1. Istanbul: Queer Desires Between Muslim Tradition and Global Pop

12 points

May 2005. It is hot, crowded and noisy. Everyone is singing, cheering, and dancing to the upbeat music from the huge screen. There is an overbearing sense of community with everybody drinking, sweating, and partying together. The atmosphere is charged with erotic energy. This is just a first impression, though. There is something strange about this picture.

I am in a bar in Istanbul—not so subtly called The Other Side[1]—surrounded mostly by men, mostly Turks, most in their early 20s. They are cheering for a song sung by a Greek performer: Helena Paparizou's "My Number One"—the 2005 winner of the Eurovision Song Contest. Greece was awarded the highest possible score of 12 points from multiple countries, including their Turkish neighbor. Why would a group of presumably exclusively gay men in a Turkish bar cheer for a Greek band, given the long-standing political animosity between the two nations and the fresh tension sparked by new controversies over Cyprus' role in Europe at the time? There is an easy answer: It is fun to be together, enjoy dance music, and flirt. But there is also a more intricate answer that needs additional explanation.

Growing up in Europe in the 1970s, it was a must for everyone to watch the Grand Prix Eurovision de la Chanson, as the annual Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) was called before its name was anglicized. Since its inception in 1956, the event has become a European institution, delineating one understanding of the European community. Originally with only seven participating countries, the contest has steadily grown, as has Europe. In 2012, 43 countries participated, making it necessary to divide the formerly one-night

1 The bar no longer exists.

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event into two semi-finals and a final. In the course of time, the field has included most Eastern European countries as well as countries disregarded as European in other contexts: Israel and Turkey—since 1973 and 1975, respectively—among the first, and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia among the later additions.[2] This can be seen as a means "of indicating a pro-European stance or a European affiliation" for these countries, often foreshadowing future membership in the EU (Motschenbacher 85). "Therefore," cultural historian Heiko Motschenbacher explains, "one can see the ESC as a musical test for what may lie ahead in politics. If certain countries can compete in a pop music competition, they may eventually try to cooperate on a political level" (86). For a long time, Turkey was without luck in the contest.

But a definite turning point for Turkey was the spectacular victory in May 2003, with many countries awarding it a full 12 points. After a quarter of a century of trying, and with much embarrassment, this was, as musicologist Thomas Solomon suggests, a "historical moment" (136). The failure to score points in the contest up to then has been perceived in Turkey "as an allegory of its aspirations to join the European Union and its frustratingly slow movement towards that goal, and proof of the perception, warranted or not, that Europeans do not accept Turkey as a European nation" (Solomon 136). The success of 2003 sparked new hope. Solomon makes a strong—not aesthetic, but political—claim that part of the sudden victory was due to Turkey's surprising opposition to the United States' wish for a military base in the southern region of Turkey as a point of invasion to northern Iraq. This resistance brought Turkey many sympathizers at a time of growing anti-war sentiment in continental Europe. But it was also Sertab Erener's song "Everyway that I can" with its hybrid musical aesthetics including English lyrics, Middle Eastern rhythms, and a mix of belly-dancing and hip-hop moves that "projected a Euro-friendly version of Turkey just at the time much of Europe was predisposed to be friendly with Turkey" (Solomon 145).[3]

So why did the gay crowd cheer for Helena Paparizou in that gay bar that evening? Certainly, there was an aesthetic point of comparison: "It seemed

2 For further developments of the ESC, see Poole, "Eurovision Song Contest."

3 As Matthew Gumpert states, "the ESC has *always* been a transparently political event, not only in the sense that singers are encouraged (according to the ESC rulebook) to reflect the national identity of the culture they represent, or in the way host nations use the opportunity (as they do at the Olympic Games) to export their own cultural capital, but in the voting process itself" (148).

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that Greece found the right combination of a solid pop song, English lyrics, and 'ethnic' stylings in its music and performance, comparable in many ways to Sertab's 2003 performance" (Solomon 143). But this only very partially explains the hurrahs of my gay Turkish friends. More obviously, there was Helena's "highly polished" stage performance that contrasted to Sertab's faux-harem machinations (O'Connor 182). Helena was surrounded by four gorgeous, bare-chested male dancers. These boys not only looked very gay but, judging from the enthusiasm of the bar's crowd, the whole song-and-dance number exuded a distinct gay sensibility, much more so than Sertab's performance.

Both songs became immensely popular in Turkey in general and in the gay scene in particular; they highlighted the lasting appeal of the ESC for a gay male audience (Feddersen 60-65). All over Europe, the event is followed by its gay fans who often gather for celebratory parties hosted in gay bars. The contest has been called "Gay Christmas," a sort of holiday not unlike Gay Pride celebrations (Wolter 139). But the ESC does not transcend nationality; "rather, Eurovision provides a rare occasion for simultaneously celebrating both queerness and national identity" (Rehberg 60). Istanbul is no exception here, and yet it is only recently that such parties have been organized as part of a growing community and an increasingly visible queer urban scene. Istanbul, although not the political capital of the country, can clearly be considered its queer capital. The queer moments just described certainly link Istanbul to the social practices of other European queer metropoles. Yet still, between its recently resurfacing Ottoman past and the political backlash that comes with it, and the momentarily arrested precarious move towards a future membership in the EU, the largest Turkish city remains very much entangled in the nation's overall struggle to find a distinct cultural identity. Proceeding from this example of a local gay cultural practice in Istanbul's gay bar scene I will look at the way understanding and treating homosexuality have evolved in the nation in general, and in the city in particular. Three majorly radical, transitional periods in Turkish history, namely the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the 1980 military coup d'état, and the Gezi protests will serve as a backdrop for a subsequent discussion of selected aspects of contemporary queer practice in Istanbul.

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Turkey's Transitional Periods: Kemalist Modernization, Military Coups, Queer Activism

Speaking about homosexuality in Turkey proves to be an endeavor charged with ambiguities and paradoxes. A secular nation modelled on Western legal standards, Turkey also remains a predominantly Muslim society. Turkish homosexuality is located at the crossroads of both East and West with strict religious traditions competing against the claims of a secular nation state, and nowhere is this more obvious than in Istanbul, a city that not only in geographical terms is precariously located right on the East-West divide. For an understanding of the current situation of homosexuals in Turkey, it is necessary to acknowledge the profound change that Kemalism, that is, the project of modernization launched by the republic's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the ensuing concept of Turkish citizenship brought along. Since this project was conceived to oppose everything that the traditions of the Ottoman Empire entailed, its nationalist agenda can also be understood in sexual terms since "sexuality, family relations, and gender identities came to occupy a central place in discourses about modernity" (Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern" 114).

With women having to discard their veils and move out into the public, both radical renunciations of the Ottoman separation of genders (Poole, "Kopftuch"), the forcefully modernized man also had to adapt to a changed sexual discourse. On the upside, this meant for a woman hitherto unknown access to sites of education and work, on the downside an increased monitoring of her virtue and honor. And as for the changing concepts of masculinity, the dissolution of gendered spheres did not come along with a loosening of strictly divided sexual identities. On the contrary, masculinity was and still is "generally regarded as superior to femininity. Those who seek to live up to the former are expected to be sexually active, initiate sex and penetrate female or feminine bodies" (Szulc 17).

