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Transness: An Urban Phenomenon In Istanbul

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Transness: An Urban Phenomenon In Istanbul

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Dedication

To my beautiful mother, who taught me the beauty of writing...

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Abstract

Transness: An Urban Phenomenon In Istanbul

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This study is about “transness” in contemporary Istanbul. As this thesis demonstrates, transness is an urban phenomenon, an identity specific to time and space. In Istanbul, it is a subculture, defined by sex, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. “Transness: An Urban Phenomenon in Istanbul” situates itself as part of a conversation about marginal subcultures in Gender Studies, Queer Theory, and especially Transgender Studies. This study fills two gaps: the temporal gap between the early Turkish scholarship on trans issues and the contemporary trans world of Istanbul; and the conceptual gap between trans words—transvestite, transsexual, and transgender—and trans identities in Istanbul.

Furthermore, this study brings the current issues and discussions of US-based queer scholarship into the Turkish context and does so by discussing recent Turkish examples of media representations ranging from a documentary to a movie, and to a newspaper article; and by analyzing certain drag performances. All these examples discussed in this work exemplify the temporality and spatiality of transness, its relation to heteronormativity, and its publicness as a subculture. As is suggested by my examples, transness is ‘out-of-time’ and ‘out-of-place,’ always already public, and, as a performance, it asserts individual identity. Moreover, it is also always a public

performance. All the examples point to the complex relationship between queerness and transness, and claim that the queerness of transness is always contextual. Combining the detailed analysis of these examples with the ethnographic work on Istanbul's trans world,

“Transness: An Urban Phenomenon in Istanbul” provides answers to the following questions: “What is transness?” “What is the impact time and space have on transness within the urban structure of Istanbul?” “What is the relationship between dominant normativity and transness?” Finally, this MA thesis offers new perspectives and opens new paths for further research on the topic intended to help imagining new futures for trans folk in Istanbul.

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Introduction

This study is about “transness” in contemporary Istanbul. It examines transness as an urban phenomenon, an identity specific to time and space. As I will demonstrate, it is a subculture defined by sex, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. This thesis fills two gaps: the temporal gap between the early Turkish scholarship on trans issues and the contemporary trans world of Istanbul; and the conceptual gap between trans words—transvestite, transsexual, and transgender—and trans identity in Istanbul. In other words, this study aims to bring the current issues and discussions of US-based queer scholarship into the Turkish context and it does so by discussing more recent Turkish examples. Transness is the central concept of this project, and a term introduced and thoroughly discussed in this study. It is located beyond gender and sexuality, and used to refer to a certain identity and subculture that pertain to specific parts of Istanbul. Although this study uses transness as a term exclusively for Istanbul, transness might be relevant in different contexts as well.

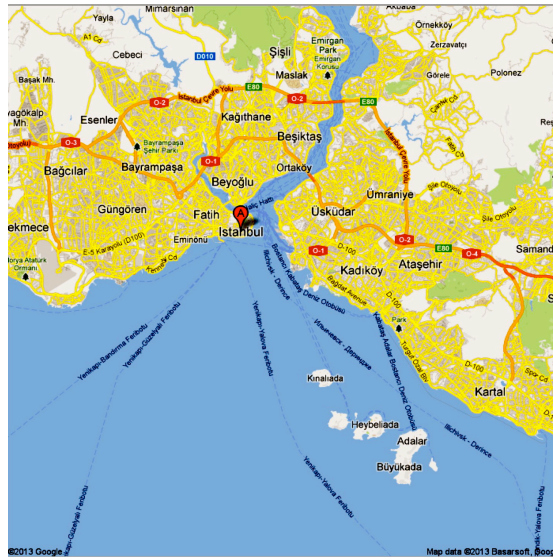


Figure 1: Map of Istanbul

This project situates itself as part of a conversation about marginal subcultures in Gender Studies, Queer Theory, and especially Transgender Studies. It emerges from early works within these fields, brings them into the Turkish context, and ties the two to contemporary discussions on queer identities, temporalities and spatialities. It serves as a bridge between the scholarship of the early 90s and today. Furthermore, it offers new perspectives and opens new paths for further research on the topic with the hopes of imagining new futures for trans folk in Istanbul. This thesis consists of four chapters; each chapter deals with transness and its specificities by using different examples ranging from a documentary to a movie, from a newspaper article to a drag performance.

The first chapter on transness introduces and thoroughly discusses the concept of transness. It gives a brief history of Turkish modernization and a brief layout of urban settlement in Istanbul to situate transness according to the specificities of time and place, where—and through which—it emerged. In order to understand the contemporary concept of transness, the first chapter discusses the history of transness in Istanbul by

closely engaging with the Turkish scholarship on the subject. It explains in detail the relation between transness and heteronormativity as a dominant normativity, and the relational marginality of transness. By illustrating the spatiality and temporality of transness, this chapter makes the claim that transness is ‘out-of-time’ and ‘out-of-place.’ To support this claim, I examine transness in public and private realms. In so doing, I demonstrate that transness is always already public; and transness, as a performance asserting individual identity, is always also a public performance. The first chapter, in other words, defines transness as a spatial and a temporal term, and as a public identity that is not only determined by gender and sexuality, but also by class, and ethnicity.

To support the claims laid out in the first chapter, the second chapter “Media Representations of “Transness”: *Proudly Trans in Turkey*, *I Saw the Sun*, and Interviews of Ayşe Arman” provides concrete examples of contemporary transness to illustrate the theoretical background set up in the first chapter. Chapter two employs three different genres of media representations that all feature trans individuals: a documentary, *Proudly Trans in Turkey*; a movie *I Saw the Sun*; and a newspaper article written by following a series of interviews with a few trans women. All these examples exemplify the temporality and spatiality of transness, its publicness as a subculture, and its relation to heteronormativity. These examples also point to the complex relationship between queerness and transness. The chapter supports the claim made in the previous one, namely that the queerness of transness is always contextual.

The third chapter “Performances of “Transness”: *Huysuz Virjin*” deals with performance and transness. This chapter studies a well-known Turkish drag queen, her

performances over the years and her place within the trans world. It illustrates that the wide acceptance of this drag character by Turkish audiences is closely related to the temporality and spatiality of transness and its relation to heteronormativity. *Virjin*'s more-than-four-decade-long stage life, the specific temporality of her performances, is crucial for understanding the change in transness and its perception of in Turkey. Furthermore, many characteristics of the performance, the distinction drawn between the actor and the drag persona make *Huysuz Virjin* a part of the heteronormative dominant culture, despite various queer features and queer moments, which are part of her performances. In other words, *Huysuz Virjin* proves the complexity of the relation between queerness and transness—and the contextuality of the queerness of transness.

The fourth chapter “Ethnography and “Transness”: Queer Spaces in Istanbul” is based on my ethnographic observations of Istanbul’s trans world, mainly of trans entertainment venues. These observations were made during the four weeks I spent in Istanbul in late December of 2012 and early January of 2013. They are also based on my prior exposure to those places during the five years I lived in Istanbul from 2006 to 2011. The locations, hours, and customers of the six venues I observed operated in accordance with the temporality, spatiality, and queerness of transness discussed in all chapters of this thesis. Furthermore, this ethnographic observation showed how much transness is related to and regulated by heteronormativity. Class, therefore, becomes the most prominent factor in determining the relationship between heteronormativity and transness, and that regulates the distribution of urban space in Istanbul. My findings show

that it is class more than any other factor that posits transness as being ‘out-of-place’ and ‘out-of-time.’

In short, by using various contemporary examples from the Turkish context and by bringing together the work of various scholars in Gender Studies, Queer Theory, and Transgender Studies, this thesis provides answers to the following questions: “What is transness?” “What are the implications of time and space on transness within the urban structure of Istanbul?” “What is the relationship between dominant normativity and transness, and how is this relationship effective on transness?”

Chapter One: Transness

This chapter discusses the concept of “transness,” which is used as a central concept throughout this study. Transness, as a term, emerges to fill the gap that cannot be fully covered by other trans words—transgender, transsexual, and transvestite—within the Turkish context. As I will demonstrate in this work, transness is an umbrella term that is beyond gender and sexuality. Within the extent of this project, it is defined as an identity specific to certain time and space, an urban phenomenon, a subculture defined by sex, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. Even though my analysis is only based on Istanbul, and my use of transness as a term is specific to Istanbul, transness is not necessarily exclusive to Istanbul. Transness might be a relevant term for certain identities/subcultures/phenomena in different times and spaces other than contemporary Istanbul. This chapter will provide multiple answers to questions such as “What is ‘transness’?” “What does ‘transness’ refer to within the Turkish context?” “How is it different from the commonly used terms of ‘transvestite,’ ‘transsexual,’ or ‘transgender’?”

Before moving to transness, it is necessary to define contemporary trans words. What do concepts such as transvestite, transsexual and transgender mean? In the first chapter of her 2008 book *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker defines transvestite as “people who wear gender-atypical clothing but do not engage in other kinds of bodily modification.” She further notes, “It usually refers to men rather than women and usually carries with it the association of cross-dressing for erotic pleasure” (17). While transvestism does not involve changing one’s morphology, which is “the shape of the

body that we typically associate with being male or female” (9), transsexual “typically refers to people who feel a strong desire to change their sexual morphology in order to live entirely as permanent, full-time members of the gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth” (18). Stryker uses transgender as a term to refer to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.” She asserts, “In any case, it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place*—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition—that best characterizes the concept of ‘transgender’” (1). In other words, transgender is a broader concept that can include transvestite and transsexual. It is a fluid gender identity that is not necessarily related to one’s sexuality. So, it is possible to claim that “transgender” is a “queer” identity, in the sense of the word Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, defines in her 1993 book *Tendencies*.

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive-recurrent, eddying, troublant and the word ‘queer’ itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (traverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English athwart,...Keenly, it is relational and strange. (xii)

Both transgender and queer point to a “movement across,” which makes transgender queer, a queer identity. In his 2007 book *Imagining Transgender: an ethnography of a category*, David Valentine states that transgender is “a central cultural site where

meanings about gender and sexuality are being worked out.” He further argues that use of transgender in institutionalized contexts cannot fully account for the experiences of gender non-normative people (14). Valentine suggests that transgender might be normative under certain conditions. As will be further discussed throughout this study, this is an important suggestion.

Transvestite and transsexual are concepts brought into Turkish from French, as *travesti* and *transeksüel* respectively, but their meanings have significantly changed in this process of borrowing. *Travesti* is commonly used to refer to MtF transgender sex workers who have not undergone sex reassignment surgery and *transeksüel* to mostly MtF transgender people who have undergone sex reassignment surgery. The contemporary English counterpart of *travesti* is the pre-op transgender woman, and post-op transgender woman is the counterpart of *transeksüel*. *Travestis* and *transeksüels* are frequently associated with sex work. *Travestis* are stigmatized as ‘other’ and frequently experience discrimination because they do not fit into the gender binary system, since their sex and gender do not match. Outcast from society, not given any opportunity to pursue any other career, most *travestis* are driven to sex work. *Travestis* are considered to be sex workers by definition. However, being *transeksüel* “can” mean liberation from sex work. For, being *transeksüel* means acting in line with one’s biology and that one’s gender matches one’s sex. Being *transeksüel* means being a woman or a man both with your body and soul. However, life is not always much different for transeksüels after surgery. In her 1996 book, *Maskeler, Süvariler, Gacılar; Ülker Sokak: Bir Alt Kültürün*

Dışlanma Mekânı (Masks, Troopers, Women: Ülker Street; A Place for the Social Exclusion of a Subculture) Pınar Selek defines *transeksüel* and *travesti* as follows:

Within the psycho-medical discourse, *transeksüel* means someone who changes their sex with an operation or someone who abandons their anatomically assigned gender role and identifies with the opposite sex. ...

