Chapter one: Looking for Resistance in all the Wrong Places

This book is based on two and a half years of fieldwork in the central Istanbul neighbourhood of Tarlabaşı, succeeded by follow-up interviews and observations spaced over another three years. For this study, I examined how the residents of a low-income inner-city area managed the intense stigmatisation of their neighbourhood as part of a contentious urban renewal project inaugurated by state actors and executed by a private developer with the legal and logistical support of the authorities. The focus of my research is not on the organised, grassroots resistance of neighbourhood groups and civil society initiatives that have been thoroughly analysed elsewhere (Ünsal and Kuyucu 2010; Ünsal 2013; Sakızlıoğlu 2014a). Instead, and drawing on James Scott's (1985, 1990) concept of hidden transcripts, or ideas concealed in everyday discourse and culture as tactics of resistance, I concentrate on everyday practices of stigma management and contestation employed to counter the discourse used to justify the destruction of solidarity networks and the displacement of hundreds of families from affordable housing in downtown Istanbul (see also Wacquant 2007).

While I have been interested in informal social struggles for a long time, the topic of stigmatisation crept unbidden into my fieldwork. The initial plan had been to merely focus on opposition in the form of unorganised protest and on everyday resistance tactics against the planned evictions. However, it quickly became impossible to ignore the important role of territorial stigmatisation used to the advantage and profit of the state and its project partners. Tropes frequently used by politicians, the media, the developer *GAP Inşaat,* and other powerful stakeholders often referred explicitly to the neighbourhood as "dirty", "uncivilised", "criminal", and "immoral". Based on existing stereotypical images of Tarlabaşı, these phrases defined public discourse and how Tarlabaşı was perceived by outsiders. They therefore determined how a mainstream Turkish public judged the idea of a "renewal" of the neighbourhood. However, as Wacquant has noted, such territorial stigmatisation affects not only the public image of a certain place, but also strongly influences how residents see themselves and how they position themselves vis-a-vis their neighbourhood and their neighbours. Territorial stigma can have a detrimental impact on local solidarity ties and networks, and therefore, as I soon came to realise in my own fieldwork, on attempts of collective and individual resistance.

The concept of stigmatisation also helped to break up the binary discourse of an idealised joint resistance as opposed to the idea of residents as victims of structural oppression and discrimination without any agency of their own. Instead, it overcomes these narratives and leaves room for a perspective that is grounded in action theory and a theory of everyday practices.

Staring at stigma

When I began to look at (a part of) Tarlabaşı through an ethnographic lens in 2010, the neighbourhood was already familiar to me. As a journalist, I reported on the Tarlabaşı urban renewal project shortly after its announcement in 2008. In early 2009, I moved to the neighbourhood, a few streets over from the designated renewal zone.[1] This was how the issue of pending urban renewal and the negative discourse surrounding the neighbourhood became part of my daily life before I thought about ethnographic research. The discussions and problems surrounding the many contentious redevelopment plans of Istanbul, a cornerstone of AKP urban and economic policy, had interested me for a long time, and I closely followed and reported on planned renewal projects in other historical neighbourhoods, like the traditional trading district of Mahmutpaşa, where hundreds of artisans and owners of small businesses were threatened by involuntary displacement. The bulldozers never arrived, but the predominantly Romani neighbourhood of Sulukule was demolished and around 3,400 people lost their homes and their livelihoods. In both cases it was marginalised groups and the urban poor who were to make place for "better, more modern, and improved buildings".

During my first years in Istanbul, I did not research the intense stigmatisation of Tarlabaşı, but I was certainly very aware of it. Even before I moved there, friends and colleagues warned me not to venture across Tarlabaşı Boulevard "into" Tarlabaşı, verbally marking the area in that part of Beyoğlu as a "no-go zone" with well-defined borders. At almost each of my weekly visits to the Sunday vegetable market held in Tarlabaşı I was told to keep a close eye on my bags and hold on to my belongings, and not to take more cash with me than I was planning to spend. From colleagues who lived in or very near Tarlabaşı I heard anecdotes of how they chose to, in one case, accompany their visitors to the nearest bus station on Tarlabaşı Boulevard carrying a large kitchen knife, or, in another, send them home before nightfall. Taxi drivers sometimes refused to drive through Tarlabaşı or warned to lock all the doors from the inside of the car. Comments on the perceived criminality of the neighbourhood were a given. After moving to Tarlabaşı myself,

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[1] This did not mean that our *mahalle* was not touched by the demolitions. While pressure on rents increased due to the fact that living space was suddenly much scarcer in the entire neighbourhood, some shops, such as a local bakery, had to eventually shut down due to a lack of customers. The project was a frequent topic of conversation amongst Tarlabaşı who lived outside the renewal zone, partly because of the construction noise, the expectation of higher rents or profits, and the fear that crime might increase due to the growing number of ruined houses close by.

I often caught myself "managing" the stigma of living in a neighbourhood considered to be dangerous, and unsuitable for a German middle class woman and journalist paid in foreign currency.[2] Depending on whom I spoke to, I would disclose the fact that I lived in Tarlabaşı, or merely say that I lived "in Beyoğlu", the greater administrative district that Tarlabaşı belongs to and that also included upscale neighbourhoods such as Cihangir, where many well-earning foreigners have chosen to rent homes.