Whereas formerly, and by way of the division of spheres, the stronghold of homosociality may at times have included clandestinely tolerated homosexual practices, now both men and women were called upon to share all spheres making same-sex interactions more difficult and indeed unwanted. Modelled after Western conceptions of heteronormativity, the Kemalist project literally left no queer spaces. Pointing to the Turkish Constitution's Article 66 of 1982 ("Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk"), communication theorist Lukasz Szulc pointedly claims: "Every citizen

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of Turkey is a (straight) Turk" (11), and human rights defender Hakan Ataman adds that the "Kemalist perception of citizenship therefore excludes LGBT people in Turkey" (131).

The military has seen it as one of its prime goals to uphold the Kemalist ideology, even though acting mostly in the background. But the three coups of 1960, 1971, and 1980 prove the willingness of the military to intervene in governmental states of affairs, if the generals decide that the Kemalist ideals are in danger of being forsaken. Of the three coups, the 1980 takeover, which resulted in three years of strict military rule, had the strongest effects on the LGBT community in urban centers such as Istanbul and Ankara. There were severe restrictions for anyone not adhering to the Kemalist ideal of Turkish citizenship and especially for those deemed morally deviant and defiant. After a growing liberation and visibility of gays and lesbians during the 1960s and 1970s, nightclubs in these cities were now shut down, burgeoning gay organizations were banned, and transsexuals were imprisoned.[4]

Due to these extreme measures, however, new social movements gradually started to emerge as soon as the elected government had taken over again in 1983, among which was the founding of professional LGBT organizations. In 1993, the first Gay Pride Week was initially permitted and then banned at the very last minute, resulting in the arrest of 28 foreign delegates; the massive protest of activists that followed led to the launching of the first two Turkish LGBT organizations: Lambda Istanbul in the same year and Kaos GL in Ankara a year later (Gecim). The first Gay Pride Week then was celebrated in 2003, and in 2004 the first Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, OutIstanbul, took place in Turkey's cultural capital. It was so heavily controlled by the police that, personally present at the event, it led me to wonder whether the police were meant to protect us from—nonexistent—protesting crowds, or whether we were being threateningly monitored by the police instead. Un-

4 Still today, the military considers it an obligation to safeguard the nation's morals (cf. Klauda 109-110; Thumann 216-217; Sinclair-Webb 69; Altinay 78-79). In its rules, homosexuality, transsexuality, and transvestism *(eşcinsellik, transseksüellik ve travestilik)* are considered 'profound psychic disturbances,' clearly not compatible with military service involving armed combat. As proof of these, the military requires medical and psychiatric reports, as well as photographs of the individual performing passive anal intercourse. These photos often 'miraculously' show up on the internet, causing an involuntary outing for many. See also Biricik; Baba.

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fortunately, the event discontinued,[5] and cineastes interested in the newest queer films again had to resort to the prestigious International Istanbul Film Festival İKSV, which for some time has included a fair share of such national and international productions. The still ongoing effort to 'cleanse' the morals of citizens led—among other things—to the effort to close Lambda Istanbul in 2008. The court decided that the existence of such an institution—in addition to not carrying a proper Turkish name—would infringe 'public morale' and the protection of family values. The Supreme Court of Appeals, however, overturned this order, and Lambda was allowed to continue operating, if under close scrutiny. On the whole, as Cenk Özbay asserts, "[g]ay life in the recent history of modern Turkey reached its peak in the early 2000s, followed by its eventual decline in terms of its visibility and diversity in social and physical spaces in the metropolitan areas" ("Same-Sex" 871). It was the period where gay—and some lesbian[6]—cafes, bars, and clubs opened, diverse media started positive coverage about queer life, and academic research was beginning to be published. Zülfukar Çetin stresses, however, that "[t]his development was only attributable to the EU accession process and did not indicate that the AKP [i.e. Justice and Development Party] had taken a tolerant policy toward queers" (6).

The 2013 Gezi protests mark a crucial hiatus in this development. The decision of Istanbul's city government to turn Taksim's Gezi Park into a shopping mall based on replica of Ottoman-era military barracks led to protests, which involved not only environmentally concerned civic activists, but also queer protesters contesting "attempts to redefine the park in neoliberal and heteronormative terms" (Erol 429). The privatization, renewal, and gentrification process of Beyoğlu, "the cosmopolitan core of not only Istanbul but also Turkey" (Atalay and Doan 113), and especially Beyoğlu's subdistricts Cihangir and Tarlabaşı, were part of the government's intrusive policies that precluded any influence of citizens over a possible restructuring of such a public urban space. This process not only disrespected basic democratic rights, but also the

5 In 2019, Turkey's queer film festival KuirFest, founded by trans women and sex workers in Ankara in 2011, for the first time opened in Istanbul (Hanson).

6 For the emergence of a separate lesbian social movement see Atalay and Doan, who have researched lesbian space and community building practices in Beyoğlu: "Beyogly and its subdistricts of Tarlabasi and Cihangir played a similar role for the Turkish LGBTQ community to that played by San Francisco and Greenwich Village, New York through their welcome of minorities, artists, as well as gays, lesbians, and the transgender community" (257).

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choice of diverse lifestyles, since Gezi Park was one of the few remaining open spaces which also served as a popular cruising area of the LGBT community, among them gay men, rent boys and trans prostitutes, as well as transgender and gay migrants. "Hence, when the park faced the threat of demolition for reasons similar to those that had recurrently displaced gays and trans women from neighborhoods such as Ülker Sokak, Tarlabaşı, and Harbiye [...] LGBTQ people made the threat to queer livelihoods a significant site of struggle for the Gezi movement" (Zengin).

The subsequent Gezi rallies started with environmental protesters setting up tents in the park, but after the violent eviction of these activists instantly erupted into a large-scale political demonstration, one of the largest and "perhaps the most significant democratic protest of the Turkish Republic's history" (Çıdam 369). The Pride Parade, held during the Gezi protests in 2013, gathered protestors and supporters from groups as diverse as Kurds, Armenians, Kemalists, and nationalists, who all showed solidarity with the LGBT community. The Gezi Park protests, therefore, created "a critical space for increasing the visibility of the LGBT activist movement" (Atalay and Doan 120) and the Pride Parades of 2013[7] and 2014, starting at Taksim Square by Gezi Park and continuing on Istiklal Street, reached record attendance before being banned in 2015. In the meantime, the Gezi Movement reached other parts of Turkey, and all but two of Turkey's eighty-one provinces held anti-government demonstrations, leading in turn to increasing levels of police violence. "That thousands of people across the country continued to participate in demonstrations, despite intimidation tactics, such as unofficial detentions, repeated use of sexual insults, threats of sexual violence, and excessive, punitive, and abusive force used by the law-enforcement officials—constituted one of the most extraordinary aspects of the Gezi park protests" (Çıdam 370-371).[8] The momentum of the protests paved the way for various activist groups making gendered, racial, and classed claims to public space and assembly, and queers took an effective role in this diversified activism (Özbay and Savcı 517-518).