On the other hand, contemporary *travestis*, who are biologically male but prefer women identity as their gender, are not different from *transeksüels* with their attitudes and manners. Due to hormone pills they take, their breasts begin to grow, their voices get higher, their bodily hair diminish, and their hair grows. The only difference between the two is their genitals. ...

Taking into consideration the fact that many *travestis* that has not undergone surgery, that has not transitioned, identify as “trans,” defining trans identity with bodily transformation does not correspond to the reality. Not everyone who identifies as *travesti* or *transeksüel* can fit into or wants to fit into this definition. For, “being trans” is more about gender identity than it is about transforming one’s body. (74)¹

These characteristics of *travesti* and *transeksüel* identities provide an example for Judith Butler’s claim in *Gender Trouble*, “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, was

¹ My translation.

always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (10-11). Even though *travestis* and *transeksüels* do not have the same sex, their gender identifies them as trans. Perhaps, they identify more as trans than *travesti* or *transeksüel* today, due to the same reason.

Stryker’s definition of transgender quoted above, is similar to Selek’s definition of *travesti* and *transeksüel* or “being trans” as a gender identity. Similar to transgender, transness also “refer[s] to the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities” (Stryker 19). Trans as a modifier can be used to describe not-cisgender bodies. Cisgender is the term used to define those who have a gender identity that society considers appropriate for the sex assigned at birth, while not-cisgender is used to define the contrary. Susan Stryker defines cisgender and cissexual as follows:

The prefix *cis-* means “on the same side as” (that is, the opposite of *trans*). The idea behind the terms is to resist the way that ‘woman’ and ‘man’ can mean ‘nontransgendered woman’ or ‘nontransgendered man’ by default, unless the person’s transgender status is explicitly named... (22)

Throughout this work trans and transness are used as umbrella terms to include acts that break the assumed connection between maleness and manhood, and femaleness and womanhood. It thus makes sense to ask the question why do I insist on using transness for the Turkish context rather than transgender? How does transness, as a

category, differ from transgender? What aspects of transness can explain Istanbul's trans world better than transgender?

In the following section, I will examine the specific historical context in Turkey of which transness is a part. I will briefly discuss Turkish modernization and how it has been effective in the formation of transness as an identity.

1. TURKISH MODERNIZATION AND TRANSNESS

Transness is closely related to the Turkish modernization process, which brought about the formation of new identities. Turkish modernization started during the late Ottoman period and gained great impetus with the formation of the Republic. The modernization process started with the *Tanzimat* (Reorganization) Period, which introduced series of reforms in 1839 and 1876. These reforms were aimed to change the old, malfunctioning system of the Ottoman Empire, and to make it a more modern state. The idea behind Turkish modernization, which also has been frequently referred to as “Westernization,” was to be like the West, to adopt the advanced aspects of the West such as Western science, technology etc. Furthermore, a crucial part of Turkish modernization was being loyal to one's Turkish roots and culture and protecting the Turkish identity from assimilation. The nationalist discourse and the patriarchal discourse were, thus, important elements of Turkish modernization process. In this process of borrowing, French was influential as the intermediary language between the West and Ottoman-Turkey. For this reason, most words of Western origin in Turkish were borrowed from French, such as *travesti* and *transeksüel*.

As also discussed by Pinar Selek, Turkish modernization was from top to bottom; all the reforms were imposed on the people by the ruling class. The society was forced to change in the direction heads of the country wanted. However, what the governing class wanted did not really match the reality of the people and their expectations. This disconnection between the reform-makers and the ones being reformed affected identity formation and caused a constant tension between identities and social structure. Definitions of identities were made independently of people's experiences at that particular time and space, and people were made to fit into those definitions. Homosexuality is one of the identities modernization affected. "If a man refuses his sexual power, he can not be a man; there must be something wrong with him, he must be a woman." This belief has been behind the understanding of homosexuality within the Turkish context. Male homosexuality has been equated to femininity, and female homosexuality has been inexistent. This common belief makes *travestis* and *transeksüels* more acceptable than homosexuals. That is why transvestism, transsexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are very much intertwined and affect each other on the subcultural level (Selek 91-93). Even though this belief is a fairly old construction and still applies to some extent, perception of male and female homosexuality has changed drastically since the beginning of the LGBTT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, *Travesti*, and *Transseksüel*) movement in Turkey, and as this study will show, Selek's argument that *travestis* and *transeksüels* are more acceptable than homosexuals is questionable in today's Istanbul.

The formation of gender and sexual identities has been closely related to the formation of subcultures around these identities. This links this section to the next, which discusses in detail transness as a subculture.

2. TRANSNESS: A PUBLIC SUBCULTURE

Gay and lesbian subculture in Turkey emerged around entertainment venues in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Entertainment venues have been spaces of a subculture where gays and lesbians come together. While there are no gay or lesbian neighborhoods, there are various trans neighborhoods in Istanbul. Trans people live together in the same neighborhoods, on the same streets, in the same buildings, and even in the same apartments. Unlike gay and lesbian subculture, trans subculture is residential. And this makes transness a spatial term. Where trans folk live and whom they live with become crucial for the understanding of transness, which is a term beyond gender and sexuality.

Various factors contribute to this residential trans subculture. Unlike gays and lesbians, almost all *travestis* and *transeksüels* earn their living through sex work. This forms stronger ties within the trans subculture. Their “visible differences” bring them apart from their families. Their occupation and the absence of families bring trans individuals together and make the foundations of trans subculture stronger. Obligated to protect themselves and to stand on their own feet, trans individuals live together. They protect themselves from the perils of heteronormativity within the spaces they claim and protect. It is thus possible to say that trans words of Turkish are a part of the construction

of trans world in Istanbul. Social definitions of trans words are manifested in spatial terms in Istanbul. They are appropriated into the urban settlement.

Trans folk largely live around Beyoğlu district, which is “considered to be the capital of ‘illegitimate world’” (Selek 105). For “illegitimate,” the word Selek uses in Turkish is *gayrimeşru*, which has two meanings in Turkish: “unlawful” and interestingly, “out of wedlock.” Beyoğlu is also the capital of entertainment, where many people working in the entertainment sector live. Beyoğlu brings people from different backgrounds together, such as non-Muslim people, people of Romani origin, people of Kurdish origin etc.—who also have long been subject to violence. *Gayrimeşru* world of Beyoğlu thus consists of ethnic, religious, sexual minorities—unlawful children that were born out of wedlock.

People of Romani origin are other inhabitants of Beyoğlu, Tarlabası, and Cihangir. They are as distant to legal authorities and institutions of the system as trans folk are; and maybe that is why *travestis* and *transeksüels* speak the language people of Romani origin speak. (Selek 105)

Beyoğlu is where different worlds come together. In Beyoğlu today, it is only a few minutes walk from a five-star hotel or colossal buildings of international corporations to neglected and run-down backstreets inhabited by displaced immigrants (Selek 115). Students, artists, single women and men, unemployed, workers, illegal workers, entertainment sector employees, and lower and middle class families constitute other

inhabitants of this “*gayrimeşru* world.” As the backgrounds of its inhabitants suggest, along with sex, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, class plays a significant role in the formation of the “*gayrimeşru* world” of Beyoğlu.

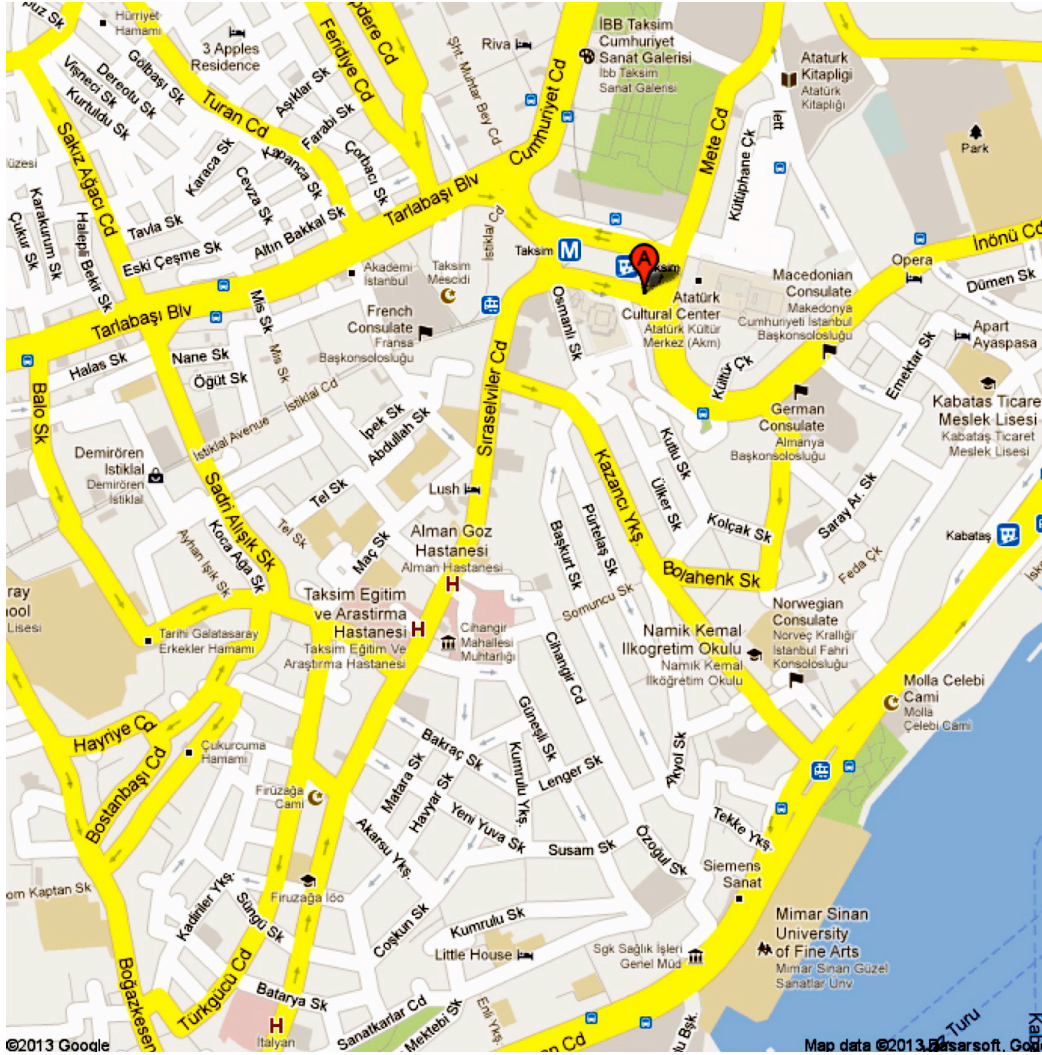


Figure 2: Map of a part of Beyoğlu, Istanbul

In the 1998 “Photo Essay: Transsexuals and The Urban Landscape in Istanbul” Deniz Kandiyoti depicts the trans urban space of Istanbul:

They [transsexuals] are also the unsettling harbingers of a new urban scene; the mega-metropolis where everything is on display and for sale, a new arena where the landscapes and, especially the nightscapes of Istanbul, Rio, New York, and Bangkok may become indistinct and shade into one another. Indeed, transsexuals appear to inhabit a social space where the influences of the local and the global meet and merge in varied and unpredictable ways. They are on the one hand, subject to the legal regulations of the Turkish state and are monitored by the forces of order. They are members of a self-conscious local subculture that has evolved its own coded vocabulary. On the other hand, they participate in a broader circulation of people, fashions and ideas—in an international market for sex-change surgery, for jobs in European clubs and in the international gay movement’s networks of political solidarity. (Kandiyoti 21-22)

As stated by Kandiyoti, trans folk form a “self-conscious” local subculture that is being “monitored by forces of order” in a “mega-metropolis where everything is on display.” What are the implications of constant monitoring and constantly being on display for transness? The fact that transness is an urban phenomenon brings public space and private space into discussion. In her article “Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space,” Viviane K. Namaste discusses the division of public and private spaces and its implications on non-normative identities such as transgender and transsexual identities. She asserts that since the division of space into public and private

is a part of gender binary system, this division puts transgender people who disrupt this binary under threat both in gay/lesbian-identified spaces or “ordinary spaces.” Basing her analysis on examples from Western societies, she points out that transgender spaces are nocturnal public spaces formed by transgender sex workers.

