CHAPTER 8

'The Exception Which Proves the Rule'
Gurbet and Historical Constellations of Mobility in Istanbul's Old City[1]

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Abstract

Regimes of relative location in much of the former Ottoman Mediterranean position migrating from one's hometown or village as 'going to *gurbet*' – a term that best translates as 'exile' (Said 2000) – and those who leave are expected to perform exile in various ways. In contemporary Turkey, this expectation is particularly upheld among those who lack the social and institutional capital to navigate strict international visa schemes. In the Ottoman era, other mobile trajectories were available to peasants wishing to see more of the world, but these were lost in the structural upheavals of the transition to the modern nation-state era. However, the phenomenological descendants of mobile figures like bandits did not go extinct with the societal structures that begat them. Drawing on more than 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul's touristic Sultanahmet district, this chapter identifies the disconnect between historical and modern constellations of socio-spatial movement, and explores how it renders the subjectivities of some

young men 'unintelligible' (Butler 2009) to normative sociability today. These subjectivities are distinct for their affective detachment from *gurbet*, so their efforts to self-actualise mobile aspirations initially go unrecognised. Those who exhibit sufficient 'performative excellence' (Herzfeld 1985) to enact these aspirations, however, are then disparaged as upstarts and explained away as 'exceptions'.

On Being an Exception: Introducing Kaan[2]

> You can't use Kaan as a sample of an experience of young males in Turkey. Kaan is an *exception*, a bastard who is young and good-looking and lucky all the time. Whenever I am trying to close in on my prey, Kaan shows up and then the girls forget about me. (my emphasis)[3]

This was Lemi's response when I tried to describe my doctoral research to him and he misunderstood that my aim was to construct a profile for the average or archetypal young man of Turkey. Lemi, a state-licensed tour guide, 'hates' (his own word choice) Kaan, in part because, despite the educational and professional disparity between the two that should have rendered him socially untouchable to the eighth-grade dropout working a low-end job at a backpacker hostel, Kaan's performative self impinged on his own masculine selfhood in key symbolic ways. For example, while Lemi professionally frequented the historic Sultanahmet district – the imperial district of Constantinople during the Byzantine and most of the Ottoman period – he returned each evening to his flat in the hip Cihangir neighbourhood across the Golden Horn and in the contemporary city centre. Kaan, meanwhile, bunked with three other young men in staff quarters behind the hostel. Indeed, this is how the two crossed paths in the first place: part of Kaan's job was to fetch and deliver food and drink orders to the hostel's manager whenever he and his friends like Lemi would retire at the end of the workday to its rooftop terrace to enjoy the view across the Marmara Sea, or to catch a Beşiktaş football match on the hostel's large communal television.

The formal contrasts between the two were stark: in addition to being fluent in English, Lemi held a degree in Italian literature from a highly regarded university, and was regularly under contract with the state's tourism board to lead groups all over the country in Turkish,

English, or Italian. Kaan, meanwhile, had little training in any foreign language but happened to have a talent for them. His English grammar wasn't as polished as Lemi's, nor his vocabulary as sophisticated, but the point is that tourists couldn't tell the difference. The other major zone of antagonism, as evidenced in Lemi's declaration above, was interactions with visiting foreign women, which often occurred in the onsite bars of Sultanahmet hotels and hostels. Kaan, for his part, was not only aware of Lemi's disdain, he took a personal delight in challenging the social order. On one occasion he even announced his intentions first, leaning in conspiratorially to whisper, 'Watch this: Lemi is over there talking with [a woman visiting from Italy]. He thinks he is charming but I'm going to take her away. It will be so funny!' He then got up from our booth and, from an almost cinematic vantage I watched as he crossed the room to join Lemi and the woman by the bar, then found his moment to interject something into the conversation (I wish I could report what he said but it was too noisy in the bar to eavesdrop). A moment later, the woman shifted her body language toward Kaan, turning her back on a fuming Lemi. Most awkward for me as a spectator was how long Lemi continued to stand there trying to look nonchalant while the other two huddled together in conversation next to him.

Years later, after we'd both left Turkey, Kaan and I had a good laugh over all this via online chat from our respective homes in the EU and US: 'Hahaha he was trying to be so intellectual … women liked me because I was more pure and spontaneous.'