The legacy of the Gezi protests continues even beyond the failed military coup attempt in July 2016 and the ensuing state of emergency which lasted until July 2018 and gave the government the right to investigate and punish

7 For the 2013 Pride Parade see Pearce's "Pride in Istanbul."

8 On this excessive, abusive police violence, see Amnesty International's report "Turkey: Gezi Park Protests."

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people involved in the attempted coup, although “many interpreted the ensuing crackdown as an opportunity to silence opposing views” (Zihnioğlu 15). In sum, Gezi gave rise to a shared experience, and even though the momentum of this activism may have faded, a new political discourse remained that still carries potential to “much needed acts of resistance” (Çıdam 390), given the current political climate in Turkey. The protests had a powerful impact, as one activist declares:

> [They] changed me, and thousands of others, for the better: we have got used to tear gas and are no longer afraid of water cannons, I have been reunited with friends I hadn't seen for years, met new and interesting people, given shelter to others, discovered Istanbul parks I didn't know existed, seen the inside of mysterious old buildings, learnt something about human rights, and persuaded my parents that when they hear words like “gays,” “lesbians,” and “transvestites” they need not be afraid. (Talay qtd. in Çıdam 391)

Sex Between Men: Ottoman Tradition and Turkish Everyday Life

Homosexuality as such is not prohibited by law in Turkey. Starting with the Ottoman Empire's adoption of the Napoleonic Code, and followed by the Turkish Penal Code of 1926—adapted from the Italian Penal Code—, homosexuality *de jure* has been decriminalized. It can be—and has been—argued, however, that the Western legal concept of decriminalization does not correspond to the Ottoman and later Turkish actual experience. “On the contrary,” claims Elif Ceylan Ozsoy, “the Ottomans introduced heavier punishments for the public display of same-sex intimacy in 1858” (20).[9] The practice of accusing homosexuals as offending “public morality” has been used to harass and intimidate LGBT people until present times: “For example, the purpose of the Law on Misdemeanors (no 5326, enacted on March 30, 2005) is defined in its first article

9 See also Engin and Özbarlas; Akman and Tütüncü; Görkemli, “From Queer Empire;” Yılmaz. For a Foucauldian reading of the shift from the fluidity of early, premodern Ottoman homoerotic *ars erotica* to an application of the Western discourse of homosexuality see Oguzhan, who argues that the “Muslim Middle East had slowly fallen under this discourse, as sexual behaviours were now controlled and regulated through ‘medical, legal and religious’ methods, demonstrating a slow, albeit eventual ‘discursive shift’ during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (133). For a similar argument see Ze'evi, *Producing Desire* 167-172; Ze'evi, “Hiding Sexuality;” Kinli.

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as: 'the protection of social order, public morality, public health, environment and economic order.' Although the law has no provisions against sexual orientation or different gender identities, it is frequently invoked to stop, search, arrest, and fine LGBT people for 'indecency' or 'disturbing public order'" (Arat and Nuñez 12).[10]

Nevertheless, there is another side to this history. Cenk Özbay concedes that "[i]t is difficult to say whether 50 years ago same-sex sexualities were freer in Turkey or nowadays they are more oppressed because it is almost impossible to fully grasp the clandestine nature of queer acts in the past" ("Same-Sex" 874). But he also argues that the radical transformations that took place after the founding of the new republic in 1923 kept everyone so busy that it opened a space for queers to flourish covertly. "Same-sex sexual activities," he writes, "became a significant part of the abject, invisible yet connived urban underground culture" ("Same-Sex" 870). Thus, there are many examples to offer insights into this queer subculture throughout the twentieth century and up to the present: the novels and stories of Sait Faik Abasıyanık, Bilge Karasu, Leyla Erbil, and Tezer Özlü; Zeki Müren's and later Bülent Ersoy's queer song careers; Vat 69 as the country's 'first gay bar' to open in 1975; gay authors of the 1990s such as Murathan Mungan, Küçük İskender, and Selim İleri;[11] and from the first commercial queer films of the 1980s such as Halit Refig's *Ihtiras firtinasi* (1984) to *Two Girls* (2007) by queer director Kutluğ Ataman and adapted from Perihan Mağden's novel as the first modern lesbian film to mainstream in Turkish popular culture.[12]

(Homo)sexual practices, gender norms and queer life in Istanbul cannot be viewed without taking into account the sexual customs at large which are still heavily influenced by their Muslim heritage. Since Islam is a religion based on a legal framework, there is no morality and sin in a Western, Christian sense, but rather the abidance or violation of laws. Accordingly, to act

10 See also "*We Need a Law*" 64-69; Muedini 66-91; Erdem 9-21; for an outline of major discriminatory practices against LGBT individuals and their resilience, e.g. regarding labor market, public life, health services, housing, military, and media, see Yenilmez; Kiliçaslan and Işik.

11 Other Turkish writers depicting queer sexuality include Demir Özlü, Ferit Edgü, Adalet Ağaoğlu, Attilâ İlhan, Ahmet Güntan, Mehmet Bilâl, Sadık Aslankara, Niyazi Zorlu, Ahmet Tulgar, Hülya Serap Doğaner, Tijen Kino, Sibel Torunoğlu, Zeynep Aksoy, Pınar Küzeci Orhan, Ayşe Kulin, Sema Kaygusuz and Yalçın Tosun (Tiftik; Erdman).

12 See Özbay, *Queering Sexualities* 11-21; for contemporary queer Turkish films see Özmen, Parlayandemir, and Çöteli; Erdem; Hanson.

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ethically for Muslims means compliance with the Sharia, which constitutes "divine law, which is, in theory, immutable—Muslim society is required to adapt to it, and not the other way around" (Sofer, 132).[13] And while the Sharia is not the directly enforceable law in Turkey, the common understanding of law and injustice is nevertheless largely associated with the older, traditionalist Islamic legal order.[14] With respect to sexuality, this implies that a sexual act can only be performed between legitimate persons. From a legal-Islamic perspective, homosexuality is fornication, *zina*, because it is defined as illegitimate and thus illegal penetration (Ghadban, "Historie" 52, 55). And yet, according to many records, 'pederasty'—the term given to male-to-male sexuality—in Muslim regions was known at least since the eighth century and almost always tolerated as a social practice. How can we account for this seeming paradox?

Muslim societies have a long tradition of erotic relations between males, which was not criminalized. Homoerotic poetry describing passionate love was common at least until the nineteenth century,[15] and pederasty or "boy-love" was acceptable because "like eunuchs, adolescent boys were also lacking

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13 See Massad (356-371) for a scathing critique of the views on "Arab and Muslim desires" of scholars such as Jehoeda Sofer and Stephen O. Murray. However, I do not share Massad's reservations.