“Transsexual and transgendered public space” refers to urban areas known for their transsexuals and transvestites, such as the Meat [Packing] District on the border of New York’s Greenwich Village, Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles, or the Tenderloin in San Francisco. While gay public space is defined through presence of gay businesses and bars, transsexual public space reflects the areas of the city frequented by transsexual and transvestite sex workers.

Because transgender areas are not tied to a notion of a resident (as in the case of gay ghettos), the ways in which space can be defined varies. Although certain sections of the city are known for their transsexuals and their transvestites, these people are only visible at night. (592)

Similar to Istanbul’s trans streets, these places Namaste mentions in the quote above are all subject to gentrification. However, the absence of a gay ghetto and the existence of a “trans ghetto” differentiate Istanbul from New York, Los Angeles or San Francisco. As previously stated in this chapter, unlike lesbian and gay folk, trans folk in Istanbul are residential. Even though they might be more visible at night because of their occupation, and form nocturnal trans public spaces in Harbiye, for instance, where sex

worker trans women wait for their clients, visibility of trans folk has a different dimension in Istanbul. Following Namaste's argument, one can possibly claim that since trans subculture in Istanbul is residential, trans public spaces are not limited to nocturnal ones mentioned above; and that there must exist a trans private space together with trans public space. Trans neighborhoods must thus be the spaces that contain public and private. However, the fact that trans folk inhabit trans neighborhoods, and the fact that those neighborhoods are publicly known as trans neighborhoods bring a different dimension to the visibility of trans people. Trans folk in Istanbul are visible day and night. They are constantly "on display" and being "monitored by the forces of order." The history of trans folk in Istanbul is the evidence of this constant display and monitoring. The neighborhood has been different each time but the violence trans folk have experienced has been the same since the 1980s: their homes were stoned, burnt down, evacuated. They have been murdered, physically and verbally abused, dismissed from their apartments, streets, and neighborhoods. As Pinar Selek argues, what happened first in Abanoz Street, then in Püretlaş Street of Cihangir, and finally in Ülker Street was an attempt to erase the visible trans subculture from the streets of Istanbul.

"Personal is political," is exemplified everyday in Turkey. What happened in Ülker Street is one of those examples. In Ülker Street, *travestis* were face to face with a front that has a thousand-year-old legacy. This front combines three discourses: the republican discourse of nationalism, the Turkish National Anthem, the flag etc., the religious discourse of chastity, adhan, morality, propriety, sin,

hell, the Devil, headscarf etc., and the patriarchal discourse of honor, manliness, family and various words of profanity etc. (81-82)

This passage from Selek's book hints at many dimensions of transness this work illustrates. All these dimensions are crucial for the definition of transness. Just like personal becomes political, private becomes public for the trans folk in Istanbul. The fact that where they inhabit is publicly known as trans neighborhoods, and the fact that they experience violence in their private lives, in their homes make transness public. It is thus possible to argue that transness as a spatial term, is always already public. As will be further discussed in the following chapters, transness as a gender identity becomes a public identity, a public performance. "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 43-44). Transness is thus, a public performance that is "constantly on display." Transness, as a gender performance is not completely free, though. Since it is constantly monitored, "[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very taking up is enabled by the tool lying there" (Butler 185). As Selek points out, trans people are faced with and regulated by three discourses—nationalist, religious, and patriarchal—that together constitute Turkish heteronormativity. So, transness is defined by and understood in relation to the dominant normativity, namely heteronormativity. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau discusses tactics of survival following Foucault's discussion on dominant discourses presented in *Discipline and Punish*:

If it is true that the grid of “discipline” is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what “ways of operating” form the counterpart, on the consumer’s (or “dominee’s”?) side, of the mute processes that organize the establishment of socioeconomic order. (xiv)

de Certeau’s questions are relevant to transness that is faced with and regulated by three discourses of heteronormativity. What “ways of operating” transness employ? Can those ways be considered queer in their relation to heteronormativity? Following chapters and the next section will ask “Is transness queer?” and will further explore the relation between transness and heteronormativity together with its three discourses.

3. QUEERNESS AND TRANSNESS

This project is a part of a continuous and emerging scholarship in Gender Studies, Transgender Studies, and Queer Theory. It engages with and emerges from the early works of Gender Studies and Queer Studies, works of such scholars as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. It also employs more recent scholarship that has emerged from the early formulations of transgenderism and has brought Transgender Studies and Queer Theory closer to each other. Susan Stryker is one of those scholars whose work on Transgender Studies has been invaluable for this project. So is David Valentine, who

made transgender as a category, a topic of anthropological work. Besides the canonical work on Gender Studies, this work closely engages with the scholarship on transgender issues in Turkey. Pınar Selek's and Deniz Kandiyoti's valuable works have provided this work with its point of origin. However, this thesis aims to close the gap between now and the time of Selek's and Kandiyoti's works. Furthermore, it aims to bring the current issues and discussions of queer scholarship into the Turkish context.

The rest of this chapter as well as the following sections of this thesis discuss the possibility of queerness of transness as an identity defined by and in relation to heterosexuality and heteronormativity. There is not a single widely accepted Turkish equivalent of queer, and usually the English word is directly used in Turkish. As will also be discussed in the following chapter, a trans activist defines herself with the Turkish equivalent of the word "unidentified;" and this study uses queer in that very sense—an unidentifiable identity. As a spatiality and temporality, I thus ask the question whether transness can be considered queer?

In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam defines queer spatiality and temporality as follows:

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification. If we try to think of queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life

schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity... (1)

If transness is “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,” is it possible to call transness a “disidentification” to use José Esteban Muñoz’s term? In *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics*, Muñoz defines the term disidentification, the basis of his theory of disidentifications as follows:

Disidentification is at its core, an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or “masterfully” fixed mode of identification. Disidentification, ... is a survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator ... to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification. (28)

In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz imagines a queer ground, to understand gender performativity, and to extend performance from the stage to everyday performance.

Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting

of self within the social. It is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. (97)

This study explores transness and examines whether transness is a disidentification, a counteridentification, both or neither. In some situations it is possible to claim that transness is a disidentification, and in others it is not; since “...its cultural politics are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order” as Stryker states in her article “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (248). As following chapters will illustrate along with various examples—specific Turkish examples of media representations and public stage performances—the relationship between queerness and transness is multi-layered and much complicated, and queerness of transness is contextual.

Chapter Two: Media Representations of transness: *Proudly Trans in Turkey, I Saw the Sun*, and Interviews of Ayşe Arman

Media representation constitutes an important part of my project, since I believe it has much to offer to understanding perceptions of certain identities. For this reason, I will be employing three examples of cultural production, more precisely, media representations of three different genres that offer representations of transness. These include:

1. A 2012 documentary by Gabrielle LeRoux *Proudly Trans in Turkey*, in which some trans activists from Turkey share their experiences of their gender/sexual identities and experiences of daily life in relation to violence;
2. A 2009 movie by Mahsun Kırmızıgül, *I Saw the Sun* and its representation of transness as impossible, embodied by one of the main characters within the movie;
3. A newspaper article by Ayşe Arman, a well-known female journalist writing in *Hürriyet*, where she shares her experience of three-days she spent with some trans women who earn their living with sex work.²

All these different genres speak to this project in its attempt to explain transness in Istanbul. They provide examples for the spatiality and temporality of transness, the perception of transness as impossible, as non-viable. They also illustrate appearances of heteronormativity and its impacts on transness.

² All these examples of cultural production are in Turkish. The documentary and the movie have English subtitles, which I will be employing. For the newspaper article, I will be providing my own translation.

1. PROUDLY TRANS IN TURKEY

2012 documentary *Proudly Trans in Turkey* is directed by Gabrielle LeRoux, a British artist, women's and LGBT rights activist, and a traveller. This documentary is a part of her activist "portrait and story" projects which she has been doing around the world since 2001. In *Proudly Trans in Turkey*, trans activists from different Turkish cities share their experiences of their gender/sexual identities; experiences of daily life in relation to violence. In the documentary, trans activists are asked to talk about the life of a trans person in Turkey, the violence they face everyday, their experiences, the most repressive things in their lives and the things they want to see changed. Heteronormativity and many key stones of it such as heterosexism, male dominancy, binary gender system, homophobia, and transphobia are what we hear again and again throughout the documentary and they reveal enough about the certain structures that exist and that are supported in the society.

The documentary is accessible online in the form of sixteen short videos. In each video, trans activists answer a question. These questions include "How do you describe your gender identity?" "What doors did your gender identity open or close for you?" "What is the role of religion and spirituality in your life?" "Who are your family, friends, and supporters?" "How would you describe the state of trans people in Turkey?" "What repressive things would you like to see changed?" "How do hate crimes affect you?" In one of the videos, a trans activist from Istanbul, Demet briefly gives "A History of Trans Istanbul."

The question "How do you define your gender identity?" is crucial for my definition of transness as well as my claim that transness "can" be queer. Most of the

trans activists admit that they actually cannot define their gender identity and say that they would not prefer to define themselves because of their trans experience.³

Aras from Ankara: *It's really hard for me to define my gender identity. Indeed it's really bad for me to have to define it. To have to say that I'm 'something.' ... I'm a trans man, I can easily say this.*

İlksen from Istanbul: *I describe my gender identity as trans. But I'm a trans within the society, there are so many tags in the society; so it's impossible for me not to be trans; I cannot escape the trans tag. In fact, I am a trans because I cannot live with those tags. If there were no tags, there would be no need for a change or transformation. Yet, our change is hindered, differences are limited, because we have no option to live the change, our transformation and choices are considered as diseases. I identify as a trans person, but I don't believe that any identity would stay fixed. Human nature evolves around change but norms and taboos force us to be stable. We live in these norms and we cannot step out of the taboos and finally consider them as our own nature. In a way, we accept staying in the frame so much and kill our differences to such an extent that we believe that these norms are our nature.*

³ Even though this work focuses specifically on Istanbul, I will be including some statements of trans activists from Ankara in *Proudly Trans in Turkey*. As the two biggest cities of Turkey, urban life in Istanbul and Ankara show similarities; and their differences do not pose a problem as far as the arguments of this project is concerned.

Sema from Istanbul: *I can't describe it. I think I am living a transgender experience.*

Buse-Ankara: *I'd rather not describe my gender identity. I am who I am. I am labeled as a trans, so I carry it. I carry it just because the trans in Turkey are subject to violence. For me, a gender identity doesn't mean anything. I am trans because I have to describe myself in some way.*

Gani-Ankara: *In fact, I don't like squeezing myself into an identity. Once I used the word trans-blender for myself as a joke. I said I was the blender for genders. I can't stereotype myself. Gender norms are insufficient. Transvestite, transsexual, woman, man... Actually, I don't have a gender identity. I am unidentified. I am unidentified in terms of gender.*

Many of the trans activists point to the impossibility of defining their gender identities, since some of their experiences are beyond the limits of fixed categories. That is why most of them define themselves as trans to refer to the ambiguity and fluidity of their gender identities. As İlksen articulates, “In fact, I am a trans because I cannot live with those tags.” This points to the fact that transness is a term that covers most parts of the gender spectrum, that is beyond tags, and that embraces the fluidity of gender and sexual identity. Transness is beyond what “transvestite,” “transsexual” or “transgender”

refer to. The fluid and non-normative aspect of transness is what makes it queer. Transness breaks down the normative definitions and challenges heteronormativity.