Weekly Tarlabaşı market

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

When I first told my friend Koray that I was going to do fieldwork in my neighbourhood, he handed me a copy of the Turkish novel *Ağır Roman* and told me that this was the book I had to read in order to understand Tarlabaşı.[3] I did. While the book did add considerable colour to my growing Turkish vocabulary, it did not help me understand Tarlabaşı. However, Koray's suggestion that I should read it in order to gain insight into the daily life there gave me a clearer idea of what others thought of the neighbourhood, and how the wide success of a work of fiction had contributed to how the stigma of the neighbourhood had been shaped. The Tarlabaşı of *Ağır Roman* is a neighbourhood of brothels, petty criminals, and knife-wielding thugs, of foul language, murder, drugs, and rape. The book turned a poor inner-city neighbourhood into a wildly exotic Other, a place stranger than fiction filled with characters one seems to know intimately, even though one has never set foot there. This creates a faux familiarity; the reader feels that they have gained factual insight into a world they, in fact, do not know at all. *Ağır Roman* now haunts the neighbourhood that inspired it. When discussing the concept of territorial stigmatisation and its applicability to the neighbourhood of Tarlabaşı during the PhD colloquium in Berlin, a fellow student familiar with Istanbul and Turkey nodded knowingly at descriptions of my friends' negative reactions to my living there and said: "Of course everyone thinks badly of Tarlabaşı. That's the *Ağır Roman* effect."

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[2] The question of how much money one earns and spends on rent is common and not considered rude in Turkey. Since people assumed that I earned quite well by Turkish standards, the idea of living in a neighbourhood like Tarlabaşı was possibly thought of as me being cheap. On the other hand, many fellow Tarlabaşı residents thought it was "stupid" of me to pay the amount of rent I did.

[3] *Ağır Roman*, a novel written by Turkish author Metin Kaçan, caused considerable uproar in the literary community of Turkey when it was first published in 1990. The book is written in harsh slang not easily accessible to a non-native speaker. It is grim, outrageous and violent in ways no other literary accounts of the lives of the urban poor in Istanbul had been until then (see Köksal 2005: 311).

During a visit to the fraud unit of the Istanbul police criminal investigation department in an unrelated matter, a casual conversation with one officer quickly turned towards my work and my living situation. When he learned that I lived in Tarlabaşı, he expressed visible shock and concern. How could, he argued, a sensible woman lack such judgement? Did I not know what kind of neighbourhood Tarlabaşı was? Sensing that his intervention was not sufficient, he then summoned the entire fraud unit. Five officers crowded around me, insisting to give me detailed housing advice for other districts in the city, a session during which the first officer told his colleagues: "She lives in Tarlabaşı, don't you know a place somewhere else? What about Kadıköy, or maybe Şişli?" When I told him that I did not really consider moving to either district, I was politely informed that, due to the "dangerous" and "unsavoury" nature of my current place of residency, I could not be choosy, and it would be better to live "anywhere else, really". In the end they gave me the mobile phone numbers of their colleagues who patrolled in Tarlabaşı, with the first officer urging me to make use of them in the case of need (which in his eyes was not a matter of "if", but of "when").

However, the alarming accounts about Tarlabaşı did not fit my experience of daily life in the neighbourhood. During my eight years living there (and during the three years before that, when I regularly frequented the neighbourhood to visit friends or the weekly market), I did not encounter the violent crime, the dangerous criminals, and the general unsafety I had heard so much about.[4]

In fact, I felt quite safe walking through my neighbourhood late at night, because contrary to more gentrified areas of Beyoğlu, corner shops [*bakkal*], small eateries and other businesses were open until well past midnight, and during the warmer months it was quite common for residents to congregate in front of their buildings to drink tea and chat with their neighbours. The vegetable market, described to me as a veritable den of pickpockets and thieves, was a place I loved to frequent, because I was familiar with most of the vendors, and in eleven years I never had any problems with pickpockets except once, when a group of boys unsuccessfully tried to snatch my wallet from me – something that might arguably happen in any place of the city, or most cities, visited by crowds and especially tourists. I knew that many of my neighbours were, in one way or another, involved in the informal or underground economy of the city: recycling, sex work, brand piracy, small-scale drug dealing, online scamming or gambling. One neighbour who lived across the street from me was involved in a criminal group [*çete*] that specialised in pickpocketing, car robbery, housebreaking and mugging. He often engaged me in friendly conversations, invited me for tea, and, since he was a Kurd originally from Diyarbakır, took great interest in my journalistic reporting from the predominantly Kurdish southeast of the country.[5] I do not mean to minimise the violence and the crime that happened or originated in Tarlabaşı. However, I wish to underline that I never experienced any of the problems I was constantly warned about. When friends got burgled or robbed in Cihangir, or other "more respected" neighbourhoods in Istanbul, their accounts of these events were seldom accompanied by the sighed "well, what did you expect in that neighbourhood" as they would have been if they had happened in Tarlabaşı.

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[4] Once, an apparently drunk man shot a bullet through my living room window late at night, which I only discovered the next morning. The *bakkal* (cornershop owner) at the end of the street had witnessed this happening, and it seemed quite clear that it had been an accident.

Despite the general discomfort with the neighbourhood in the media, in public discourse and amongst my friends, it took me much longer to recognise the link between the profound stigmatisation of Tarlabaşı, the planned urban renewal project, and the different tactics for challenging it. As an enthusiastic Istanbul resident and someone incensed by the glaring social injustice inherent in much of the rapidly occurring urban changes promoted by state forces and private investors, I was, sometimes unthinkingly and somewhat naively, opposed to all radical change to the city's fabric, which is doubtlessly why I expected resistance to be straight-forward and coherent. My own subjective reading, intimately linked to my political allegiances and sympathies, led me to assume that people threatened with losing their homes, their workplaces, and their social networks due to urban renewal would – of course! – put up visible, and possibly collective, resistance. My commitment to social justice led me to align myself with defiance, and to feel strong sympathy for protest, which obviously coloured the lens through which I initially looked at (and for) resistance tactics in Tarlabaşı. This is also why, in order to gain access to and get to know the renewal zone and its residents, I first sought out the help of a volunteer activist who tried to rally people to fight against the plans of the municipality and *GAP Inşaat*.

