Sharing Dance, Forging Politics

Folk Dance, Interdependency, and Dissent in Turkey's Recent Protests

Sevi Bayraktar

In the busy streets of the popular Kadıköy district of Istanbul, people are rushing from one place to another on a chilly but sunny March day. Leaving behind the port where ferries dock to transport people between the Asian and European sides of the city, I continue towards the area's tiny, slightly hilly, and overwhelmingly crowded market lanes. While walking, I am repeatedly stopped by people who are working on the presidential referendum campaigns of various political parties. In two weeks, on 16 April, people will vote on a major change in the constitution of the Turkish Republic and decide whether the political system will shift from a parliamentarian to a presidential democracy, which may serve to consolidate Turkey's authoritarian state regime. Political parties have set up stands in several districts to promote their campaigns. They often have a tent, one or more tables to display brochures and party paraphernalia, and an amplifier to play songs expressing their political views. The volunteers reach out from the tents to passersby and hand them flyers explaining the pros and cons of the presidential system, trying to convince them to vote "yes" or "no" for the constitutional change proposed by the government.

The Kadıköy pier is hosting three political parties that afternoon: the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the main oppositional Republican People's Party (CHP), and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which is currently in power. These three parties do not share the space equally: while the HDP and the CHP are using the small area at the exit of the pier, the AKP is occupying a larger space next to them. I can see a group of women in front of the HDP pavilion dancing govend *– a generic name for Kurdish group dances. The dancers are holding each other's hands to create circles, semi-circles, and lines. The lead dancer, who usually holds a handkerchief, is this time holding instead a "Na" sign ("No" in Kurdish), thereby showing the dancers' stance in the referendum.*

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A young woman is leading the dance, and a few men of different ages are following her cues to improvise the next sequence. Each participant in the dance takes three steps on the counts forward and stops on the fourth to tap the sole of the right or the left foot on the ground gently. Then they walk back, again in three steps, and pause on the fourth. While walking back and forth, thereby closing and opening the semi-circle, the group members move in a counterclockwise direction. Sometimes one member adds quick footwork ornamented with a hop-step, a squat, or a crouch in the tempo of the dance, showing that some dancers have a better balance and rhythmical knowledge. Protesters link their pinky fingers to connect with one another. Passersby stop to watch, or they join in by also taking the hands of two dancers, thereby blurring the boundary between audience members and performers in the public space. Should they leave before the music ends, then they step back slightly and join the hands of the dancers on either side of them. Protesters chant as they dance; their voices and the amplified music merge with the acoustic cacophony of the city as street-sellers take advantage of the crowd to sell water and pastry, while ferries, buses, and cars blast their horns in long and short bursts to call passengers who are in a rush.

[...] The female leader of the dance seems to be enjoying herself until a male dancer, who a short while ago was one of the followers, takes the lead by leaving the circle and coming back to hold the right hand of the previous leader. His claim to lead seems to have taken place softly and naturally during the dance in the square. The young female dancer first appears uncomfortable, but then does not insist on her leadership and continues to dance as a follower. Competition over leadership gestures internal power relations in this group of activists, who share a political objection to the government's proposal and to the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey (Fieldwork notes, Istanbul, 29 March 2017).

Folk dance is used in Turkey's contemporary protest movements to demonstrate solidarity among dissenters against the authoritarianism of the state. In many cases, dissenting women lead dances in protests; yet they often note that men try to defend their leadership roles by drawing on gendered discourses about their biological assets. Men claim, for instance, that the average man has a louder voice or is taller and more muscular than the average woman, explaining that dancers should be able to clearly see and hear the dance instructions. Esma, an activist in the movement for social justice and Kurdish political rights, confirms that men often hope to lead the dance or expect women to watch them dancing, and that this is like "*gücü izlemek*"

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("watching power") for female spectators, where "power" can be interpreted as "masculine" or patriarchal power. Esma argues that women are, and have to be, louder and more visible in dance circles during protests because they do not want simply to *watch* power; instead, they want to *claim* it (Istanbul, 13 April 2017). Such claims are manifested through forms of leading, mentoring, and teaching dance. For example, activists in a protest align their bodies to create lines and circles, hold hands, and execute step patterns of the dance style. Experienced dancers may teach these movements to newcomers during the protest or simply lead the dance until a chanted song is over or the dance is interrupted by the police. If the police attack, activists disperse until they come together once again at another corner with another group of protesters, chanting and dancing once more. Music is sometimes amplified to accompany dances, its sound being intensified by the acoustics of the protest space, such as shouts and cries intertwined with screams and ululations, whistles, applause, police sirens, announcements from megaphones; the soundscape of the protest sometimes includes activist music groups and their whistles and trumpets, and occasionally a call-for-prayer dominates. Protesters usually dance in circles and semi-circles, facing the center of the circle. Whereas a closed circle suggests a kind of immunity from outside effects, a semi-circle invites passersby to participate.[1] These encounters allow vulnerable identities both inside and outside of the dance circle to be recognized. At the same time, their leadership and competency claims may create new political relationships, hierarchies, and contestations among the dancers. Sharing dancing entails these possibilities of competition over authority and visibility as well as solidarity and support.