14 There is still dire need for research on the relation of Islam and homosexuality, and thus on, as Sabine Schmidtke puts it, one of the "least understood aspects of Islamic civilizations" (265). However, as some of the recent publications I mention here document, this "closed subject of enquiry" (Schmidtke 261) has recently begun to open up, partly through the growing interest in migrant identities in countries such as the Netherlands and Germany. Two important German publications of the early 2000s were *Homosexualität und Islam. Koran, islamische Länder, Situation in Deutschland* (Homosexuality and Islam: Quran, Islamic Countries, Situation in Germany, eds. Bochow and Marbach, 2003) and *Muslime unter dem Regenbogen. Homosexualität, Migration und Islam* (Muslims under the Rainbow: Homosexuality, Migration, and Islam, ed. LSVD Berlin-Brandenburg e. V., 2004). Both volumes evolved from the rise of queer studies and gay political activism, and include chapters on the situation of gay men in Turkey as well as on gay German-Turks. Both collections were still 'outside' accepted academic traditions at the time and published in book series predominantly addressing a queer audience, but have lost their marginal status in the meantime due to a further influx of research on related topics. On queer Turks, especially regarding migration, see also Vida Bakondy et al.'s compilation *Gook Luck! Migration Today: Vienna, Belgrade, Zagreb, Istanbul*; Yener Bayramoğlu's "Border Panic."

15 See Murray on boy-love poetry and transvestite dance traditions; see also chapter 2 on hamam practices.

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in 'defining skills of males'" (Rehman and Polymenopoulou 28). The public visibility of sodomy, however, as the act of anal intercourse between two men was prohibited and severely punished. Even though the Qur'an does not specifically mention sodomy and prescribe punishment for sexual relations between men, Muslim countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen even today have death penalty codified and implemented under Sharia law (Mendos 201-202).[16] The concern of human rights violations and protection against discrimination has not yet found its way into the official belief systems of these countries.[17] In many strictly traditionalist Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia there are still strong homophilic traditions that allow premarital and sometimes even extramarital sexual activities between men due to the strict social segregation of the sexes. But this cultural practice can by no means be called homosexuality in our Western understanding. For these countries, the idea of homosexuality remains inextricably linked with that of Western decadence. And it seems that the more these countries interact with and are influenced by Western culture, the more rigid the control of Islamic law becomes in order to counteract a possible weakening of Islamic traditions. These mea-

16 Afghanistan's criminal code has a "possible" death penalty for same-sex intercourse (Mendos 200), but given the most recent events of August 2021 with the Taliban taking over the country and its government, this might change for the worse.

17 This could be seen, for example, in the attempt in 2003 to submit for the first time in the history of global organizations a legislative proposal to the UN Commission for Human Rights, which combines "sexual orientation and human rights" and "calls all governments to promote and protect the human rights of people, regardless of their sexual orientation" (IGLHRC 5). The proposal was drafted by Brazil and rejected by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, formerly the Organization of Islamic Conference), an organization to which all Muslim-majority countries, including Albania and Turkey, belong. In view of the threat of economic sanctions by the OIC, a second attempt was also rejected in 2004 (cf. Klein et al. 39-40). In 2011, finally, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution to document "discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity" (Human Rights Council 1). This counts as the first time that any United Nations body approved a resolution affirming the rights of LGBT people. The ensuing report confirmed, for instance, that "[s]eventy-six countries retain laws that are used to criminalize people on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity" (Human Rights Council 13), and that "[i]n at least five countries the death penalty may be applied to those found guilty of offences relating to consensual, adult homosexual conduct" (Human Rights Council 15).

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sures certainly only reflect a particularly drastic form and application of the Sharia, i.e. the Islamic law, as it emerges from the Qur'an and the Hadith.[18]

In Arabic and Muslim countries as well as in Turkey, active and passive sexual roles are the constituting paradigm of masculinity and femininity.[19] Homo- and heterosexuality are thus defined not so much by a concrete choice of object, but rather by sexual practices. Arno Schmitt describes this gendered logic as follows: "Men consider themselves to be stronger physically, intellectually, and morally, and be able to control instinct and emotion—unlike women, children [...] and transvestites. [...] It is the right of men to penetrate and their duty to lie on top" (2-3). A derogatory view on male homosexuality therefore relates predominantly to men who engage in receptive anal intercourse, whereas insertive anal intercourse is not considered defamatory for

18 According to traditional commentators, Islam's ban on homosexuality goes back to the Qur'an. In fact, however, the story of Lot only contains hints when it says: "And (remember) Lût (Lot), when he said to his people: 'Do you commit the worst sin such as none preceding you has committed in the *'Âlamîn* (mankind and jinn)? Verily, you practice your lusts on men instead of women. Nay, but you are a people transgressing beyond bounds (by committing great sins).' [...] And We rained down on them a rain (of stones). Then see what was the end of the *Mujrimûn* (criminals, polytheists and sinners)" (*The Noble Qur'an* 7: 80-81, 84). More recent, less traditionalist commentators point out, in clear contradiction to their conservative colleagues, that the Qur'an does not explicitly speak of sex and certainly not of homosexuality, pederasty or even sodomy. There is also no threat of punishment. The explicit prohibition, including punitive measures, only appears in the Hadith, where the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed were collected centuries after his death and thus after the writing of the Qur'an. It is therefore doubtful to what extent the compilation actually goes back to Mohammed in each individual case. The Hadith, however, remains so important for Islamic law because the Qur'an itself contains few legal provisions. The relevant passage in the Hadith speaks of damnation as well as killing, stoning, throwing from a mountain, or even burning of the *lutis*, i.e. the sodomites (see Mohr 13-25; Ahmadi, 551-555; Rehman and Polymenopoulou 9-18; Muedini 9-28; *Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project* 36-38; Wafer). Sofer, furthermore, points out that the regulations of penal measures are extremely strict and codified, and there also is severe punishment for unproven accusation: "Only oral testimony by eye witnesses is admitted. Four trustworthy Muslim men must testify that they have seen 'the key entering the key hole' or the culprit must confess four times" (132).

19 Bereket and Adam write that Turkey shares this traditional sex/gender order with Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Latin American regions, "where male-male sexual relations are expected to embody a gendered division between an inserter partner (*aktif*) considered 'masculine' and a receptive partner (*pasif*) who is expected to show some aspect of the feminine gender in behavior, voice, or dress" (131).