I first met Erdal Aybek when I reported on the Tarlabaşı renewal project in 2008. An urban activist who had cut his teeth in the Berlin squatters' movement in the 1980s, Erdal volunteered in the newly founded Association for Solidarity with Tarlabaşı Property Owners and Renters where he manned an improvised information office on Tarlabaşı Boulevard. In addition to that, he helped assemble and manage a considerable archive of documents on the ongoing project and kept various folders containing copies of all title deeds, publicly available plans and court documents in his office. During his office hours, every afternoon on weekdays, residents and other interested parties, such as researchers, activists and journalists like me, had the opportunity to come and ask for advice and information about the renewal project. Residents' questions generally concerned municipal letters and other correspondence with the authorities, issues related to title deeds and legal procedures, as well as inquiries about the advancements made by both the project stakeholders and the lawyers employed by the solidarity association. I spoke to Erdal on several occasions as a journalist and as an ethnographer. When I told him about my research idea on resistance tactics, he offered to introduce me to some of the residents affected by the planned demolitions, assuring me that all of them would express nothing but open disdain and defiance. I had been sure that he was right.

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[5] I am maybe naive/too optimistic in thinking that being a neighbour and someone people talked to in some way protected me. For example, the apartment below mine, frequently rented out to foreigners and wealthier Turkish students, was burgled several times. Maybe I had just been lucky, or the steel door at my apartment had managed to keep burglars out.

As a Kurd, a former Tarlabaşı resident and someone who was both well-informed and approachable, he was popular and respected, and I had the immediate impression that people trusted him with his task and their queries. Walking through the streets with him it was easy to come into contact with residents. It was also clear that he wanted me to understand the importance and the strength of local neighbourliness and solidarity ties, that, in his eyes, were not negatively impacted by the neighbourhood's ethnic and religious diversity, and the many trans* residents and sex workers living and working there. He showed me an informal trans* brothel close to his office and introduced me to some of the sex workers there. Erdal made sure I noticed that the trans* women[6] frequented an all-male teahouse next to the brothel because he really wanted to prove to me how harmonically diverse the neighbourhood was. Gesturing towards the many full laundry lines shared by neighbours on opposite sides of the same street, Erdal insisted that these laundry drying lines clearly demonstrated that there was a tight-knit community in Tarlabaşı and proof that the municipality's claim to the contrary was false and wilful misinformation. And indeed, one argument defending the renewal project that I heard several times was that Tarlabaşı was a neighbourhood of people in transit, and therefore there was no community that could be destroyed. Another – quite outlandish – argument, one that I will discuss in detail in a later chapter, was that Tarlabaşı was "empty".

Erdal was very invested in convincing me that in Tarlabaşı "everyone got along fine". In his eyes, this tangible harmony was one of the main arguments that the project needed to be stopped and the neighbourhood to be preserved. Similarly, newspaper articles and columns critical of the renewal project described Tarlabaşı as a place where "Turks, Kurds, Christians, Transvestites, Roma and African migrants" lived happily side by side. Some non-resident activists used the argument of the co-existence of the Kurdish, Roma, foreign migrant and the trans* community in Tarlabaşı to appeal to a romantic (and romanticised) idea of neighbourhood unity that had been destroyed almost everywhere else in Istanbul and that would be lost with the evictions. People invested in defending the image of Tarlabaşı against the negative discourse of the municipality also argued that strong neighbourhood ties between diverse groups of people were an important enough reason that the neighbourhood be preserved, and evictions be stopped. Some blamed conflict and violence that did happen along ethnic, religious and gender lines on the interference of the municipality and the developer. One prominent opposition activist and member of the Istanbul Chamber of Architects (TMMOB) argued that transphobia had been non-existent until the start of the project discussions and had been brought to the neighbourhood by the divisive renewal project.

These were views that I easily identified with, and in the beginning, I was smitten by what at first glance looked and felt like a tight neighbourhood community. It was also one of the main reasons that at the beginning of my ethnographic research, which I had begun in order to understand the underlying dynamics of everyday resistance in a way that my journalistic work could not, I was secretly looking for a political struggle, for joint protest and strong solidarity ties between all affected residents. After all, they were all "in it" together! This is why I expected that their apparent togetherness, their seemingly unproblematic sharing of spaces and laundry lines, would clearly be reflected in their resistance and their defence of the endangered neighbourhood.

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[6] All trans* persons I met in Tarlabaşı self-identified as women. Throughout this book I use the gender that trans* persons who spoke to me self-identified as.

Therefore, it came as a (somewhat nasty) surprise when I heard that some Tarlabaşı locals were not only willing to have their houses demolished but were excited to be promised a flat in a "modern" high-rise apartment building at the outer edges of the city in exchange, happy to leave their old homes behind. I was bewildered when I heard residents cheering for the government-led "clean-up" of the neighbourhood. And even more so, I was shocked to witness Tarlabaşı residents berate *each other*, blaming their (variously Kurdish, Roma, trans*, Arab, or black) neighbours for the state of the quarter and its bad reputation, that, in their eyes, had brought urban renewal to Tarlabaşı in the first place.