These complex power dynamics of sharing are the focus of this essay, which aims to examine the radical dancing communities in Turkey's contemporary protests. How do dissenting women tactically deploy folk dance, which is often seen as representing a shared history and culture, to protest against the increasingly authoritarian and misogynistic policies and practices of the Turkish state? How can folk dance as a shared national tradition

1 I use the term "audience" to signify these passersby in the public space. This refers to Randy Martin's conceptualization of the audience as – in Mark Franko's formulation – a "co-player – a participant in the dance work" (Franko 2016: 34). I emphasize the potential of passersby to become dancers in the public space, since the performance "initiates and sets the terms for kinetic circulation with the audience in order to generate the momentum for their involvement" (Martin 1990: 171).

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also highlight the inequality and violence constitutive of the history of this tradition? I argue that the folk dancing of protesters manifests the fact that history, tradition, and politics are not shared equally or consensually. Rather, the act of sharing is a social and political practice; it is relational and can thus be renounced by its participants. Challenging the stable conceptualizations of solidarity and empathy that are often associated with sharing, folk dance choreographies contribute to the sense of relationality and responsiveness among protesting dancers, who are both allies and competitors in reconfiguring the public space. Dance is thus a form of public political assembly, which enables agonistic encounters that become essential for coalition building (Butler 2015; Mouffe 2000). Dissenters who are interdependent both in the public sphere of political action and in folk dance circles persistently challenge the limitations of the hegemonic choreographies and urge discussion about what is not shared in the dominant narratives of culture, history, and politics.

The dominant political discourse in Turkey has grown more exclusionary over the last decade, as the state has turned authoritarian and marginalized large segments of the population, particularly women. Under the ruling AKP government, women have been targeted through public statements that, for instance, demand that they have at least three children (2009), do not walk in public when pregnant unless accompanied by a man (2013), and refrain from laughing out loud in public (2014). The precariousness of women's institutional and legal position in Turkey, exacerbated by the abolition of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2011, reached a new low recently when in 2021 an overnight presidential decree withdrew Turkey's signature from the Istanbul Convention.[2] Such precariousness has increased further with the rise of Turkish nationalism, the mass dismissal of public employees who hold dissenting political views, and the escalation of femicides and trans-murders, due to the impunity with which gender-based violence is often carried out. In challenging these conditions, women have become prominent in grassroots politics and protest actions.

This article focuses on activists who self-identify as women coming from diverse social, economic, and political backgrounds and are non-profession-

2 A human rights treaty issued by the Council of Europe that aims to prevent and combat violence against women, as well as domestic violence. Turkey was the first country to sign the treaty when it was opened for signatures in Istanbul in 2011.

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al dancers. It draws on ethnographic work that I conducted between 2015 and 2019, the main period of uninterrupted fieldwork taking place between November 2016 and October 2017, which coincided with Turkey's recent state of emergency. Following a failed coup d'état against the AKP government in July 2016, the government declared a state of emergency, which it extended at regular intervals until July 2018, thereby creating a prolonged period in which many people were targeted on account of their political stance. The right to public assembly for anti-government demonstrations was officially suspended, and the suspension was continued unofficially after the state of emergency had been lifted.[3] These developments led me to ask: What does it mean to dance in public spaces when there are no other means of dissent? How do activists create a physical space of dissent through the dynamic of a circle in public and through the human body? I documented a variety of protests in Istanbul, including feminist and LGBTQI+ demonstrations, vigils against the state-of-emergency decrees, and protests against the presidential system proposed in the April 2017 referendum. In these protests, two folk dance types, mostly performed in a circular and semi-circular forms, were particularly popular: *horon*, characteristic of the north-eastern region of Turkey, along the Black Sea coast, and *halay* (in Kurdish, *govend*), associated with the majority Kurdish eastern and south-eastern regions of Turkey. By analyzing these dances in recent protests, this article explores the moves that are performed in both dance circles and urban spaces. In doing so, I foreground the potential that dance has to create the tools for an anti-hegemonic politics.[4]

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3 Many state-of-emergency decrees not only targeted the perpetrators of the coup, but also caused over 100,000 anti-government and dissenting teachers, academics, and public service employees to be sacked or to be the object of false accusations (Human Rights Watch 2018). The decrees legalized arbitrary dismissals, arrests, and the murder of the associates of all oppositional groups, including scholars, students, journalists, human rights defenders, and members of parliament – notably, HDP MPs.