The word used by the trans activists to refer to fixed categories is very striking. English translation uses “tag” for the Turkish *etiket*. *Etiket* was borrowed from French. French *étiquette* refers to three things: piece of paper indicating something, conventional social requirements as to what proper social behavior is, and a prescribed code of usage in matters of ceremony. *Etiket* in contemporary Turkish also has three meanings: piece of paper indicating something, identity, and conventional social requirements as to what proper social behavior is. Trans activists’ claim that they are beyond *etikets* is thus an indicator of queerness of transness. For, being beyond *etikets* promises two requirements of queerness: being beyond identity and being beyond proper social behavior. Since transness is beyond *etikets*, since it is not an *etiket*, what Gani offers becomes the queer definition of transness: “unidentifiable.”

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sarah Ahmed writes, “We are turned toward things. Such things make impressions on us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are *located*, which gives us a certain take on things” (27, *my emphasis*). As she is answering the question “How do hate crimes affect you?” Esmeray from Istanbul says that trans individuals are more subject to violence since they are so visible and since ‘where they are’ is obvious. Their work places, their homes, their neighborhoods are publicly well known and tagged as “trans.” Trans activists who are from Istanbul in the documentary *Proudly Trans In Turkey* all

dwell and/or work in those known neighborhoods and inhabit those spaces. I am interested to see what kinds of environments and livelihoods those neighborhoods provide for trans bodies as well as the demographics of those quarters. For, “[s]exuality itself can be considered a spatial formation not only in the sense that bodies inhabit sexual spaces (Bell and Valentine 1995) [cited by Ahmed], but also in the sense that the bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space” (Ahmed 67).

In the documentary, one of the activists, Demet, talks about the history of trans Istanbul based on her own experiences. She starts her story with the 80s, when systematic violence against trans folk first started. After the military coup of 1980, trans people were forced into “exile” and were sent to Eskişehir, a mid-Anatolian city, by buses and trains. Those who could stay in Istanbul were subject to inhumane violence. For example, every couple of days, they would be left naked in the forests around Istanbul. They would be beaten and insulted. Then Cihangir became a home for trans folk around 1985. She talks about the implications of certain urban developments on trans folk, namely, gentrification. Inhabited by trans folk and bohemian artists around 1985, Cihangir has become an expensive neighborhood for many upper-middle class people in the 2000s. Ülker Sokak, as Selek thoroughly discusses in her book, was the street of trans folk around the 1990s, but now stands as the witness of violence trans folk experienced. As discussed in the first chapter, trans people were the victims of nationalist, religious, and patriarchal discourses of heteronormativity. Forced to move out of their homes, trans folk made other neighborhoods their homes—“*gayrimeşru* neighborhoods.” Tarlabası and

Dolapdere are among those neighborhoods and they are now subject to various urban development projects. The trans folk are faced with evacuation, once again.

Furthermore, this constant forced movement trans folk tells much about transness. “[I]n moving this way, rather than that, and moving in this way again and again, the surfaces of bodies *in turn* acquire their shape. Bodies are ‘directed’ and they take the shape of this direction...bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling” (Ahmed 9). Trans bodies are always directed, are made to move again and again and are marked by movement, transition, and constant mobility. It is “the movement across” (Stryker 1). Transness is thus not belonging, not dwelling. Transness is thus perpetually ‘out-of-place,’ there is no place for trans. trans people’s experiences with their families are also related to this ‘out-of-place’ feeling. Most of the trans activists admit that they do not have close relationship with their families, since their trans being is not welcome within their families. Stryker points to the fact that trans people have no place in her article “My Words to Victor Frankenstein.” “Home was so far gone behind me it was gone forever, and there was no place to rest” (251). Şevval from Istanbul explains, “The trans people challenge and break down the monogamous and traditional family-based social structure only, even merely with their existence.” This is another aspect of the queerness of transness. Of particular note, trans people are forced to be mobile all the time but they are also confined in a specific place since their trans identity denies their access to certain spaces. Aras from Ankara says, “We have just a few places to breathe in ... We just want to walk on the street, take a bus for instance.” Selay answers the question “What doors

did your gender identity open for you and what doors did it close?” “My space of livelihood became limited. If I were not a transgender woman, if I were a gay man, I would be able to get into places easily.” Many trans activists confirm this statement and accept that transness brings both mobility and immobility into their lives at the same time.

Selay’s statement, “if I were a gay man, I would be able to get into places easily,” brings out the crucial issue of visibility within transness. As Selay states, transness is more visible than homosexuality; and more visibility means more violence. Thus Selay’s statement challenges Selek’s argument that *travestis* and *transeksüels* are more acceptable than homosexuals. If they were more accepted, would not they be faced with less violence? Homosexuality does not have to be visible. Unlike transness, homosexuality is not always already publicly visible. While homosexuals can blend in the dominant normativity, trans people stand out as they break the dominant norms. Non-normativity and non-normative visibility of transness are what make transness queer. However, as pointed out in the first chapter, queerness of transness is also questionable, or rather contextual. Furthermore, the relationship between transness, visibility, and queerness is much complicated and very much determined by the specific context. The documentary provides a great example to this with its discussion of trans men’s visibility.

Two members of Voltrans, an activist organization for trans men, İlksen and İnan talk about (in)visibility of trans men and its implications:

İlksen-Istanbul: *For example, there are seven or eight activist trans members in Voltrans but that is nowhere near the number of trans male in Turkey. Trans females are distinguished easily and more visible in the society. That makes them subject to more violence and discrimination, and therefore they defend their rights more. We see more trans female activists than trans male activists, who are hard to find. Voltrans has been active for almost four years now but the group of activists in the group never exceeded eight. Most trans men mingle with the society and exist within the limits of the heterosexist system.*

Like İlksen, İnan also talks about trans men's visibility and his experience. Ironically, the audience cannot see İnan, only hears his voice. In his reply to the question "How do hate crimes affect you?" he talks about visibility and his experience in detail.

İnan- Istanbul: *Directly. I might be subject to that violence, too. Violence against trans people may also be directed against people who accept and support this gender identity, you do not even need to be a trans to be subject to that violence. Conversely, as long as it is not obvious that I'm a trans, that I refuse that gender identity, I am safe as a part of that masculinity. But at the moment I come out or my gender identity is revealed, I become subject to that violence. I had a terrible experience about this: A journalist interviewed me. Then published it on the internet with a ridiculous subheading. The next day they published in a newspaper that is distributed throughout Turkey, including a before and an after photo of me, without permission. It was terrible. Anyone who read the*

paper that day could easily recognize me. I usually manage to keep calm, don't get anxious easily. But I don't know how I spent those three days. I was suspecting anybody who looked at me, I was worried so much, if they recognized me. ... After reading that newspaper, anyone who saw me in the street could beat, rape, or kill me. The violence directed to a trans man or woman is a message sent to me, saying "keep quiet!" It means "don't dare to be visible!" When I hear that a trans woman is killed, it hurts me as I see no difference between that violence and the violence directed to me, we are subject to so much violence.

What does this invisibility imply for the queerness of transness then? That İnan can blend in the heteronormative culture and refuses to be visible make him less queer? Or does that make him less trans? These definitely are not questions that can easily be answered. Perhaps, there is not a single answer for each. Perhaps the queerness of transness is contextual, depends on one's "orientation" and "location" as Ahmed would argue. While choosing to be invisible and blend in the dominant masculinity may be seen as "non-queer" for İnan, can we say the same thing for the fact that he identifies as trans, and chooses to take part in this activist documentary? This tension between transness is queerness emerges and is discussed in every example this work deals with in the following parts.

2. I SAW THE SUN



Figure 3- *I Saw the Sun* Movie Poster

My second example that deals with the spatiality, temporality, and visibility of transness is *I Saw the Sun*. *I Saw the Sun* is a 2009 Turkish movie by Mahsun Kırmızıgül, a director, actor, and singer. The movie tells the story of a family living in a small village on the southeastern part of Turkey that has been struggling with the civil war between the Kurdish people and the Turkish army. Experiencing the difficulties of the war, the family is left with no choice but to leave their land. The big family of three generations separate into three: one part decides to flee to Norway, one decides to move to a town in the southern part of Turkey and the last one—three brothers Ramo, Mamo and Kado and their father—moves to Istanbul. Ramo, the oldest brother is married and has five

daughters and a son. Mamo, the middle, and Kado, the youngest, are both single. For my discussion of transness, I am interested in Kado and the story around this character more than the movie as a whole. The viewer meets Kado for the first time when he is slapped in the face for “acting and speaking like a woman.” As he is trying to break the good news to his oldest brother that his fifth child was born, Mamo shouts at him, “What is that woman voice you are making? Are you a woman to speak like one?” As is shown in several scenes during the movie, Kado is very much interested in normative feminine house chores, and he tries to imitate women around him and women he watches on TV; these are the main reason for he is verbally and physically abused by his brother. When this traditional, uneducated, lower class family of Kurdish origin moves to Istanbul, the only place they can afford is a small apartment in an old building. They have *travesti* neighbors living on the same street and sharing the same social/material conditions with them. Kado makes friends with his trans neighbors and finally identifies what has been growing inside him all those years. He becomes a *travesti* himself and runs away from the verbal and physical abuse of his brother Mamo who had continued to beat and yell at him for “acting like a woman.”

The representation of this trans character and the symbol associated with Kado are striking. As they leave their village, Kado takes with him a snowdrop that made its way through the snow right before the sunrise, since snowdrops are his favorite flowers. He dries the flower and keeps it in a box and always carries it with him. When he becomes a *travesti*, he chooses Kardelen as his new name, which means “snowdrop” in Turkish. As with all flowers in Turkish folk culture, *kardelen* has its own story, unfortunately a sad

one. The snowdrop lives under snow and soil. However, it is deeply in love with the sun. One day the snowdrop asks God to see the sun even if it is only for a moment. God reminds the snowdrop that it would die the moment it sees the sun. Its love is such that death is not a source of fear for the snowdrop. It makes its way through the snow and waits for the sun all night. As the sun rises, the snow, snowdrop's source of life, melts and its fragile leaves burn with the heat of the sun; the moment it sees the sun it loses its life. This becomes the sad story of the snowdrop, which is the only flower that can grow under snow. This is how the snowdrop becomes the symbol of fragile beauty, impossibility and death. Thus, with Kardelen, her trans body becomes the symbol of fragile beauty, vulnerability, impossibility, and death. Perhaps for snowdrops and Kardelen, "not being dead" does not always mean "being alive." Perhaps, a-moment-long life is worth death because life under snow is not life anyway. This is the "cycle of prohibition" as Foucault explains in the *History of Sexuality*: "Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification" (84). So, you are always already non-existent. As also expressed by İnan, you are either invisible and a part of the dominant culture—which means you are inexistent as a trans individual—or you are visible as a trans—which means you cannot exist within the dominant culture, you do not have high chances of livelihood.

Moreover, Kado's trans friends who are sex workers admit hardships of sex work and the fragility and brevity of the trans life. Since trans bodies have been subject to intense violence and that they are targets of violence, life in a trans body is thus fragile and brief. In an attempt to dissuade him from sex work, Cansu says: "Butterflies. That's

what we are. Life is a nightmare for us. You turn one way, loose your footing and whoops... You find yourself down the bridge. Don't be a bug or a butterfly, get yourself a proper job." Kado explains why it is impossible for him to find a "proper" job and replies, "I'm not like my brothers. I killed the man inside me."

