# Displaced

The last weeks in the apartment were a time of restless, anxious waiting for Cemile and Ramazan. Following the unannounced police visit, Cemile felt ill with disappointment and anger. The couple had found a small rental apartment a few streets over from Tree Street, but the place was in dire need of renovation before they were able to move. They had been given an eviction date on which they were supposed to turn over their keys to a project delegation similar to the one that had come in early July, but that day came and went without anyone from *GAP Inşaat* or the municipality showing up at their door. Ramazan commented:

> They don't even call. They were supposed to come at ten thirty. When they say they don't come, they come. When they say they will come, they don't. It makes no sense. We have finally resigned to having to leave the house, and now they don't come.

Cemile did not feel "resigned", however. As much as it was possible with her infected toe and due to the stress palpitations and the intense summer heat, she paced the apartment, opening and closing boxes, deciding what objects she would be able to take with her when the municipal lorry did finally turn up to move their things. Sinking down on the upturned sofa, she exclaimed:

> *Vallah*, they can keep them. They can put a match to them and burn all of it. I'll leave all of it here. There is nothing I can do anymore, I am tired. I have no more tears left from all the crying. I can barely see clearly anymore. I will hand them my keys and leave all of it. They can lock it in here, or they can throw it all away. Or you know what? I can just throw it all out onto the street from the window and burn it all there. There isn't much left anyway.

One of the main objectives of this research has been to capture and describe the pain felt by Tarlabaşı residents facing the loss of their homes and their neighbourhood. In many ways, this pain was without recourse, and expressions of desperations like the one above shows how residents who felt helpless, utterly disenfranchised and dispossessed, expressed that pain. Psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove (2004: 11) has described the relocation of residents after the demolition of their homes as a "root shock", defined as the "traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem". It

can leave deep psychological and emotional scars. In his study of the suffering that residents of West Boston endured as a result of being forcibly evicted from the neighbourhood, Marc Fried (1969) has written about the consequences of "grieving for a lost home". J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra E. Smith (2001) have described victims' experiences of anxiety, stress, and desperation caused by "domicide", the planned, deliberate destruction of homes that are in the way of corporate, political or bureaucratic projects.

A growing amount of research has focussed on various aspects of urban renewal, displacement and gentrification in Turkey in recent years (Esen and Lanz 2005; Ünsal and Kuyucu 2010; Ünsal 2013; van Dobben Schoon 2014; Sakızlıoğlu 2014b; Zengin 2014; Islam and Sakızlıoğlu 2015; Yetiskul and Demirel 2018; Rivas-Alonso 2021). This book aimed to focus on details of territorial stigmatisation, how it was exploited by powerful actors in a state-led renewal project, and how residents managed that stigma. Departing from discussions centred around the "strengths and shortcomings of the analytic concept of territorial stigmatisation" (Kirkness and Tijé-Dra 2017: 252), one of the contributions to the literature consists in expanding the focus on the symbolic consequences of territorial stigma, and the material impacts on residents in the immediate run-up to evictions and demolitions.

*Cemile and Ramazan's apartment after eviction*

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

The Beyoğlu Municipality and other state and corporate actors involved in the Tarlabaşı renewal project promoted and fomented existing spatial stigma in the neighbourhood in order to legitimise and justify a highly controversial large-scale urban intervention, arguing that the demolition of hundreds of homes in central Istanbul would improve the district "for everyone". Paul Kirkness and Andreas Tijé-Dra (2017: 253) point out that urban capitalism profits from everyday depictions of stigmatised neighbourhoods in the media, in advertisement, as well as through political discourse, "everyday hearsay"

