

4. "Built for Europeans who came on the Orient Express:" Queer Desires of Extravagant Strangers in Sinan Ünel's *Pera Palas*

"a fucking palace:" Grand Hotel

When Agatha Christie visited the Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul in the mid-1930s and allegedly began to write one of her most famous crime novels, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), the prime time of grand hotels was already over (Karr 118). The political and economic turmoil of the First World War not only led to a financial crisis and rising nationalism but also to a crisis in the hotel industry. Grand hotels, cherished for their worldliness and opulence, succumbed to the austere living conditions of post-war Europe. In the 1920s, the American Conrad Hilton bought derelict grand hotels and turned their lavish splendor into functional effectiveness. He started to lease the hotels and gradually built up his chain empire. Accordingly, for Europe being in ruins, the Hilton Hotels stood for a future that signaled the "American way of life."¹ Until very recently, however, the Pera Palace withstood this tendency towards corporate hotel business. It was only after extensive renovation measures between 2008 and 2010 that the hotel joined the Dubai-based Jumeirah hotel chain. The hotel's website nevertheless boasts that the building has remained true to its historical legacy:

1 See Paul Rösch's claim that "[Hiltons] Erfolgsrezept bestand darin, die verschwenderischen Räume effektiver zu nutzen und den Service zu rationalisieren. Ihm ging es um Funktionalität und Effektivität—dies bedeutete den Tod für die altherwürdigen Grand Hotels und ihre luxuriöse Herrlichkeit" (39).

Today Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah the hotel maintains the elegant classical style that made it famous, with authentic 19th century features serving as a timeless focal point. Additionally, Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah was designated with “museum-hotel” status in 1981 when, as a tribute to the founder of modern Turkey, Room 101 was converted into the Atatürk Museum. (“Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah”)

Still, this purported history is somewhat misleading, since, although being unique in many ways, the Pera Palace indeed was conceived as part of a chain, which, according to Charles King, was precisely its charm. While the first Orient Express travelers stayed in various hotels scattered throughout the Pera district, which was a highly sought-after area of European tourists, the opening of the Pera Palace not only was located right at the center of this commercial district, but it also differed markedly from the other hotels:

The hotel had a considerable advantage over the other first-class facilities nearby, such as the Hôtel de Londres, the Bristol, the Continental, the Angleterre, and—its perennial rival—the Tokatlîan, situated right on the Grande Rue. It was the only hotel that was part of a pan-European network owned and operated by a single company. Its sister establishments in Nice, Monte Carlo, and other cities offered unprecedented luxury to a new generation of trans-European travelers, and staying at each of the Wagons-Lits facilities became a collect-them-all game, at least for those wealthy enough to afford it. Like the Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton hotels of later eras, the Pera Palace provided an exclusive experience not because it was wholly unique but precisely because it was part of a chain—a grand community of properties such as the Avenida Palace in Lisbon or the Odyssée Palace in Paris that promised luxury, safety, and a certain degree of predictability in major destinations, all built to a similar style and standard. As the *Guide Bleu* later noted, the Pera Palace was equipped with “all the modern comforts: elevator, bathrooms, showers, radiator heat, and electric lighting, with a magnificent view over the Golden Horn.” (King 26)

For Agatha Christie, the grand hotel was above all a site where people met. In this semi-public, semi-private atmosphere, love affairs began and ended, and people could pretend to be somebody else. And yet, in contrast to Vicky Baum’s *Menschen im Hotel* (1929), the classic example of the hotel novel of her times, Christie’s guests were never anonymously assembled individuals, but instead connected and interrelated in some social or personal way (Karr 116-

117). Grand hotels and the stories set therein had an appeal far beyond their geographical locals, precisely because of their transnational backdrops and densely communal structures.