4 This article draws on my research on folk dance and political protests in contemporary Turkey (Bayraktar 2019a), whose fieldwork study included my observations of the choreography in various contexts such as protests, dance studios, theaters, and urban and rural venues for celebrations and festivals, and interviews. I am extremely grateful to every person in Istanbul and in the eastern Black Sea towns such as Rize and Artvin who participated in this study and who shared with me their opinions on dance, politics, and tradition. The names of all participants are pseudonyms. To highlight the dialogical relationship between participants' and the author's analysis, block quotes from interviews are given in the same

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Sharing choreography and politics also entails asking how distinct political actors differently share precarity and risk when participating in a political action in the public space. In her study on contact improvisation in American culture of the 1970s, Cynthia Novack (1990) shows that sharing is central in this dance because one person cannot perform it alone and individually. This interdependency between dancers often requires cooperation and can therefore promote egalitarianism in dance and as an ethical value in dancers' social life. Similarly, folk dancers who look at each other in circles and semi-circles share the dynamic of their movements while dancing. Their gaze and bodies are necessarily connected to what dancers, musicians, spectators, and the police do in protests. By holding hands in particular ways, such as interlacing their fingers to dance shoulder to shoulder or hooking their pinky fingers to highlight resilience in their vulnerable connection, dancers in the circle can foster, change, and reshape the political and social meaning of protest.

However, hierarchies based on the skill and experience of dancers, as well as degrees of precarity conditioned by the intersectionality of identities, also alter the experience of sharing. In this article's opening vignette, for instance, dancers execute a routine from a Kurdish folk dance style popularly known as *Delilo*. Wanting to intensify the movements, the male follower adds to the dance a quick bouncing of the knees and the shoulders in double rhythm. The female leader responds by slowly adjusting her steps to this bouncing and seamless undulation of the body. In our talks, some protesters mentioned that bouncing the body and shrugging the shoulders may indicate support for the suppressed Kurdish identity and culture in Turkey. Based on their interpretation of these movements and according to their political stance, some protesters may wish to participate in the dance, while others may avoid it. Some activists carry signs, such as banners belonging to their political party or rainbow flags indicating their support for the LGBTQI+ movement, and others chant songs that refer to the history of left-leaning struggles of the past decades. All dissenting political groups have their opponents with whom they compete to recruit more people to their cause. Some activists may not want to step into a dance performed by a competing group due to the political history of the specific genre or because they disapprove of the

font size as the body of the text. This study transformed my perspective on both dance and politics, and I hope it inspires future research on the political efficacy of dance.

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song lyrics chanted. To understand these nuances in the reception and deployment of folk dance as a popular practice, we need to look more closely at the history of dance, gender, and body politics in Turkey.

Folk Dance and Politics in Turkey

Folk dance has been and remains crucial to politics in Turkey. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the state elites and institutions collected and codified dance forms to create a repertoire of popular music and dance for the Turkish state that succeeded the Ottoman Empire in 1923. Expert musicologists, linguists, and folklorists carried out scientific expeditions across Turkey's newly established territories to assemble cultural materials for analysis and performance on the national stage, ranging from dance, music, and poetry, to lullabies and epic stories. The material was shaped by the precarious nature of the research. Technologies at the time, such as passenger ships, cameras, and recording equipment like gramophones facilitated collection and archiving, but time limitations and accidents of fortune, as well as the fragility of the recording instrument, defined the scope of the data collected (i.e. Gazimihal 1929; Saygun 1936).

During this nascent period, scholars and researchers assumed that reaching out to rural populations considered to have been neglected by the Ottoman urban elites was the key to finding the true essence of the Turkish nation. The expeditions aimed at revealing the arts, traditions, and culture of "the long-forgotten people of Anatolia" (Mümtaz 1998 [1928]: 292). In 1932, the state set up the *Halkevleri*, or People's Houses, a nationwide network of community centers that brought together local dancers across Turkey for a national folk dance festival in the capital of Ankara during the 1940s.[5] The festival took place annually until the government of the right-wing populist Democratic Party closed the houses down in 1950. Folk dance festivals and competitions, however, continued nationally and internationally throughout the 1960s and 1970s, attracting growing interest from urban audiences.

5 Researchers were encouraged to cooperate with People's Houses and other state institutions, such as the Turkish Hearts (*Türk Ocakları*, 1912-31), founded by the nationalist Young Turks in the last decade of the Ottoman Empire, so as to disseminate ideas about national independence after the First World War (Üstel 1997).

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University students who came from small towns to study in big cities such as Istanbul and Ankara initiated students' clubs and associations to teach each other the dances of their respective regions, and performed them extensively in national events, international competitions, and tourist shows, thus contributing to the dissemination and popularization of folk dance (Öztürkmen 2001, 2002).

These dances also became part of school curricula and were taught to a wide range of pupils from primary to high school. The State Folk Dance Ensemble was founded in 1975, and the first university department dedicated to folk dance was established in Istanbul in 1984. Integral to this process of institutionalization and repertoire-making was the fact that dances contradicting the official narrative were peripheralized or excluded from what was deemed to be the shared national past and present. For instance, many Kurdish dance styles have no representation in these institutional curricula until today. Similarly, in our talks, non-professional dancers in the eastern Black Sea region told me of about fifty Hemşin dance styles, only a modified version of one such style being taught formally.