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The following is not an ethnography of flirting with tourists; or, it is one only insofar as the fact of my informants' choice to base themselves in Sultanahmet, and their eagerness to interact with visiting foreigners – and how both figure into the way they imagine their futures – are features of their 'masculine trajectories' (Ghannam 2013). And this is why it is worth including the ethnographic coda that Kaan no longer lives in Turkey. Based on 18 months of fieldwork in Istanbul, this study instead explores the intersection of mobility and manhood through historically charged concepts related to place and 'place identity' (Mills 2008). More specifically, I will show ethnographically how a disconnect between historical and modern constellations of relative location have rendered unintelligible the subjectivities of young men

like Kaan, with 'intelligibility' defined by Judith Butler as 'readability in social space and time' (2009, 10–11).

I will also show that the unintelligibility of my informants' subjectivities from the normative perspective is mirrored in the unintelligibility of Sultanahmet itself. These young men may indeed be attracted to the district because of factors relating to its 'non-placeness' on the contemporary Turkish landscape, where 'non-place' is defined as 'a space which cannot be identified as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' (Augé 1995 [1992], 77–78). This is a product of the district's own peculiar trajectory, as it long struggled to recover a sense of itself after, first, the Ottoman imperial epicentre was moved to another district, and then the Turkish republican capital was moved to another city altogether. By the mid-20th century Sultanahmet had been reduced to little more than a backwater of incongruous architectural grandeur. The obfuscation of its place identity was exacerbated with the rise of mass tourism later that century, and these days the district is considered to have been wholly given over to the industry, with most Istanbul residents preferring to avoid it.

Given a societal context wherein people and place are mutually and affectively defined, the fact of these young men's association with a non-place is a factor in their unintelligibility. And it is important to clarify that affiliation with a non-place does not suggest an *absence* of place identity but a 'non-place identity'. Indeed, my informants are generically referred to as 'Sultanahmet boys', a term whose construction follows both the convention of labelling individuals according to location affiliation and that of referring to any unmarried male as 'boy' (*çocuk*) regardless of age. I note this for clarity since my informants ranged from their late teens into their thirties, but the term 'boy' also signals rootlessness, as evidenced when contrasted against the Turkish word for 'married' (*evli*), which translates literally as 'of a home' (in the sense of house). Association with a non-place amplifies this, projecting Istanbulites' sense of malaise about the district onto its denizens. This scenario, though, also fosters new possibilities, as we saw above, wherein a combination of Sultanahmet's liminal non-placeness and tourists' lack of cultural baggage levelled the playing field between Lemi and Kaan. The latter's 'performative excellence' (Herzfeld 1985), in turn, was bitterly explained away by the former as an 'exception'. Such outcomes help illustrate why unintelligible people would be attracted to unintelligible place.

The project of portraying Sultanahmet boys' unintelligibility to the normative gaze has many layers, and over the course of this chapter I will establish who they are by subtracting who they are *not*, exploring points of slippage between the two with respect to the notion of socio-spatial movement. I argue that young men like my informants are defined by their non-normative 'affective bonds with place' (Gustafson 2001, 669), and will explore this in the next section through the indigenous concepts *sıla* and *gurbet*, which give shape to the affective relationship between person and place. *Gurbet* is a term common across much of the former Ottoman Mediterranean that most closely translates as 'exile', and is commonly invoked to describe both the location and experience of migration. I show the distinctiveness of these young men's affective distance from *gurbet* in normative context, and go on to link this disposition to an old social type that can be captured in the term *garip yiğit*. I elaborate on this by differentiating between the concepts of 'migration' and 'mobility' in ways not consistent with the literature but that are salient to the case of contemporary Turkey. I then extend these concepts diachronically in the subsequent section, contrasting the notion of migration-as-right-of-passage against the introduced term manhood-via-mobility with reference to the extant literature on the former. This is in order to connect these young men's subjectivities to their actions, and leads to the argument that, while migration-as-rite-of-passage is part of the normative process of intergenerational community propagation, manhood-via-mobility remains centred around individual subjectivity, with the result that life courses come to resemble 'trajectories' rather than 'cycles'.