It came as an even bigger surprise that some of those actively involved in organised resistance denigrated Tarlabaşı and the neighbourhood's inhabitants, such as the president of the Association for Solidarity with Tarlabaşı Property Owners and Renters, a businessman originally from the Black Sea region who owned several buildings but did not live in Tarlabaşı. I met him for the first time in 2009 for a newspaper interview, and several times after that during protests, at the courthouse, or in the association's office on Tarlabaşı Boulevard. He was, most importantly due to his impressive real estate portfolio, invested in demanding higher compensation for property owners, but he had very little love for the neighbourhood itself. He warned me not to walk around Tarlabaşı on my own, because someone might rob, or even kill me. He also told me, somewhat disgustedly, that he would never want to live in Tarlabaşı himself. I wondered why the man who was the public face of organised grassroots resistance against the planned renewal project talked this negatively about the neighbourhood he defended. Did he not, by toeing the state's discursive line, endanger the success of the association's resistance? And if he really disliked Tarlabaşı that much, why had he not opted for an individual court case, but instead chosen to be the spokesperson of the association and therefore the most visible representative for the neighbourhood?

The lack of resistance that I had expected as well as continuously shifting statements and conflicting narratives initially made it difficult for me to anchor my research and come to a conclusion. In fact, I was afraid that I had not found anything of note and that, after years of fieldwork, I was still empty-handed. Failing to find collective, coherent resistance, I was afraid that I had not found any resistance at all. However, while editing hundreds of pages of transcriptions, going through media reports on the project and analysing the state discourse– the press statements, the media interviews, the general comments and marketing material jointly published by the Beyoğlu Municipality and *GAP Inşaat*– the dominant role of stigmatisation became more apparent. More importantly, I noticed how this stigmatisation did not only shape the way that state and investors framed Tarlabaşı, but that it had also seeped into the speech and conduct of targeted residents, which in turn influenced the way they defended their neighbourhood and each other. Loïc Wacquant (2007: 68) describes how residents of a stigmatised place internalise the stigma associated with their neighbourhood, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and self-loathing. He distinguishes a range of defence tactics that inhabitants use to dissociate themselves both from the tainted location, and the stigma attached to it, a split from the neighbourhood and their neighbours, a distancing from identity categories perceived to be of low symbolic value that others have defined as "disidentification" (Jensen and Christensen 2012: 75). As discussed earlier, this break-up of trust networks in the neighbourhood makes organised resistance against powerful actors much more difficult. It became clear to me that in order to understand the nuances of local resistance against the urban renewal project I had to refocus on the way that actors invested in its completion framed the neighbourhood, and on how residents positioned themselves vis-a-vis this stigmatising discourse.

Positionality

When conducting research in a familiar setting, the ethnographer faces the challenge of too little distance between the ethnographic field and one's own experience(s) in it. When researching topics centred around social injustice, as I did in Tarlabaşı, one might be drawn to the argumentation and the point of view of the people one studies, and identify with their cause. As Phillippe Bourgois (1995: 13) has noted in relation to his work on crack dealers in East Harlem, "we become intimately involved with the people we study". When the research is conducted in a context of struggle for social justice and rights, the ethnographer is presented with the added challenge not to idealise this endeavour. Above I have explained how my own subjective reading influenced what I expected to see, how I assumed resistance to play out, and how my own position determined not only the kind of information that protagonists like Erdal Aybek or the association president gave me, but also what aspects they did not immediately tell me about. My position affected what Tarlabaşı residents disclosed to me, the white middle class woman from Germany researching (and looking for) resistance as part of a doctoral thesis, and the politically interested journalist with a strong interest in human rights and equality. When Erdal Aybek, who had lived in Berlin and been engaged in political activism, praised the diversity in Tarlabaşı and told me how people stood and would stand together against displacement despite their differences, he told this story to me, an eager interlocutor who expressed admiration for his squatter's past and who was keen to find the sort of solidary resistance Erdal was describing to me. He was likely equally aware that I, a Western journalist, had access to publicity and media channels that might further his cause fighting for the neighbourhood. It is likely that he did not disclose his past political activism in Berlin to Tarlabaşı residents he was representing, but rather stress his credentials as a former Tarlabaşı local to them. This is not to imply that what Erdal told me was false, or "less authentic", than what he told others. However, it is important to remember that there are many narratives that overlap, exist side by side, or even contradict each other. By now it has long been agreed that ethnography is always influenced by the researcher's own position, and that there is not one person that can ever convey one full truth. Ethnographic truths, as James Clifford (1986: 7) reminds us, are based on exclusions and translations of "the reality of others". They are "inherently *partial*" (ibid, emphasis in original), a play on words that underlines the fact that all ethnographic texts are both biased and incomplete. They are always "systems, or economies, of truth" (ibid). One's race, gender, sexuality, and social position influence what kind of information one receives, and what kind of knowledge is produced. Knowledge is always situated, and postmodern anthropology recognises the partiality and interestedness of any researcher's account of social settings. The observer is always already part of the study. There is no longer "an authentic or comprehensively true image of social and cultural groups, no singular language of protest and revindication, but rather partial, shifting, and clashing representations, each with its own paradoxes and erasures" (Warren 2006: 214).

Furthermore, in a complex neighbourhood such as Tarlabaşı, and no matter how familiar I was with my field, it would be naive to claim that I had "full access" to it. Being close to some members of a community will often preclude the researcher from being accepted by others. That was the case in Tarlabaşı as well. While I tried to cast as wide a net as possible in the beginning, people saw with whom I spoke and whose homes I regularly visited. From that, they were able to draw conclusions about my views and sympathies. Finally, and although the research was driven by what people told me, this thesis is very much a text written by me: it was me who made the final decision if and how these interactions would be quoted here.

Engaged anthropology

During my fieldwork, I did not only observe, I took sides. I agreed with the many people in the neighbourhood who thought that what was happening was deeply unjust. I agreed that Tarlabaşı should not be demolished, and the people be able to stay if they wanted. From this arises the question of my stance towards my subject, my "neutrality".