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the active partner (Bochow, "Junge schwule Türken" 172). 'Gay'—or Turkified as 'gey'[20]—generally defines the one who takes this role. His social depreciation relates above all to his betrayal of the masculine ideal. In contrast, the active male may even gain admiration because he has proven his masculinity without a proper external 'object of desire' (Ghadban, "Gescheiterte Integration" 223). The more recent model of the masculine, butch gay man does not qualify for this conceptualization, as his sexual identity is considered to be largely based on Western standards and thus on the customs of the urban, young, educated middle class (Tapinc 39-40). Mehmet Ümit Necef also confirms that the notion of 'homosexuality' basically is a Western import, whereas traditionally there is a distinction according to sexual roles between *kulanpara* (from Persian meaning "fucker of boys") and *ibne* (73). The practice of hate speech, for example, shows that *ibne* does not invariably signal homosexual behavior but is an appearance that lacks male sovereignty, similar to "fag," "pansy," or "pussy" in English. *Ibne* means "being fucked" in a rhetorical-symbolic way, in the sense of being unmanly and impotent, but also more generally of not being able to offer resistance (Bochow, "Junge schwule Türken" 175). This means that a colloquial threat like "I fuck you" ("Ich ficke dich" in German—where it is frequently used among young Turks), implies the willingness to fight coupled with a confidence of victory as documented in Hermann Tertilt's ethnographic study on youth gangs, *Turkish Power Boys* (1996). In general, of the 80 entries in the contemporary Turkish vocabulary that allude to same-sex sexuality, only ten refer to female homosexuality and only five to men as active partners in sexual intercourse, whereas more than 50 terms refer to men letting themselves be 'penetrated' by other men thus indicating again a cultural preoccupation with the putatively emasculated male (Günay 126).

Today, it is still difficult for young unmarried Muslim men—and thus not only for women—to live alone outside the parents' home, because this would

20 The coinage of 'gey' as well as 'aktif' and 'pasif' can be seen as ironic indebtment to the English language (Bereket and Adam 133), but in the case of 'gey' also as a trend to counter the derogatory words such as *ibne*, *eşcinsellik*, *homoseksüel*, or *lubunya* and thus "asserting homosexual interest ostensibly devoid of the effeminacy" (137). On the global usage of the term MSM—men who have sex with men—that starting in the 1980s—and at first predominantly in the context of the AIDS pandemic—was used "to describe the reality that many men have sex with each other without any sense of homosexual identity" (Altman et al. 443) see Mizielinska and Kulpa 103; Bereket and Adam.

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violate the family's honor and the absolute authority of the father (Bochow, "Sex unter Männern" 105). Therefore, the common social practice in Muslim countries calls for heterosexual marriage as the favored way to bypass impeding marginalization. In moderate, Europeanized families, many of which live in Istanbul, it is now more common for young unwed men to live alone outside of the parental home. But still, a son's announcement of being gay nonetheless often leads to an appointment with a therapist. This practice is common across the country, but especially prevailing in a metropolis like Istanbul and supported by the Turkish psychiatry that is known to be overly conservative (Thumann 213; Oksal 514; *"We Need a Law"* 89-91; Günay 124; Bochow, "Junge schwule Türken"). Homosexuality thus continues to be considered a passing phase or sickness that may be overcome with professional help (Günay 124; Kiliç and Uncu 205-206).[21] The situation for lesbian women is even less encouraging. Some efforts by lesbian activists notwithstanding, who in the 1990s founded organizations such as Sappho'nun Kızları (Sappho's Girls) and Venus'un Kızkardeşleri (The Sisters of Venus), lesbianism remains almost completely invisible in public life; there is currently, for example, only one bar in Istanbul addressing a specific lesbian clientele, Bigudi Club, "the first ever exclusively lesbian venue opened in Turkey" ("Bigudi Club").[22] Transvestism and transsexuality, on the other hand, have a long tradition that differs substantially from Western understandings. The Ottoman sultans, for instance, kept young dancers (*köçekler*), who performed in woman's clothes and could

21 A murder case from 2009, called "the first gay honor killing in Turkey" (Bilefsky; see also Ataman 138), therefore is a case in point. Ahmet Yildiz, who lived openly as a gay man in Istanbul and was the first 'Mr. Bear' to represent Turkey at the International Bear Rendezvous in San Francisco in 2007, was shot by his father, who had urged him to return to their village to see a doctor and imam for a 'cure.' While this may or may not be a single case depending on the number of unreported cases, there were as many as 11 killings of transgender people registered in 2008-2009 alone, mostly in Istanbul and Ankara, and they must be regarded as hate crimes even though police officials claim: "A person is not killed because they [sic] are homosexual, it is because of other things" (qtd. in *Turkey: Pride and Violence*). Furthermore, while at least some of these murderers were caught, they are usually facing a lower sentence due to the claim of being 'provoked' under Article 29 of the Turkish Criminal Code.

22 See also the collegiate student association Legato, an acronym for Lezbiyen ve Gey Topluluğu (Lesbian and Gay Association), that first was launched in Ankara in the 1990s and then reached out across the country now being Turkey's largest LGBT organization and explicitly including lesbian images and stories on their webpage and print fanzine, published in Istanbul (Görkemli, "Gender Benders").

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also be part of the sultan's harem (Janssen 84).[23] The term "köçek" is still being used instead of the foreign word "transseksüel" that is much more associated with a preceding, underlying male identity.

Certainly, coming out still remains an extremely painful, if not impossible act for many queer Turks and likely to lead to suffering from discrimination, disrespect, low self-esteem, internalized homophobia, paranoia, melancholia, unemployment, violence, or forced loneliness, amongst other symptoms (Özbay, *Queering Sexualities* 5; Eslen-Ziya and Koc). That was true even during the queer peak period, i.e. the early 2000s, before the ongoing backlash began. The Turkish-Kurdish human rights lawyer from Istanbul, Eren Keskin,[24] for example, reported in a Human Rights Watch interview in 2003 of increasing attacks on gays, lesbians and especially transsexuals in Turkey. She received complaints about brutal assaults and arbitrary arrests by the police, especially in Ankara, Bursa, Istanbul and Mersin. "We live in a society," says Keskin, "in which police power is very great, and militaristic. Police and military—they take homosexuality as a vice. This is why people who are homosexual face a great deal of violence" (qtd. in *"We Need a Law"* 33). At the same time, there have been openly gay Turks in Istanbul who can freely admit to their sexual orientation in both their professional and private lives. Gay bars and clubs were then and still are crowded at nights and on weekends. Pride events and marches have been held since 1993, although under continued threat of violent police measures and bans.[25] All of this means that an expanding subculture has gained greater public visibility[26] and acceptance—with a record high of 50% of the population supporting LGBT equality in 2020, according to

23 More on such *köçekler* in the next chapter.

24 Keskin received amongst other awards the 2001 Amnesty International Human Rights Award (German Section), the 2004 Aachen Peace Award, the 2005 Theodor Haecker Prize for Civil Courage and Political Integrity, the 2005 Hrant Dink Award, the 2018 Helsinki Civil Society Award. Most recently, she was an honorary finalist of the Martin Ennals Awards for Human Rights Defenders but could not receive the award in person due to the travel ban imposed by the Turkish authorities ("Martin Ennals Award").

25 For the ban on the 19th Pride March in Istanbul in 2021 see "Turkey: Recurrent Instances."

26 This can also be seen in the media where celebrated singers and actors for a long time may not have been 'out' but neither have they been especially closeted (cf. Kolat, "Islam" 206). More on some of these singers, especially the pop singer Tarkan, in the last chapter.