As Sara Ahmed states, "[i]f orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that orientation fails. Or we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others" (11). It is this disorientation that also occurs in Kado's story. Upon moving to Istanbul, Kado orients himself to this new place and new life. He changes as his environment changes. He becomes Kardelen away from his hometown and away from people who were part of his previous life. There is no place for Kado's family in Kardelen's life. Kardelen is defined with non-existence of Kado's family as much as she is defined with her new friends. However, intrusion of his brothers' into Kardelen's space creates a feeling of disidentification. Not knowing Kado became a *travesti*, his brothers start looking for him after he disappears. Right before sunrise, they find her *travesti* friends and her on the streets of Istanbul but they do not recognize her in female outfit, high-heels, with a wig and make-up. But the moment Kado turns back to her own way Mamo recognizes that she is Kado, he shouts out his name and points his gun at him. Kardelen takes off her dress and her wig and confronts her brothers. At that moment of (dis)identification Kardelen can no longer be Kardelen or Kado is no longer Kado. This means death for Kado and Kardelen. After Kardelen says, "Your brother is a woman. Accept it, your brother is a woman!" Mamo shoots her in the chest and then runs and

holds him in his arms crying, “Brother! I told you, it’s beneath us.” That morning, the sun rises to Kardelen’s death. Kardelen dies the moment she sees the sun, holding her snowdrop in her hands.

The death of this trans character brings queer temporality into the discussion. The fact that Kardelen dies immediately after sunrise is no surprise. As Gary Needham argues in his article “Scheduling normativity: Television, the family, and queer temporality,” queerness is “out-of-time.”

Queerness can be understood as a challenge to normative time simply because being queer is experientially outside of those definitions of a ‘normal lifetime’. Queer time is desire reconfigured to embrace temporal displacements, especially with regard to the past and the future. This is effected through the many ways in which queers themselves be conceived of as existing outside the logic of a linear time, as *having no future*, as being written out of history.” (Needham 152, *my emphasis*)

Halberstam suggests queer temporality can be productive for queer communities.

Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (*In a Queer Time and Place* 2).

The following section moves the discussions of spatiality, temporality, and heteronormativity of transness away from the realm of fiction and brings these discussions to daily life. Next section further demonstrates importance of class as a determinant of identity.

3. AYŞE ARMAN EXPLORES TRANSNESS

Ayşe Arman is a well-known female journalist writing in *Hürriyet*, one of the mainstream newspapers of Turkey that has a wide circulation. In her column, Ayşe Arman frequently and openly shares her more upper-class lifestyle and experiences with her readers. She is well-known for her bold questions to her interviewees, which can also be read as her upper-class privilege. In May 2011, in order to understand what it means to be a trans women in Turkey, she spent three days with a few trans woman who earn their life with sex work. Her articulation of her prejudices, experiences, and feelings about her encounter provide a great example for perception of transness and how it is “the other” for upper-middle class, heteronormative lives. Arman expresses how she felt before meeting trans women and visiting their apartment:

It is a high and narrow building. I get inside, I run out of my breath as I climb those narrow stairs. They seem endless. *Travestis* live in buildings that don't have elevators because they're cheaper. I ring the doorbell. The moment I ring the doorbell I want to run away, I am so nervous. That's a lie. I am totally scared, my heart is beating so fast. Because I don't know what is waiting for me.

These are the feelings “the unknown,” “the other” brings up. The moment trans women open the door Arman begins to tell her readers “how womanly they are.” She talks about Mehtap, one of the trans women she interviewed. As Peggy Phelan states, “[i]dentity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other” (13). This provides a great example for self-defining through “the other,” for the ways heteronormativity defines transness:

She is younger than I am. She is more beautiful, sexier and funnier. I can’t take my eyes off Mehtap, I try to find even the smallest hint of a man in her appearance but there isn’t any. She is a woman from head to toe. A beautiful, charming, sexy and a slender woman. I mean, you would never say “She is actually male!” I share my clothes with Mehtap. My clothes look better on her. As she is putting them on I see her butt, she has a g-string on. “What a beautiful butt you have, there are no cellulites on your legs!” I say. She replies, “Are you kidding me, of course there are not, I am male!”

And at the end of the three days she spent with the trans women, Arman finishes her article by writing “It is hard, it is hard to be a minority. God help them.” Being the symbol of impossibility, only God can help the trans.

Another point that comes up in Arman’s writing is the feeling of being ‘out-of-place’ and its relation to other bodies which inhabit that space, since “the orientations we

have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting the relations of proximity and distance between bodies” (Ahmed 3). Ayşe Arman’s narrative, different worlds of Ayşe Arman and the trans women provide a great example of this. On their second day together, Arman invites the trans women to her ‘house’, which is definitely different than their ‘apartment,’ which Arman found “surprisingly clean and neat.” Their visit to this new space creates different feelings in another inhabitant of her house. She mentions the reactions of the woman that works as her housekeeper, Leman. “It is the first time Leman saw a *travesti* and to tell the truth, she doesn’t like them at first, she’s really cautious, she immediately puts whatever they use to eat or drink in the dishwasher after rinsing them with bleach.” Through this, we are reminded of some of the stigmatizations attached to transness and sex work. On their third day, Arman takes Mehtap to Nişantaşı, one of the “upper-class,” fashionable neighborhoods of Istanbul to have some “women-time.” Realizing the constant eyes on them, Arman says, “People in Nişantaşı read *Hürriyet*, that’s why they are looking at us.” Accepting the gazes on her trans body, Mehtap replies with a sense of irony, “No, they are looking at me. Because I am beautiful.” Together, they look at the windows of Louis Vuitton, Cavalli, and many other famous and expensive brands where Arman shops. Then they go into a lingerie shop. Seeing the price tags, Mehtap says, “It is expensive in here Ayşe, dear. Come on let’s go to İstiklal.” This feeling of “out-of-place” also provides an evidence that gender, sex, sexuality, ethnicity and class are components of spaces. Mehtap does not belong to Nişantaşı due to the same reasons why Arman doesn’t belong to Mehtap’s trans neighborhood. However, their intrusion into each other’s worlds has different implications. The fact that Arman is a part

of the heteronormative world and the fact that she is from an upper class protect her in Mehtap's world. Mehtap, on the other hand, is under threat with her trans body and her class in Arman's world. While Arman can enter Mehtap's world, it would be a different experience for Mehtap to enter Arman's world without having Arman in her arm.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

All three media representations of transness contribute to the discussion and support the definition of transness in this study. All three examples illustrate how transness is constructed and shown as impossible and non-viable. They also show “out-of-time” and “out-of-place” being of transness, because urban space of Istanbul is arranged in line with gender, sex, sexuality, class and ethnicity. They all show how transness is connected to heteronormativity, the way it is defined by and for heteronormativity and its institutions.

The following chapter moves these issues from streets and the screen onto the stage, and examines performances of a drag queen. It illustrates various aspects of transness discussed in the previous chapters such as the temporality and spatiality of transness. Third chapter furthers the discussion on the queerness of transness with different examples. Finally, it lays out the similarities between the performance of transness on stage and the performances of transness on the streets of Istanbul.

Chapter Three: Performances of Transness: *Huysuz Virjin*

This chapter focuses on performances of a queer public figure and representations of transness in her performances. *Huysuz Virjin*, a nationally known drag queen is the main focus of this part of the thesis that discusses performing transness. I base my analysis on newspaper articles about her, interviews with her, and her performances. This chapter employs these sources to trace heteronormativity and its relation to queerness. These examples illustrate several heteronormative institutions that have been pointed out in previous chapters such as the state, the family, religion, heterosexuality, masculinity etc. The analysis of these examples shows the compromises that have to be made to survive as a queer individual, compromises that make queer transness ultimately (im)possible. Furthermore, it provides a great example of transness disrupting the public/private dichotomy. The chapter, thus, aims to answer de Certeau's questions:

“what popular procedures (also ‘miniscule’ and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, ... what ‘ways of operating’ form the counterpart ... of the mute processes that organize the establishment of socioeconomic order.” (xiv)

What does “public transness” mean? Can public transness be queer?

HUYSUZ ON STAGE

Huysuz Virjin's name and its meaning are important to understand her. *Huy*, as a noun, means “temper” in Turkish. The suffix *-suz* means “without” and makes *huy* an

adjective. So, *huysuz* literally means “without temper.” The English counterpart of this Turkish adjective is either “bad-tempered” or “ill-tempered.” *Virjin* is the Turkish word for “virgin.” *Huysuz Virjin*, thus means “The Bad-tempered Virgin;” and *Huysuz Virjin*, as this chapter will illustrate, is a “bad-tempered virgin.”

Seyfi Dursunoğlu, a well-known actor in Turkey, created the drag character *Huysuz Virjin* more than four decades ago, when this performance was a completely new, different and radical experience for the audience. *Huysuz Virjin* is the only nationally known and popular drag queen in Turkey. She became famous years before Dursunoğlu himself as an actor.⁴ *Huysuz Virjin* was born in Istanbul and appeared in only a few clubs, called *gazinos* in Turkish, whose customers were mostly upper class. *Huysuz Virjin*’s first appearance outside of Istanbul was in the then-famous Izmir International Fair. At this prestigious event the most famous singers of the time would give their best performances. The story Seyfi Dursunoğlu tells about *Huysuz Virjin*’s appearance in Izmir, in front of a broader audience, demonstrates her marginality in those years. As he states on a talk-show with Oylum Talu, “not even a single person from the audience applauded at the end of the show, they did not know what to do, as it was not something they were used to or they had seen before.”⁵ However, *Huysuz Virjin*’s popularity increased gradually until she had her own show on TV in the 90s—*Huysuz Show*. Later, in 2011, the Turkish version of *So You Think You Can Dance* was named after her,

⁴ Since the actor makes a clear distinction between himself and the drag persona—as will be discussed in detail in the following sections—masculine pronouns are used to refer to the actor, and feminine pronouns are used to refer to the drag character throughout this thesis.

⁵ Performances and interviews included in this chapter are all in Turkish; quotes from those examples are my translations into English.

Huysuz'la Dans Eder Misin? (Would you Dance with *Huysuz*?), since she was the hostess of the competition. Her audience was now the entire Turkish society, not just the Istanbul's.

Dursunoğlu's drag persona *Huysuz Virjin* is a *kanto* singer who appears on stage as an exaggeratedly feminine woman in her elegant, glittering clothes, flashy make up and hair. On the talk-show with Oylum Talu, Seyfi Dursunoğlu defines the character he created as "an ugly, old, capricious woman who wasn't able to find love and a man to love her and thus bullies people to make up for her ugliness and loneliness." She talks openly about herself, her experiences, and her sexuality. This flirtatious woman constantly hits on men in the audience while she criticizes and looks down on women, and teaches them how to be a desirable woman as she is.

How is transness represented in *Huysuz Virjin*'s performances? What are the elements of those performances that play into her mainstream popularity in Turkey? What in *Huysuz Virjin*'s performances resonates with the important structures of the Turkish society and culture? In order to answer these questions, this chapter focuses on two performances: a stage performance at a *gazino* in the 1980s, and a talk-show with Saba Tümer in 2011. In addition, the chapter includes several interviews with the actor in and out of drag. I have decided to include performances of two different times and spaces to point to the performer's temporality, to the change in her audience, and to the change in the perception of transness; *Huysuz Virjin* as a stage performance of four decades provides an important example for the discussion of temporality and spatiality of transness. This approach juxtaposes discussions around transness in the 80s and the 90s

with more contemporary discussions in Istanbul now. The chapter discusses *Huysuz Virjin* and her transness under three headings:

1. Choosing *Kanto* As Her Performance
2. Drag As The Male Privilege of Mastering Two Sexes
3. Drag As A Way to Support The Gender Binary

1. CHOOSING *KANTO* AS HER PERFORMANCE



Figure 4-*Huysuz Virjin* in her *kanto* costumes in 1980s.