Ethical issues relating to politics, moral responsibility and advocacy have been raised by anthropologists since the early twentieth century (Sanford 2006: 3). The discussion around neutrality vs. advocacy in anthropology is not a recent one either and has been going on for decades (Bourgois 1990; Kirsch 2002b; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006; De León 2015; Schiffauer 2015). Drawing on the work of Stuart Kirsch, Victoria Sanford (2006: 4) argues that advocacy for the community one studies is in fact the "logical extension of the commitment to reciprocity that underlies the practice of anthropology", as the researcher has an obligation to that community. Feminist anthropologist Shannon Speed (2006) defends the importance of explicit activist engagement as part of the research process. She argues that, if the rights of protagonists of ethnographic research are being violated, it would be ethically indefensible to benefit from them through the gaining of information without any commitment to their future wellbeing. Daniel M. Goldstein (2012: 36) goes further and demonstrates that "[a]ctivist anthropology is not only an ethical responsibility for many ethnographers of contemporary society. Instead, it may be the only kind of anthropology possible in the twenty-first century, involving a commitment by its practitioners that is essential if the discipline is to have a future as a viable producer of knowledge about the human experience."

Werner Schiffauer (2015: 38) argues that the engaged anthropologist practices observant participation, instead of participant observation. He writes that research is done in order to develop the project one investigates, and to change its underlying structures. This means that subjectivity gains more importance than in "classic" ethnography. Texts that are the result of such engaged anthropological fieldwork put much greater emphasis on respect: interlocutors and informants have to be able to recognise their own self-image, their identity, and their self-perception in the documents that are produced. Engaged ethnography calls for "radical understanding": this means that any employment of explanatory models that imply the possibility of false consciousness, such as psychoanalysis or Marxism, are ruled out (ibid: 40).

Due to my persona as a researcher and my expressed interest in resistance and the preservation of the neighbourhood, people approached me with questions about the various options open to them, about examples of urban renewal in the German context, and about the legal procedures at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg to which several residents wanted to take their cases. Whenever possible, I passed these questions on to lawyers and other experts or tried to discover where to find relevant information. In the same way, I shared my findings with human rights activists, researchers and journalists whenever it was possible to do so without violating the wishes, privacy, or the safety of residents. I facilitated contacts between activists and the Tarlabaşı community. In four cases I introduced human rights researchers of an international organisation who were preparing detailed reports about trans* rights and the right to housing to people in the neighbourhood. I also helped residents when they did have to move, carried boxes, assisted with cleaning or brought food. I often expressed my dismay about the project and the pending evictions to Tarlabaşı residents and made no secret about my dislike for the urban policies of the AKP municipality. Without any doubt I have repeatedly asked leading questions when speaking to Tarlabaşı residents about their experience of the project and the pending evictions. And finally, I also tried to provide emotional support.

Shannon Speed (2006: 185–186) notes that it might well be impossible to conduct ethnographic research in some social settings, especially those riddled by conflict and political polarisation, without demonstrating political commitment. I was careful not to risk the trust of Tarlabaşı residents by engaging project stakeholders – the project office was located across from the project zone on Tarlabaşı Boulevard, and it would have been impossible to enter the building without being seen by residents and shop owners. My interest was not in the representation of "both sides" of the project, but in understanding and, within my limited means, assisting a vulnerable community threatened by destruction. I fully agree that the engaged ethnographer's position "may mandate engagement and advocacy on our part, rather than a scholarly, neutral stance. The notions of right and wrong can be invoked not only in relation to the truth, but also with regard to the cause of social justice" (Kirsch 2002b: 193).

Methods

In order to understand the way that the state discourse and stigmatisation influenced and shaped everyday tactics of resistance, I relied on participant-observation ethnographic techniques that are better suited than structured interviews and exclusively quantitative methodologies to observe the daily life of people, especially those on society's margins for whom statistics and random sample neighbourhood surveys cannot provide an accurate picture (Bourgois 1995: 12–13). This method requires the ethnographer to disregard the rules of positivist research to become "intimately involved" with the field and the studied community (ibid: 13).

Ethnography manages to capture the ambivalence of human behaviour, the contradictions, and discontinuities of social actions. In Tarlabaşı, people told me that they did not want to leave, that they would resist evictions, that they wanted to do "all it takes" not to be displaced from their homes, only to cheerfully tell me some weeks later that they had moved into new houses and were very happy there. Intentions to resist were expressed differently amongst different people, depending on political circumstances and context. No quantitative survey, no matter how detailed, would have been able to capture these sentiments.

Clifford Geertz (1973: 27) sees the importance of specific circumstantial ethnographic findings in the way they lend actuality to main concepts of social science. Small facts aim to yield large conclusions. Ethnography and interpretive anthropology, he writes, is located "between setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such." In looking at the ways residents of a poor Istanbul neighbourhood managed and challenged state-led urban renewal and the accompanying effects of territorial stigmatisation, and how both affected their everyday life, I aim to open a wider field of observation into how massive urban changes in neoliberal cities affect the lives of the urban poor and the marginalised. Without falling back onto reductionist theses, I want to try and understand why resistance occurs, or why it does not.