Gender Body Politics of National Folk Dance and Dissent

Folk dance was seen as representing national history and identity. Since gendered body politics was central to this representation, women's corporeal and emotional expressions were subject to continuous regulation. Men and women holding hands and dancing together in public places was considered an important manifestation of the secular and modern ideals of the nation-state in the 1930s, which was contrasted with the Islamic past. Up until the 1960s, male critics, artists, and scholars celebrated the visibility of women in stage performances, opposing it to their purported invisibility in Ottoman society (Gazimihal 1961: 2474).

In this context, the movements of the hips, torso, and the belly were the subject of heated discussions among nationalist ethnologists and folklorists. Horizontal hip swaying, shoulder shimmying, and torso undulations found particularly in solo dances, such as belly dancing and *çiftetelli*, were considered obscene and thus improper representations of the national female body (Kurtişoğlu (Oğul) 2014: 112-114). In 1971, the journal of the People's Houses announced that the belly should not be the center of bodily weight and

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advised that their repertoire omit dances emphasizing these motions of the belly (Halkevleri 1971: 12).

Another significant discussion revolved around the demonstration of emotions. The revelation of "excessive" emotions, such as "unconfined" passion and enthusiasm (Eyüboğlu 1967: 88-93), was disparaged as representing child-like, improper, and immoral attitudes generally attributed to women. Bodily control, on the other hand, was seen as a sign of maturity and civilization; an ideal female folk dancer was expected to conceal vehement emotions to achieve this maturity. As such, the body of the female folk dancer was constituted as the "other" of both the "variety artist," who dances by lifting her legs to hurl her skirts up (Coşkun 1963: 3238), and the belly dancer, who centers her belly to move meticulously and sensually. The variety dancer was seen as being Western and modern, but neither moral nor mature.Similarly, the belly dancer's profession was disdained as being that of an entertainer who belonged to Ottoman palace culture (i.e. Baykurt 1995: 145).

Figure 1: Women dancers of the Turkish Folklore Association representing Turkey in Spain during the second Mediterranean folk dance festival, 1969 (Görür 1969-1970: 23)

I argue that the authentic body of the folk dancing woman was constituted in opposition to these two types of female dancers, the belly dancer and the va-

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riety dancer, to show her values as modern and secular, but also moral, moderate, and traditional.

The photograph shown in figure 1 depicts Turkish Folklore Association dancers in the 1969 festival parade in Murcia, Spain. They are standing on a model built on a moving platform: a structure with a dome and four pillars resembling the minarets of a mosque, and a crescent moon and a star symbolizing the Turkish flag. Greeting the audience on both sides of the street, female folk dancers are seen resting on an Islamic past and facing towards the secular and modern republic. Their headscarves reveal some hair, which goes against orthodox religious restrictions. They are wearing dresses of different folk dance styles showcasing the cultural heterogeneity of Turkey. With their lips sealed and their eyes assuming a soft look, the dancers' smiles communicate a greeting to the audience that is modest and graceful. In this greeting gesture, their bodies seem immobile between the constructions on the platform. Situated in this limited space, the dancers embody tradition and modesty and depict the authentic woman of the nation.

This gendered discourse of authenticity that restricts women's ability to move continues to be taught and performed in institutional settings in Turkey. For example, during my research, I participated in *horon* classes in different venues, such as a conservatory, a dance association, and a private studio, and noted that in certain iterations of the dance, women's movements include restricted bodily extensions. Women execute small steps and quick skips with no large squats or high jump-kicks, the signature movements of the men's *horon*. In women's *horon*, the arms are configured at chest level but not much higher. The hips do not easily move side-to-side but remain straight; the body is encouraged to move as a whole. In our conversations, participants and teachers in these dance sessions emphasized that women's dancing often enriched and complemented men's *horon* alignments, whereas men's *horon* was seen as a stand-alone spectacle.

Folk dance has been used not only in these institutionalized settings, but also as a central part of left-leaning activism in Turkey. The waves of rural migration to urban areas in the 1950s resulted in a new and increasingly organized working class in large cities such as Istanbul. During factory workers' strikes in the 1960s, for example, a variety of folk dances were performed (İşçi Postası 1964, 1965). In the 1970s, leftists deployed dance to demonstrate their solidarity with rural migrant workers and propagate their causes, and many of them established folk dance groups as part of their political organi-

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zations (Kızmaz 2015). Dancing was also meant to represent an ideal revolutionary body that was uniform, disciplined, and unembellished – a body in control of itself, and naturally male.

More recently, grassroots movements in Turkey have used folk dances to claim diverse political, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities suppressed in mainstream politics. Many advocating social and environmental justice as well as human rights for ethnic and religious minorities, low-income populations, women, and LGBTQI+ individuals came to use folk dance in the late 1990s. These groups performed dances for various purposes: to blockade the police, embolden fellow activists, learn about the cultural practices of oppressed ethnic groups, and to transform their feelings into forms of public and political mobilization by generating and circulating anger, mourning, and joy. By deploying folk dances, activist women in Turkey draw on a familiar repertoire of dances regulated and stabilized by state elites during the foundational decades of the Republic and appropriated and performed by left-leaning groups during the 1970s. I will now discuss how these dance circles are a forum for sharing and negotiating dissenting politics, and the means by which activists interpose themselves into the conventions of national choreography and make the dominant gender and ethnic discourses, and the violence embedded within them, visible in the public space.