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ILGA—, but is still subject to state-controlled surveillance, hate speech incidents, anti-LGBT crimes, and censorship measures (ILGA Europe). Above all, these developments towards a greater queer public visibility and acknowledgment clearly distinguishes Turkey from other countries with a predominantly Muslim population, where "homosexuality is typically perceived as forbidden, or *haram*" (Polymenopoulou) leading to homosexuals being legally suppressed, persecuted, tortured and executed to a far greater extent.[27]

Scholars such as Tarik Bereket and Barry Adam speak of globalized syncretic notions of gayness in the case of male gay Turkish men, who "are adapting, but also selecting, imported ideas of modern gay discourse and Western identity politics into their way of conceiving or re-conceiving themselves" (146). 'Traditional' and 'modern' forms of male same-sex bonding coexist, intersect, and even fuse giving credence to Turkey's geographical placement in both Europe and the Middle East and its "long tradition of cross-cultural dialogue, migration, tourism, and cultural appropriations" (Bereket and Adam 146). Accordingly, the claim to being 'gay' for many Turkish men may signify the wish to assert personal freedom and the agency to live 'beyond the closet.' For others, however, to identify as gay still is in conflict with the privileges

27 In 2019, there are still reported cases of gay men being hanged in Iran and tortured and beheaded in Saudi Arabia, but even in Turkey activists risk their lives and personal safety (Polymenopoulou). See for human rights violations in countries such as the Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Iran Gundermann and Kolb; Klein et al; Marschner and Klein. The 2018 Human Rights Watch report *Audacity in Adversity* documents LGBT activism in the Middle East and North Africa where "laws across the region are far from uniform, although in most countries, same-sex acts between consenting adults in private are treated as a criminal offense" (n.p.). On torture, specifically, see the series of Human Rights Watch reports *Dignity Debased*; *"It's Part of the Job;" "They Hunt Us Down for Fun;" "They Want Us Exterminated;"* and *In a Time of Torture.*

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that a hegemonic masculinity offers in a socially stratified gender system.[28] Furthermore, the factor social class is relevant since being gay "has a certain middle and upper class connotation in the Turkish vernacular" (Özbay, "Same-Sex" 872) and entails certain ways of utilizing cultural capital and mastering symbolic codes. Özbay mentions the example of "varos" as originally negatively connoted term for masculine, straight-acting, working-class men with same-sex sexual affinities, which in Turkish gay slang has been transformed into a word that "also highlights robust virility and an authentic, uncontaminated masculinity" ("Same-Sex" 872). "Lubunya" in contrast refers to a lower-class person with a more effeminate style and is more readily acknowledged by the public as a variant of transvestite and transsexual behavior known from popular transgender singers. Accordingly, class for queers in Turkey, argues Özbay, "is deeply intertwined with desires that govern one's bodily presentations, gendered acts and the modes of interpretation that affect how homosexual subject [sic] relate to other people" (*Queering Sexualities* 19).

Emrecan Özen describes such sexual codes in a campy way. In an internet tourist guide catering to gay male patrons, he 'warns' Western tourists visiting Istanbul thus: "For some hetero men, a gay arse is the next best thing if they cannot find a woman that night! With these types, you've got nothing to do if you're looking for a long and versatile session—your only chance is to spread the legs and try and enjoy yourself till he cums." It is not easy to tell whether trendy youngsters in the gay—friendly—bars of Beyoğlu are just playing it cool—and queer—showing off their muscled-up bodies, or whether straight-looking bears drinking beer in Tekyön are later up for the transvestites of Sahra Bar, "[a] perfect example of Istanbul's underground LGBT culture" ("Sahra Club"), where it is just as likely to be ripped off by some

28 Massad in his critique of the liberatory project of human rights groups goes as far as to claim that the "so-called passive homosexual," who is defended by such associations as ILGA against social denigration, precisely "will fall victim to legal and police persecution as well as heightened social denigration as his sexual practice becomes a topic of public discourse that transforms it from a practice into an identity" (384-385). In contrast, Özbay and Soybakis in their account highlight the ways "Erdogan signifies the current Islamist hegemonic masculinity in Turkey" (33), and they show how Erdoğan's 'Neo-Ottoman' authoritarianism "in the political field presents at the same time a gender hegemony based on a highly masculinized public sphere, Islamized and nationalized (as anti-Western and anti-modern) cultural domain, 'conservative' family-oriented policies, and the sex-segregated social life" (33).

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sleazy pimp as it is to be offered money by an eager patron. Trusting appearances may likely lead to comic misunderstandings, harsh disappointments, or more serious trouble.[29]

Istanbul at Night: Queer Literature, Arabesk Music, and Gay Bars

At night in Istanbul's party district, Beyoğlu, you can see transvestites walking on Tarlabaşı Street, as well as in Cihangir, around Taksim Square, and along the side streets of İstiklal Avenue, all of which comprise the traditional Western-Christian bohemian neighborhoods of Beyoğlu. In this area, there are most gay bars and clubs, some with darkrooms. It is also the area of prostitution, especially for men seeking transsexual partners.[30] Therefore, this group has specifically been the target of policing. Since it is very difficult for transgender people to find regular employment and even licensed bordellos are closed to them, most earn money as street workers and are thus easy prey for police harassment, blackmailing, arrests and abuse.[31] By contrast, Russell Ivy, studying gay travel patterns, finds Istanbul a particularly interesting example of a place "with a modest build-up of gay infrastructure" that serves as an "island" "surrounded by a region with little to no gay infrastructure" (353). Istanbul has been hailed as the queer capitol of Turkey and it arguably

29 If one looks at everyday experiences in sexual encounters, it is indeed very easy (at least as a Western man) to have sex with Turkish men, even if these men would usually not call themselves 'gay.' Lesbian sexuality, on the other hand, remains a completely invisible phenomenon in public life. Thus, while a queer community in a contemporary Western sense still does not exist in a broadly recognized social space, the practice of hidden homosexuality and the highly marginalized and stigmatized scene of transvestism and transsexuality have long persisted.

30 For a recent butching up of gay street prostitution with rent boys showing off an exaggerated masculinity, see Özbay, "Nocturnal Queers" as well as his more comprehensive study *Queering Sexualities*.

31 This state-sanctioned homophobia means gay bashers act with impunity as is documented, for instance, in the report *Human Rights Violations of LGBT Individuals in Turkey* by Kaos GL, LGBTI News Turkey, and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2014. See also Engin as well as the Human Rights Watch report on Turkey "*We Need a Law for Liberation*" (2008) and its follow-up *Turkey: Pride and Violence* (2009) as well as the newest reports of Amnesty International ("Turkey 2020") and Human Rights Watch ("Turkey: Events of 2019").

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is the second most important queer location in Eastern Europe after Mykonos, Greece. Therefore, Istanbul can be perceived as the most important queer city in the Muslim world.

