

Conclusion

Common Places and Hospitality in a Changing World

*Yetişmez mi bu şehrin halkına bu nimet-i bâri
Habib-i Ekrem'in yârî Ebû Eyyûb el-Ensârî.*

*Won't this blessing of God suffice for the people of this city,
the friend of the most generous Prophet, Ebu Eyyub el-Ensari.*

There is a small, framed piece of calligraphy that hangs from the wall near the *mihrab* in the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan. “Won’t this blessing of God suffice,” it asks, “for the people of this city?” The blessing of God is, of course, Halid bin Zeyd Ebû Eyyûb el-Ensârî. The phrasing of the question tells us two things: first, that Halid bin Zeyd *should* suffice for the people of Istanbul; but second, that he doesn’t always, because if he did, we would never need to ask this question.

Halid bin Zeyd is often described as Istanbul’s “spiritual conqueror,” a description easily enrolled into a politics of religious triumphalism. Such a description is, for many, central to the definition of this place. But there is a second aspect to the story of Halid bin Zeyd—one suggested by this inscription—his hospitality. He was the *mihmandar*, the person who hosted the Prophet Muhammad in Medina and whose spirit of hospitality is tied to this place.

In this conclusion I briefly restate the key arguments and conclusions of the book, describe some of the ongoing changes playing out in Eyüp, and reflect on the limits and possibilities of a cultural geography of Islam. I close, however, by speculating a little more on how Eyüp might help us think about hospitality in a changing world.



FIGURE 24. Visitors to the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan speaking with a photographer, March 2012.

KEY ARGUMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The broad argument that guides this book is that thinking in terms of place provides a novel and nuanced way for understanding *where* Islam is; defining *what* Islam is—whether that happens in academic texts, among communities of Muslims, or anywhere else—is inextricable from that definition of *where*. Understanding these places of Islam as multiple helps us follow how different connections link

people, places, objects, and times in shifting and overlapping ways. Examining geographies of connection—in contrast to the container geographies that tend to underpin many of our discussions of space—shows us that sharing a place is neither a simple function of location nor some innate cultural, ethnic, or religious force. Sharing a place of Islam is to share a set of connections to the past and the future and forms of affiliation that often exceed the legible boundaries provided by the map.

Places are made through human activity, but, crucially, they come to acquire a kind of agency and status that situate them outside the solely human. In my account, the project of making place involves the articulation of multiple forms of connection, variously imagined, symbolic, immaterial, material, thick, thin, fragile, durable, mobile, and powerfully rooted. The book's organization into two sections sought to call attention to two distinct forms of place making that are, in fact, woven together: storytelling and building.

At first glance, stories seem to be imagined, mutable, ephemeral, often a matter of perspective, while buildings seem to be concrete, rooted, durable, incontrovertibly *there*. But as I hope to have shown, taking these forms of place making together affords a new approach for thinking about Islam, particularly in the context of contemporary Turkey. Structuring the book by concentrating on these forms of place making (i.e., rather approaching the topic chronologically) also helps highlight echoes and shared experiences that might not otherwise be visible.

This is especially important for discussions of the historicity of Islam in Republican Turkey. For some, being Muslim—often, though not necessarily, linked to being Turkish—becomes a way to ground one's unchanged identity in opposition to the "West." One of the reasons Eyüp has been so important to these claims is because it provides both a story and a material landscape that is seemingly unchanged. For some, this ostensibly fixed Muslim geography helps to ground an internally consistent Muslim identity.

One way that such claims could be critiqued is by conceptualizing them as "invented traditions," fabricated to serve the needs of political Islam during the 1990s or to fit with the postmodern world in which Istanbul residents now find themselves. Yet to call Eyüp and its meanings an invented tradition serves to flatten its complex historicities. Some encounter Eyüp and find a connection to the Prophet Muhammad; some encounter a link to the Byzantine past; some see Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror; some remember the neighborhood of their childhood in the 1950s; still others trace an Eyüp of the 1980s. These encounters with multiple pasts are channeled by means of social, political, and religious relationships and networks. The problem of simply calling these woven braids of time and place "invented traditions" is that it obscures that complexity. Thinking in terms of place thus provides one approach to negotiate the long-running debate between stability and change, continuity and rupture that has played out in studies of Islam in Turkey. If there are powerful forms of continuity at work, it thus challenges us to examine how the meanings of a place like Eyüp are reproduced and transmitted over time to create a shared geography of tradition.