Figure 5: *Huysuz Virjin*



Figure 6: *Huysuz Virjin*

Huysuz Virjin is a *kanto* singer, a performative genre with a fairly long history. During the Westernization process, *kanto* emerged in the Ottoman-Turkish context as the first Western style music. *Kanto* was borrowed into Turkish from Italian “cantare,” which means, “to sing.” This borrowing happened a mobile theatre came to Istanbul in 1870. From then on, “the performance of singing and dancing at the same time as well as the

songs written for this performance were given a new generic name *kanto*, in order to distinguish them from the traditional songs” (Beşiroğlu).⁶

Kanto is by and about women including the dance, costumes, lyrics and the performance. *Kanto* “suddenly enabled women, who were hardly seen even on the streets, to appear on stage in an attractive outfit performing a lively dance” (Dura 33). That is why *kanto* introduced a new femininity—a more seductive femininity. Since this exaggerated and seductive femininity was incompatible with Islam, which teaches women to be modest and to suppress their sexuality, early *kanto* performers were all non-Muslim women. And this is the reason why broken Turkish is a part of *kanto* songs. *Kanto* language derives from daily language, including slang, thus its lyrics are easy to remember.

Kanto performances are more than just singing and dancing. Acting is a huge component of the *kanto* tradition. “*Kanto* performers would play the characters in *kantos* by putting on the identity of the character being told in the *kanto*, dressing accordingly and supporting these with the stage setting” (Özbilen 45-46). Many *kanto* songs use first person pronouns. So, the singer becomes the woman *kanto* is telling about—the performer and the character becomes the same. That is what makes *kanto* performative in Judith Butler’s term.

The above-mentioned aspects of the *kanto* genre and its emergence as the first mode of female performance in the Ottoman-Turkish context show that *kanto* created a

⁶ The sources on *kanto* used in this chapter are all written in Turkish. English quotations from those sources are my translations.

new kind of femininity, made by a minority, a marginalized group and thus a marginalized femininity. With modernization, however, the “woman” image that *kanto* created was realized. In other words, *kanto* enabled a shift in societal perceptions of “woman” and “female identity.” Due to this increased visibility of women with the modernization, *kanto* lost its popularity. For, the “different woman” image *kanto* once created was no longer different.

Her revealing of a performance that is a part of the Ottoman-Turkish music and theatre tradition helps the audiences accept *Huysuz Virjin*, her hyper-femininity, and her hyper-sexual language. *Huysuz Virjin* claims that she is different yet familiar. In his interview with Oylum Talu, the actor explains this as follows:

I wanted to create something different, something that was not done before. I created a quick-witted, candid woman always interacting with her audience, never afraid to say whatever she thinks. Also, I did not borrow this performance from the West. It is a *kanto* performance, which comes from our own roots, which is a part of the traditional Turkish theatre.

As the actor explains, *Huysuz Virjin* and *kanto* are means to reveal the old traditions. It is a way for the actor to show his attachment to the Turkish nation and to the Ottoman-Turkish roots, which are essential parts of Turkish nationalist discourse as also mentioned in the first chapter. This way, *Huysuz Virjin* upholds the nationalist discourse,

and so becomes a part of it. Similarly, *Huysuz Virjin* participates in the heteronormative discourse in various ways. However, it is not an easy to claim either that *Huysuz* upholds heteronormativity or that she subverts it. The following two sections thus give various examples from her performances and discuss *Huysuz Virjin* and her relation to heteronormativity.

2. DRAG AS THE MALE PRIVILEGE OF MASTERING TWO SEXES

In “Broken Symmetries” first chapter of her 1993 book *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, Peggy Phelan talks about identity formation and binary structure of heteronormativity. She asserts, “[i]dentity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other” (13). In this formation process, the defined other becomes “marked,” while the definer of that other remains “unmarked.”

In the fourth chapter of *Unmarked*, “The golden apple: Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*,” Peggy Phelan applies her theory of unmarked to the art of drag as she writes about the drag balls in Harlem in the late 1980s, which were brought to the screen by Jennie Livingston’s ethnographic work. She explains drag performances as follows:

A re-presented woman is always copy of a copy; the real (of) woman cannot be represented because her function is to re-present man. She is the mirror and thus is never in it. Her narrowly defined but ubiquitous image represents the frenzy of

man to see she who makes him him. ... A man teaches a woman how to walk and she models that walk for another man to imitate. Given the slippery politics of appearance, this walk contributes to the definition of what a woman 'is.' Homophobia demands that the woman continue to be placed between the bodies of the two men—but she is just a foil for the central relationship between the men. At the balls, he then displays that walk for the approval of other men. (101)

This quote further supports the claim Phelan made in the first chapter of the book that phallic function is an inherent part of drag.

Perhaps the best performative example of the phallic function is the theatre of drag. A man imitates an image of a woman in order to confirm that she belongs to him. It is necessary and desirable to perform her image externally and hyperbolically, however, because he wants to see himself in possession of her. Performing the image of what he is not allows him to dramatize himself as "all." But the performance of drag does not and cannot re-produce "the woman." It re-enacts instead the performance of the phallic function—marking her as his. (17)

Phelan situates drag within the dominant culture, supporting male dominancy, heterosexism, homophobia, and misogyny. What changes and what remains the same when one moves from the drag balls of Harlem to *Huysuz Virjin*'s stage? In *Huysuz Virjin*'s performances there always is a hierarchy between *Huysuz Virjin* and other

women. She is the superior of any woman; she is the master woman as she claims. She doesn't like any other women; she constantly criticizes them, and sometimes, teaches them how to be women. *Kanto* is obviously one of her tools to secure superiority. She uses *kanto* to illustrate and perform the desirable woman and to position herself at a higher level where she teaches other women to be "real women." At the beginning of her stage performance, she sings *Katina*, one of the *kantos* most frequently associated with *Huysuz Virjin*. The subject of the song, *Katina*⁷ is an unskilled woman who is not good at any kind of "womanly task" such as using scissors, sewing or making love. The singer sings about how unskilled *Katina* is, and offers to help teach her how to do these womanly tasks.

Katina

Katina'nın elinde makası,

Biçemez ah biçemez.

Biçmesini bilmez yavrum, gülüm Katina,

Getir biçeyim, getir biçeyim.

*Katina*⁸

Katina has her scissors in her hand,

But she cannot cut anything.

My dear Katina does not know how to cut,

Just bring it to me; I will cut it for you.

Katina'nın önünde makine,

Dikemez ah dikemez.

Dikmesini bilmez yavrum, gülüm Katina,

Katina has the machine in front of her,

But she cannot sew anything.

My dear Katina does not know how to sew,

⁷ A non-Turkish female name, which clearly suggests that the person is a member of a non-Muslim minority.

⁸ My translation.

Getir dikeyim, getir dikeyim.

Just bring it to me; I will sew it for you.

Katina'nın yatağında aşığı,

Katina has her lover in her bed,

Sevemez ah sevemez.

But she cannot make love with him.

Sevmesini bilmez yavrum, gülüm Katina,

My dear Katina doesn't know how to love,

Getir seveyim, getir seveyim.

Just bring him to me; I will love for you.

As this song suggests, *Huysuz* knows various womanly tasks such as cutting, sewing, and making love. Furthermore, she masters in those tasks, since she can teach those to Katina and many others like Katina. In the same manner, in both of her performances analyzed in this chapter, *Huysuz Virjin* criticizes famous female figures in Turkey. In her stage performance she says: “There are a lot of women I’m angry at. I don’t like any of them probably because I’m so beautiful.” Also on the talk show with Saba Tümer, she constantly makes fun of the hostess, who is a famous journalist and a TV programmer. She keeps questioning and criticizing her womanliness and womanly skills throughout the show. After she performs her song, she starts teaching Saba Tümer how to dance. When the hostess fails to keep up with her, *Huysuz* pushes Tümer around and says: “Unskillful! How do these [people] make money? Unbelievable!”

Another striking example is from her stage performance. During the performance, she makes fun of a young woman in the audience who is wearing a headband. When *Huysuz* asks the woman if she had an accident, pointing at her headband, the woman replies laughing “It is the fashion now.” When *Huysuz* criticizes the new fashion, a man

in the audience calls *Huysuz Virjin* old. “Old women are a better investment,” *Huysuz* replies and continues her song, but she stops the orchestra as she remembers the man calling her old. She says: “He called me old and made me angry. Man, I am old but every part of my body is like a celebrity. [Pointing at her back] Look at this back, Angelique. [Pointing at her eyes] Look at the eyes, Liz Taylor. [Pointing at her nose] Brigitte Bardot. [Pointing at her breasts] Jane Mansfield. [Pointing at her genitalia] James Bond—you know that one, right?” In the face of a threat from a superior, a male, *Huysuz Virjin* accepted and reminded the audience that she has male genitalia even if it means giving up all her womanliness. It is that phallic function that lies behind her superiority, which Peggy Phelan explains as an inherent part of drag.

It is possible to read these two examples as indicators that *Huysuz Virjin* and her performances are normative, and in the service of the male dominant, heterosexist system. However, as the second example illustrates, *Huysuz Virjin* is an aging and thus a failing queen. The moment of failure, the moment when she cannot trick her audience, the moment when her audience reads her can also be read as a productive failure through which she subverts heteronormativity. The moment she returns the reading by accepting her male genitalia can be seen as the queer moment of her performance that disrupts heteronormativity. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the queerness of transness is contextual; and *Huysuz Virjin* further exemplifies this. The following section continues this discussion on the queerness of transness by providing more examples from *Huysuz*’s performances and their dynamics of masculinity and femininity.

3. DRAG AS A WAY TO SUPPORT THE GENDER BINARY



Figure 7- A 2011 Photo by Cem Talu

In the chapter “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance” of her book *Female Masculinity* J. Halberstam points out the general understanding that unlike femininity, masculinity is not performed but inherent in the male body, “authentic property of adult male bodies” (233). To illustrate her point, she makes a comparison between drag queen and drag king performances and their use of camp.

The difference between men performing femininity and women performing masculinity is a crucial difference to mark out: the stakes in each are different, the performances look different, and there is a distinct difference between the relations between masculinity and performance and femininity and performance. (238)

This understanding about masculinity and femininity is explicit in Seyfi Dursunoğlu’s performance of *Huysuz Virjin*. In his interview with Cem Talu, Seyfi Dursunoğlu points out the relation between femininity and performance as he talks about the importance of the audience for *Huysuz*’s shows:

Huysuz Virjin would be meaningless without her audience. The audience is the most important part, not that I perform in drag. Anyone can act in drag but I am doing that to bully people more freely. *Huysuz Virjin* can sit on a man’s lap but you cannot do it as a man.

This relation between masculinity/femininity and performance is a part of *Huysuz Virjin*'s performances. Towards the end of her stage performance, *Huysuz Virjin* sings another song *Alavere Dalavera* (Trickery), which is also frequently associated with her. The implicit irony of the lyrics becomes explicit the moment she pulls off her wig at the end of the performance.

Alavere Dalavera

*Trickery*⁹

Dünya yuvarlaktır, döner.

The world is round, and it rotates.

Sevda yalancıdır, söner.

Love is a liar, and it fades.

Dalavera, dalavera.

Trickery, trickery.

Dibi delik fiçi dolmaz.

A barrel with a hole in the bottom won't fill.

Hiç kimseyle inan olmaz.

Believe me, you cannot make it with anyone.

Dalavera, dalavera.

Trickery, trickery.

Alavere, dalavera, alavera, dalavera

Trickery, trickery

Şimdi her şey dalavera.

Now everything is trickery.

Alavere, dalavera, alavera, dalavera

Trickery, trickery

Sinemalarda da dalavera.

Trickery, also in theaters.