It is this very hotel, Christie supposedly wrote one of her most celebrated novels that Turkish-American dramatist Sinan Ünel chose as backdrop for his play *Pera Palas* (1998). Set in the 1920s, 1950s, and the 1990s respectively, the play offers a complex spatial and temporal negotiation linking the hotel's history to that of the nation. From the very start, the hotel's grandeur plays a pivotal role in the way the characters position themselves within the spatiotemporal atmosphere they encounter. Evelyn, a young and emancipated English writer visiting Istanbul for the second time in 1918, is the first person we see on stage, and she immediately takes on the role of narrator, which she keeps throughout the play:

EVELYN: Yesterday, I arrived once again at the Queen of cities and I held my breath. As our ship anchored at the Golden Horn, I could see the seven hills, the cypress trees, and the looming minarets stretching to God like devoted believers, all bathed in those wonderful, uncertain and poetical tints which do not belong to our Western world. Nothing had changed. There was the Hagia Sophia and the majestic Süleymaniye just as I had left them. I looked upon this glorious city, my enchanting dream, with the same fascination of that school girl seven years ago. [...] I soon discovered, however, that things had indeed changed. The war rages throughout Europe and here there is great suffering. The people are demoralized. Hunger and illness prevail and the city is overcrowded with refugees. (1)²

Evelyn serves as an intermediary, a role she intermittently performs throughout the play, reflecting and commenting on her impressions of Turkey towards the end of the First World War and therefore the end of the Ottoman Empire. While she speaks to the audience, Murat and Brian simultaneously enter the scene. Murat is a thirty-three-year-old Turkish man, and Brian is a forty-year-old American; the two are a couple. Their appearance is set in the most current time frame, i.e. 1994, and their profane language strikingly contrasts Evelyn's lyricism. Hence, the action takes place concurrently, and as the stage directions announce, "[a]ll three time frames have one common setting: a room at the Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul. The rest of the action takes place in various

2 Since this is a typescript manuscript, the parenthetical information refers to the pages only.

settings such as the harem, the living room in 1952 or the living room in 1994” (ii). This opening scene already discloses the fact that the characters “speak to each other” in this hotel-room setting although they belong to different eras:

BRIAN: Man, I can't believe this place! I couldn't even grasp that lobby. All that marble and that fantastic ancient elevator!

MURAT: First elevator in the city!

BRIAN: We're staying at a fucking palace! Would you look at this fucking room?

EVELYN: It is only here, in the district of Pera, that the ravages of war are not felt.

MURAT: Built for Europeans who came on the Orient Express.

BRIAN: (*He goes to MURAT, to hug him.*) You didn't tell me! You bastard! (1)

Brian clearly is in awe of the hotel's splendor and location (“Wow! The view!” [2]), and it is he who first makes the link to Agatha Christie and the way the hotel has been part of Western popular culture: “I fucking feel like fucking Hercule Poirot. I'm in a fucking movie with Ava Gardner” (2). Murat, somewhat more somber and less stereotypical in his use of American slang, explains, “Poirot was here, of course. There's an Agatha Christie room somewhere. Some of the rooms are named after celebrities who stayed in them” (2). Murat refers to a fictional character, Inspector Poirot, and its inventor, the British novelist Christie, rather than to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which we may well read as an ironic eclipse, silently commenting on hidden or suppressed moments of history that nevertheless haunt the present. It turns out in fact that the gay couple is in one of the celebrities' rooms “called the Evelyn Crawley” (8), which is a reference to Evelyn the fictional character, whom we have already encountered and who has a distinctly different attitude to the hotel and the district it represents. For her, Pera “is the district that Europeans have adopted as their own. [...] So here I am, stifled in a room of this distasteful European hotel, finding it rather impossible to write. How I hunger to enter the world of the natives and submerge myself in the luscious experience of the east” (1, 3). Atatürk's stay at the hotel is obscured in the play. Evelyn's residence there takes place shortly before, Brian and Murat's long after, and yet, “[o]n the same day the Allies began their occupation, an Ottoman field

commander named Mustafa Kemal checked into a room in the Pera Palace," Charles King writes in his book-length homage to the hotel and its era (52).³

The Pera Palace's strategic location made it the epicenter of this turbulent era of historical transition at the time of Atatürk's arrival there, and it may account for why two years earlier Evelyn railed against "this distasteful European hotel" (3). Established in 1892 specifically to service clients arriving on the Orient Express, the hotel's special features included the "wood-and-iron elevator [which] had only been the second one installed in Europe (after the Eiffel Tower's)" (King 3). Located in one of Istanbul's most fashionable neighborhoods and with its very close vicinity to the major embassies, the YMCA, and legal brothels, the Pera Palace attracted a broad mixture of clients and visitors. For King, as well as for our writer-character Evelyn, "[t]he Pera Palace was meant to be the last whisper of the Occident on the way to the Orient, the grandest Western-style hotel in the seat of the world's greatest Islamic empire" (King 4).