Wanting to get a "thick impression" of how Tarlabaşı residents resisted the stigmatising language and the dominant discourse about their neighbourhood and the renewal project, I aimed to establish long-term relationships based on trust with the people there. Over the course of two and a half years, I spent hundreds of hours in the streets, in workplaces, and in people's homes. I regularly digitally recorded their life histories, their interactions, and conversations. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I invested a lot of time into "being seen" in the neighbourhood and into becoming more familiar with the people who lived and worked in the Tarlabaşı renewal area, into gaining people's trust and gaining their permission to follow them around and record their conversations.[7] It was equally, if not more, crucial that community members knew who I was and what I was doing in Tarlabaşı. At that point, residents had witnessed several "expert committees" wander through the neighbourhood to gather information in the name of the developing company or the municipality, and I wanted to make sure that nobody suspected me of being part of such an interest group. Another reason that it took a relatively long time for me to start my actual fieldwork was the fact that people were wary of journalists, photographers, and random observers who came to Tarlabaşı looking for (and reproducing) clichéd representations of inner-urban poverty and crime that further reinforced stereotypes about the neighbourhood and the different minority communities who lived and worked there. This initially led to a certain hesitation (and a number of sarcastic comments) regarding my research intentions. Another reason why I limited my fieldwork almost entirely to participant observation and unstructured interviews spaced over many months is that I did not want to impose and add to the stress of pending displacement by insisting on conversations. It was important that people could decide for themselves on what level and for how long they wanted to interact with me.

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[7] I used a digital recorder as often as possible, but in many situations, either because they were spontaneous, difficult to record or because people did not allow me to record their voices, I exclusively used field notes and a field diary.

During the first three months of my research, I met several people who either lived or worked in Tarlabaşı, and who went on to introduce me to other local residents. My research snowballed from there. While it was relatively easy to make first contact with shopkeepers, artisans and other small business owners, it was more difficult to meet women who did not work outside their homes and who, especially during the colder months, did not spend much time on the street. I owe it to chance encounters, and, most importantly, to the trust these women decided to extend towards me, that I was allowed into their homes, daily activities, and conversations.

I do not speak or understand Kurdish, which is why I was not able to have meaningful conversations with older Kurdish women who did not speak Turkish.[8] This means that I only learned about these women's experiences dealing with stigmatisation and pending displacement through the "filter" of family members who translated for me. I did not always ask for translations during ongoing conversations in Kurdish, since I did not want to impose my curiosity. This means that much of my notes on these situations are confined to descriptions and brief summaries of what was said by Turkish-speaking bystanders.

As a privileged, foreign woman I was granted a certain leeway in entering and spending time in predominantly male spaces, such as most workplaces and the three teahouses [*kıraathane*] I regularly frequented.[9] In some cases I was first introduced to these spaces by a male friend or a local gatekeeper, but I was never denied access to places where only men worked and socialised. In the same way I was lucky to be allowed access to trans* spaces in Tarlabaşı because Müge, a trans* sex worker I befriended early in my fieldwork, introduced me to her friend and colleague Gülay and other trans* women in Tarlabaşı.

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[8] By "Kurdish" I refer to Kurmanji Kurdish, which was the predominant language spoken by ethnic Kurds who lived and worked in Tarlabaşı. Kurdish men and women under 40 usually spoke Turkish. When I say "meaningful", I mean verbal interactions and an exchange of information beyond very basic communication, such as invitations to eat etc.

[9] An important example here is the barbershop where I spent many hours. The barbershop caters uniquely to male customers of all ages, and women do not usually spend time there. In the case of Hakan's teahouse on Bird Street, I was not the only woman spending time there, as it was patronised by Müge, Gülay, and a varying number of their trans* women colleagues.

They invited me to their homes and to places they frequented, such as hairdressers catering to a trans* clientele. These hairdressers' shops, many of which line both sides of Tarlabaşı Boulevard, are backstage areas. They are spaces where trans* sex workers did the work to turn themselves into beautiful-enough women marketable to male customers – work that must remain invisible to their intended audience and was therefore a very exclusive, very private insider activity. It was there where I, having been granted a seat off the side, was able to witness candid conversations about sex work and trans* issues in Istanbul.

Over time, I became friends with many people from the community I had set out to study. During the many months spent with Tarlabaşı residents I attended family celebrations and reunions, and took part in engagement parties, weddings, and several *iftar* dinners, the traditional breaking of the fast during the month of Ramadan. I also interviewed family members and friends from outside the neighbourhood, accompanied homeowners to court dates, to walks and chores in the surrounding Beyoğlu area, or to business-related visits with colleagues and traders in other parts of Istanbul. Whenever possible I was present during evictions or when people moved their homes out of Tarlabaşı. This was not easy to plan. First of all, evictions would not always take place on the dates and times stated in eviction notices, if there had been any. Furthermore, people going through the very stressful event of (threatened or actual) eviction naturally did not think of notifying me while this was happening. In several cases, it was possible to observe people moving out on dates they had set for themselves.

In a handful of cases, I stayed in touch with residents after their relocation and visited them in their new homes. The conversations and interviews I conducted were almost exclusively in Turkish and are presented in this thesis in their translated English form, with some expressions and words left in their original language for effect, or when they provide additional information or meaning. Because people sometimes digress, tell complicated stories out of order, or repeat themselves, I have edited some of the material that I first translated in order to preserve the narrative flow and to avoid repetition. I used these edits carefully and sparingly. The editing of interviews sometimes included combining separate interviews with the same person into one narrative. Sometimes I added missing words or deleted redundant sections from conversations to preserve the narrative flow. (For comments on the editing of ethnographic interviews see Bourgois 1995; De León 2015). In all except a few cases I used pseudonyms, changed some personal details, and camouflaged street addresses to protect people's identities and their personal privacy. This is not easy as some shops can be identified from professions and location alone. The political situation in Turkey has changed massively since the beginning of my fieldwork, and people who initially agreed to appear under their real names might now face consequences for what they told me.

