

Chapter eight: Giving in to stigma

Lute and *saz* maker Kerem Usta owned a two-storey workshop on a corner just outside the project area. He had spent his childhood in Tarlabası and used to live there, but by the time I met him in 2010, he owned a modest apartment in a high-rise residential complex in Sefaköy, two hours from Taksim by public transport.

Kerem Usta commuted to Tarlabası every weekday, and sometimes on weekends as well. His workshop was spread out over three and a half floors (the low room that he used as a depot occupied a low-ceilinged room accessible via a set of steep stairs), and he shared the workspace with his younger brother and another master instrument maker. The three men arrived in the morning and stayed until the early evening, which made it necessary to cook and eat breakfast and lunch in the shop. For the various customers, business partners, neighbours and random guests, Kemal Usta kept a small stock of biscuits, and of course tea. There were several corner shops [*bakkal*] and a few eateries in proximity of the workshop, including a good mussel kitchen¹ just across the small street. Despite this, Kerem Usta never bought or ate anything at any of them, with the exception of one *esnaf lokantası*² that he had frequented for decades and that was at a 15-minute walking distance. If he could help it he did not even buy bread or packaged biscuits at any of the corner shops in Tarlabası, arguing that the wares there might not be “clean” or of a quality he would be able to offer to guests. He balked at the idea of eating cheese or eggs from any of the *bakkal* closest to his workshop, and only did so as a last resort, for example when they hosted an unexpectedly high number of guests for breakfast or lunch. His brother Efe sometimes went all the way up to and across Tarlabası Boulevard to buy food – at least a twenty-minute walk at a brisk pace back and forth – even for items as simple as savoury biscuits to serve with tea. Both Efe and Kerem Usta frequently warned me not to “trust” local Tarlabası sellers, be it in a shop or on the Sunday vegetable market, because, they argued, in shop owners might “mix anything” into the foodstuffs they sold.

¹ While many mussel kitchens in Tarlabası were informal, and often quite unhygienic – businesses in the basement of buildings that sold the mussels on itinerant trays – this mussel kitchen was a state-of-the-art manufacture that delivered to several well-known restaurants in Beyoğlu.

² Literally a “small shop owner restaurant”, an *esnaf lokantası* is a restaurant that offers a range of home-cooked meals in self-service style. They usually do not offer dinner.

Residents of stigmatised neighbourhoods find different ways to manage the stigma of living in a defamed place. Some residents of stigmatised urban areas “internalise this territorial taint, which sets off a number of negative social effects (Wacquant 2007). Feelings of guilt and shame can lead residents “to deny belonging, to distance themselves from the area and their neighbours, and to emphasize their own moral worth in contrast to other residents (Jensen and Christensen 2015: 75)”. This chapter examines the various ways in which some Tarlabası residents internalised the bad reputation of their neighbourhood and how they tried to deflect the stigma onto other groups they blamed for the disrepute. Following that I analyse along which fault lines residents mirrored the stigma onto other groups. Finally, I want to show the role that weaponized nostalgia played in such lateral denigration. The main question hereby is not if lateral denigration happened amongst residents in Tarlabası, but more crucially, *how* this denigration happened, and what kind of “symbolic boundary work” (Lamont 2000) maintained and justified it.

Internalisation

Kerem Usta was ambivalent about the neighbourhood that he was, after all, very familiar with, and he was not the only one. Halil Usta’s barber shop was an important fixture in the neighbourhood, and both he and his associate Necmi Usta often spoke lovingly about their *mahalle*. However, this affection for Tarlabası was not without handicap. For example, they both bemoaned the decline of quality standards in their trade that had apparently occurred over the years they had been working in the neighbourhood. Halil partly blamed the lack of *zabıta* controls. The regulatory officers were tasked with the control of hygiene standards and working hours in barber shops. This absence of oversight, he argued, meant that some barbers did not always use fresh towels, or that shaving blades might be reused to save money. He thought that the *zabıta* had not dared to come to the neighbourhood for a long time, which affected his trade and his business. Hygiene regulations were violated to cut costs, leading to worsening overall quality in an attempt to undersell the competition. It also meant that Halil felt the need to open his shop on Sundays:

Barber shops are supposed to close on Sundays, but nobody checks if they do. The *zabıta* are worried that they will get beaten up if they come. So, they just let it slide, but that means that I have to open my shop on Sundays as well, because I’m afraid that I will lose customers otherwise. The *zabıta* are afraid to come here, so they don’t, or just very rarely. Here they’d be told anyway [by residents]: Get lost, man, what do you want from me?

Halil said that the *zabıta* checks were important because they were a public service that would have alleviated barbers’ workloads and forced everyone to stick to basic hygiene rules. It was also beneficial to their health and kept them safe in their jobs:

Before everyone would get licenses, there were public health checks, like 20 years ago, I remember that, done by the *zabıta*. Now they don’t exist anymore, and I don’t go to these check-ups either, which is bad in fact because it would be good for my own health

to have them. Customers could be sick, they could have tuberculosis, these checks were good for me, too.

Necmi added that the lack of control and check-ups was not the fault of the *zabıta*, but in fact the fault of Tarlabası residents whose “rudeness” towards public officers and municipal officials was the reason they stayed away in the first place. He argued that people in Tarlabası did not “deserve” public service if they did not show the necessary appreciation and deference:

Some of the shops here are not very diligent with hygiene. Some of the cheaper barbers use the same blade for several customers, things like that. Normally the *zabıta* would fine them for that, but if people treat them so disrespectfully, why would they bother to come here? If people here behave like that, why would they care about such things?

During my fieldwork I have indeed never seen a *zabıta* control – or even a *zabıta* patrol – in Tarlabası.³ I have also never heard of first-hand incidents in the neighbourhood where *zabıta* had been insulted or beaten. The municipal police were not popular amongst Tarlabası residents, especially those who were engaged in the informal and illegalised economies of recycling and itinerant sales karts. However, they usually dealt with the municipal police through avoidance, not confrontation. Anecdotes of encounters with the *zabıta* by other residents did not reflect what the two barbers alleged. On the contrary, *zabıta* officers were often unfriendly and high-handed, and showed neither mercy nor understanding for the often-desperate situation of those they reprimanded.⁴ This is not to say that verbal, or even physical, violence against *zabıta* officers was impossible, but I have never encountered any evidence for it during my fieldwork. What the thoughts relayed by Halil and Necmi do show is their impression that Tarlabası was a neighbourhood so uncivil that it did not deserve the municipal attention and care that were expected and taken for granted in other districts of the city.