This approach also expands how we come to think about the meaningfulness of Islam. For a variety of reasons, Islam in contemporary Turkey has been studied largely in relation to discourses of modernity, secularization, and the political institutions linked to those discourses. While such an approach is of course valuable and important, it can limit how we understand the meanings of Islam. Being Muslim is not simply about one's relationship to the state or modernity; it can also involve how one encounters the meanings of the city. Thinking in terms of place thus maps out one approach for expanding how we come to think about the meanings of Islam. Yet these meanings continue to shift.

A CHANGING EYÜP(SULTAN)

This book has set out to explore the tensions—sometimes productive, sometimes destructive—between continuity and change in Eyüp. One thing that makes Eyüp exceptional is its striking continuities: in its meaning, in the ways that people visit, in parts of its built environment. Nevertheless, the district's political and urban landscapes have shifted in dramatic ways since I first began this research.

When I began my fieldwork in 2011, the network of individuals, associations, and businesses affiliated with Fethullah Gülen formed an ever-present background to many of my conversations. At the time, the mayor of the Eyüp Municipality was a man named İsmail Kavuncu. Elected to the position in 2009, Kavuncu had little organic connection to Eyüp. In contrast to his predecessor, Ahmet Genç—who had grown up in Eyüp and risen through the local party networks—Kavuncu seemed to secure his nomination as the result of political connections at the national party level. Nevertheless, some residents were optimistic about the apparent energy, modesty, and probity with which he approached his position. Others dismissively labeled him a *cemaatçı*—a term used to identify people affiliated with Gülen's network.

It should be noted that Gülen's network was active in Eyüp well before 2009. The newspaper *Zaman*, the primary print medium for the movement, frequently published articles about Eyüp's religious importance in the 1990s. The movement's ubiquitous presence in the Eyüp Municipality between 2011 and 2013 was another sign of its prominence within municipal politics. It is likely that people associated with Gülen also invested in Eyüp's redevelopment during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, most visibly in some of Eyüp's hotels and restaurants, as they also did elsewhere. Although I never participated in one, I was also aware that Gülen reading groups operated in Eyüp.

Following the 1994 municipal election, the Eyüp Municipality worked to restore and repurpose several historic properties in the center of the district. Most of these properties were registered as property belonging to pious foundations (Tr., *vakıf*, Ar., *waqf*), and this legal designation had helped to prevent their redevelopment. Following their restoration, many of these properties were

transformed for various social purposes, turned into libraries, museums, and municipal cafés. During the course of my fieldwork I came to realize that several of these sites had been transformed a second time into cafés, restaurants, and hotels. There were even rumors that the building that housed the Eyüp Municipality would be transformed into a new hotel following the completion of a new municipal building. In nearly every instance, rumors and gossip seemed to suggest that these new commercial properties were associated with the Gülen movement. These links with the Gülen movement functioned as a sort of open secret, neither wholly opaque nor entirely transparent. Given Mayor Kavuncu's association with the Gülen movement, it seems likely that the group was able to leverage political connections at the local level to further its commercial interests.

Beginning in 2013, however, a series of political, legal, and economic struggles began to play out openly between those affiliated with Gülen and those linked instead to then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Most notably, the arrest and indictment of several businesspeople and high-ranking government officials in December 2013 sparked a fierce response from Erdoğan. Calling the indictments a "dirty operation," Erdoğan's government embarked upon a systematic project of dismantling what they called the Parallel State Structure (*Paralel Devlet Yapılanması*).

I had moved back to the United States in September 2013. When I next returned to Istanbul in May 2014, Eyüp had a new mayor. Likely because of Mayor Kavuncu's association with the Gülen movement, central party authorities declined to nominate him a second time for the March 2014 municipal election. In his place they chose Remzi Aydın, a longtime member of the Justice and Development Party with strong local connections to earlier Welfare Party organizing in the 1990s.¹ Based on what I was able to follow from a distance, it appeared that many of the Eyüp-based businesses associated with Gülen saw their fortunes decline in 2014. Restaurants and hotels that had prospered from municipal business struggled to survive.