In order to understand the legal underpinnings and the process of the project, I interviewed several outside experts such as lawyers, architects, and members of the Istanbul Chamber of Architects (TMMOB) as well as of the Board of Listed Monuments and Buildings. I also spoke to what could be called 'activist experts', professionals involved in lobbying against the renewal project, many of whom were lawyers, architects, scholars, human rights defenders, and urban planners. Some of them doubled as representatives of civil initiatives which supported other grassroots movements and communities in danger of eviction (and were later very active during the Gezi protests of 2013). I collected and read many legal documents such as title deeds, eviction notices, indictments, court protocols, and expert reports ordered by the courts dealing with the appeals against the project. Reviewing these documents was necessary in order to understand the language used by the authorities to explain and justify the renewal project, and a useful source for the analysis of the state discourse. Wanting to gain a more complete overview of the neighbourhood's development, its history, and the way earlier renewal projects were framed by the authorities and received by residents, I undertook extensive research of the newspaper and map archives in the TMMOB library.

During the many months of my fieldwork, I observed numerous public and semi-public interactions between the corporate lawyers working for the developer *GAP Inşaat*, the police, public order officers [*zabıta*] and local residents. I witnessed countless discussions and disputes on the street, as well as a number of evictions. In such situations, I was careful not to endanger or compromise residents in the eyes of project stakeholders. I never accompanied residents to negotiation talks with the municipality and *GAP Inşaat*, for fear that my presence would have a negative impact on residents' already fragile and often very precarious situations. However, many residents shared accounts of these interactions with me afterwards.

I never spoke directly to municipal or any other state officials, nor did I engage in conversation with employees or subcontractors of *GAP Inşaat*. This was partly due to the fact that my activist-researcher and reporter persona made attempts to contact official sources difficult.[10] At the same time and as I have stated earlier, my research focus was not on the state's defence of the project, and I was able to analyse the state discourse using text sources that were available to me, such as interviews with state officials in the media or their presentations at press conferences. The marketing material for the renewal project produced in cooperation between the Beyoğlu Municipality and *GAP Inşaat* provided further valuable insight into the official framing of both the renewal project and the neighbourhood itself. I further scoured several newspapers and media outlets for their take on Tarlabaşı in general and the project in particular. An in-depth media analysis was outside my capacity and the scope of this thesis, but I undertook a search of the online archives of seven national newspapers and TV stations for mentions of Tarlabaşı and the Tarlabaşı renewal project between the years 2004 and 2018: *Sabah*, *Milliyet*, *Hürriyet*, *Radikal*, *CNNTürk*, *Habertürk* and *NTV*.[11] Since the vast majority of the mainstream

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[10] In Turkey, it is not easy for foreign reporters to reach officials for (meaningful) comment. It is just as, if not more so, difficult to reach spokespeople for private companies, especially if they are involved in contentious projects. As the Turkey correspondent for the Guardian, these attempts became even more difficult. Besides that, neither the municipality nor *GAP Inşaat* were happy with me going around the neighbourhood every day to talk to people, and after a while their employees recognised me. I did try to contact both *GAP Inşaat* and the municipality for comments but did not insist when I was rejected – on the one hand because my focus was on residents. On the other hand, I found it very important to not lose the trust of residents by appearing to try too hard to be accepted by their opponents.

[11] During my archival research and due to the ongoing and worsening crackdown on press freedom by the Turkish government at the time and through to the present, several media outlets I had relied on were shut down. In some cases, their online archives were deleted, making previous

Turkish media during this period (and through the present) reflected the positions and interests of the ruling AK party, the utility of such sources was in establishing the state's preferred narrative about the project. In order to gather additional background information on the progress of the project and organised resistance, I looked at the media coverage by outlets considered oppositional, such as the online news platform *Bianet*, the leftist daily *Birgün* and the now defunct independent broadcaster *IMC-TV*.

In order to get a broader idea about the range and extent of the stigmatisation of Tarlabaşı in the wider population, I looked at social media entries on Twitter and Facebook, at YouTube videos, entries in popular online forums and dictionaries such as *Ekşisözlük.com* and the comment sections of online content dealing with Tarlabaşı. Again, a complete media and discourse analysis of that material was outside my capacity and the scope of this work, but this overview helped me get a better idea about how people saw and judged Tarlabaşı.

Politics of representation

As mentioned above, Tarlabaşı and its residents have long suffered from stigmatising and discriminatory representations that framed the neighbourhood as immoral, criminal and dirty. I consequently worried that the descriptions and life stories in this thesis would reinforce this image and further stereotype the urban poor in Istanbul. Many of the municipality's arguments for the urban renewal project centred on these stereotypes, as I aim to show in the following chapters, and I was worried that I might bolster the state discourse. However, ethnographies of marginalised communities face the challenge of aiming to counter moralistic biases toward these groups without sanitising the social misery, the violence, and the discrimination they witness.

The ethnographic method of participant observation requires researchers to be physically present and emphatically engaged with the people they study over a long period of time. This might lead ethnographers to censor unflattering or deviant behaviour as they usually want to portray the culture or the people they chose to observe in a positive light. However, Philippe Bourgois (1995) warns that minimising negative, violent, and destructive aspects of life in poor inner-city districts makes the ethnographer complicitous with oppression.