Rather than young men like Kaan being an 'exception which proves the rule' (Hobsbawm 1981/1969; see next section for the quote in context), this chapter aims to show that they embody *another* rule, one that can be understood through historically encoded spatiotemporal constellations of place and place attachment common around the former Ottoman Mediterranean. Expressed ethnographically, 'Sultanahmet boys'-to-be originally leave their home towns and villages citing a sense of social constraint, as opposed to the economic or political push factors characteristic of classic migration literature. They would tell me that even as youngsters they could not envision themselves inhabiting the lives that had been modelled for them, and complained about the insular attitudes of those they grew up around, whom they found gallingly non-curious about the world. So they head to the big city, typi-

cally as teens, whereupon they gravitate toward the district of Sultanahmet at the heart of Istanbul's Old City (see Image 8.1). With Turkey consistently ranked among the most visited destinations worldwide,[4] this choice of positioning at the inside–outside frontier via international tourism – where the world comes to them rather than the other way around – is as near as they can get to freedom of movement in the near term, since Turkish citizens are subject to strict visa regulations for travel to most countries. This we can think of as an adaptation in the nation-state era to the trajectories of the *garip yiğitler* (plural), who roamed the 'borderless' Ottoman Empire. After a period of adventure, though, the impinging quality of the normative gaze eventually creeps back into their awareness. They sense that their aspirational subjectivities are misunderstood and/or looked down upon by other Istanbul residents, and they come to believe they will not ultimately be able to lead the lives they imagine for themselves if they remain in Turkey. By this point, however, having intentionally not maintained the

Image 8.1: Satellite image of Istanbul. Sultanahmet is located at the tip of the Old City peninsula, whose boundaries correspond to those of Byzantine-era Constantinople. The city's unique geography, concentrated around three converging peninsulas, helps make the phenomenon of multiple urban centres that do not interact with one another plausible.

Source: Adapted by author from Google Maps: https://www.google.com/maps/@41.0276337 .28.9719445.24163m/data=!3m1!1e3. Imagery ©2015 DigitalGlobe, Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, TerraMetrics. Map data ©2015 Basarsoft, Google (retrieved 29 August 2015).

usual familial or hometown networks that could have been mobilised to help them move abroad (e.g. via chain migration), they endeavour instead to cultivate their own such networks, which in Sultanahmet often become centred around visiting foreign women.

Finally, I introduce another iteration of the normative perspective. This will be the migrant gaze of the Bitlis boys, as I call them, and the discordant ways in which their inwardly directed socio-spatial orientation interacted with the lived reality of liminal touristic space vividly portrays the difference between migrant and mobile subjectivities as these concepts are used here. The revelation that theirs is the expected disposition among those 'in *gurbet*' contrasts the subjectivities of Sultanahmet boys in ways that help to render the latter intelligible.

Mobility and Migration: A Turkish Case

Migration has been Istanbul's defining demographic trend since the mid-20th century, when a series of economic transformations (later also political developments) triggered successive waves of arrivals to Turkey's major cities, mostly from the Anatolian countryside. Istanbul in particular has received such a volume of migrants that today only a small minority of residents can claim roots in the city prior to 1960.[5] Unsurprisingly, this has been perceived by the now-outnumbered urbanites of old as a peasant invasion, and it is common to hear residents complaining that the city these days feels like 'a big village' (see also Demirtaş and Şen 2007; Keyder 2005; White 2010).

Settlement patterns reflect the persistence of what Sema Erder labelled 'relations of localism' (1999, 166), such that many urban neighbourhoods function as satellites of towns and villages around the country. The persistence of hometown attachments in the migration context can be illuminated through 'the dichotomous terms *gurbet* and *sıla* [which] are popularly employed to portray socio-spatial dimensions of migration' (Zırh 2012, 1780). *Sıla* means 'home' (in the sense of homeland), but is a Turkish adaptation of an Arabic word that translates as 'connection', 'convergence', or 'coming together', and so circumscribes the concept of home as both a spatial and relational place of communality, nurturing, and sanctuary. *Gurbet* translates as 'exile' (Said 2000 [1984]; see also Abusharaf 2002; Elliot 2021; Saloul 2012; Sayad 2000) or the state of being 'out of place' (Said 2000 [1999]), and signifies anywhere that is not *sıla* – as easily a single step outside

the natal village as the other side of the world. It is associated with danger, and its emotive qualities have been communicated for centuries in poetic traditions that – superimposed onto the contemporary migration context – feed the so-called 'myth of return' (see also Soysal 2008). *Gurbet*, like *sıla*, is both a place – one actually goes *to* it (*gurbete gitmek*) – and an experiential assignation, described by Carol Delaney as 'an unenviable condition' (1991, 271) characterised by a melancholic nostalgia for the past as a faraway place. In the collective socio-spatial imaginary, then, no one 'in their right mind' (I expand on this phrasing below) would depart the embrace of *sıla* voluntarily, and 'the journey towards *gurbet* [is] never thought of as being one way' (Zırh 2012, 1760; see also Mandel 2008).