A pop cultural case in point reflecting such vagaries of queer Istanbul is Mehmet Murat Somer's 'Hop-Çiki-Yaya' thriller series.[32] This crime series set in contemporary Istanbul features an unnamed transvestite amateur sleuth, who, made-up as a flamboyant drag queen "with an Audrey Hepburn alter-ego" ("Mehmet Murat Somer"), manages an underground transvestite bar at night while by day—and clad in all-male attire—he runs a lucrative hacker business. Turkish author Somer explains the series' title in an interview: "Hop-Çiki-Yaya was a cheerleading chant from Turkish colleges in the early 1960s, and it came to be used in comedy shows to mean gays. If somebody was queenish, then they'd say 'Oh, he's Hop-Çiki-Yaya.' By the 1970s, it wasn't being used anymore—so I brought it back" (qtd. in Wiegand). What is most interesting is that this character, although ostensibly a transvestite and homosexual in the sense that s/he desires men and defies given gender norms, highlights the flexibility of such norms through temporal and spatial anchors. Whether on the hunt in Westernized liberal Beyoğlu, the queer hub of the city, or investigating in the visibly more Muslim Eminönü, the former center of Constantinople, s/he moves about the city effortlessly crossing the gendered East-West divide.[33]

If one compares this hero/ine to British author Barbara Nadel's Istanbul inspector Çetin İkmen, the difference becomes strikingly obvious. Similar to Somer's *The Prophet Murders*, in Nadel's ninth novel of her Çetin İkmen-detective series, *A Passion for Killing* (2007), homosexuals fall prey to a serial killer on a moral crusade. But whereas Nadel's shabby, middle-aged, chain-smoking and hard-drinking detective could be said to emblemize a variant of a (stereo)typical Turkish heterosexual male, Somer's multifaceted and flashy

32 There are seven novels, five of which have been translated into English so far: *The Kiss Murder* (2009, orig. *Buse Cinayetleri*, 2003), *The Prophet Murders* (2008, orig. *Peygamber Cinayetleri*, 2002), *The Gigolo Murder* (2009, orig. *Jigolo Cinayetleri*, 2003), *The Serenity Murders* (2012, orig. *Huzur Cinayetleri*, 2004), *The Wig Murders* (2014, *Peruklu Cinayetler*, 2011), *Ajda'nın Elmasları* (2013), and *Kade'in Peşinde* (2009).

33 Somer is well aware that his books may not sit well with every Turkish reader. His initial struggle to find a publisher and then being represented by the prestigious Iletisim company, which also publishes Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, for Sonnet are signs that he needs "Iletisim's stamp of approval" to protect his books "from a hostile reception" (qtd. in Wiegand).

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hero/ine is nothing like any such stereotype. Somer names Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar as his model and likewise spices his novels with social commentary in the form of satiric comedy, something joyous like "champagne or bubblegum" (qtd. in Wiegand). Instead of presenting transvestites in a stereotypically negative way "as either slapstick fun material or potential criminals [...], doomed to be street hookers but nothing else, with almost no moral values" ("Mehmet Murat Somer"), Somer writes against the moral grain to create a complex, contradictory, and highly likeable character and narrator with witty, yet intriguing social insights. In *The Gigolo Murder*, for example, the narrator teams up with yet another drag queen, Ponpon, in a Holmes-and-Watson-like transvestite coupling. Ruminating about the next investigatory step, the narrator stops to think over the situation: "What on earth would we do if the police, intelligence officers, Interpol, and all the others caught up to us? Either we'd be quietly locked away in an undisclosed location or our names would be released to the press. We'd be disgraced and scapegoated, and they'd be baying for our blood. My personal life, which I'd carefully kept just that all these years, would be dredged up. Society's most feverish suspicions about my dubious character would be confirmed [...]" (121). In this novel, the narrator's double life, complicated enough as it is, gets further entangled in an intricate web of homophobia, family honor, the nouveaux riches, and sexual desire. Alluding both to Turkish society's apprehensions concerning queers and to Turkey's notoriously bad reputation concerning policing tactics and prison conditions, the narrator succeeds in acknowledging and satirizing this "in-depth view of life in a transvestite community," as Jessica Moyer writes about *The Prophet Murders*. And it is modern-day—or arguably night—Istanbul which, as reviewer Kat Dawson states, "provides a fantastic playground for this humorous page-turner to unfold within" ("Galley Talk"). In this novel, the sassy amateur detective investigates cases in which the victims are all transvestites who bear the names of Islamic prophets. "The book is not as successful as a whodunit and the mystery is less than gripping," writes a blogger in his review of the novel, but maintains that "the story of these marginalized men who love to dress as women yet still know how to be men in a culture where being out and proud can lead to imprisonment and even execution is the most fascinating part of the book" (Norris). All of Somer's novels center around the world of marginalized queers and through the lens of the trans narrator many topical issues such as bigotry, fundamentalist Islamic beliefs, scapegoating people, and precarious existence are addressed.

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As could be seen in Turkey's victory at the ESC that installed Sertab Erener as a national heroine who 'conquered Europe,' music has played a crucial role in the self-definition of the Turkish nation state as well as in the self-fashioning of various groups including queer audiences (Gumpert 147). Arabesk in particular is a musical style that is closely connected to Turkey's recent national and cultural history. Besides its immense and at times subversive power, which is mostly at odds with the state-regulated efforts to forge a common national identity, Arabesk also pays tribute to a questioning of how to situate an overwhelmingly popular and socially pervasive music genre within the discourse of globalized pop music. Sertab Erener's performance at the Eurovision Song Contest, for example, used elements of Arabesk and it proved to be the formula for international success. Indeed, perhaps Arabesk poses the greatest potential for thinking about how queerness functions in contemporary Istanbul, blending together gay, straight and queer elements and providing an opportunity for subversion through tradition instead of against it.

As a cultural practice, Arabesk was always quintessentially queer, blurring high and low, modern and traditional elements, and emerging on the scene from the fringes of the city during the 1950s and 1960s, where the traditional habits of immigrants from predominantly impoverished southeast Anatolian—mostly Kurdish—rural areas blended with contemporary urban lifestyles (cf. Stokes 213). From the very start, and given Turkey's Kemalist ideology, Arabesk's foreignness and alienness—its 'Arabic' style[34]—could not easily be assimilated and it posed a threat to the politics of the Turkish nation state in general and Istanbul in particular. In suggestive sexual metaphors, Alev Çınar remarks that the notion of the "provincial other" as "the alien infesting the city" has created personifying depictions of Istanbul as a beleaguered place suffering from corruption, alienation and degeneration; it is "open to penetration and destruction, a place that is defenseless in the face of the modernizing and Westernizing influences of the secular state" (386).

On the whole, Arabesk has remained in the stronghold of a masculine culture that "is strongly associated with mustaches, masculine friendship, and *rakı*-drinking, cigarette-smoking rituals" (Özbek 223). Nevertheless, the longstanding 'Othering' of Arabesk singers as well as the melodramatic lyrics of

34 Etymologically, the adjective 'arabesk' or 'arabesque' derives from the "French, from Italian *arabesco* Arabian in fashion, from *arabo* Arab, from Latin *Arabus*" (<www.merriam-webster.com>).