Sharing Dance to Choreograph Public Assemblies

When activists hold hands to dance, their public political assembly demonstrates interdependence. Many participants find this relationality of the dancers a crucial part of their experience. Esma states, “when I dance in protests, I feel I am not alone; the people, on whom I lean my hand, my arm, [and] my shoulder, give me courage” (Istanbul, 13 April 2017). Folk dance requires one person to connect with another person in the public sphere and prompts interactions among ethnically, racially, economically, and sexually marginalized individuals to work together against the conditions of their precarization. Judith Butler (2015) underscores this relationship between precarity and assembly, arguing that in democracies “the people” are constituted through acts of demarcation – discursive borders indicating national, racial, linguistic, or political belonging. This demarcation of people separates those whose bodies are defensible and whose lives are counted as

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being worthy of life from those whose lives are seen as being unlivable and whose bodies are conceived of as being disposable. Butler defines assembly as a concerted bodily enactment on the part of those who come persistently together to resist the preconditions of their disposability. Interconnectivity is the key to defining their collective act as a form of plural performativity.

Dance scholars who have worked extensively on the body politics of public assembly in the context of recent social movements (Foellmer 2016; Klein 2013; Lepecki 2013) share a collective performative approach to political gatherings. Some of those describe popular mobilizations as massive scale "choreographic arrangements" that "shape and re-shape the social, the aesthetic, and the political" (Gerecke/Levin 2018: 5), whereas others find different choreographies of resistance that could be learned and practiced within larger movements (Foster 2003; Goldman 2010). The radical folk dance gatherings, and particularly the circular formations that I discuss here, complement and expand on these discussions by demonstrating how bodies perform interconnectivity both physically and politically, even when they depart from the mass choreography of protest and continue to intervene in small groups in the public sphere (Bayraktar 2019b). The relationality and interdependency of protesters in these dance gatherings update and give nuance to our understanding of what assembly means and what it can be, as well as how it works choreographically under authoritarian regimes.

Interdependency does not mean equality, however. A dance circle supposedly composed of equal individuals who join hands to demonstrate solidarity and support in a horizontal organization of bodies may also invoke hierarchies based on inequalities in skills and abilities. Those who are competent dancers might be distinguished as the lead dancers. These experienced dancers who assume leadership roles in the dance may compete among themselves to persuade the audience of the legitimacy of their claims. The placement of the participants in the circle can be competitive as well, since many newcomers make the strategic decision to dance next to an experienced dancer. They may compete to gain the attention of experienced dancers, who may teach them the step patterns accurately, so that they can express their opinions or emotions more fluently. Leman, who identifies herself as an independent feminist, and an ambitious dancer, says that she often studies the circle from outside before joining the circle next to competent dancers – this helps her enjoy the dance more and allows her to express her joy better. On another account, Lara, an environmental activist in an

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Istanbul-based grassroots organization, says that, if she does not know the dance style well, she joins the dance from the middle of the group because she feels more comfortable surrounded by other people; even though she becomes confused and takes a wrong step, she can still adjust her rhythm by observing those around her who are more experienced in the dance style in question (Istanbul, 3 April 2017). Maintaining proximity can be a constant challenge in a circle where no one stays in the same place. Unlike institutionalized choreographies, where dancers are often fixed in their places and their roles, in protests, some participants may compete to lead, while others may follow, or dance next to the leader, on the margins, or among their acquaintances. Negotiation among the participants over placement and proximity requires attention to and knowledge of the leader's cues. When the leader increases her distance from the next dancer, she may be expected to perform a solo improvisation; or, if she uncouples her hand, then the other dancers should clap to the rhythm of the accompanying song. Constant awareness not only of the changing cues and step patterns but also of the shifting conditions of the protest space help dancers avoid injuries and stay alert to developments in their immediate vicinity.

Mentoring as Sharing

Experienced dancers in a group may or may not prioritize teaching the dance to others, although doing so often helps them establish new relationships and develop alliances. By teaching and mentoring others, competent dancers enable them to learn and execute folk dance movements and make them more confident to join the circle. However, there is also a tension between the experienced and competent dancer on the one hand, and the inexperienced newcomer on the other, because mentoring may preclude enjoyment for the former and introduce new hierarchies for the latter. Such pressure leads to a continuous negotiation based on competition and cooperation.