Alavere, dalavera, alavera, dalavera

Trickery, trickery

Localarda da dalavera.

Trickery, also in boxes.

Alavere, dalavera, alavera, dalavera

Trickery, trickery

⁹ My translation.

Şimdi her şey dalavera.

Now everything is trickery.

Huysuz Virjin becomes on stage with her words, with her language and also with her *kanto* songs. As a trans character, *Huysuz Virjin* exists only on stage where she creates herself within the boundaries of language and the language of music. She is just “a copy of a copy” (Phelan 101). After singing her songs, at the end of each and every performance, *Huysuz Virjin* pulls off her wig, removes her make-up and appears on stage as Seyfi Dursunoğlu, the successful male actor, the proper man. By doing this, the actor repeats, reasserts and reiterates the assumed gender roles and satisfies what society expects from a man. The reveal at the end of her shows and this clear distinction made between the drag persona and the actor himself are perhaps the most solid protectors of *Huysuz Virjin* as a trans character. She does not want a life outside the stage, which is perhaps the reason why her brief life has been very long—her life is until the end of each show but she has been on stage for more than forty years. This also proves and supports the impossibility of transness. The stage provides the only time and space of possibility for *Huysuz Virjin*. Her life lasts until the applause. It is her sun, and just like a *kardelen* sees the sun, she has to die the moment she hears it.

Seyfi Dursunoğlu is never a part of *Huysuz Virjin* and her campy attitudes. The actor asserts this himself as he explains why the audience loves *Huysuz Virjin* and why Seyfi Dursunoğlu has never felt under threat as a male actor staging a female character: “Although *Huysuz Virjin* bullied everyone used bad language, the moment I pulled off my wig the audience knew that the show was over and I was Seyfi Dursunoğlu, the

serious, calm and quiet man, who would never behave in that way.” *Huysuz Virjin* becomes Seyfi Dursunoğlu’s, the other that defines him. A part of the interview with Ayşe Arman that appeared in a newspaper is another great example of this distinction made between the actor and the drag character.

Does *Huysuz Virjin* manage to get along with such a real gentleman as Seyfi Dursunoğlu?

- Well, they never get along well. They are total opposites. You can never trust one of them. She is shameless; she cares only about certain things. Nobody wants to be with her as she is ugly but she sees herself as the most beautiful woman on earth. On the other hand, poor Seyfi Dursunoğlu is a thrifty, humble man that chooses to lead a respectable life. He always pays attention not to disturb his neighbors... If you let *Huysuz*, she’d go to the police station everyday—especially if there are a couple of officers she is into, she’d never leave the station!

Another striking example is from Dursunoğlu’s interview with Yener Süsoy who attempts to bring Dursunoğlu and *Huysuz* closer to each other:

What I really wonder is whether Seyfi Dursunoğlu has *travesti* emotions hidden inside. Can that be the actual reason why he wears women’s clothes?

-No Sir, absolutely not. You can see the hair on my legs behind the leggings, or my hair under the wig. It has nothing to do with being a *travesti*. I don’t have any

emotions as such and I wouldn't want to have. What I do on stage is totally different than my normal life. I am not colorful but my performances are.

Huysuz Virjin is proof of the impossibility of transness within the heteronormative system. That is perhaps why she is funny as a failing queen with her hairy legs, her deep singing voice, her aging body, and her male genitalia. In fact, in addition to all these, the actor's transphobic and homophobic statements support heteronormativity. As he states, he doesn't have any emotions as *travestis* and wouldn't want to have. In another interview, he says, "I don't like homosexuals. I don't trust them. I think they are not reliable."

Huysuz Virjin is a part of the heteronormative discourse. Her performances and her performance of her identities are proofs of the general perception of transness as impossible and the contextual queerness of transness. Even though there are queer elements to her performances, her queerness is within the discussion of the ambivalent relationship among transness, performance, and public space. The next chapter further discusses the relationship between the three with different examples from contemporary Istanbul's trans life.

Chapter Four: Ethnography and transness: Queer Spaces in Istanbul

As I have demonstrated earlier, transness is a spatial term defined in relation to heteronormativity. Transness, as a spatial term, is always and already public. This chapter is based on my first-hand observations of the trans world of Istanbul—Tarlabaşı, and İstiklal Street— and explains how transness is experienced by certain contexts— such as queer social venues that are part of queer nightlife in Istanbul. In this exploration of the trans world, heteronormativity as well as space and time, which are also defined by heteronormativity, turn out to be the keystones of the perception of transness. This chapter addresses following questions: “How are certain spaces identified as queer?” “How do certain spaces become ‘other’ in the face of the dominant norms?” “What are the dynamics within those spaces and among their inhabitants?” “How do trans identities make the ‘trans world’ and how does the ‘trans world’ make trans identities?” To answer those questions, this chapter’s ethnographic work focuses on my observations of Istanbul’s trans social venues. I gathered the data provided in this chapter within the four weeks I spent in Istanbul, in late December of 2012 and early January of 2013. I spent extensive time at six queer nightclubs, four of which are on İstiklal Street, one on Tarlabaşı Avenue and one in Harbiye. However, I would like to make it clear at this point that this chapter is also informed by my prior exposure to these venues. So, along with my observations of last winter, five-year’s knowledge of these spaces I have as a previous resident of Istanbul are disclosed in this chapter. Locations of these venues, their hours, and their frequenters were my main points of focus. They speak to the aim of this

project, which is to illustrate spatiality and temporality of transness, and to evaluate whether this spatiality and temporality are queer or not.

Since I have been in the United States for my graduate studies, I have been away from the queer scene in Istanbul for the last two years. Thus, I conducted research on the internet to see the most popular queer venues among Istanbul's queer inhabitants, before wandering around the back streets of İstiklal. I entered in the search engine words like “trans,” “bar,” “club,” and “Istanbul” and from the results that came up, I gathered a list of six trans bars and clubs of Istanbul to explore names of which point at the global nature of queer circles:

1. Sahra Club
2. Club 17
3. Penthouse
4. XLarge Club
5. Love Dance Point
6. No Name

In the following part of this chapter I will be quoting from the notes I took during my observations of trans Istanbul.

It's a Friday in late December. After a reunion with my friends back home, I start exploring the bars on the list above. Aylin—one of my closest friends, a tiny, queer-femme woman in her mid twenties—says, “I'll go with you!” I show her the list. Aylin does not want to go to the bar on Tarlabaşı, thinking that it might be dangerous for two women to walk around Tarlabaşı that late at night. So, we decide to go see the ones

around İstiklal. We draw a road map and set off. Aylin and I start walking down İstiklal Street around 11:30pm, which is when the street gets livelier, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. It is the coldest time of the year and it is an exceptionally cold night, which makes me think that maybe people will stay in because of the cold. We turn to Sadri Alışık Street and start looking for Sahra Club. After a couple of steps into the street, the crowd and the noise on İstiklal suddenly disappear. The chaos of İstiklal is replaced by a street full of eyes gazing at us. The street gets darker the further we get away from İstiklal. Groups of four to five men of different ages are standing in front of the buildings, watching the people in the street. Two middle-aged men standing in front of a small hotel start talking about us as their eyes follow our every movement. One of them says, “Those poor things must be lost.” I sense the irony in his voice. His sentence is followed by the laughter of the other. They do not seem to be concerned about the possibility that we might hear them. As our eyes look for “Sahra Club” sign, many eyes around us look for why we might be there. We hear a group of teenage boys approaching from behind. One of them says something, which we cannot understand but must be funny, since they all start laughing. They pass by us. They and their laughs disappear in the dark of the night.

We keep walking. We walk slowly, patiently, and cautiously. We look up and down, at each and every building to find Sahra Club. Unable to spot any sign or any place that looks like a club, Aylin and I decide to turn back to İstiklal Street. On our way back, a taxi stops next to us. The taxi driver sticks his head out of the car window and starts talking to me, “Sister, are you lost? I can take you wherever you are going. Just jump in

the car!” I say, “No, thanks. We are just wandering around.” He replies, “What are you doing here, sister? You will get into trouble, I swear. Go back to İstiklal.”

A little confused and discouraged by the taxi driver’s warning, we go back to İstiklal. It is almost midnight. Club 17 is our new destination. Club 17 is located on a street toward the beginning of İstiklal, closer to Taksim Square. This time, there is a large sign, so fortunately we can find our destination. It is closer to İstiklal, on a wider and better-lit street, and thus it is more visible. Excited to find it, I walk directly to the door. Aylin stops me and points at the crowd standing in front of the door. It is a crowd of 10-15 men in their thirties. They all are staring at us. Intimidated by their eyes, we decide to idle around. We start waiting for the crowd to break up. In the meantime, two trans women arrive at Club 17. They walk through the crowd in front of the bar talking to some of the men, replying as each man says something to them. Before long, the women make it to the door and get inside. Having lost our hope that we will ever be able to make it to the door, we see on the other side of the street a bar we used to go to when I lived in Istanbul. That bar, Penthouse, which used to be called Otherside, is actually the next bar on my list.

We get to the other side of the street, get into the building where Penthouse is, climb the stairs to the fourth floor, and finally arrive at its door. We pay the cover charge of 20TL (around \$12) for entrance at the door; this is unlike most bars around İstiklal where there is no cover charge. This dimly lit club is not very crowded for a Friday night and the crowd is mixed: trans and cisgender men and women, heterosexual and same-sex couples. The bar is actually the way I remember it from when my friends and I would go

there to see drag shows, dance shows or for dancing. We watch the shows of a male and a female dancer. We each grab a drink and dance to the most popular Turkish and English songs of the month. We leave Penthouse around 1.30 am. We walk to Taksim Square and from there we both head to our respective homes. Aylin leaves me with last piece of advice: “Don’t you go to all those places alone. Especially, Tarlabası and so.”

I get back home. My mind is still preoccupied with Sahra Club, and I wonder why we were not able to find it, why we could not see any sign or any clue that it was around there. I remember the taxi driver and his reactions. My interaction with him makes me even more curious. I have many questions in my mind; they all start with, “Why?” I open my computer, and go back to my previous research on trans clubs. I find the following description of Sahra on the English version of a website, *gayIstanbul.com*, which is intended as a guide to Istanbul gay life for gay tourists. Sahra is depicted on the “Istanbul Transgender Guide” page.

It is comparatively cheaper than other transvestite clubs and mostly patronized by young ghetto boys who like trans-girls and she-males, as well as some gay men and queers on weekend nights who like this type of boys. Besides regular transvestites, this is where you can see drag-queens and cross-dressers usually on Saturday nights. Do not go here with a lot of money and watch your wallet. (*gayIstanbul.com*, “Istanbul Transgender Guide”)

Time Out Istanbul’s website *timeout.com/Istanbul* depicts Sahra Club as follows:

Chamber of horrors or fun house? Sahra is three floors of get-it-here trannies basking in the tongue-lolling attention of young greasers, drooling hicks and aged toughs. Meanwhile, the few gay boys present dance, preen and vie for the attention of a 'real man' reckless, adventurous, or drunk enough to be stolen away from the 'ladies' (*timeout.com/Istanbul*, "Gay & Lesbian").