The classic Turkish term for 'migrant' is *gurbetçi*, where the professionalising suffix *-çi* conveys that one goes to *gurbet* as a duty. Kemal Karpat described *gurbetçiler* (plural) as men who 'left the village every year seeking jobs as chefs, drivers, porters, menial workers, and so on' before returning to their *sıla* 'to rest and to reproduce and … receive there special respect and care as breadwinners and hardship sufferers' (1976, 54, 55). Men who spend extended periods in *gurbet* are thought of as kites without strings; ideally, then, they will be joined by wives and children before too long. Across the Aegean, Roxanne Caftanzoglou described a shifting of familiar networks of convergence to a new location – her informants, who worked as labourers in Athens, would send for sisters from the home village in the Cyclades – as the transplantation of 'homeland memories' into 'new and unchartered living space … thus symbolically appropriating it and bridging the distance between the homeland and the new settlement' (2001, 30). This analogous example supports the idea that *sıla* place-making is considered achievable only with the inclusion of female kin (Sıla is also used as a given name for women in Turkey). Within this normative socio-spatial framework, then, migrants comprehend their absence from home in the same way as those they left behind, and so remain intelligible to their home communities even across vast distances.

As for the issue of mobility as a counterpoint to migration, the distinction between the two can be understood through Deleuze and Guattari, whose nomad–sedentary model would position mobility and migration as fundamentally different categories in that migrants are also 'the sedentary', only dis-*placed* (1987 [1980], 380–87; see also Braidotti 1994; Clifford 1997; Cresswell 1996; Malkki 1992). *Voluntary*

long-term absence from *sıla* and/or affective distance from *gurbet* are thereby associated with the state of *not* being in one's right mind. The most common term that incorporates this imagery is *delikanlı* (adj. crazy-blooded, n. one with crazy blood), which is used to both demarcate a period and suggest a style of youth characterised by social experimentation and spatial movement. As Leyla Neyzi explained,

> Turkish society [acknowledges] a stage of potentially unruly behavior, particularly among young men, who are referred to as delikanlı. … Historically it was single young men who became involved in acts of collective rebellion [so] it was preferable for reasons of social control to keep the period between puberty and marriage … as short as possible. 'Wild blood' was to be channeled along tracks acceptable to adult society. (2001, 415; see also Kandiyoti 1994)

Those *not* successfully channelled back into the fold, on the other hand, would become defined by this externality – and by spatial movement – the most successful being storied for their capacity to thrive in far-off lands or inhospitable geographies. Two categories of Eric Hobsbawm's (1981 [1969]) peasant-to-bandit typology run parallel to this: Potential bandits may be 'the age group of male youth between puberty and marriage' (31) – which corresponds to *delikanlı* – but may also

> [consist] of the men who are unwilling to accept the meek and passive role of the subject peasant; the stiffnecked and the recalcitrant, the individual rebels. They are, in the classic familiar peasant phrase, the 'men who make themselves respected'. … Theirs is an individual rebellion, which is socially and politically undetermined, and which under normal – i.e. non-revolutionary – conditions is not a vanguard of mass revolt, but rather the product and counterpart of the general passivity of the poor. They are the *exception* which proves the rule. (35–36, my emphasis)[6]

Terms linking spatial movement to lack of sanity proliferated in the Ottoman era. Many of these, like *delibaş* (crazy head), *başıbozuk* (damaged head; see Image 8.2), and *garip yiğit* (defined below), originated as designations for irregular and/or mercenary forces under the umbrella category of *gönüllü* (volunteer, lit. 'with heart') before passing into colloquial usage. Upon being decommissioned, these militia tended

Image 8.2: Ottoman-era postcard featuring *başıbozuk* irregulars.
  Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bashi-bazouk_Ottoman_Postcard.jpg.
  Accessed 13 January 2018. Image is in the public domain.

not to return to the peasantry, instead cutting ties to land to comprise the storied bandit cohorts found around the empire (Blok 1972; Gallant 1988; Hobsbawm 1981 [1969]; Sant Cassia 1993; Todorova 2009 [1997]). The cycles of war and peace could see a 'deterritorialised' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]; Malkki 1992) ex-peasant swapping allegiances for and against the state multiple times in a career, so it was in the best interest of the powers that be to approach relations pragmatically. A few bandits even 'ended their days at the Sublime Porte and as guests of the Sultan were treated on par with his closest advisers' (Barkey 1994, 192). In short, spatial and social mobility were formally linked and could be exploited to transgress the boundary between centre and periphery.