Residents that have internalised the stigma associated with their neighbourhood sometimes view experiences of inequality as a natural consequence, a rational reality for them to face simply for living in a ‘bad’ place. As Wacquant (2010: 217) writes, the “physical disrepair and institutional dilapidation of the neighbourhood cannot but generate an abiding *sense of social inferiority* by communicating to its residents that they are second- or third-class citizens undeserving of the attention of city officials and of the care of its agencies.”

It was also not uncommon for inhabitants to acerbically joke about Tarlabası as a no-go zone, a place void of beauty and interest for any visitor. (Incidentally, this was also

3 They were quite common on nearby İstiklal Avenue and its side streets in Beyoğlu, however, where shops and itinerant sellers were rigorously policed, and beggars and street musicians not seldom – and often rudely – removed. This also concerned street sellers and recyclers from Tarlabası, whose goods and karts were regularly seized by the *zabıta*, but usually outside of the neighbourhood. The only *zabıta* officer I regularly came across in Tarlabası was one man tasked with logistics during the eviction period.

4 The seizure of karts and products meant a considerable financial (and temporary income) loss for sellers and recyclers that was difficult to recuperate. For example, the iron kart and the large bag used by recyclers cost 100 TL at the time, a large sum that could mean several days’ work.

an argument put forth by the municipality in order to justify the renewal project.) Sometimes people mocked me for my interest in the neighbourhood, and my bringing visitors with me to walk the streets and meet the people I was spending so much of my time with. Tourists also found their way into the neighbourhood, mainly because of the rapid proliferation of apartment hotels in the area. Halil Usta ridiculed the tourists who chose to stay in one of the accommodations in the neighbourhood, or who came wandering in to see Tarlabası:

Tourists come here, their guidebooks in hand, and wander around Tarlabası. *[animated]* One should say to them: You idiots, why did you come here? [...] They are building hotels everywhere now, in every street, and for what? What is there to see here? The only thing Tarlabası is famous for is being the *worst* place in Istanbul!

This internalisation of the neighbourhood stigma affected how residents thought about the renewal project. When I asked trans* sex worker Cansu what she thought of the renewal project in general, she said that she was in favour of it. She agreed that Tarlabası could only be salvaged if it was demolished and rebuilt from the ground up, because it was dilapidated beyond saving and its infrastructure hopelessly outdated:

They will demolish this place and there will be new construction projects. That's great! At least there will be natural gas then. Look, we don't have natural gas here. In the very centre of Istanbul. Natural gas! In Istanbul! We don't have it here. But all that will come now. With the new projects. The streets are way too narrow. They are right [to demolish]. Something happens here and the fire trucks cannot even enter! The ambulance cannot enter! But if everything is demolished and cleaned up nicely, it will be much more beautiful, I think.

Cansu thought that the only way to improve the infrastructure in Tarlabası was not by careful renovation or the installation of lacking amenities, but by the neighbourhood's destruction, including the displacement of everyone in it. She accepted the loss of her home and her workplace in exchange for a meagre compensation because she considered Tarlabası to be beyond the pale and impossible to redeem. Views like hers were not uncommon. I regularly heard residents argue in favour of the renewal project, even if they themselves were to be displaced or cheated on the sales price of their property, by saying that Tarlabası just "did not deserve better", "residents had only themselves to blame", or because the neighbourhood was "simply too bad to save it". Bahar Sakızlıoğlu (2014a: 199) found that a number of residents supported the renewal project as an opportunity to get rid of the Kurdish community, and the concentration of crime, even if it meant their own displacement.

Such an unfavourable view of the neighbourhood and its residents obviously had a detrimental impact on any opposition to the renewal project. If residents accepted that Tarlabası was the dirty, dangerous, and irreparable place that project stakeholders described it as, they would not fight against its demolition. The internalisation of stigma also led to a lack of empathy for residents who did resist their eviction, and who sought to rally support from their neighbours and fellow Tarlabası dwellers. More than once I told someone about a pending expulsion, hoping (and fully expecting) that my interlocutor would share my outrage. However, that was not always the case. Sometimes that person

defended the developers' arguments and interests. Once I told Halil Usta about how upset some people I had spoken to were about being thrown out of their homes. He argued that they were wrong to complain:

Believe me, and I am telling you this from the bottom of my heart, most of the people who live here are squatters. No matter who you ask here, no matter who you interview, that person will be a squatter who lives in an apartment that they don't own or rent, I guarantee you this. They'll say that they are being thrown out, that this is unfair. But that's not true. They are squatters and have no right to live there.

Halil based his assessment on the allegation of project stakeholders that the vast majority of Tarlabası residents had no claim to the area. The point that only five percent of all residents in the renewal zone were squatters has been made several times throughout this book (Kentsel A.Ş. 2008). The existing negative image of Tarlabası, painting it as a neighbourhood of undeserving squatters, criminals and terrorists made it easy for the municipality to manipulate and exploit the stigma, and residents who aimed to distinguish themselves from that negative image sometimes took these arguments at face value, without questioning them.

Lateral denigration

Hakan, a Turkish man in his late forties who ran the small teahouse on Bird Street, often complained about the amount of garbage scattered on his street. A relatively narrow cul-de-sac inside the renewal zone, municipal cleaning vehicles rarely passed through to mop up refuse. Even street sweepers, many of whom played cards in his teahouse, seldomly took to the street with their brooms. On one side of the street, a development company renovated an old Armenian school independently of the renewal project. Several abandoned, half-ruined houses steadily filled with rubble and material discarded at the construction site and garbage. These were at least partly the reasons that Bird Street looked increasingly uncared for, though the residents that still lived there, such as Müge and cobblers Zeki Usta and his son Sedat, often swept in front of their places. Nevertheless, Hakan blamed local residents, not the municipality or even the construction site owners, for the dirty appearance of the street.

Look at this mess. Bags everywhere, rubble everywhere! [In other neighbourhoods] there are garbage containers and people leave their garbage in those containers. They don't do that here. They just don't! Here people just open the window and throw their garbage on the street. They couldn't do that elsewhere. Some people in Tarlabası just behave in such a bad way. I don't think this is right.