that produce, maintain, fuel, and reinforce spatial disrepute. The analysis of the dominant media discourse, of marketing and PR materials, and officials' statements in this book showed how a state-led urban renewal project in Turkey exploited and fuelled state-led stigmatisation. Such dominant images and representations play a crucial role in the social construction of urban geographies of stigmatisation, which has tangible, material effects on residents. On the one hand, these representations render stigmatised neighbourhoods hyper-visible, creating urban spaces that are imagined as sensationally dirty, immoral, and dangerous no-go zones by the non-resident community. It follows that non-residents rarely if ever set foot in these areas, which leaves most image and knowledge production to "experts" (Bourdieu et al. 1994; Kirkness 2013), which fuels further marginalisation, prevents outside solidarity, and fosters consent with neoliberal urban policies. On the other hand, dominant representations of a stigmatised neighbourhood erase their residents, and makes them vanish behind a "discursive wall of negative tropes" (Carter 2010: 12–13). In the case of Tarlabaşı, this meant that residents were largely excluded from decisions of how their neighbourhood was seen and represented, as well as from decisions pertaining to the physical alterations of their homes and livelihoods. Tarlabaşı, therefore, became a neighbourhood that was hidden in plain sight, a poor district in central Istanbul that was partly, and illegally, destroyed by the municipal and state authorities while the stories and words of residents remained mostly unheard. Metaphorically speaking, territorial stigma was the curtain behind which authorities were free to abuse residents, while non-residents trusted and "knew" that this curtain was there for good reason, and the screams coming from behind it were not worth listening to.

In recent years, scholars of territorial stigmatisation have insisted that it is these voices that need to be recorded and amplified in order to understand how residents of stigmatised neighbourhoods manage and oppose this stigma (Jensen and Christensen 2012; Kirkness 2014; Kirkness and Tijé-Dra 2017; Fattah and Walters 2020). Contrary to the claims of Loïc Wacquant, Tarlabaşı residents did not uniformly internalise the stigma, and they did not all want to leave the neighbourhood. A significant number of residents expressed a deep attachment to Tarlabaşı formed through various symbolic and material bonds they had built up over time. This attachment was rooted in a Turkey-specific form of an urban social network – the *mahalle*. And while these ties did not necessarily translate into pride in the neighbourhood (though that did happen, too), residents were clear about the importance of this built social environment consisting of neighbourly relations, business ties, and access to aspects of an urban social contract that were specific to Tarlabaşı and could not be transferred elsewhere. This book concentrated on symbolic practices of managing and opposing stigma, on the manifold ways that Tarlabaşı residents questioned, distorted, or challenged their neighbourhood's bad reputation. In the context of the Tarlabaşı renewal project, struggles against stigmatisation were also struggles against the displacement that this state-led and state-produced stigma tried to justify. While these struggles remained ultimately toothless against dispossession, it is important to carefully analyse them in order to understand how territorial stigmatisation operates. This book aimed, therefore, to draw back the curtain, and train the gaze on the suffering of those hidden behind it.

Much work remains to be done. In this book I analysed the intersectionality of territorial stigma and its symbolic and material consequences for residents, which raises the

question how these aspects play out for minority groups in Tarlabaşı whom I did not have ethnographic access to. It would be really interesting to have the perspective from inside the sizable Romani community in the neighbourhood, but for reasons of access, that was not something I was able to do. However, I would be very curious to see how that point of view completes the picture of how territorial stigma influenced how residents dealt with the renewal project. In the same way, it would be crucial to find out how communities that found refuge in Tarlabaşı, such as the considerable number of migrants from various African countries, dealt with intersectionality and stigma. For residents without a legal status in Turkey, the invisibilisation of their place of residence might have provided useful cover. However, this requires a different ethnographic focus and a different methodological approach than those I have chosen to pursue in my thesis.

In 2017, the Council of State [*Danıştay*] confirmed an earlier ruling by the same court that the Tarlabaşı renewal was not, as the application of Law No. 5366 suggested, in the best interest of the public, and cancelled the entire project (Doğan2017). However, between the first court ruling, the appeals, and the final verdict, neither demolitions nor constructions were halted by project stakeholders. The Beyoğlu mayor dismissed earlier court orders as a formality (Can 2020: 145). As of 2021, four years after the final ruling, the project is still under construction and planned to be finalised by 2022. It would be interesting to analyse how legality, illegality, and stigma intersect in the Tarlabaşı Renewal Project, and how the disregard for the court order is connected to the social construction of a stigmatised neighbourhood. In the same way, it is important to analyse to what extent the stigma obscures such government practices in the eyes of the non-resident community.