Garip yiğit, among such terms, speaks directly to *sıla* and *gurbet*. *Garip* means 'strange' in both the sense of being 'odd' and of being a 'stranger in a strange land'. Like *gurbet*, it is negatively connoted – the lyrics of classic Turkish songs like 'Bir Garip Yolcu' (A Strange Trav-

eller) feature protagonists complaining self-pityingly of the hopelessness, emptiness, and disorientation of lives spent on the road. *Gurbet* and *garip* actually share an etymological root, the former emphasising expulsion from the community of origin and the latter entry into the new milieu.[7] When *garip* is paired with *yiğit* (adj. valiant, n. hero), on the other hand, the compound term connotes facing the perceived ills of 'strangerhood' with a certain swagger. Its history as a term follows the aforementioned military-to-vernacular arc, dating in Ottoman records to 16th-century calls for 'fit for fighting, effective fellows able (to acquire) a horse and garment' (Fodor 2000, 251). By the 17th century the term had spread beyond military usage, as when Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi reported on an incident in which '*bir garîb yiğit*' (translated as 'a young stranger' in Sariyannis 2006, 168) slew several people in the capital city's Tophane marketplace. As of the 19th century it was still in use as a descriptor for single young men roaming the empire, but has all but disappeared since, seemingly (albeit speculatively) lost in the structural upheavals of the transition from empire to bounded, modern nation-state.

While both *garip* and *yiğit* remain in the lexicon individually, in the era of national borders and the institutional mediation of movement, the sort of swashbuckling approach to *gurbet* that epitomised the *garip yiğit* no longer has an intelligible corollary. Self-generated impulses toward spatial mobility for personal enrichment or pleasure are now conceived of as the domain of privileged classes, while others are migrants, glossed as the culturally insular masses moving only in reluctant response to economic or political imperatives, and existing at the societal margins in a form of exile. Indeed, the settlement patterns of migrants to Istanbul described at the top of this section seem to support this, suggesting a preoccupation with reproducing *sıla* in *gurbet* through various place-making efforts (see also Mandel 1996 for the case of Turkish migrants to Germany). But I contend that the phenomenological descendants of the *garip yiğit* did not go extinct with the vocabulary used to describe them:

> We can say I'm in *gurbet* because I left the village but I don't feel so. Usually in *gurbet* people are missing their homes and always dream of going back. (Informant from rural southeastern Turkey; living in Istanbul at the time of interview, currently living in Australia)

> Do I feel in *gurbet*? … For me *gurbet* is missing your city and … foods
> and blah blah. I was never a fan of my own traditional things. I don't
> mean I never liked these things, I just don't feel that way. (Informant
> from urban northwestern Turkey; living in France at the time of inter-
> view and currently)

With *gurbet* maintaining the socio-spatial perimeter around the cate-
gory of 'migrant', here two informants from divergent parts of Turkey –
but who have in common self-described poor backgrounds and unfin-
ished secondary educations – also share a disassociation from *gurbet*
that reinforces my contention that, while the young men in question
may be 'elsewhere in geographical space' relative to *sıla*, they are nev-
ertheless not 'displaced' in the exilic sense associated with migrants.
Notably, the second quoted informant actually articulated this disposi-
tion during a conversation largely dedicated to complaints about his
difficulty finding a satisfying job and making lasting friendships after
nearly three years in France, yet this had done nothing to coax his per-
sonal trajectory back in the direction of 'home'.

By way of comparison, later in the chapter we will meet a group
of informants whose lives in Istanbul vividly portray the influence of
gurbet. Primarily, though, this study focuses on Turkey's 'contempo-
rary *garip yiğitler*', single young men from modest backgrounds who
roam the landscape outside their *sıla* 'with heart' (*gönüllü*) in an effort
to parlay their 'performative excellence' – along with a dose of luck
(Su 2022) – into lifestyles that socially and spatially exceed the usual
limits associated with their peripheral origins. I label this 'mobility'
and define an ethnographic community through it even though, with
current paradigms of movement accommodating no middle ground
or third way between exile and expat (see Schielke 2015, 2020 for an
emerging take), contemporary *garip yiğitler* (plural) find themselves
lumped in with the deluge of migrants absorbed by Istanbul in recent
decades (see also Kaplan 1996), and they chafe at both the socially
stifling demands of those back in *sıla* and the perpetually dim view
Istanbulites take of them. The slippage between their aspirational sub-
jectivities and the weight of public judgement feeds a desire to create
distance between themselves and Turkish sociability in general. In turn,
this becomes part of the attraction of the Sultanahmet district, whose
peculiar history and connection to international tourism beget its own
unintelligibility. This also shapes the belief that in order to enact the

lives they envision for themselves – as opposed to those determined by normative sociability – they should leave Turkey altogether.