His words implied that there was something about Tarlabası residents that made them inherently dirty. In his eyes, the problem was not a lack of garbage bins, infrequent garbage disposal, or negligent construction site management inside a residential area, but a negative quality that was ingrained in some residents because of where they lived. Hakan's argumentation therefore perpetuated the stigmatising discourse used to describe his neighbourhood. Wacquant (2007, 2008) has identified such "lateral denigr-

tion" as a coping strategy for residents of tainted neighbourhoods to try and deflect the stigma from themselves onto a demonised Other. Like Hakan did, they might describe faceless others as the "real" transgressors whom they blame for the bad reputation of their neighbourhood (Hastings 2004; Palmer et al. 2004; Warr 2005b; Watt 2006; Eksner 2013; Contreras 2017; Cuny 2018; Verdouw and Flanagan 2019; Sisson 2020). However, while the accused were name- and faceless, they did fit into certain identity categories. Some people in Tarlabaşı tended to variously direct their anger and distaste against (more recent) rural migrants, Kurds, Roma, Syrian refugees, trans* sex workers, and migrants from African countries instead of against the municipality or the media, to blame them for how Tarlabaşı was being perceived from the outside. These narratives were often informed by the same ordinary iconic profiles that project stakeholders used in their stigmatising discourse about the neighbourhood. This inclination to blame neighbours for the area's bad reputation corresponds with sociologist Michèle Lamont's (2000) concept of "symbolic boundary work", which she uses to explain that members of a group increase their own sense of moral worth compared to those of another group by denigrating them (see Contreras 2017).

Necmi Usta, the 35-year-old assistant barber [*kalfa*] to Halil Usta had first migrated from the central Anatolian province of Konya to Tarlabaşı in 1985 to start his apprenticeship. When I met him, he had been working in the barbershop on Tree Street for ten years. There, he served customers of "all kinds of" ethnic and religious backgrounds, as he often hurried to underline during our chats. However, when he spoke about the people who lived in the immediate vicinity of the shop, predominantly Kurds from the provinces of Mardin and Siirt, he complained that their lifestyle and daily practices were incompatible with what he considered to be "urban culture" [*şehir kültürü*]. He argued that these newcomers he euphemistically termed as "coming from the east" [*doğudan gelen*] were to blame that the neighbourhood and its image had deteriorated. As was often the case in the Tarlabaşı, this did not prevent Necmi from entertaining excellent relations with his Kurdish neighbours and customers. When talking to me, knowing about my pro-Kurdish stance, he stressed that he meant "no harm" by his complaints, and that it was a "simple fact" that Kurds, who had migrated to Istanbul from the countryside, did not conform to life in a big city. Once I observed the following conversation between Necmi and long-standing (Kurdish) customer Murat in the barbershop:

M: I used to live here, and I've had a business here since 1983. I own a textile workshop here. This used to be a very nice neighbourhood, believe me. A lot of successful [*karyerli*] people used to live here. Respectful people. It was a more luxurious place, a cleaner place...

N: Many artists used to live here.

M: A lot of distinguished people used to live here. An elite. When the people from the countryside came here, in the 80s and the 90s, those people fled. They went to more luxurious neighbourhoods, to quieter neighbourhoods. Because when those villagers came here, those people that lacked city manners, these people, the former inhabi-

tants, they started to withdraw from here. [...] When that happened, they left Tarlabası to a different kind of people.

N: Yes, that's how it is. Whatever these people that came from the east did in the east, they now do in Tarlabası as well. [...] For example the thing they do with their bedding. We buy our blankets and pillows, but they don't. [They use] sheep's wool. Ok, it's nice to use natural things, but to do this in the middle of the street..you saw it in the summer. They take a stick and start beating that wool, bam, like that.¹³¹Necmi refers to the practice of filling pillows and blankets with sheep's wool, which is common in rural areas in Turkey. This wool is regularly taken out of the cases, washed, fluffed up and dried in the sun. Ok, that's what you are supposed to do [with wool], but not in the centre of Istanbul! Urban culture is different. If you'd take these people and put them in a residential complex....[...].

M: I now live in one of the more luxurious apartments in my complex. But you know what they do [in Tarlabası]? Those people who have come from the southeast, these guys they just open the window and, bam! They throw their used baby diapers out into the street from their window. There really are people with peculiar manners who live here. Very peculiar. How many times have they landed on my head...when I got into my car...I have seen all sorts of things here unfortunately. There really are very strange, very peculiar people here now. And when you say something, they give you a rude answer. [...] Don't get me wrong, they are our brothers, I don't mean to badmouth them, that's not my intention.

N: And this has nothing to do with education. It has nothing to do with education when you throw your used diapers from the balcony. It's not required to teach someone not to do that. You should think of that yourself! Put it in a plastic bag and put it in front of your door in the evening. When the garbage truck comes, it will pick it up. You cannot just throw a diaper from the third floor.

M: And they bring out their garbage just after the truck has left! How hard is it to bring the garbage down in time? Put it at your front door before the truck comes! Those people have a very peculiar outlook on life. Because I own a building here and my business is here, I couldn't move it elsewhere. But I really want to move my business elsewhere. This is the centre of Istanbul. Tarlabası, Beyoğlu! Beyoğlu, the place where gentlemen [beyler] live! It's supposed to be a place where distinguished people, elite people live. I have not seen that either, I came in the 70s, but there really used to be very different people in Beyoğlu, in the centre of Istanbul.

N: I really don't mean to talk badly about anyone. After they came, the feeling of neighbourliness declined a bit more. Do you know what I mean? It's not like when the madamlar [non-Muslim women] lived here. Those colourful bowfront houses...some guy moved in and has lived there for thirty years, why doesn't he paint it, at least once? Should the government come and do it for you? There is [cheap] paint, and there is [expensive] paint. Only to make it look nice and clean, but they don't even do that.

The complaint about the “ignorant villagers” who migrated to the city but do not know how to adapt to urban life has been a well-known and much-used trope in the media, fictional artwork and daily conversations in Turkey for decades. During my fieldwork

I heard it often, mostly from ethnic Turks who had come to Tarlabası a decade or two before their Kurdish neighbours.⁵

It is important to note that Murat, a Kurdish businessman whose family had also migrated to Istanbul, did not protest Necmi's observations. Similar to Müge, who was trying to distance herself from trans* sex workers she deemed unworthy of respect, Murat distinguished himself from stigmatised Kurdish rural migrants by adopting the same negative narrative used in the mainstream Turkish discourse.