I wonder what they have to say about Club 17. On the "Istanbul Transgender Guide" page of *gayIstanbul.com* we read:

Club 17 is defined as a gay-club by the owners but it is actually a fairly mix place hosting gay men, rent-boys and visibly shemales. The difference of the venue is that the trans-girls also comes here as clients. Beware of the boys and "girls" you pick up from here. It is a typical reflection of city's underground night life. (*gayIstanbul.com*, "Istanbul Transgender Guide")

On the "Gay Bars and Clubs in Istanbul" page of *gayIstanbul.com*; following is written about Club 17:

Meeting point of mainly cheap young hustlers & amateur escort boys and some gay men who would be interested in them. There are also several drag queens and transvestites in the place most of the time. They play loud techno & underground

music from their lousy music system but it is a busy place usually full of these hustlers. (*gayIstanbul.com*, “Gay Bars and Clubs in Istanbul”)

The next night, I’m in İstiklal with my brother and my sister-in-law. We have dinner together, and I share with them my Friday night experiences and my plans for that night. They both say, “We’d love to join you tonight,” because they do not want me to go alone to the rest of the places on my list. Even though my brother, a 31-year-old heterosexual-identified man, and my sister-in-law, a 24-year-old heterosexual-identified woman are also among my best friends, it will be the first time for us to go to queer venues together. However, they both have heard a lot about two of my Saturday destinations—XLarge Club and Love Dance Point. These two venues are the ones I would frequently go to when I was living in Istanbul due to my deep interest and investment in the arts of drag and burlesque. Both clubs are well known for hosting various drag performances and dance shows.

Around 11 pm, we dive into the Saturday night crowd of İstiklal Street. Our first stop for the night is XLarge Club, located on Kallâvi Street, on the end closer to İstiklal. We each pay 30TL (around \$17) cover charge. Once inside, we enjoy the venue’s spectacular atmosphere. There used to be a movie theatre where XLarge is now located, which explains why it is such a big club with a very big stage. “The venue itself is like a small ball room; very spacious and authentic for a gay club, where once there used to be a movie theater (Elhamra) one of the oldest of cinemas opened in Istanbul,” writes on the “Gay Bars and Clubs in Istanbul” page of *gayIstanbul.com*. Even though there are not

many people when we first arrive, it becomes more crowded after midnight. Extravagant drag performances, dance shows on stage and go-go dancers dancing on the bar, seem to attract people from various backgrounds. The well-dressed crowd in XLarge on that Saturday night is very mixed: many heterosexual couples, some trans women, a few homosexual couples. Everyone seems to be enjoying the shows. As *Time Out Istanbul* points out “True to its name, this is a mega club. It features a ballroom-sized chandelier, the biggest bar of the venues in this chapter and two giant beds flanking the mezzanine bar. ...The Las Vegas style drag revue brings Lady Gaga and Madonna to the stage. A straight and pansexual crowd often roars in appreciation of the spectacle” (timeout.com/Istanbul, “Gay & Lesbian”). We enjoy the shows and the cozy atmosphere for a little longer. Even though we all will be stay there longer, we leave XLarge a little before 1 am, since I have two more clubs on my list.

On our way out, I give some information to my followers about our next two stops. I first mention No Name Club; I give them the recent information I gathered about it. “This place is the most popular transgender club and can also be visited by gay-men comfortably to see the colorful life of Turkish transvestites and transsexuals,” says gayIstanbul.com (“Istanbul Transgender Guide”). “Mix ages and various types of gay men, queers, rent-boys, few transvestites, and bears are regular attendants” (gayIstanbul.com, “Istanbul Transgender Guide”). When my brother and my sister-in-law hear, in addition, that No Name Club (formerly Ekoo Bar) is located on Tarlabası Avenue—a street parallel to İstiklal—they do not want to go onto Tarlabası Avenue. Trying not to make them feel uncomfortable, I agree not to go inside the venue. But I

insist on at least walking by No Name on our way to Love Dance Point. We get to Tarlabası where the crowds of İstiklal disappear. There are a few people on the street and it is very quiet. The liveliest part is around No Name, where a couple of people are standing and smoking outside the bar. We leave No Name behind, and head to Love Dance Point, which is a 20-minute walk from where we are. Unlike what is advised on the website, we do not take a taxi even though it is after midnight. On our way, we see groups of *travestis* waiting for their clients on the sidewalks of Harbiye, where they work at night.

Around 1:30 am, we finally arrive at Love Dance Point. We each pay a cover charge of 25TL (around \$14) for entrance. It is very crowded inside; and the crowd seems very mixed: from drag queens to transsexuals, from heterosexual couples to men and women of ‘almost’ all-ages. *Time Out Istanbul* reviews the venue as follows:

Istanbul's only gay venue worthy of the title 'club', Love Point has a full-size dancefloor, a no riff-raff door policy, professional sound system and groovy DJs. It draws a mixed crowd, most of whom are too focused on dancing and preening to notice anyone else but themselves. (timeout.com/Istanbul, “Gay & Lesbian”)

After spending almost an hour there having drinks, seeing the drag shows and the dance shows, and dancing to the music, my companions are tired. We leave the club and go back home; I have a lot to think about. I start writing, I think as I write.

My visits to these clubs are actually not limited to those I have discussed so far. I went back to each and every one of them both during the day and at night. I was able to observe them more. Even though I tried two more times, I could not find/go to Sahra Club. Even though I was able to observe the others more, I wanted to include in this chapter my observations of those places when I had the company of others. For, I believe interactions between people, as well as interactions between people and spaces provided invaluable feedback for my discussion of temporality, spatiality, and queerness of transness, and the relation between transness and heteronormativity. Even before I went out to explore trans Istanbul, I got similar reactions from my family and my friends every time I mentioned that I would be doing some research around trans neighborhoods, exploring trans bars. “What are you going to do there?” “You should be very careful.” I am used to hearing such statements from people who are not members of the queer community. However, this time, even my queer-identified friends were vocal about their concerns: “Don’t go alone to those places!”

These concerns they shared with me are related to their stereotypical view of the trans world. Just like English travel guides for gay tourists of Istanbul, Turkish guides also advise people to watch for their wallets and to be careful with the people they meet at bars/clubs of the trans neighborhoods. These concerns are also related to my identity—based on who I am perceived to be and how I look. As I have discussed in previous chapters, spaces affect and are affected by their inhabitants. Furthermore, in some places, some bodies do not leave enough space for others. As a cisgender, queer femme woman, I would be entering trans spaces; and there may not be enough space for

my cisgender and invisible queerness. My body that can easily be read as a heterosexual woman can be seen as a threat to trans identified spaces. I believe my experience of the way to Sahra Club is an example of this. Furthermore, as has been discussed earlier, transness is very much related to class. The eyes following us as long as we were on that street, the man standing in front of the hotel and his assumption that we were lost, and the taxi driver's warning were all signs that there was not enough space for us, women from a different class and socio-economic background. Our sex, gender, or class were not welcome on that street and we would thus not be welcome at Sahra Club. That is perhaps why we could not find it or why nobody was willing to help our searching eyes: there was nothing on that street that we could possibly be looking for.

The following comment I read on *gayIstanbul.com* made me realize another aspect of those encounters:

Typically, there are several security guys waiting at the door of each gay bar/club. They look like mafia types, but do not be scared. They are there to stop some unsolicited visitors, definitely not gay tourists. You will be well respected in any gay venue, not only because you have money but because -if not all- majority of the Turkish people have a kind of appreciation for western people/culture. (*gayIstanbul.com*, "Gay Bars and Clubs in Istanbul")

My pale skin, the light shades of my hair and my green eyes have always been the reasons behind my perishable Turkishness. I have thus always been me read by others as

a Western tourist. My ‘Western look’ might be the reason why the man standing in front of the hotel was recklessly talking about us out loud. He perhaps thought I would not understand him as a tourist. Furthermore, he perhaps thought we were lost, because we were foreigners. Perhaps, our non-nativeness was what made our entrance into the street negotiable. It was perhaps understandable that we got into that street: how could we know that it was a part of the trans neighborhood?

The very same quote above makes me re-think about the places my followers and I were welcomed. Even though security guards are said to be protecting the bars from non-queer people, as is expressed in the quote above, Aylin and I as misidentified queer women, and my brother and sister-in-law as a heterosexual couple were not stopped by anyone at Penthouse, XLarge, or Love. It is interesting that all three places have a pretty high cover charge, host a more mixed crowd and are more visible venues. They are located on more visible and easily-accessible spots. Furthermore, those same the venues are the ones where heterosexual people choose to go, as was the case for my brother and sister-in-law who were content to go to XLarge and Love Dance Point but refused to go to No Name Club in Tarlabası. Even though these venues are more visible and more easily-accessible, the cover charge makes them accessible to only a certain group of people—those who can afford to spend up to 30TL a night. “Admission fee is required and higher than most other gay clubs in Istanbul but it is worth well for most people who want to be in a place offering very professional shows & great music in an upper scale environment.” As is expressed on the website, about XLarge, higher admission fees

create upper-scale spaces, which may not bring about desirable results for everyone. Here is a comment on XLarge by a visitor:

I went to X large twice in the week, it was empty on Wednesday night till almost 2 am when I left, on Saturday night when I went there I paid a hefty entrance of 30 lira, but the place was filled with straight people, I could not see any gay people around, I don't know why this club is even considered gay. there [sic] were drag shows on stage but that was all to it..." (Posted by Aaron from India on 07/02/2011)

As also discussed and pointed out in the previous chapters, gender, sex, sexuality, and class are important factors in the distribution of public space in Istanbul. Spaces made and called queer or trans because of their queer or trans inhabitants are located in more invisible spots around neighborhoods where lower-income folks live. Those other venues where money replaces gender or sexual identity are located in more visible spots, since they are appropriated by and made to serve for the dominant normativity, heteronormativity. This chapter's discussion brings class to the forefront. Just like class brings inhabitants of Tarlabası together, it brings customers of certain entertainment venues together.

The work presented in this chapter is actually not ethnographic work, as the title of this chapter suggests. Even though it has been very valuable for the purposes of this particular project, and has offered many insights to its understanding and presenting

transness; it can be seen as a preliminary research conducted to see the possibility of any kind of an ethnographic entryway that would be taken in the future for a more comprehensive project.

Conclusion

This thesis discusses transness, which I have defined as an urban phenomenon, and which is at the same time an identity and a subculture in contemporary Istanbul. To illustrate the salience of the term, this work examines trans subculture in Istanbul from its beginnings, and briefly lays out the history of the trans subculture as manifest in Turkish scholarship on the issue. My examination reveals many aspects of transness besides its historicity. Apart from being a temporal term, transness is also spatial, and defined by factors such as sex, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. As I demonstrate, transness is constantly in relation to heteronormativity, which makes it a marginal subculture formed by trans folk, most of whom earn their living through sex work. It is this very relation that makes transness “out-of-time” and “out-of-place.” It puts transness under constant regulation, constant monitoring, and, as a spatial term, it becomes always public. As an identity, it is a perpetual public performance.

The relational marginality/centrality of transness and heteronormativity brings queerness into discussion. Even though heteronormativity places transness outside the norm, it also regulates transness in order to contain and assimilate it within the dominant culture. This makes transness neither wholly queer, nor wholly normative. Accordingly, the queerness of transness is made contextual, as demonstrated by the examples I employ in this thesis. In other words, each example used in this study examines how transness is neither only queer nor only normative, and that it can be both queer and normative. The fact that transness is “unidentifiable” is its very strength. I see this strength as a great

potential for trans activism, an opportunity to both reclaim its past and to use its present as a bridge from the past in order to imagine a future for non-normative Istanbul.

This project brings together the early Turkish scholarship on transness, current theoretical discussions on queer and trans identities, and contemporary trans life in Istanbul. It makes an intervention by contextualizing the term transness, and, through my ethnographic observations, it brings trans scholarship to the present. However, transness, as a temporal and a spatial category, is constantly subject to change, and, as a subculture, always transforming. However, this aspect of transness makes it a subject that necessitates further ethnographic research to better capture transness within its temporality and spatiality. As someone entering the academy through the field of Anthropology, this thesis is an opportunity for me to systematically deal with a subject I am looking forward to further exploring. This MA thesis is intended as a preliminary exercise, which has helped me to sharpen my ethnographic eye before I embark on my doctoral dissertation, in which I plan to further explore transness as an urban phenomenon in contemporary Turkey.

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