Manhood-via-Mobility

It is tempting to evaluate claims of indifference toward *gurbet* like those quoted above as youthful bluster rather than evidence of a 'lost' or unintelligible social archetype, especially since my informants are demographically indistinguishable (e.g. by ethnolinguistic or educational background) from Istanbul's majority migrant population. Distinguishing between *delikanlı* and *garip yiğit*, then, requires tracking both word and action over time: are their gendered selfhoods eventually 'channelled' by normative sociability or do they become expressed as 'masculine trajectories', a term Farha Ghannam employed to '[depart] from the "life cycle" concept, which assumes a fixed and repetitive socialization of individuals into clearly defined roles that support existing social structures' (2013, 6–7)? In other words, separating mobility from migration requires a diachronic approach.

And so, for the same reasons that 'migration' fails to capture my informants' subjectivities, the existing literature on 'migration-as-rite-of-passage' (e.g. Mondain and Diagne 2013; Monsutti 2007; Osella and Osella 2000) fails to capture their trajectories. That is, without minimising the challenges facing migrants, such challenges are nevertheless institutionalised within 'cultures of migration' (e.g. Ali 2007; Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Horváth 2008; Kandel and Massey 2002), and are viewed by the 'home community' – both diasporic and in *sıla* – as temporary and for the purpose of shaping the next generation of community pillars. A different diachronic model becomes necessary to describe trajectories linked to mobility, which expose contemporary *garip yiğitler* unmitigated to the uncertainties of *gurbet*. Indeed, if it were as simple as 'young men having an adventure before marriage', then Lemi – one among relatively few educated, middle-class urbanites whose profession grants him substantial direct exposure to such young men – might have seen little in Kaan that he found 'exceptional'. I employ instead 'manhood-via-mobility', wherein self-actualisation as a man is considered achievable through spatial movement outside the normative gaze. In the short term, liminal Sultanahmet fulfils this requirement, but many of my informants also feel this means a move abroad in the longer term. And, since their primary social interactions

are with tourists, they most commonly come to imagine this through marriage to a foreign woman and emigration to her country of residence.

Three factors make manhood-via-mobility qualitatively different from migration-as-rite-of-passage: first is the sense of social rather than economic or political constraint that draws my informants away from *sıla*. Second is the high risk of failure in the absence of mitigating 'cultures of migration' support structures abroad, including aid from diasporic community members and 'hometown associations'.[8] And third is the lack of *re*incorporation among those who eventually leave Turkey into communities that grant them full social and political rights of membership (see also Su 2022). In fact, the first of these may overlap with or also resemble *delikanlı*, as this represents a starting point. The second and third, however, demonstrate divergence from the life cycle. This divergence is already seen in the choice to avoid settling in one of the aforementioned satellite communities of migrants, instead choosing to base themselves in Sultanahmet *because* it is outside the gaze of normative sociability and its associated baggage. The eventual move abroad that some of these young men make follows this logic as well, since when they choose to leave Turkey through marriage to a foreign woman they do not choose their place of settlement.

To synthesise, my informants' subjectivities are unintelligible to the normative gaze because that gaze has lost the capacity in the modern era to recognise non-normative 'affective bonds with place', at least among those from less privileged classes who may not have the option to enact mobile subjectivities by institutionalised means (e.g. a study abroad programme). And this renders their trajectories resistant to being channelled back toward the life cycle by family and friends in *sıla*, or by the diasporic community in a migrant setting.

On Being a Migrant: Introducing the Bitlis Boys

In the continuing effort to make Sultanahmet boys' projects of manhood-via-mobility intelligible, in this section I ethnographically portray the normative gaze through the eyes of those who embrace it – those who are *not* exceptions, we might say. From the Bitlis boys, as I call them, we get a sense of the material and affective presence of *gurbet* in daily life among migrants.

