

NARRATIVES IN CITY LANDSCAPES: CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ISTANBUL*

AMY MILLS

ABSTRACT. Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, when the Turkish nation was defined as ethnically Turkish and Muslim, the issue of ethnic minorities has been at the root of a deep insecurity concerning cultural identity and what it means to be Turkish. The movement to “recover” ethnic minority in history and in place is most visible in Istanbul, the city identified as the location of European culture in Turkey and Turkey’s most culturally pluralistic city. The movement has gained pace since the formal acceptance of Turkey as a candidate for membership in the European Union and the push for reforms in human rights. It is promoted by a very small cultural and economic elite and works together with gentrification to produce elite spaces in the city, as exemplified by two neighborhoods: Kuzguncuk, a historic minority neighborhood on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus; and “French Street,” a new commercial development in Beyoğlu, on the European side of the city west of the Bosphorus. These landscapes articulate a European, cosmopolitan, and multicultural place identity for Istanbul and reflect a particular notion of Turkey as modern and European, providing insight into the contemporary debate in Turkey concerning the tensions embedded at the core of Turkish cultural identity. *Keywords:* *cultural identity, landscape reading, minority history, Istanbul, Turkey.*

One of the most important issues to consider in studies of ethnic identity and the status of internal debates in Middle Eastern societies is the ways in which nationalism creates a sense of identity as belonging to—or being excluded from—the nation. Geographers examine how these imagined national boundaries, which define one as part of the dominant group or as a “minority,” are spatialized in the experiences of everyday life. Contemporary Turkey provides particularly interesting insights into how identity is created in the spaces we live in every day and how debates about national identity produce new landscapes because the country faces ongoing internal debates concerning national identity as it seeks membership in the European Union. One of the most important obstacles to Turkey’s accession is its poor human-rights record regarding ethnic and religious minorities (Dahlman 2004), and the European Union is pressuring Turkey to reform laws concerning the rights and status of its minority citizens. The issue of minorities is a sensitive one for Turkey because it touches on a fundamental part of its national identity.

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey has defined itself as an ethnically Turkish and Muslim nation. Persecution of ethnic-religious minorities—from the Armenian genocide in the early twentieth century to the more recent erasure of Kurdish villages and the deaths of several thousands of Kurds in the southeast—has been justified as

* Many thanks to my anonymous reviewers and, most especially, to Patricia Ehrkamp. Their suggestions significantly improved the structure of the article and strengthened its argument. Any weaknesses or errors are, of course, solely my own.

✉ DR. MILLS is an assistant professor of geography at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina 29208.