During my fieldwork and my life in Tarlabaşı, I regularly came across urban activists involved in anti-gentrification and anti-displacement struggles elsewhere in Istanbul who expressed in various ways, such as derogatory comments or simply silence on the issue, that Tarlabaşı was not a neighbourhood that was "worth" fighting for. Often, they reproduced the same stigmatising discourse dominant in the mainstream media or public policies. This shows that further research is needed into how intersecting stigmas of a tainted social identity and territorial disrepute influence non-resident activism against contentious urban interventions.

My focus on intersectionality and spatial stigma in Tarlabaşı leads to the question how territorial stigmatisation plays out in areas where the community is not broken down into small minority groups, for example in predominantly Kurdish cities in the southeast of Turkey. Of course, those are completely different ethnographic sites, but this problematic poses an interesting question since a lot of locations in the predominantly Kurdish provinces have been subjected to state-led dispossession and violence in recent years. Between 2015 and 2016, entire urban areas were wiped off the map during sieges that the Turkish state laid to Kurdish districts and neighbourhoods as part of the violent conflict between Kurdish militants and state security forces. Some of them have subsequently been rebuilt as luxury housing sites that are out of reach for their former inhabitants. How do intersectionality and stigma play out in an area that is more uniformly Kurdish, and what are the lines along which solidarity takes shape – or not – in a situation where Kurds are not a minority group in the local community? Which fault lines exist in a majority Kurdish geography that suffers a deep territorial stigma for its

Kurdishness? How do reactions to stigmatisation play out in areas where intersectionality is not as fragmented as it was in Tarlabaşı, and where local residents might have the tools to reject the capacity of the Turkish mainstream discourse to distort their self-perception. Due to a focus on the collective Kurdish experience in Tarlabaşı, this book also opens a window into further research of trauma as a result of state repression and displacement, especially in predominantly Kurdish areas in the southeast of Turkey that have remained underrepresented both in academia and journalism.

The reason these are all important questions is because we ought to be interested in how and why people resist, and how and why people do not resist when they have been stigmatised in the name of neoliberal dispossession, something that happens all the time, and in many different contexts. What kind of conditions create the capacity to effectively resist these kinds of forces? How can people challenge, oppose, or even stop these forces? The question of how stigmatisation and the resulting invisibilisation provide cover for severe human rights abuses, hidden while in plain sight, remains in urgent need of answering.

## Gone

Halil Usta and Necmi Usta were amongst the last to leave on Tree Street. By October 2012, they had found and rented another shop further down the street. The semi-basement room required a lot of repair work and some renovation, and both barbers hoped to be able to stay put in their old shop until they were finished preparing the new one. However, by that time Necmi Usta was already working in a barbershop in a military hotel [*ordu evi*] four days a week, and only came to see customers in Tarlabaşı on Thursdays. Halil Usta rarely came anymore at all. He felt dejected and alone in a street where all his former friends and neighbours had left. The coffeehouse at the corner had long since closed down. The chicken döner restaurant of his friends Ekin and Seray was gone, too, and they mostly spoke on the phone now, since the couple lived in Sultanbeyli, a *gecekondu* neighbourhood on the Asian side of the city. When I saw Halil Usta in early 2013, he said:

> I have not come here in a very long time. I don't come here anymore, not even during the holidays [*bayram*]. What is left here? There is no café, either, and [the owner] has not opened another one. If he does open another one further down the street, that would be no use to me either. Everyone's gone anyway. And the café needs to be close to the barbershop, in case that customers come.