One of the hostels I spent time in during my fieldwork was owned by three brothers who had been raised in the Aegean province of Manisa before coming to Istanbul to pursue professional opportunities, but who self-identified as being from their ancestral homeland of Bitlis, and as Kurdish. The affective constellation positioning Istanbul as the location of *gurbet* is the norm in Turkey; in addition, it is notable that *sıla* here is not Manisa but Bitlis; that is, the ancestral homeland takes precedence over the place of birth and/or upbringing where these are not the same.[9] Two of the brothers were actually high school teachers who gave their evenings, weekends, and summers to the family business, while the middle brother managed it full time. The family were relative newcomers to Sultanahmet, part of a late wave of entrepreneurs attracted to the district strictly as an investment opportunity after the profitability of tourism-driven enterprises had been proven, but who had no special interest in hosting foreign visitors. Not only that, they also expressed suspicion of others in the district. All staffers but one were family members, and the non-family member told me he believed the reason he'd been chosen for the job was because he was also Kurdish (albeit from a different province). In addition to the three brothers and the non-familial staffer were two male cousins – neither of whom had any skills or experience that made them particularly suitable to work in tourism (one indeed had studied to be an imam!) – brought directly from Bitlis to work as housekeepers and general support staff. The cousins also lived at the hostel, typically only venturing outside its immediate environs to run errands. Upon leaving the job, both returned directly to *sıla*.

It didn't take long for the Bitlis boys' mode of interaction with Sultanahmet tourism to distinguish them from many others I knew in the district. The differences were evident even in the material environs of the hostel's interior. For example, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism distributes promotional posters representing major locations of interest around the country to tourism-related enterprises. The managers of most such businesses request posters depicting the most popular sites with foreign visitors – especially those associated with classical antiquity, or with the beach towns dotting the Mediterranean shore – in hopes of whetting their appetites for onward travel within Turkey. This is because, if tourists book accommodation or activities for those destinations while still in Istanbul, commissions can be earned not just by the travel agents who make the bookings but also by the

third parties (often hotel or hostel staffers) who initiate conversations about these places of interest with potential customers and then refer them to a 'friend' at a nearby agency. But at Outback Hostel, as I call it, only posters of sites associated with Bitlis were on display: Lake Van in the lobby, Nemrut Volcano in the common room, and so on. Other material cues included the customisable picture-frame keychain that held the master keys, into which had been inserted a photo of musician Ahmet Kaya on one side of the clear plastic casing, and of filmmaker Yılmaz Güney on the other. Both were renowned Kurdish artists revered almost as much for the nature of their deaths 'in exile' in Paris – Kaya is said to have died of a broken heart from missing his homeland – as they are for their bodies of work.[10]

Most evenings I would find the staff huddled together around a table in the hostel's semi-enclosed rooftop terrace café, with the TV trained on Kurdish-language news programmes or folk music performances. This is usefully contrasted against what would be found on the televisions at other hostels, namely FIFA, UEFA, and Turkish Superlig football matches; or international and Turkish-language series and music videos. Note that at Outback Hostel the programming was always set according to the tastes of the staff, and the remote control rested permanently at their table, as opposed to being mounted under the television so guests could go looking for whatever they liked, as is more conventional in Sultanahmet hospitality. Indeed, although they were never unfriendly, the Bitlis boys infrequently socialised with the guests who ventured up to the café; the guests, in turn, tended to stay there only long enough to finish a glass of tea or write in their journals before heading back down to their rooms or dorms, returning the space to its proprietors. Meanwhile, the norm in Sultanahmet's hostels is for guests to congregate in these spaces, spending evenings there befriending other travellers or asking staffers cultural questions about Turkey, sometimes extending these interactions late into the evening by going together to bars or nightclubs in the more exciting Beyoğlu district (the contemporary city centre).

The case of the Bitlis boys is recognisable as that of migrants rather than of the affectively mobile, not only according to the understanding of *gurbet* in the Turkish collective consciousness but also according to the common frameworks of migration literature: the family members had been motivated by economic factors to move to Istanbul, and entered the tourism industry while nevertheless avoiding interaction

with those they deemed 'outsiders' – customers and colleagues alike – a category they defined in overlapping place-based, kinship, and sociopolitical terms. Unlike the case of today's unintelligible *garip yiğit* youth, the boundaries of *gurbet* were not imposed on the Bitlis boys any more severely than they also imposed them on themselves and others, as they barricaded themselves counterintuitively inside their guesthouse.

Conclusion

The connection between a subject and *gurbet* not only continues to exist in contemporary Turkey and elsewhere around the former Ottoman Mediterranean, it even retains some of its sense of legend despite its unintelligibility. For example, Penelope Papailias (2003) detailed the case of Flamur Pisli, a 24-year-old Albanian labourer in Greece, who became storied as a 'hero of *kurbet*' (p. 1084) after hijacking a public bus at Kalashnikov-point in May 1999.[11] The event, which ended by sniper-fire in the deaths of both the perpetrator and a Greek hostage, became immortalised in poems, songs, and 'a privately-recorded memorial *rapsodi*, a genre of folk epic, [which] became a pirate cassette hit that travelled beyond the borders of Albania and Kosovo, Greece and the Albanian areas of [Macedonia]' (pp. 1062–63). According to Papailias, 'What ultimately turned his typical migration experience into a heroic event … is that Pisli spoke back to the Greek people. … He thus succeeded in turning the humdrum, often miserable experience of migration into the stuff of history' (pp. 1065–66).