The coup attempt of July 15, 2016, marked the most dramatic rupture between the Gülen movement and the current president, Erdoğan. Following the coup attempt, the government used a state of emergency to seize all manner of assets from the Gülen movement, including educational institutions, hotels, restaurants, and dormitories. In Eyüp, the most visible evidence of this seizure was the outright demolition of a hotel and restaurant alleged to belong to the Gülen movement. Many of the properties that had been restaurants between 2011 and 2013 were either placed under new management or repurposed in other ways.

In 2017 the municipality's name was changed as part of an omnibus bill. In news reports, Mayor Aydın argued that the municipality's inhabitants already used "Eyüpsultan" while speaking among themselves and that the name change "would further contribute to our vision and efforts of increasing people's awareness."² Nevertheless, party leaders declined to nominate Aydın a second time for mayor. In his

place they selected Deniz Köken, another longtime party member with similarly deep connections to the district and local party leadership.

The March 2019 municipal election was one of the closest elections in recent history, with Köken narrowly edging out Emel Bilenoglu, the Republican People's Party candidate. At the level of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, however, residents of the Eyüpsultan Municipality voted differently in the June 2019 electoral runoff, with almost 54 percent voting for Ekrem İmamoğlu, the opposition candidate. While Eyüp's municipal politics merit closer attention, even this cursory description points to both the complexity and the dynamism of local politics.

Alongside municipal politics, Eyüp's built environment has also changed in far-reaching ways over the past decade. Most notably, a new tramway line was opened on January 1, 2021. The line runs along the Golden Horn from Eminönü to Alibeyköy and will likely help to shift patterns of movement within the city and perhaps alleviate some of the automobile traffic along the shore road built in the 1980s. However, the tramway—built onto piers where it passes near the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan—will also further separate Eyüp's historic core from the water. During the 1990s, the shore road's construction sparked fierce critique from prominent architects like Turgut Cansever and Nezih Eldem. It remains to be seen if and how this tramway line will reconfigure the relationship between Eyüp's historic core and the Golden Horn.

Similarly unknown is the future of Feshane, the large building that sits along the shores of the Golden Horn and takes its name from its original function as a factory producing fezzes and other textiles during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. During the twentieth century, the factory became the hub for a sprawling textile production complex. In the aftermath of the area's deindustrialization, however, Feshane's function became an object of some debate. Various imagined as the Museum of Textile and Industry, the site for the Museum of Modern Art, and a site for an authentic Ottoman-crafts bazaar, the building served primarily as a venue for conferences, festivals, and fairs between 2011 and 2014. More recently, the building was once more closed for restorations. Recent news reports suggest that the building will be reopened in 2022 under the administration of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality as the Museum of Sufism.³

Meanwhile, urban redevelopment projects (*kentsel dönüşüm*) continue to emerge in many Eyüpsultan Municipality neighborhoods. The local municipality is also seeking to lead a large-scale historic preservation project in the center of Eyüp. These projects also remind us that Eyüp's transformations have happened at many different scales, ranging from individual property owners to the local municipality to the Metropolitan Municipality to national-level institutions.⁴ Their geography is thus much more complicated than a top-down political project.

Another area of study—one not addressed in this book—would be considering Eyüp's political and urban changes within a different framework: in what ways do the activities of religious networks intersect with urban life? There is a long

history of religious networks like the Gülen network, the Association for the Dissemination of Knowledge (İlim Yayma Cemiyeti), and various Naqshbandi groups establishing bookstores, cafés, media centers, and dormitories in cities across Turkey. In Eyüp, some of these groups also worked with municipal and national leaders to lease historic properties, thereby accruing a form of cultural capital in addition to consolidating their economic activities.