After that, Halil Usta took on a job as parking lot attendant in his suburb of Bostancı. Necmi Usta said that he had problems with his health and a "bad foot" and could not stand up for long times anymore.

Years later, in a 2019 visit to Istanbul, Halil Usta told me that he did not want to come to Tarlabaşı anymore at all, and he had not, because it made him too sad and reminded him of everything that had been lost.

*View from Cemile's apartment after eviction*

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

After days of waiting for the municipality to come and evict them, Cemile and Ramazan moved into a rental apartment on nearby Hill Street, a little closer to Taksim Square, in August of 2011. They had invested into repainting the small two-bedroom place, and Cemile had spent weeks scrubbing and cleaning the run-down kitchen and the toilet that doubled as a shower. For a while she continued to visit the women from her old building who now lived scattered all over Beyoğlu, but these visits trickled to a halt after a while. In June 2013, during my reporting on the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, I met Cemile walking in the park. It was the height of the movement, and the park had been transformed into an activist campsite, filled with tents and information stands, a library, a community garden, a teahouse, medical facilities, and free food stands. Various activists and political groups sat together in discussion, there was music and a general euphoric atmosphere that had not yet been dampened by the clearance of the adjacent occupied Taksim Square earlier that week.

Despite the diversity and plurality of groups and characters in the park, Cemile looked a little out of place, but she was ecstatic.

> I was curious and I wanted to come and see what Gezi Park was like now. It's really nice, isn't it? I wanted to convince the other women in my Qur'an reading group to join me, I can't wait to tell them about all this. All these kids! Can you believe this? That many people? They should have done this earlier, when the municipality came to demolish my house.

Cemile pulled a small white dust mask from her purse and held it up to me, saying that she had come prepared. Ever since the teargas cartridge had landed in her living room, she was afraid of violent police interventions. That fear was not enough to keep her away. A few years later, Cemile was evicted from her rental apartment in Hill Street by investors

who wanted to turn the entire building into an apartment hotel, a type of tourist accommodation that was shooting up all over Beyoğlu at the time, driving up prices and displacing residents. Cemile and Ramazan had to move in with their daughter, waiting for the completion of the renewal project.

*Project billboards burned during 2013 Gezi protests*


Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Müge left her home in Bird Street to move back with her family in Izmir for a while. The informal brothel, the teahouse, and the cobbler's workshop were all evicted. Finally, the entire street was fenced up before demolitions. When she had to leave her home in September 2011, Müge had wanted to move to Bahçeşehir, a middle class residential neighbourhood on the western outskirts of the city, where she had made a downpayment on a flat in a gated community [*site*]. She had to pay 310 TL every month and hoped to move into the new flat with Gülay and eventually, her mother from Izmir. However, she had problems paying her instalments on time, and for a while faced serious money issues that she struggled, and ultimately failed, to solve, which meant that she defaulted on her mortgage and had no place to live in Istanbul.

I did not see Müge for a long time, and she did not answer or return my phone calls. In 2017, I saw her on the street, but almost did not recognise her: she looked pale and emaciated, her hair was matted, and her clothes ripped and dirty. She did not recognise me and was unable to focus. Müge, who had always been so meticulous about her appearance and her manners, looked dishevelled. Gülay, who had moved into a place closer to Taksim Square together with other single women, later told me what had happened. Apparently Müge had fallen into a severe depression and started to take drugs. Gülay said that she tried to pry her friend away but failed, and Müge's mental and physical health deteriorated further. By the time I had seen her, Gülay said that "nobody was able to talk to her

anymore", that she had gotten "violent", and that she mostly lived on the streets. Burcu continued to work in Tarlabaşı, on the opposite side of Tarlabaşı Boulevard, but constant police and *zabıta* controls made this increasingly difficult. The network of trans* women in Bird Street had been dispersed.