In the absence of *gurbet*'s signature melancholic nostalgia, my informants demonstrated non-normative 'affective bonds with place' that obliterate the socio-spatial 'striations' in the otherwise 'smooth' space of mobility (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]). Through a socio-historical analysis of constellations of relative location and understandings of spatial movement, I have in this chapter isolated 'mobility' as a discrete phenomenon alongside 'migration' for the Turkish context. I have also fleshed out this framework ethnographically, sharing Sultanahmet boys' articulations of their positionality relative to *gurbet* and discussing how the dissonance between their affective mobility and the 'sedentarist' (Malkki 1992) normative gaze compel them to try to actualise their subjectivities outside Turkey.

Despite the phenomenological residue of *garip yiğitler*, bandits, and other swashbuckling youth of old in contemporary social life, the substance of my informants' distinctiveness is unintelligible today. This was demonstrated in Lemi's attempt to explain away as aberrant Kaan's 'performative excellence', especially around visiting foreign women. Lemi is in fact is also a migrant; he grew up in another province and moved to Istanbul only after graduating university. However, such factors as his sought-after neighbourhood of residence and skilled profession granted him the social and modern institutional capital to obviate many of the ills of *gurbet*, and protecting that privilege had everything to do with his ire toward Kaan. It is also important to recognise that the gaze of Lemi and the gaze of the Bitlis boys on the location of *gurbet* and its subject are one and the same, only the former is cast from the centre and the latter from the periphery. Kaan, meanwhile, preferred to evade their gaze altogether. In another time, he might have been able to exploit societal mechanisms through which to manoeuvre himself up the socio-spatial hierarchy, but in the here and now he simply wanted to leave.

Notes

1 This chapter builds partly on Su 2022.
2 All parties are referred to by pseudonyms.
3 Lemi's comment about closing in on prey was meant in self-deprecating jest at the perceived absurdity of the outcome, which I note in case it is interpreted as disparagement of the women in question.
4 According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization's annual reports, Turkey has consistently ranked in the top ten for tourism, measured in international arrivals, since 2007 (UNWTO 2021).
5 For reference, the city's mid-century population was around one million; at the time of writing it stands well above 15 million.
6 There are four parts to Hobsbawm's typology; the other two are those who are forced to the margins of the home society due to antisocial behaviour, or to economic exclusion. These two types we could think of as 'involuntary bandits'. A key point about my informants, then – whom I liken to Hobsbawm's 'individual rebels' – is that no interpersonal or systemic obstacles stand between them and living their lives wholly within normative sociability; the issue lies only in their desire not to do so.
7 Both descend from *garb*, which means 'west' in Arabic. The original reference was to the setting of the sun and the sense of disorientation, isolation, and fear associated with trying to find one's way in the dark (Sayad 2000, 166–67). That said, this imagery does not directly inform contemporary Turkish usage, as the word for 'west' is *batı*.

8 See Zırh (2017) on the ubiquity of 'hometown associations' serving the Turkish diaspora in Europe – in this case among the Alevi religious minority.

9 The distinction between place of birth and/or upbringing and ancestral homeland is not just an affective orientation, it is also administratively codified. The national ID cards of all Turkish citizens contain two location-related fields: *ikametgah* and *kütük*. The former is one's current location of residence according to the civil registry, from which things like voter registration are determined. The latter is one's patrilocal ancestry originating in Ottoman census records. One's *kütük* and one's *sıla* tend to be the same, although one category is not derived from the other as such. In the context of the Bitlis boys' understanding of 'home', despite being raised in Manisa, its official significance was erased when they moved to Istanbul and changed their *ikametgah* at the registrar's office, while Bitlis remained the *kütük* of all three brothers even though the youngest had never even lived there, having been born after the family's move to Manisa.

10 The official cause of death for Ahmet Kaya was a heart attack.

11 *Kurbet* is the Albanian variant of *gurbet*. It is also *gurbet* in Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav republics. Elsewhere around the former empire it is *kourbeti* in Greece and *ghurba* (transliteration varies) around the Arabic-speaking world. In addition, the ethnonym used by Romani populations in the former Yugoslavia, Albania, and Cyprus is Gurbeti.

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