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their songs have put these male performers in a somewhat ambiguous category of masculinity. The considerable popularity of transsexual performers in this genre further adds to the complexity of body politics that characterizes Arabesk in general. Despite the queerness of the practice, it could still be quite a precarious existence for performers. Following the 1980 military coup, the restrictive politics included a policing of Arabesk music and films that in turn resulted in the exile of stars like transsexual Bülent Ersoy, to pick an especially notorious and famous example.

Ersoy's cult status within the Arabesk community was the effect of various factors, amongst which her transsexuality was certainly a principal one. She had to face a fierce fight against the government's refusal to legally recognize her as a woman after the sex reassignment surgery in London in 1981—such operations were illegal in Turkey at the time—and as a consequence was forced into exile in Germany, where she successfully pursued her career for the next years. In 1988, she returned because a new Turkish Civil Code now included an amendment for male-to-female post-operative transgender people to obtain the 'pink card' to certify their new gender. Keeping to her rather male first name Bülent, Ersoy's career flourished as a female performer in Turkey.[35]

Although the change in legislation—in part the result of Ersoy's court case—seemed fairly progressive, this did not necessarily improve the situation for transgender people but brought on different problems, instead. They were now facing the pressure to eliminate any gender ambiguity, which in turn often resulted in "potential medical malpractice" (Kandiyoti, "Pink Card Blues" 279). Adhering to a hegemonically structured and strictly dichotomous gender system, a male-to-female transsexual like Ersoy was more likely to be considered an aberrant woman thus simply ignoring her former biological male sex. In consequence, 'coming out' for many queers has resulted in 'corrective' surgical procedures, as can be seen in many cases from Istanbul's transgender scene. The ambiguous fascination with transsexuals that affect the public undoubtedly has helped to solidify Ersoy's iconic stardom. Indeed, her highly visible career—particularly as Arabesk singer—says a lot of the persistence of identity issues in a society that is "strangely composite" and as such unwillingly "appropriating and incorporating into its closed circle what does

35 For a renewed effort in changing and thus liberalizing the Civil and Penal Code see the publication by Women for Women's Human Rights as well as Sahika et al., "Group Psychotherapy."

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not fit into the existing scheme of things" (Öncü, "Global Consumerism" 186, see also Öncü, "Istanbulites" 115).

A different, internationally even more celebrated example of how Arabesk has been queered in the last years is Tarkan. The Turkish singer, who for years has been one of country's most prominent pop exponents and exports, mixes belly-dance, rap, break-dance, Turkish classical music and Western pop. In 2006, he released his first all-English album *Come Closer*, produced in the United States, thus aiming, with his music style, dance performance, and star image, to join the global market forces. Like Sertab Erener in her ESC act, Tarkan "attempts to steer a middle course between the Scylla of Western pop music and the Charybdis of 'traditional' Turkish music" (Gumpert 151). Tarkan, a child of Turkish *Gastarbeiter* in Germany, is but one—albeit very visible—example of a booming popular culture in Turkey, centered in Istanbul's clubbing scene, but present through various media in virtually every household throughout the country. In different ways than Ersoy's migratory career, Tarkan's binational background speaks of migrant politics due to transnational economics. From a Western perspective, he can be perceived as a thoroughly Westernized and highly sexualized Orient-export. Yet his music is actually rooted in the Turkish tradition of Arabesk culture that is historically and geographically locatable as non-Western.

As I will elaborate in my last chapter, Tarkan in his videos amply alludes to Oriental belly-dancing thus precariously fashioning himself into a representation of an 'Oriental Other.' This in turn brings him in risky vicinity of feminized, exoticized and colonial notions of the Orient, which is mostly associated with sexually attractive and available women, but does not exclude men. More than other Arabesk singers, Tarkan situates himself within a cultural context of the Middle East, where belly dancing, for example, has long been both a social—or folk—practice as well as a profession performed by women *and* men alike (Shay 70, 82; Mansbridge 22). Thus, even though the dancer would be recognizable as a biological male, his gender affiliation remained questionable for the cultural outsider. From this external viewpoint, the male dance was scandalous because of his dubious sexual allure as seemingly being 'available,' yet remaining frivolously aloof.

But Tarkan in the way he styles his body and lets it move resorts to a particular Western discourse of double entendre: he covertly uses a second language that is queerly coded. For a long time, gossip has circulated within the gay community—both in Istanbul's clubbing scene as well as abroad—that enjoys to believe in the 'open secret' of Tarkan's gayness. As part of and participant

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in this queer discourse that covers *and* reveals simultaneously, I take it that Tarkan deliberately mixes musical genres of different cultures as well as creates hybrid body images. In this way, his body represents a terrain upon which the gender and sexual conflicts in modern Turkey play themselves out, in a highly spatialized fashion. In this way, Tarkan signifies the cultural dilemma where "gay men are forced to resort to re-appropriation, *bricolage*" (Amico 369) when attempting to imitate 'straight' society. Tarkan's local success and global appeal are markers not least of a transnational queer community that fosters a shared bond of common knowledge. This is manifest in the transnationality of the Eurovision Song Contest, but characteristic of the versatility of queer culture at large. The worldwide fandom of the ESC forges an "imagined queer community" (Rehberg 60), which also manifests itself through the very concrete and physical experience of partying together at the ESC celebration in the gay bar in Istanbul where I myself was present. "Queer culture," Michael Warner claims, "has found it necessary to develop this knowledge in mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising." These sites are mobile, not easy to recognize, and yet full of potential, and in Istanbul in particular, are as "fragile and ephemeral" (Warner 202) as ever.

This notwithstanding, with Istanbul's growing touristic appeal and global importance the gay scene is still on the rise in this megacity where, according to insider tourist guide Emrecan Özen, gay life "is probably the best way to experience Istanbul's highly cosmopolitan atmosphere and diverse cultural fabric that is stretched from East to West." In "The Gay Map of the Islamic World," published by *The Advocate* in 2007, Turkey ranked highest of all Muslim countries most likely to be visited by members of the LGBT community. While the article claims that "[d]reams of European Union membership are a liberalizing force," igniting "burgeoning gay tourism infrastructure in Istanbul" ("The Gay Map"), the fact remains that after a peak in queer visibility and freedom in the mid-2000s, an increasingly palpable conservatism of Turkey's President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have caused an Islamic backlash for the queer Turkish community. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether Istanbul can uphold the claim to being the queer metropolis of the Islamic World. However, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the fact that ever since Turkey's inception as a modernized, secular nation, political efforts to forge a national identity were at odds with social practices that successfully subverted such efforts. Regarding Turkey in general and Istanbul in particular, the LGBT community managed the paradoxical feat of embracing transnational notions of queerness while staking out sites of re-

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sistance, here exemplified in the vagaries of the histories of Istanbulite queer (night) life. This blending and interlacing of subversion alongside tradition instead of against it has led to a highly flourishing, if greatly contradictory queer capital where the modern and traditional, the rural and the urban, the margin and the center, and above all gay and straight merge into a hotbed of contemporary queerness at the crossroads of East and West.

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