Randol Contreras (2017), in his research on residents' reactions to territorial stigma in Compton and South Central, Los Angeles County, cites Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "matrix of domination" to point out how marginalised communities deflect negative stereotypes onto more vulnerable groups, and by so doing reinforcing intersecting marginalisation and oppression based on categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, etc. The belittling of other residents, evident in the barber shop conversation, reflects macrosocial divides in Turkey that are not specific only to Tarlabası. It does not echo random hostilities either. Necmi Usta airing his grievances about Kurdish rural migrants in his street has little to do with his neighbours specifically. The differences and conflicts he described followed lines that are salient and meaningful outside of Tarlabası, and in Turkey as a whole. They will be recognised anywhere. Contreras (*ibid.*: 657) shows that residents of stigmatised neighbourhoods do not just deflect the stigma to anyone, but to those that are lower in the social hierarchy made up of intersecting categories such as gender, race, or class. The way people deflected the Tarlabası stigma depended on categories of Other that are supplied by the broader political context. In that sense they are only Tarlabası-specific inasmuch as there are very few neighbourhoods in Turkey that were threatened by urban renewal and where such a diversity of groups lived side by side.

The faceless Others that some residents blamed for the bad state and bad reputation of the neighbourhood often corresponded with the ordinary iconic icons (De Koning and Vollebergh 2019) that personified macro-political fissures and societal problems. Burcu, a trans* sex worker in her fifties who worked from the informal brothel in Bird Street alongside trans* sex workers Gülay and Müge, reproduced well-known racist stereotypes about the criminal Kurdish male when she explained why Tarlabası had deteriorated:

Things went downhill in Tarlabası. Fifteen, twenty years ago there was not a single Kurd. They are all with the PKK. All of these backstreets are in the hands of the PKK. A Turk or a tourist cannot go there, they'd rob the tourist. There are thieves and pickpockets. [...] There's all kinds amongst the Kurds. The whole place needs to be cleaned up.

As a trans* sex worker in Tarlabası, Burcu did arguably not have more social power than most of her neighbourhood's Kurdish residents. Like them, she represented a "marked" member of society in Turkey, a person significantly "below" the norm of the unmarked, perfect ideal of a Turkish citizen.⁶ Her distance to the ideal put Burcu in danger of vio-

5 Ethnic Turkish rural migrants who arrived in Istanbul after 1950 were disparaged in the same way by Istanbul residents who were living there before (see Lanz 2005).

6 Sociologist Wayne Brekhus (1998: 35) writes that the "unmarked represents the vast expanse of social reality that is passively defined as unremarkable, socially generic, and profane". In the Turkish

lent discrimination. It is no surprise then that she felt moved to deflect the stigma onto anyone else who might be perceived as the “real problem” instead of her. In order to do that, she points to the same “problem categories” anchored in the Turkish dominant discourse that Necmi Usta did. In the same way, I frequently witnessed Kurdish residents rail against the local trans* community and the visible sex work economy.

The discrimination of an entire ethnic group or a community sharing a social identity was common in the deflection of the spatial stigma. Once, during a family gathering at Alev's house, her uncle who lived in a different part of the neighbourhood talked about the changes in Tarlabası and the ongoing renewal project. He elevated the successes of the Kurds compared to the Romani residents who, he argued, had lived there much longer but achieved much less:

Just take the local Roma. They've been here for 100 years, and they've not been able to wise up in 100 years. I don't mean to talk badly about Roma. But they are, how should I put it...they're lazy people. They have been living here for 100 years, but they are all renting their homes. They are not hard-working people. We have them on our street, too! And we get in fights with them. That happens. Look, it's been 15 years that our people have moved here from the east and all of them are property owners, are homeowners, are business owners. They're hard-working people. We're hard-working people, not like the Roma. The Roma have been here for 100 years, and they're still tenants, they languish in cellar flats. But us Kurds are not like that. We made a life for ourselves here in only 15 years, that's a short time. For example, 90 percent of the people from our village have become homeowners here, they've become business owners.

The stereotypes used in such deflective descriptions reflected racist and discriminatory tropes that I heard many times in various settings and contexts in Turkey, and they were directed at Romani residents, African and Syrian refugees, but mainly at Kurdish residents. Randol Contreras (2017: 667) points out how the symbolic violence of constant violent discrimination in stigmatised spaces drives targeted groups to search for “an enemy within”. The Kurdish, trans* or the Romani communities were an obvious target.

However, sometimes these scolding narratives reflected the kind of intra-group denigration that members of marginalised and stigmatised groups used to prove their own respectability in comparison to peers who were described as less deserving of respect and rights. When I told Cansu about the difficulties that Müge, Gülay, and the other trans* women who lived and worked in Bird Street were facing, she expressed no sympathy. On the contrary, Cansu argued that the women, whom she knew personally, had no one but themselves to blame for being threatened by eviction and displacement.

What else is [the developer] supposed to do? And they have been working there for so many years! They should have saved some money and invested it in something, buy a house...something! They have been working there for years. Where did all that money go? You have to work, save money, and do something with it. People should use their

context, the closest to an ideal citizen that does not require additional markers to “Turk” would be an ethnically Turkish, Sunni Muslim, able-bodied, cis het male. The image of the “ideal Turk” has arguably shifted with the rise and consolidation of power of the AKP, but I would argue that at least these signifiers remain largely the same.

brains. It's not right to now whine and complain and ask [the developer] not to evict people. Save your money and do something. Isn't that right?

In her time in Tarlabasi Cansu had continuously faced violent discrimination from some of her Kurdish neighbours, and especially their children who had thrown stones and bottles after her and some of her trans* friends. On the other hand, she said that she got along well with her ethnic Turkish neighbours, a family who had migrated to Istanbul from the Black Sea, and with whom she shared a negative view of Kurds. In fact, she defended that most Kurdish rural migrants in Tarlabasi had unduly profited and had no right to claim victimhood.

