacity to unravel imagined and constructed narratives about belonging to the Turkish village.

In terms of generalizability – though not qualitative research's main goal – all our informants spend roughly as much time in Turkey as they do in Western Europe, and most have been doing so for many years. This population was suitable to study belonging among older people who live transnationally, because they may be biased to a lesser extent by relative length of residence in the two countries. Consequently, the conclusions of this study are not necessarily representative for other Turkish older migrants who are financially, legally, physically, socially or otherwise not able to live in two countries to such an extent. Besides, some Alevis are Kurdish (Aksoy, 2014); Kurds' ethnic identity is divorced from a national identity. They consequently tend to hold a different position towards their country of origin than the Alevis from this research, who are not Kurdish (Hopkins, 2011).

We finish on what we believe this research adds to the future of belonging studies. First, the personal and intimate dimension of belonging that is often overlooked warrants further investigation and scrutiny – particularly how the subjective feeling of familiarity and comfort, which can be invoked by family or meaningful objects (Nowicka, 2007), can be used as a safe haven against the challenges that the more interpersonal dimension of politics of belonging evokes. Second, as belonging is an inherently geographical concept connecting matter to place (Mee & Wright, 2009), we encourage scholars to more explicitly analyze how the location of the data collection impacts on narrations of belonging and non-belonging. Not only are place, context and location inherently tied to how belonging is experienced (Anthias, 2013), the place where we ask informants about these belongings is also significant. Acknowledging and paying particular attention to the many manifestations in which context and location are important in belonging experiences improves our understanding of such a 'fundamental human motivation' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

## Notes

1. Alevism is a religious belief stemming from the heterodox Shia tradition of support for the fourth caliph (Ali), in contrast to the Sunni, followers of the first three caliphs in Islamic belief (Hopkins, 2011). More on this under the header 'Politics of belonging'.
2. This is a pseudonym. The exact location and name of the village remain unspecified, upon request of informants.
3. This is a pseudonym.
4. In this paper, the age range is 63–84.

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