While these groups are diverse in their background and composition, they often seem to share the quality of appealing to first- and second-generation migrants to Istanbul. In contrast, there are several other Sufi orders, such as the Mevlevi, the Kadiri, and the Cerrahi, with deep roots in Istanbul's urban fabric. Are there meaningful differences between these older religious networks and more recent arrivals? The challenge, I think, is to take seriously how these groups narrate their traditions without flattening the lived complexity of their worlds and motivations.

How, why, and for whom these projects will play out remains uncertain, but these projects also speak to a key part of this book's argument: Eyüp is not and has never been a static, unchanging place. Its material landscapes, social relationships, and cultural significance have always been in flux. Eyüp continues to be a fascinating site for research because it asks us to consider the tensions between ongoing change and powerful continuities in its religious significance.

A CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF ISLAM?

People foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further into the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realise that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena.

—MARCEL PROUST, *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*

Beyond describing how Eyüp—and thus its geography of Islam—has changed over the course of the past century, I've also tried to sketch out one model of what a cultural geography of Islam might look like. Here, I briefly reflect on the limits of that project and offer several reasons why—despite its limits—a cultural geography of Islam is even more urgent today.

In many respects, my methodological and conceptual approach is defined by a narrowing of the scope of inquiry, a situating of myself in a particular place while simultaneously trying to follow how that place is connected—imaginatively, materially, practically—elsewhere.⁵ For me, working and thinking in terms of place has provided an especially rich and productive way to do so. In the process I've also tried to be more precise about the geographical terms that I use, especially concepts of *space*, *place*, and *landscape*. Particularly as the “spatial turn” continues to become increasingly interdisciplinary and our theoretical vocabulary expands, this book is an argument for spending more time understanding how and why

other disciplines—and geography in particular—have come to conceptualize their objects of study.⁶ Thinking in terms of place is less an attempt to reduce Islam to a single “master concept” and more a call to take place and place making as a point of departure.⁷ Places can be made, transformed, and shared in many ways. This multiplicity both prompts us to examine how particular places come to be so durable and reminds us that places could be otherwise.

That said, I find at least three limitations to this argument. In the spirit of a provisional ending and with a desire to build future conversations, I find it useful to engage with those limitations openly. The first limitation involves the methodological gaps and failings in my own work. I opened the book with a brief discussion of my position as researcher, a move familiar to anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers, though less common among political scientists and historians.⁸ While we are accustomed to opening with a brief reflexive assessment of our own positions, I am often struck by the way that those reflexive considerations tend to drop from view once we begin our “real” argument. We thus lose sight of the iterative process—the failures, the coincidences, the distractions, and the disciplines—through which our arguments were developed. In the case of this book, I am acutely aware of the failures in my own field notes; my accidental erasure of dozens of interviews before I’d transcribed them; my frustration at the imbalance between my participant observation (a lot) and deep, searching interviews (very few). I am also aware of the value of time: how the possibility of returning to the interviews, texts, images, and buildings that weave their way through this book has changed how I think about Islam in small but important ways. A cultural geography of Islam, as I approach it in this book, pushes us to be more humble—more situated—in the ways that we think about how meanings and places are made through shifting connection.⁹

Such methodological considerations are especially important in relation to discussions of Islam in Turkey. At least as they make their way into English, analyses of Islam in Turkey—this book included—often find themselves forced to respond to a set of categories and frameworks that have dominated the field. These include the methodological nationalism that tends to define the field of Turkish studies; the long-running debate about secularism in Turkey; and the tendency to focus on the state in our discussions of the politics of Islam. How might we expand where and for whom we speak about Islam? Such a project might be more attentive to different disciplinary traditions and their respective blind spots. It also might push us to move beyond tactical appropriations of other disciplines to a richer engagement with their respective traditions.