Do you really think that anyone here is a victim? Are those that have been living here for years without paying rent really victims? For years [the Kurds] have been...what do you call it? They've been squatting here. They broke into buildings, they painted them and started living there. Can those people be called victims? For years they have not paid any rent! They could have worked, saved money, and bought a house! [In instalments], like paying rent. Is this victimhood? They've been living here for years, have not paid for electricity, nor for water, nor for rent – so where has their money gone? They don't have any. Don't you think so? This has nothing to do with being a victim, they've been living for free for years. [...] There are people that are much worse off. Are the people in Tarlabasi being victimised? They walk around decked in gold everywhere [points to her upper arms, where some women wear gold arm bands]. They cover it up! There are so many hard-up, hungry people. [...] Those are the people that are really being victimised. I don't mean them. But there are so many people who live here for free. Squatters.

Cansu never explicitly specified that she was talking about Kurdish families. However, the descriptions she used to vent her anger over alleged squatters corresponded to the anti-Kurdish narrative used in the dominant Turkish media and political discourse, accusing Kurds of free-loading and failing (or refusing) to pay their amenities bills, while presenting themselves as victims. She tried to establish privilege over space and respectability she had worked very hard to secure for herself and did so by portraying Kurds as undeserving. The accusation that many Tarlabasi residents were in fact "not really" victimised by the urban renewal project was one I heard repeatedly, and it was very detrimental to neighbourhood solidarity. Barber Halil Usta once angrily told me that the majority of the people who lived in the project area were shirkers:

You see the people that live [at the end of this street]. 80 percent of them are unemployed. When you go to our teahouse, ask those people, those people are all opposing the project. But none of them even have a job! If you give those guys a house, they'll want a villa. Sometimes the fault lies with the people, they don't work.

Halil Usta's estimation of unemployment in Tarlabasi, based on his encounters and gossip in the tea house, was much higher than it actually was.⁷ Halil Usta, who was officially

⁷ A 2008 survey conducted by a consultancy firm that had been hired by the municipality concluded that 11.5 percent of household heads were without employment. However, 92 percent of surveyed household heads were unskilled workers, many of whom were employed in precarious and poorly

retired by the time we met, owned his own small business and was proud of the honorific of “Master” that he had worked hard for. His assessment of the living situation of many of his neighbours made clear that Halil Usta did not think that those men, idle, poor, and “unemployed” as they were – the “undeserving poor” – had the right to complain about the project, or about the threat of being evicted from their homes without adequate, or any, compensation. Halil Usta, while himself a tenant of his shop, and therefore just as much a victim of pending evictions as the other tea house patrons, set himself apart from those he dismissed as “unemployed”. As a business owner who spent his entire working life in a respected profession, he thought that the “idle unemployed” did not have the right to complain about evictions and demand compensation, certainly not if he did and could not. As a tenant whose landlord was still in a legal dispute with the municipality, he had no possibility to do either. Furthermore, Halil Usta was very angry that he still had to pay his monthly rent to the landlord, despite an increasingly painful lack of business, while tenants whose landlords had sold their property to the developer were often granted a rent hiatus until the start of evictions. This led him to double down on disparaging other residents, while trying to demonstrate that *he* was treated unjustly, because in his eyes, he was offered even less choices in a situation that was in fact unjust to everyone:

Sometimes fault lies with the people here, too. That *han*⁸ for example. They told [the people] there: we will not take rent from you until the project is implemented. Look, it's been two years. [The municipality] didn't ask for rent for two years. Look, this guy, the turner next door. That adds up to 24,000 [TL]. He was told to sign, he did. Now the [agreed] day has come, and he says he won't leave. Now there's a thing called justice in this country. There are laws. I'm talking about the turner. For two years you didn't pay rent, you sign a contract where you promise you'll leave, and then you go and say: Connii⁹, write this and that. Who is right now? If it's one-sided...look, this is going to happen to me, too, one day or another. Look, I still pay rent now. If they would say: Halil Usta, you don't have to pay rent for two years, I'd be fine with that. Even though we are paying rent, we'll be the first to be thrown out, you'll see. [laughs]. [...] Ya believe me...I am telling you with all sincerity, many people here are squatters. They're squatters, [but] they say: they are throwing me out. They say: they are cheating me.

Halil did criticise the project for destroying the social fabric of the neighbourhood he had lived and worked in for more than 40 years. However, he believed that the state-

paid jobs in the service sector, construction, textile, or recycling. Only 19 percent of household heads had health insurance through their employers (Kentsel A.Ş. 2008). Those that worked in these insecure jobs often found themselves without employment over longer stretches of time, or they had to work evening or night shifts, which could mean idle time during the day. Pay was very often dismal, and it was not unusual in these jobs not to be paid on time, or at all. The local tea house was a place where men who were, for whatever reason, without occupation at that time, could congregate with friends and neighbours. However, in Turkey, the tea house (*kiraathane*) has a reputation as a space for idle men who do not work, and some men, like Necmi Usta, underlined with pride that they never went there.

8 A *han* is a collection of several businesses and workshops inside one building.

9 Almost everyone in Tarlabasi called me by my nickname.

led renewal, no matter how much he disliked the general idea of it, nevertheless happened within a legitimate legal frame, because contracts were signed between residents and stakeholders that were equally binding for each side. Halil believed the legal norms set by the state justice system to be “objective” and binding for every person operating within it. While activists and lawyers opposed to the project argued that the laws passed to make the Tarlabası renewal possible were in itself a violation of people’s rights, and the contracts signed largely unjust or even illegal, Halil demonstrated faith in “the law” as being above politics. On the other hand, his unquestioning belief that the men in the teahouse, who in his eyes refused to adhere to it, were “shirkers”, was informed by his experience of living in a deeply stigmatised neighbourhood. Halil Usta argued that many residents in Tarlabası were in fact squatters and cheats who had no right to protest the evictions. This was part of the narrative that the municipality and the developer used to stigmatise the neighbourhood, and to stifle protest inside and outside of Tarlabası. Halil Usta overlooked the fact that most tenants had signed agreements with the municipality because they had no other choice at the time, and he glossed over the reasons why Kurdish families had to move to Istanbul in the first place. He did not challenge the social problems, the structural inequality, the racism, and discrimination against many of the neighbourhood’s inhabitants. Instead, he accepted the dominant narrative and viewed Tarlabası, the residents, and the renewal project through that same lens.