Some activists are reluctant to teach others during the protest itself because, as they explain, doing so may reduce their enthusiasm for the dance. Dancers look towards the center of the circle, to the leader, and at each other to communicate their emotions and synchronize the rhythm as well as the steps. When they learn a specific dance, however, they may need additional

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support because learning the steps from someone across the circle may be confusing for a newcomer, who then needs an experienced dancer next to her to show the movements in a clear direction and order. Wendy, a member of an environmental solidarity platform fighting ecological destruction in the eastern Black Sea region, says, "it's very boring to teach the *horon* to those who have no idea how to do it. But they insist on dancing! I say, 'OK, look at my feet,' and hold their hand" (Istanbul, 21 July 2017). There are also those who are learning the dance but do not want special attention. Lara is inexperienced in dancing *horon*, but she does not want a lead *horon* dancer to give her individual attention during the dance. She prefers to execute the steps by following others and places her body far from the leader so as not to bother anyone else and disrupt the flow of the dance. But Lara is an experienced *halay* dancer. She told me of her pride at dancing with ease in various *halay* styles during another protest against gold and copper mining activities in Bakırtepe in Kangal village of eastern Turkey (Özcan 2013). She then empathizes with Wendy's comments on the boredom of dancing with a person who does not have enough experience, but also differs from Wendy when she emphasizes that the protest has a common goal that goes beyond the dance. In the protest setting, she argues, dance can be taught with willingness, and those unfamiliar with the dance can be tolerated because of the shared political aim. Lara continues:

> Someone who does not know about the dance distracts your rhythm, and you get irritated after a while, and [perhaps] you do not enjoy dancing … But the question of why you dance is also important. There is a whole other pleasure involved in dancing together with many people for a particular purpose. Then what you are dancing for becomes more important than how *akıcı* (fluently) you dance. The dance that you deploy while struggling for something together with people coming from different cultures is very precious. (Istanbul, 11 April 2017)

The corporeal experience of a multitude moving towards a shared political goal is crucial in establishing connections between experienced dancers and newcomers. Esma's account also highlights the importance of this shared motivation and mentorship in dance gatherings. Esma had rehearsed a repertoire of Kurdish dance styles during her long periods of waiting outside prisons to visit her relatives, who were political prisoners. Those hours

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turned into pedagogic spaces where she learned dances as part of a political act. Today, this experience informs her attitude towards dancing and mentoring. She explains:

> I never say, "Get out, don't ruin the dance!" I never exclude [those who do not know the dance] because I remember learning these dances myself outside the prison where I went with my family to see our acquaintances. I had no idea what to do but I eventually learned the dances because I feel I'm not alone while I'm dancing. (Istanbul, 13 April 2017)

Esma now leads both women-only and mixed-gender circle dances in political demonstrations and makes a point of not discouraging activists who want to learn these dances. If she sees someone behind her who wants to dance but feels shy about joining or is afraid of failing in front of other people, Esma turns towards them and smiles to encourage them to participate.

Figure 2: A protest against the copper and gold mining projects in Cerattepe, Artvin. Environmental protesters dance in several horon *circles in the city square (Karadeniz İsyandadır, 2013)*

Interdependency and relationality in the circle combine competition between and cooperation among protesters who are working towards a common objective. On the one hand, there might be a tense negotiation between

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a newcomer and an experienced dancer – sometimes novices may not listen to experienced dancers or may show a kind of stubborn persistence in continuing to dance next to the experienced dancer even though her rhythmic (dis)engagements might distract the latter. On the other hand, intentionality towards a shared political goal is constitutive in these relationships despite varying degrees of competency in dance and vulnerability in the public space. In these areas of conflict and debate, protesters generate new hierarchies and political positions, as well as new forms of solidarity.

Forging Politics in Public Spaces

Circles and semi-circles have a different dynamic than other geometrical formations such as stars, lines, and squares which are often used in the staging of folk dances due to their representational quality. Circular and semi-circular formations, such as those depicted in Figure 2, are more likely to occur in protests. When I move together with or within the circle, its dynamics, such as holding hands and walking back and forth, result in continuous openings and closings of the circle and help protesters keep the form by creating a balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces. When I look at a circle from the outside, I just see people's backs, moving further away from me when they step forward and nearer when they walk backwards, their faces often disappearing behind the back of another dancer in motion. Those who want to take a photo therefore go inside the circle to catch the dancers' expressions. Bags, coats, flags, posters, and other objects can be left temporarily within the circle so that the dancers can perform unencumbered while watching their belongings. The center of the circle is sometimes also occupied by activists chanting through a megaphone or by musicians accompanying the dancers. Children who go to protest together with their mothers are also often found inside the dance circle, a relatively safe space in case of a possible police attack. Passersby, the police with their armored vehicles, and members of other political organizations could intervene the dance at any time either to become part of the dancing group or to disperse its participants. The placement of bodies and objects in relation to the circle and to each other reconfigures the public space as a space of protest; and, as the conditions change, protesters search for new ways to keep their interaction in the street.

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Dancing in the public space involves three different modes of looking: the dancers in the circle look at each other, they look at the leader, and they are looked at by the spectators. Since dancing in the public space blurs boundaries between the dancer and the audience, a passerby may look at the dancers in a bid to take part in the dance, and in the protest. This person may turn out to be an undercover police officer, who stands among the spectators and films the dancers to collect "evidence" that could be later used against them. Protesters often find that these records are utilized to prosecute them in court. The gaze inside the circle can also come from multiple directions: Dancers look at the leader so that they can follow the changing steps and tempo. When it is a large circle composed of dozens of people, or several circles inside one another where the leader's movements cannot be seen easily, newcomers may look for experienced dancers so that they can learn from them. As dancers look at each other within circles and semi-circles, they cooperate with a group of mostly unknown bodies, and further develop familiarity with each other, thus enabling them to recognize other activists in the public space and making forms of solidarity possible beyond the moment of protest. The circle also allows participants to observe each other when they face the center; hence, the supportive gaze may become a disciplinary tool, used to praise or correct others' dancing.