The second limitation of this argument involves the question of its representativeness. After all, this book focuses on a specific district of Istanbul; more precisely, two or three neighborhoods around the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan. One could walk from edge to edge of this field in forty minutes. What hope does such a site provide for a discussion of a cultural geography of Islam? In answer, I reply: What

does it mean to be representative? And *where* does knowledge become representative? One way to think about “representative” knowledge is that it is knowledge no longer linked to places—it can travel in particular ways.¹⁰ But what are lost in discussions of “representativeness” are the practices through which that argument has been decontextualized in the first place. The great virtue of a cultural geography of Islam is that it does not claim representativeness; *a* cultural geography of Islam in, of, and from Eyüp is not *the* cultural geography of Islam. It is one of many possible worlds. Working in terms of place helps me better understand *how is this where made, and how might it be made otherwise?*

The final limitation I find in my argument involves what might be termed the “context of context.”¹¹ In other words, my focus on the connections through which people make places could be critiqued on the grounds that it obscures a discussion of the forces, structures, and systems that really matter. Some might ask about this book: But where is capitalism and neoliberalism? Where is the state? What about the roles of *tarikāt*, *cemaat*, and other religious institutions? Such questions are valuable and important, and I hope that other scholars will take them up. But what is lost when we focus only on those questions is—in many respects—an individual experience in and of the world.¹²

As I approach it in this book, meaning—both of Islam and Istanbul—is generated not in relation to static categories or containers but through shifting relations and connections. The possibility of making connections is necessarily shaped by dynamics often well outside human control, but how, why, and for *where* people make those connections is neither solely nor simply reducible to the operation of structures, systems, or material conditions. How people learn to share places and the meanings associated with them turns out to be neither straightforward nor as simple as we first might imagine.

A cultural geography of Islam could challenge us to think more creatively and expansively about the forms of connection that our interlocutors use, be they human, animal, natural, manuscript, monument, or otherwise. It could push us to be more attentive to the temporalities and geographies that exist in the world, thus reframing many of our received normative categories.¹³ Perhaps most importantly, a cultural geography of Islam could help us to be open to many forms of meaning but also insist on the possibility of a shared form of being in the world. This form of shared place making needs to be defined not by projects of exclusion (we have enough of those in the world already) but by an expanded capacity for hospitality. What might it mean to hold open the idea of shared place in the world without insisting on a single possible form?

Such a project speaks to Asu Aksoy’s call to protect Istanbul’s “worldliness” by “nurtur[ing] and sustain[ing] this civic imagination of the city and of its possibilities.”¹⁴ For this project to have any hope of success, I think, it needs to take seriously traditions of Islam that are deeply embedded in the imagination of this city. This is not to adopt a naïve view of Islam where we are incapable of critique. Adapting

Kabir Tambar's astute formulation, we need forms of inquiry that attend to the costs of defining who and what belongs where and to the limits of what is sayable within those geographies.¹⁵ This is not to trace the same oppositions between "secular" politics and "religious" politics but to call for an engagement with Islam in Istanbul that is open. To borrow Annemarie Mol's formulation, "Open endings do not imply immobilization."¹⁶

A STORY ABOUT HOSPITALITY

In July 2018, I returned to Eyüp for the first time in over four years. I had come back for several reasons: to reconnect with friends and interlocutors, to fumble through the beginning of a new research project, and, of course, to wander the streets of Istanbul. While I was gone, the Eyüpsultan Municipality had opened a new research center. As far as I'm aware, it's the first instance of a municipality opening a locally focused research center. The Eyüp Sultan Research Center (Eyüp Sultan Araştırma Merkezi) provided a browsing library, a room with several computers for researchers, several small offices, and a small seminar room on the top floor for invited guests. The center is located in the former offices of the district governor (*kaymakam*), a reminder that the geography of government offices often builds on older histories and mostly invisible relationships.

In any event, they very generously invited me to speak one evening about a small part of my project, the notebook prepared by Süheyl Ünver that I described in chapter 4. But before I began my lecture, a friend from Eyüp pulled me aside. "Look," he said, "before you talk about Ünver, talk a little bit more about yourself, about how you found yourself here and the people you've met. You know, about Eyüp Sultan, about Halid bin Zeyd, about his hospitality [*misafirperverliği*]."

By the time that you read this book, it will have been more than decade since I first arrived in Eyüp to begin research. I was in every way a *misafir*, a *mihman*, a visitor and guest in a place I knew very little about. Although there were certainly moments of exclusion and suspicion, there were also frequent moments of welcome and friendship. If, in some small way, I'm no longer the same visitor in this place I have come to know, that change is due at least in part to those who have welcomed me there along the way. May this book also have welcomed you.