Sometimes the deflection of the stigma was used as a direct way to try and fend off discriminatory treatment during the evictions. When Cemile faced the small delegation of policemen who appeared at her door, demanding that she vacate the apartment she was “squatting” and hand over the keys, she felt that it was not *her*, but the Kurdish residents in the neighbourhood who merited such humiliating treatment:

I told the policemen: ‘There is no need for you to come, we are two people, we are both old, we won’t do anything to you.’ Those others, they have ten kids and fifty grandkids, that’s a different matter. It’s of them that they should be afraid, not of us.

Cemile also used a bigoted stereotype – “they have too many children” – that has constantly been used against Kurds in the dominant narrative.

In some cases, lateral denigration meant that people blamed others for the planned demolitions, arguing that it was them who were *really* responsible. Osman Yazıcı, a Turkish man in his sixties whose family had migrated to Tarlabası from the Black Sea coast in the 1970s, co-owned a hardware shop on Tarlabası Boulevard with his brothers. He had decided to take the municipality to court in order to increase the compensation he had been offered. Aware of the bad image of the neighbourhood and of the excuse it provided for the municipality to demolish, he was keen to rectify whatever I, the foreign researcher and journalist, might think the reason for the planned renewal might be. He told me:

Do you know why they are really demolishing this place? All these people here came from their villages, from the East, they came straight here, before going anywhere else, before seeing anything else. They came with their trucks, they don’t know how to dress in the city, they don’t know how to talk in the city.

The rumour that Kurds were to blame for the project were not generated in a vacuum either. The prevailing Turkish nationalist ideology, anti-Kurdish sentiment and bigotry were generally accepted in the mainstream.

Nostalgia

During a conversation with Halil Usta and Necmi Usta, I told them about family members who had recently visited me. I excitedly described our various walks through Istanbul and added how much they had enjoyed strolling through Tarlabası with me. Halil was pleased but said that they had not come “at the right time”. Necmi agreed, stating that they “should have come twenty years ago instead”. Halil nodded emphatically, and launched into a detailed, nostalgic description of what they would have encountered in those (imaginary) years:

Yes, exactly. Had they come then, they would have moved here! Then there were the *madamlar* [non-Muslim women], these sweet old ladies, all of them so beautiful! They had these sweet accents. Had they come then, they would have not wanted to leave again. The houses were designed in a certain way back then. Almost everyone had their kitchen downstairs, one little bathroom, and in these very small houses they lived with their own families. They took off their shoes at the door, the families were not that big anyway, for example there was a preacher who had two daughters. He was a carpenter himself, what a nice man! They took off their shoes at the door and went upstairs. And now? It stinks everywhere. [...] And they wore such nice clothes, even when they sat on their doorsteps. We would always go and play elsewhere in order not to disturb them, they had to say only one word and we would leave.

If my guests *would* have come to Istanbul twenty years earlier, we would have wandered Tarlabası in the very early 1990s. The neighbourhood would have indisputably been very different from the one we visited in 2011. However, we would not have found the community that Halil Usta described. There would not have been less poverty, nor less dilapidation, and most of the non-Muslim residents who used to live in Tarlabası would have been long gone. There *would* have been fewer Kurdish families living in the neighbourhood. The migration of Kurdish people, most of whom had been forced out of their homes in the southeast of the country by Turkish state forces, was just starting to accelerate in those years, and only a part of those migrants had moved to Beyoğlu by then.

The kind of nostalgic image of an earlier, better Tarlabası that Halil and Necmi were describing was a very common narrative exclusively shared by non-Kurdish residents. The exact time frame used in these nostalgic descriptions was always vague, sometimes reaching twenty years back, sometimes thirty years or slightly longer, somewhat depending on the age of the speaker (though Necmi Usta was in his mid-thirties at the time and had only just arrived in Tarlabası in the 1990s), but the point of reference was always an idealised, better past that included the presence of a “civilised” non-Muslim community, and the absence of the more recently arrived Kurdish “villagers”. On one occasion I witnessed a conversation in Halil’s barber shop between the Usta and one of his customers, a middle-aged small business owner who had moved away from Tarlabası, where had lived

for eighteen years, to the high-rise suburb of Şirinevler. The customer, an ethnic Turkish man, explained that he had left because he could not stand how much the neighbourhood had changed, and that it was “no longer a place to raise a family”.

C: The culture in this place used to be very different. Before, in the summer around midnight families sat together, and guests came to join them to eat with them, and it didn't matter what your financial situation was, that was the humanity of this place.

H: And nobody thought of stealing your money!

C: Nobody would have even been able to glance at it, that's how good it was. I was small, in the evening we would play, and when our parents went somewhere, the neighbours would look after us, take us into their house. People swept in front of their doorstep every day. they kept flowers in their windows. Everything was neat and tidy.

H: Everyone was well dressed, too. People were polite and would not shout and use bad language. There was no spitting in the street.

C: Yes, these people were civilised [medeniyetli] people. It has changed a lot since then. A lot!

I have analysed how the nostalgia for an imagined, counterfactual multiculturalism, harmonious ethnic diversity and distinctive culture had been exploited by those interested in marketing Beyoğlu, stakeholders such as the municipality, real estate developers, investors, and local business owners (Maessen 2017:91). This nostalgia was also aggressively marketed by the Beyoğlu Municipality in order to justify the Tarlabası renewal project and sell the future development to investors. And just like their marketing campaign, the romanticised narratives by residents entirely erased the area's, and Turkey's, violent past and ignored the forced displacement of the non-Muslim minority populations from Beyoğlu. Trans* sex worker Burcu, who had lived and worked in Bird Street for several decades described the “old” Tarlabası as an improbably rosy, idealised place:

The street used to be very beautiful. The shop owners were good, everyone was good, they respected us. We had nice chats. We sang together, had tea together. How nice, right? [...] Greeks and Armenians didn't harm us. They were gentlemen, the neighbours waved at us. Even tourists and Americans came here. They came from Austria. They came, they sat down...they walked around, they were on holiday. But now the neighbourhood has filled up with indecent people.