Activists may engage in dialogue with other protesters during the dance and develop forms of sociability that can foster interdependency. According to Esma, a dancer may have a conversation with someone during the dance that helps establish a connection. Such verbal and corporeal forms of communication transform a personal relationship into a political one, and vice versa. Esma says:

> In protests, I danced the *halay* with hundreds of people. When you go to another protest, you may bump into one of these people and you may remember [this person]. During the dance, perhaps, you had a conversation. For example, "I can't do [the dance]", "What is [the movement]?", "Shall I move my arm like this?", or "Shall I step in this direction?" It becomes a conversation. When I establish such a connection, I remember them when I see them in another place. I say [to myself] we have danced the *halay* together. (Istanbul, 13 April 2017)

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The intertwining of physical movement and verbal exchange shows how forms of political relationality can be established during the dance, and how these relationships can be maintained outside the dance and into social and political life beyond the time and space of the protest. As a result, participants who familiarize themselves with one another and accept each other in a dance circle can also create solidarity outside the protest. In a potentially hostile public space, familiarity as a means of possible support is important for women in general, and for queer and transwomen in particular. In our talks, some activists said that they feel safer in the street when they recognize another person with whom they had previously danced in a protest. Meri, a transgender rights activist, states that people may make support accessible when she needs it in homophobic and transphobic public spaces of everyday life. She says:

> When I see a person with whom I randomly danced in a protest in the street, I probably recognize this person. I often think, "Oh, she is one of us," and continue on my way … I feel good because I know that this person is somewhere close by. (Istanbul, 19 April 2017)

The extremely high number of trans murders and femicides in Turkey makes Meri's statement especially poignant.[6] State institutions implement various technologies to degrade and discipline women by marginalizing their bodies in the public sphere and violently detaining, capturing, or even killing them. Legal impunity for the perpetrators of domestic violence, alongside the broader reluctance on the part of the authorities to address violence against women, create a conducive environment for femicides (Gülel 2021).[7] In this context, the lives of trans and queer individuals are particularly precarious, both in everyday life and in protests – many trans activists continue to be pursued by the police even after protests in which they participate end peacefully (Bianet 2022).

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6 For trans murder rates and femicides, see https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/18/turkey-femicide-istanbul-convention-womens-rights.

7 For more information about the data collected on the *Monument Counter*, an online monument to commemorate women who have been killed due to domestic violence, see http://anitsayac.com/?year=2021.

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Politics of Emotions

Dancing encourages people to come together to participate in the politics in public spaces and makes it more difficult for the police to use violence against dancers. The hesitancy of the police to intervene stems from the fact that dancing is typically seen as an apolitical activity, unlike other forms of demonstration, such as marches and sit-ins, which are assumed to belong to the realm of the public and the political. As I have already pointed out, efforts made by representatives of the state to collect, categorize, and regulate folk dances have been part of the political discourse since the early decades of the republic; and these dances have been treated as intuitive and thus apolitical in the representation of the national culture. Dissenting women utilize this discourse today to dance tactically and politically: sometimes they perform gender-bending by adding to their dance kick-steps, high jumps and deep squats, which are attributed to masculine movement qualities, and sometimes they dance in high heels, flip flops, shorts, or a mini-skirt, thus flouting the conventions of the authentic body of the folk dancing woman and its institutionalized iterations. Protesters sometimes use a minority dance excluded from the national folk dance repertoire and sometimes combine movements that belong to different dance vocabularies. By employing these multiple choreographic tactics, activist women reconstitute the political value of folk dances *as* and *in* protest against the dominant national and gender narratives.

In public political assemblies, dance is performed to demonstrate sentiments such as mourning, lamentation, anger, and rage, as well as joy. A number of activists stated that they do not explicitly think about dance as a significant political gesture but are well aware that displaying joy and laughter is a disruptive and defiant act against the austere face of state power in Turkey. Others identify dancing as a high-risk activity, since some activists have been prosecuted and are waiting to face trial for their "illegal" dancing. In this sense, the joyful interactions of dissenters should not be read as a sign of "public happiness," which feminist scholar Sara Ahmed critiques as an ideal of the liberal multicultural society (2008: 1-2). Rather, their demonstration of joy acts as a form of political positioning to promote the "principle of hope" against the politics of fear that the state disseminates (Bloch 1986). Eylem explains why it is important to dance in protests despite the repeated targeting of dissenters. She has lost female comrades in armed attacks by the

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Army and commemorates their friendship with sorrow and pain; however, she dances in demonstrations because she thinks that her dead and living comrades would want to see her doing it – alive and resistant while under duress. She remarks:

> Folk dance is our practice of happy days (“*neşeli günler pratiğimiz*”). We have a lot of reasons to be depressed but we should not wallow in [our] depression. We should keep up our “happy-days-practice.” Our friends who died in political actions lost their lives for us to have a smile, and I inherit what they intended to do. If all others who are in extreme danger can still smile, why should I not keep my spirits up? (Istanbul, 6 April 2017)

Eylem engages in dancing to keep alive the memory of her comrades who lost their lives in resistance struggles. Sharing the practice of dancing together creates a relationship among activists that was established in the past and continues into the present, towards the realization of a future that was imagined together. It enables an ongoing connection between the body of the protester and of the fallen comrade. Holding hands to continue dancing means mourning for loved ones whose stories are not inscribed in the official record. It also enables activists to establish new relationships in the present, their demonstration of joy and happiness denying the grim edifice of the coercive state.

Fahriye is activist of the labor movement and one of the survivors of the 2015 Ankara massacre. On 10 October 2015, a bomb killed more than a hundred people and left hundreds more injured, and many others traumatized by the horror that they witnessed. The attack targeted activists who had joined the Peace, Freedom, and Democracy Rally before the general elections that were due to be held that November. Organized by the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party in collaboration with professional chambers, civil society, and labor organizations such as the Turkish Association of Architects and Engineers (TMMOB), the Revolutionary Workers’ Union Confederation (DISK), and the Confederation of Public Employees’ Unions (KESK), the rally brought people from across Turkey to the capital. Fahriye lost that day friends and comrades who had been standing next to her. And she dances today in protests, refusing to cooperate with the state-sanctioned climate of fear. We talked after a demonstration where she had danced enthusiastically. The kicks were forceful in her dance; she

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lifted one leg from her bended knee and stomped it as if she was smashing the floor under the high heels of her shiny boots. Her untidy hair sometimes impaired her vision, particularly when she showed the step patterns to those in the semi-circle; but her dynamic leaps and skips with upright chest created a momentum that brushed her hair off her face. After this *horon*, she explained her movements to me, saying, "when I dance in that square, I feel I have freed all the birds that were stuck beneath my rib cage" (Istanbul, 13 April 2017).

Fahriye's words have stayed with me. Dancing exposes and intervenes in state coercion, regulation, isolation, and the uneven distribution of anxiety and punitive violence in the public sphere. It creates the possibility of collective joy and enables a politics of good feeling and hope, despite the pain and risk to which the bodies sharing the dance are exposed. As the protester stomps, kicks, shrugs her shoulders, laughs, and sways her hips enthusiastically, the birds imprisoned within her body may reach out to others and invoke the interconnectivity of wounded dancers in the public space of politics. Resilience can be collectivized when many dancers negotiate to find a common ground to express their lamentation, celebration, and frustration in dance circles.

Sharing Dance in Agonistic Politics

This article centered the testimonies provided by folk dancing activists in order to illustrate how dance encourages people to resist injustice, helps build communities, and provides alternative modes of expression in a context where other means of political protest, such as marches and mass public gatherings, are significantly suppressed. Sharing dancing demands interconnectivity and interdependency among dissenters against the state's strategy of individuation and isolation, thereby fostering mutual support and solidarity. Some key forms of this relationality that are developed during dancing include mentorship, leadership, gender dynamics, the making of the public space, and the circulation of emotions – these all essentially involving conflict and competition as well as cooperation. The feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2000) argues that these adversarial relationships are foundational for agonistic pluralism, a democratic form in which political groups relentlessly debate, fight, and compete with regard to their

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opinions and objectives. Unlike enemies who aim to exterminate each other, adversaries seek to develop a pluralist political practice based on dissensus and disagreement. This approach also distinguishes agonistics from liberals, the latter believing that they can solve problems through consensus, while always ending up excluding some groups. Whereas sharing is often seen as being part of such a consensual space, one in which diverse opinions can be expressed freely, this article has highlighted agonistic discussions and emphasized the relational and confrontational qualities of sharing.

The constant movement of the dancers activates forms of gathering and dispersing and shows the significance of dance in creating and reconfiguring the public space. In dance circles, protesters create familiarity, a sense of protection, and a safe space, while semi-circular formations allow passersby into the dance, who might be potential allies or enemies. Different directions of the gaze cast by dancers, the police, and audience members continuously look for people and objects to gain more information and better negotiate. Dissenting women undertake a restless struggle both with the state and within the dissenting group in order to carve out a space in this protest culture. Dancing in contemporary protests allows activists to challenge hegemonic body politics and also to assert their emotions, so that they can express their joy, grief, and anger at the same time. The embodiment of seemingly conflicting emotions points to the complex ways in which politics is tactically choreographed in protests.

Sharing a national history, a traditional dance, or dissenting politics is never free of power dynamics and struggles. Turkey's radical folk dance assemblies use conflict productively and creatively to advance interdependency and interconnectivity as non-violent forces, through which activists forge a coalitional politics in the face of oppression and political crisis.

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