This is not the only reason that I wanted to present the bigotry, the violence, and the abuse as I witnessed them or as they were narrated to me. Omitting intra-neighbour-

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coverage of Tarlabaşı inaccessible to me. These include the Gülen-affiliated outlets *Cihan News Agency*, *Zaman*, *Today's Zaman*, *Samanyolu TV*, or the leftist *IMC TV*. The liberal-leftist paper *Radikal* which had extensively covered urban renewal issues in Turkey, halted production and made online searches of their archives very time-consuming and challenging. Media outlets that changed hands and subsequently became more "government-friendly", partly purged their online archives for some content, possibly because it was considered too critical of the ruling AKP, making a complete search of their archives impossible. This was the case for the newspapers *Sabah*, *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet*. Some of the older coverage I was able to access via the TMMOB media archives and the help of journalist Rıfat Doğan who had assembled various news pieces and legal documents pertaining to urban renewal projects in Tarlabaşı over time.

hood conflict and suffering would not only result in a false picture of Tarlabaşı, but make it impossible to understand the frequent contradictions, the often puzzling lack of solidarity, and the way people in the community dealt with the stigmatisation in the face of displacement. To illustrate my argument, I would like to give two examples: One was the chicken döner restaurant on Tree Street run by an ethnic Turkish Alevi[12] couple originally from Sivas. They sold inexpensive chicken döner sandwiches and refreshments and were popular with people working in neighbouring businesses who did not live nearby and with children who passed the restaurant on their way to and from school. I often went to their restaurant for a cup of *ayran*, a chat, and the occasional sandwich. Across from their eatery was a second-hand furniture shop [*eskiçi*] run by Maher, a Kurdish man from the province of Siirt who lived in a flat above his shop with his family. On most days the furniture spilled out into the street, with Maher sitting in one of the chairs or couches, conversing with neighbours and passers-by. Whenever I came to visit him, often after or before popping in at the chicken döner restaurant, he would offer me food. I usually suggested getting two sandwiches for both of us, which he regularly declined. His reasons became more explicit as time went by, with him telling me that the food at his neighbours' place was "dirty" and that "one should never eat the food of those people". I first assumed that Maher simply did not get along with owners Seray and Ekin, that he had maybe had some dispute and was therefore not on speaking terms with them. It took me a while to understand that he did not want to eat anything from their restaurant because they were Alevi. His refusal to eat anything they had made or touched was very common bigotry against Alevi people in Turkey. The realisation that Maher, who openly criticised the AKP government, who opposed the project and who presented himself as a supporter of the Kurdish left and social justice, discriminated against his Alevi neighbours came as a shock to me. Not only because I liked Maher, and because I was disappointed to learn about his bigotry, but also because it did not "fit" my initial, wishful, impression of Tarlabaşı as a place where intra-neighbourhood solidarity networks were organised into clearly discernible frontlines of those who were threatened with displacement against those who threatened to displace them, cancelling out all other rifts.

Another such example was the aforementioned small teahouse on Bird Street, located right next to the informal brothel where I met Müge and her trans* colleagues. Our chats, initially only exchanges of small pleasantries on the street, soon became regular meetings in the teahouse, a somewhat crummy hole-in-the-wall run by a Turkish man called Hakan. The teahouse was frequented almost exclusively by male regulars, such as local shopkeepers, artisans, workers, municipal cleaners, and the trans* women from the brothel next door. The sex workers made use of the teahouse to keep warm, to reapply their make-up, to have tea or to play a game of cards with other patrons. There were preciously few places in Istanbul (that I knew of) where trans* women and nontrans* residents entertained such friendly ties, let alone played cards together. Hakan's teahouse felt like a noteworthy exception to several rigid social norms.

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[12] Adherents to Alevism follow the mystical Alevi Islamic teachings of Haji Bektash Veli, who is supposed to have taught the teachings of Ali and the Twelve Imams. However, Alevis differ considerably from Shi'a communities in other countries in their practice and interpretation of Islam, as well as from the Sunni Muslim majority in Turkey. Alevis constitute the largest religious minority in Turkey and have been subject to extreme violence and discrimination.

Several months after I had met Müge for the first time she told me that much of the sociability I witnessed in the teahouse was only an act, a "theatre performance". She told me that the trans* women had wrested the right to run the brothel on Bird Street from the men using physical violence. Müge recounted how Hakan and several others had blocked the entrance to the brothel and threatened potential customers, which Müge and some of her friends had answered with "a good beating". This skirmish, in Müge's words, "turned them all into lambs". And as time went on, I saw a different side of Hakan who began to let his transphobia show. When he talked to me in his teahouse without Müge or any of her trans* colleagues present, he dropped the affectionate monikers and dismissively referred to them as "these people" [*bunlar*], or even "faggots" [*ibneler*]. Again, I was disabused of the idea of Tarlabaşı residents sticking together as one "group of victims" in the face of imminent displacement and the injustice of the planned renewal. This led to a worry of how to represent the neighbourhood without stigmatising it further. I had been so convinced that the description of Tarlabaşı as a besieged, but tightly knit community that found strength in its diversity was true. It was the image I had not only been looking for, but also the description that I had until then communicated to outsiders, like fellow journalists or researchers. Just as Erdal had told me, I told others that Tarlabaşı was a place where different people stood together to defend their right to housing. This is why I was conflicted and worried on how to best describe the friction and the discord I saw. Was it better to omit the hostile behaviour of Tarlabaşı residents towards their neighbours in order not to present them in a bad light to outsiders? Would these descriptions not hinder, rather than clear up, the topic I had set out to study – resistance?

However, the more I started to focus on stigmatisation and stigma management as resistance, these fault lines could not be overlooked. Just as the state discourse on Tarlabaşı exploited them in order to garner support for the demolitions, resistance and solidarity inside the renewal zone hinged on conflict and prejudice. In order to understand how territorial stigmatisation impacted the people in Tarlabaşı, I had to understand the negative dynamics, the bigotry and the many intra-neighbourhood discriminations that shaped the community.