None of the residents who lauded the former presence of a “civilised”, “friendly” and “well-mannered” non-Muslim community in Tarlabası made mention of the fact that all of them, in one way or another, moved into buildings, homes, and shop spaces that had at some point been forcibly abandoned by their former owners, and that these former owners had been subjected to violent discrimination by their fellow citizens and the Turkish state.¹⁰ Sometimes these accounts claimed that former (non-Muslim) Tarlabası residents

¹⁰ Following the 1955 anti-Greek September pogroms, the Turkish state expelled more than 10,000 Istanbul Greeks in 1964. Tens of thousands more left Turkey in the following year, and the Greek population in the city decreased from around 80,000 to 30,000 in 1965.

had left because “those people from the countryside” had arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, and that they had simply relocated to “more luxurious neighbourhoods” in the suburbs. Baker Gökhan Usta argued that the Greek residents left because the neighbourhood deteriorated and that Greeks who could not afford the Istanbul suburbs left to Greece:

Things got bad here, very bad. There are none of the old Istanbulites left. They all left. Those with money went to Etiler, to Bebek or to Tarabya. To pretty places. To areas along the Bosphorus. Those without money went abroad. Many went to Greece. And why did this happen? There was pickpocketing here, too then. There were only non-Muslims here, normal families, everyone knew each other. There were thieves, there were misfits, too. But they wouldn't do their thing here. They'd go elsewhere to do that, this was a neighbourhood of families, everyone was like a family. So there was no crime, no problem. That changed with time, and pickpocketing started here...after 1997. After 97 things went downhill here. Maybe it was state policy. Before that there were all kinds of small businesses here. Bag makers, shoemakers. But all these workshops are gone now. They were all here. Belt makers, wallet makers. They left. When the pickpocketing started. [...] There is nothing likeable left about Tarlabası. Tarlabası used to be very likable! There were non-Muslims, there were friends, there were decent [*düzungün*] people. There's none left now, it's been 15 years and they are all gone.

While Gökhan Usta argued that Greek residents left because they did not like the increase of petty crime in the neighbourhood and because, how he euphemistically puts it, “things got bad”, the vast majority of Greeks, who used to be the largest group of non-Muslims in Tarlabası, had left because they had been violently chased out of their homes.

I once had the opportunity to hear a first-hand account of the everyday violence against Greeks in Tarlabası by a Greek woman I interviewed in Athens. Then in her late fifties, she was born in Tarlabası in the early sixties, and said that her parents had told her not to speak Greek in the street as a child, for fear that she would be attacked. With an increase in violence and anti-Greek sentiment due to the ongoing Cyprus crisis, her parents told her not to speak Turkish in the street anymore either, because they were afraid that her Greek accent would be detected and spark violent reactions. She remembered that her family home, a house on Kalyoncu Kulluk Street, was repeatedly targeted by stone throwers. The sad result of her parents' anxious policing of her language was that she refused to speak at all for several months following their arrival in Athens.

Trans* woman Burcu arrived in Tarlabası in the late 1970s. Throughout Turkey this was a time of unstable coalition governments, violent political strife and extreme economic hardship that was neither peaceful nor in any way safe.¹¹ The early 1980s, particularly the time following the violent military coup of September 12, 1980, were characterised by intense political repression and state violence against activists and marginalised groups, especially on the left.

The residents quoted here all expressed a nostalgia of an era in Tarlabası and Beyoğlu that never existed, and none of them could possibly have lived in or remember a time that was not in any way violent towards minorities, non-Muslim or otherwise. Nor was the

¹¹ Between 1976 and 1980, 5,000 civilians were killed in street violence between opposing political factions in Turkey (Ersan 2013; White and Gündüz 2021).

nostalgia for a better past unambiguous, or ignorant of the historical events. Halil Usta, for example, told me about violent police repression he had experienced as a younger man in the neighbourhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Once he was arrested in a tea-house for simply “looking like a leftist”, due to his, as Halil explained, “thick, leftist-style moustache”. Burcu told me in great detail about the horrific violence she lived through as a trans* woman at the hands of the military and the police in the months following the 1980 coup.

But just as the municipality had done in their city marketing campaigns, the sentimental discourse recounted here weaponized nostalgia as a way of deflecting the neighbourhood stigma onto a group of “newcomers” that had put an end to the alleged “golden days” of Tarlabası. This discourse almost exclusively targeted the Kurdish community, even if this was not always explicitly expressed. These veiled allusions to Kurdishness sometimes referred to a certain point in time such as the 1990s, when forced Kurdish migration to bigger cities in the west of the country accelerated. In other cases, they were voiced in the form of racist complaints used to describe problems understood in the collective nationalist narrative as being rooted in Kurdishness, such as Cemile’s comment about having a large number of children and “shady” connections. Whatever the angle, these frames always erased the reasons why Kurdish families arrived in Tarlabası in large numbers. It remained unsaid that most of them had been burned out of their homes in the southeast of the country, and that Turkish state policy towards Kurds was the reason they had to migrate elsewhere.

Most non-Kurdish residents I came across, including ethnic Turkish business owners and artisans, trans* sex workers, Romani, and non-Muslims (such as members of the Orthodox Assyrian community who came together in a local church or two elderly Armenians whom I met via lute maker Kerem Usta) were united in their resentment of having to live amongst a Kurdish majority.

Especially those residents who had been in Tarlabası prior to the arrival of forcibly displaced Kurds in the late 1980s and the 1990s felt that they had been “robbed” of “their” neighbourhood specifically by the incoming Kurdish population. This was also true for non-Muslim residents who really did remember the days when a Greek majority resided in the neighbourhood. Sarohi Hanım, an 84-year-old woman of Armenian descent who still lived in the family house built by her great-grandfather, said that her only friend left in the neighbourhood was a single Turkish woman of the same age as herself who lived in a *vakıf*-owned building across the street. Both women entertained distant, yet friendly relationships with their predominantly Kurdish neighbours, and they said that they never had any problems with them, on the contrary: When Sarohi Hanım fell ill, and after breaking her hip falling down the stairs of her house, the Kurdish woman next door looked after her, cooked and brought her food, and did her shopping, since Sarohi Hanım did not have family left. However, when it came to their views on the more abstract idea of a Kurdish majority in Tarlabası, both women insisted that they did not like

what their neighbourhood “had become” and that “it had all gone downhill after the Kurds had moved in”.¹²

Turkness as Whiteness

Lute maker Kerem Usta, whose workshop was close to Sarohi Hanım’s building and who had introduced me to her, expressed a similar sentiment:

30 years ago, there were almost only Non-Muslims [*Gayrimüslim*] in Tarlabası. I came to Tarlabası around 35 years ago. That’s how it was then. [...] Later they came from the east, they came from Diyarbakır, from Mardin, they filled all the houses. [...] It was much better before. When the [non-Muslims] lived here, people respected each other. We would drink tea together in front of my shop, for example. We don’t do that anymore. These things just don’t happen anymore. Neighbourly relations were good back then, but now neighbours don’t have any relations anymore.