*Waiting for eviction*

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Alev married and moved with her husband Özgür into a spacious three-bedroom apartment a few streets from her parents and her brother's family in Haciahmet, a neighbourhood very close to Tarlabaşı where many Kurdish families live. Alev stayed in touch with the women from her old building as much as possible, and for a while both Cemile or Fikriye, her former upstairs neighbour, regularly came to visit. She kept working in the textile workshop. Her husband sold water, tissues, and other necessities on Taksim Square. They worked hard to make themselves comfortable and hoped to give her parents the opportunity to visit their old village in Mardin province. Alev and Özgür invested in new furniture, a flatscreen TV. During the Gezi Park protests, he volunteered in one of the makeshift clinics. When I visited her in 2016, she had two children, and said that they were happy. When we talked about Tarlabaşı, the anger and the sadness about what had happened were very close to the surface:

> They promised us that nobody would be victimised, but they victimised all of us. They threw all of us out into the street. What are laws in Turkey worth if they allow this? [...] First listen to the people, to what they have to say. Speak about personal freedoms, unemployment and poverty first, and then about giant construction projects.

Six days after his failed eviction, Kemal moved out. His sister had found an affordable basement apartment in the suburb of Bayrampaşa for him, and Kemal said that the local

district governor's office there would grant him some financial assistance. The municipality hired a small lorry for him that fit most of his belongings, but Kemal had to take the public bus to get to his new home in Bayrampaşa. On the way to the bus station on Tarlabaşı Boulevard, he hugged his neighbours and friends good-bye.

*Kemal and Sarı*

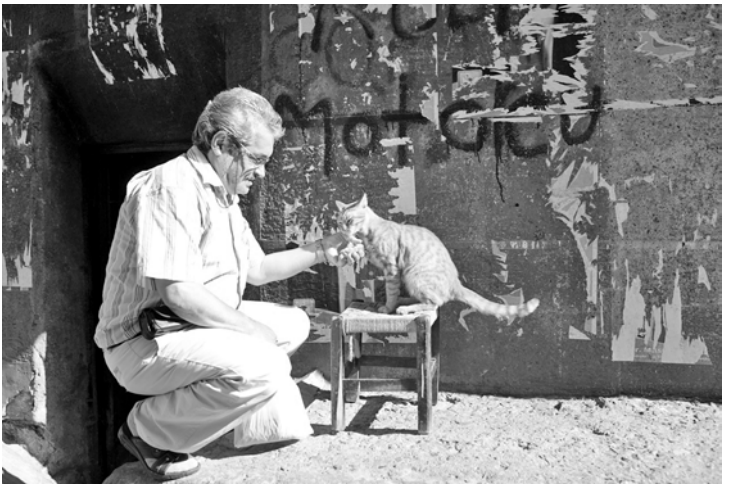

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

For a while, Kemal came to visit. In his old Tarlabaşı home he had looked after a gaggle of five street cats, for whom he had put out food, and, if he had a little money, pieces of meat he bought at the butcher shop. In February 2012, I met him in the teahouse where he was playing cards with Halil Usta, second-hand furniture seller Maher, and the teahouse owner. Two months later I visited him in his new apartment in one of the many high-rises in his new neighbourhood.

> I knew everyone in Tarlabaşı, they all helped me out. Here nobody helps me. And [various charities] came to my house there, now I moved, and I have not been able to notify them. [In Tarlabaşı], a friend of mine registered me with them, and I don't know how to do that. […] It's difficult here. I go to the market but can't buy anything. […] My neighbours are good people, but I don't know them well. It's not like Tarlabaşı. Here, nobody knows each other's names.

As the months passed, his visits to Tarlabaşı trickled to a halt. Kemal was distressed to have left the cats behind, especially his favourite, "Sarı" [The yellow one], who had glued himself to Kemal's leg each time he came to visit his old street. A neighbour who had looked after the tomcat could not do so any longer as her court case against the municipality was concluded, and she had to leave. Kemal said that he felt guilty for abandoning Sarı, but his new landlord did not allow for cats in the house.