It is worth picking apart the instrument maker’s stance. While not entirely surprising, it is nevertheless important to note that Kerem Usta maintained a very good relationship with the Kurdish owner of a stuffed mussel kitchen across from his workshop and generally got along very well with Kurdish neighbours and other Kurdish owners of neighbouring businesses. Many of his customers were in fact Kurdish musicians, and many of them were regular visitors in his shop. In 2015, Kerem Usta even joined the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) as a member, and he voted for the HDP in the June national elections. HDP co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ had visited his shop during the election campaign and Kerem Usta told me several times about how pleased he had been to make her acquaintance, and how proud to have taken a selfie with her.

Therefore, it is worth asking why Kerem Usta thought that Kurds were responsible for the decline of the neighbourhood, and why he, like other ethnic Turkish residents I had spoken to, tried to deflect the territorial stigma onto them. It was obvious that he felt alienated from Tarlabası. The neighbourhood taint weighed on him, and like so many other of his fellow non-Kurdish neighbours had done, he blamed the Kurds for the physical and symbolic deterioration of the neighbourhood. In his eyes they, in the most abstract sense, were “intruders”. It is not a stretch to say that this nostalgia was a euphemistic way to vocalise racist thoughts against the Kurdish community. But how did Kerem Usta reconcile his favourable view of the Kurdish neighbours he appreciated with his bigoted view about the local Kurdish community as an anonymous whole?

I would like to suggest that “Turkness”, the metaphor of a naturalised performed identity of privilege, can provide a useful analytical tool. Most (especially cis het, male, Sunni Muslim) ethnic Turkish residents never questioned their own position, their “right” to live and work in Tarlabası, or if their presence impeded on the comfort of other

¹² Sarohi Hanım never once talked about Turkish state violence against the non-Muslim minority, which was arguably a protection mechanism and something I have witnessed many times in Turkey.

communities. In that sense it can be argued that *Turkness* is similar to the idea of whiteness.¹³ Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 1) characterises whiteness as a “structural position of social privilege and power”, a standpoint, a “location of structural” advantage. Research on whiteness has shown that whites benefit from a number of social understandings and institutional processes, “all of which seem – to whites at least – to have no racial basis” (Hartigan 1997: 496).

Turkness, then, is a position of invisibilised privilege and of naturalised “everywhereness”. It is a point at the top of the social structure in Turkey, a position that affords ethnic Turks to settle, live, and work at a place of their choosing without having to justify or defend their presence. From a position of privileged *Turkness* one will expect to be treated with respect in any shop, restaurant or business, and that one’s needs and standards, such as to be able to communicate in Turkish, be met. However, many ethnic Turks will bristle at the idea of affording a Kurdish person, or any member of a native non-Turkish minority community, the same rights and privileges in Turkey.

In the context of Tarlabası, the fault lines along which lateral denigration happened was often based on this kind of naturalised position of entitlement when it was practised by ethnic Turks. The underlying assumption was, similarly to the concepts of whiteness and white privilege, that belonging to the unmarked category of a person meant that it was mainly their comfort that the surroundings needed to cater to: the non-Muslim community was perceived as nice and respectful, even as “civilised”, but historical and structural reasons why they would behave that way towards an ethnic Turkish majority were ignored. Kurds, on the other hand, did not necessarily perform niceness in Tarlabası, and did not take Turkish sensitivities (and privilege) into account. This was one reason why some Turks derogated the entire neighbourhood as a “shithole” that deserved to be bulldozed to the ground, even if it meant that Turks would, metaphorically, be buried under the rubble, too.

Lateral denigration as described by Wacquant was something I observed in Tarlabası. However, that some residents tried to deflect the neighbourhood stigma onto “a faceless, demonized Other” (Wacquant 2007: 68) was only the starting point of the analysis in this chapter. Maybe more important than the existence of lateral denigration in a stigmatised neighbourhood is the analysis of the fault lines and symbolic boundaries along which such denigration happens, and why. The denigration of fellow residents in Tarlabası was not random, and neither was it specific only to the central Istanbul neighbourhood. Instead, that the grievances some residents voiced about their neighbours reflected macrosocial conflicts and fissures that were supplied by a broader political context in Turkey. This context provides the background before which the work that goes into drawing, maintaining and reinforcing symbolic boundaries is done, and it determines peoples’ ability to make choices of whom to direct their anger and blame against. It partly explains why neighbours were able to angrily point at neighbours in an area with strong social ties.

¹³ Here I do not refer to the concept of “White Turks” and “Black Turks”, terminology that was used as “an explicit reference to the American racial categories suggesting an analogical similarity between the oppression of African Americans by the white supremacist system and that of pious Muslims by the secularist regime in Turkey” (Güner 2021).

Furthermore, the kind of weaponized nostalgia I observed in Tarlabası offered a two-pronged form of stigma management. As a concept it was oriented both towards an imagined past, insisting that the neighbourhood *used to be* beautiful, tidy, and safe, while the messy, violent, and discriminatory history of the area was erased. As lateral denigration it offered a forward-oriented explanation of why the neighbourhood was not beautiful and safe *anymore*, pointing mainly at the Kurdish community as a scapegoat in the form of bigoted blame. Implicit in this use of lateral denigration, both before and during the run-up to evictions, are two categories of deflection: pointing at a vilified Other as the reason for one's own marginalisation and mistreatment rooted in stigma ("They are the reason this is happening to me!") and the assertion that it is these Others that should in fact be targeted ("This should happen only to them!").

The question arises why people do not direct the denigration against someone else, for example against the people who dehumanise them and their neighbourhood. Why did many residents target other marginalised communities at all, when the threat came from such a clear institutional centre located in plain sight and just across the street? One could argue that socially, the naturalised location of structural advantage *Turkness* as a position of naturalised privilege did not make that choice likely. However, in the following chapter I examine several ways in which Tarlabası did decide to reject the neighbourhood stigma and "speak back" at those who stigmatised them.