This rather melodramatic way of staging the hotel as harbinger of an empire in decline actually reflects the history of the grand hotel at large, which by the end of the First World War had surpassed its prime. At the turn of century, however, grand hotels were meant to resemble representative aristocratic castles providing a chance for the bourgeois tourist to feel royal. The emergence of the grand hotel thus is closely linked to the dissolution of a strict class society in Europe. As "machines for wish-fulfillment," grand hotels stood for representation and distinction, a space of assembly within larger sites of tourist attractions such as fashionable spas and rising metropolises, which in turn were also highly attractive as cosmopolitan concourses for locals as well as for writers (Rösch 32). It is therefore no surprise that the grand hotel has

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- 3 The military occupation of Istanbul on March 16, 1920, brought Atatürk from southern Anatolia as commander against British forces back to Istanbul: "If he needed convincing of how much Istanbul had changed since his last visit, the Pera Palace provided ample evidence. Always filled with foreign guests, the lobby and restaurant were now overrun with British and other Allied officers in uniform" (King 53). Atatürk later recalled that the "ridiculous styles and dress of the women with their made-up faces, half-exposed breasts, and immodest manners occupied my special attention ... [T]he Turkish capital had become a Babylon" (qtd. in King 54). It was especially the Pera district, "the first 'Europeanized' quarter of the city" that, as an experimental area for urban reform, represented the Ottomans' efforts to transform Istanbul into a 'Western' city (Bartu 33). The reforms were to serve as a model for the rest of the city, a plan that failed and eventually led to Istanbul losing its status as capital.

been compared to a stage play with visible and invisible ‘actors,’ ‘directors,’ technicians, props, etc. (Rösch 37).

The grand hotel as dramatic stage figures in Ünel’s play in various ways. First, it is a drama, thus taking up the challenge to double the performativity of the hotel business with the performativity of the stage. But, secondly, Ünel does not choose to transfer the hotel onto the stage as a mimetic act. On the contrary, by using simultaneous action across time and space, he disrupts any semblance of mimesis. Whereas single scenes may come across as ‘realist,’ they are constantly interrupted by temporal and spatial jump cuts. This technique reinforces the impression of artifice, which in turn could also be said to reflect the artificiality of the hotel scenery. A third element of the inherent theatricality of the hotel that is reinforced in Ünel’s hotel play is the tension between presence and absence, between showing and hiding. Much of that tension is localizable in the dichotomy between the public arena of the lobby and the private sphere of the room, the former calls for role-playing, the latter for dropping the masks. “The door, marking the threshold between outside and inside, is the most significant physical barrier in the hotel,” explains Bettina Matthias; “Whatever you do in your room cannot easily be detected, but if you choose to, you can open the door and let the outer world in” (60–61).

The literary tradition of hotel crime fiction picks up this very tension of hidden secrets, notably in conjunction with violent acts of sexuality behind closed doors. One could think of Christie’s *At Bertram’s Hotel* (1965), Stefan Zweig’s *Rausch der Verwandlung* (posth. 1982), or John Irving’s *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), but also Fatih Akin’s film *Gegen die Wand* (2004), which partly takes place in Istanbul’s Büyük Londra, another late Ottoman grand hotel, located close to the Pera Palace. In these and in many more examples, “hotels are perfect experimental settings [...] to study the dynamics between the individual and society or a chosen sub-group thereof and the subject’s struggle to find the right balance between feelings of estrangement and liberation” (Matthias 5). In this sense, according to Matthias, hotels represent “social laboratories for writers to test the stability of traditional value systems, and they use the spatial limits of their setting to zoom in on a potential struggle that would be harder to detect or isolate in a less focused setting” (5). Ünel capitalizes on this play between individual and society, of secrecy and disclosure, of presence and absence—also on a visibly performative level, by having characters from one time frame exit through doors and others from a different time frame enter through the very same doors within the same scene. Above all, it is the figure of Evelyn who personalizes the anti-mimetic structure and whose com-

ments enrich the play with an intensified self-reflective bent. Being travelers like her, Murat and Brian follow the promise of the grand hotel being Other, a small-scale model of a utopian metropolis (Seger 8). But people might also gather in such hotels for very different reasons. In his travel account to the Near and Middle East, aptly named *Orient Express*, John Dos Passos recounts a lobby drama taking place at the Pera Palace in 1921. This episode echoes quite the opposite of any utopian comingling of different peoples:

Downstairs in the red plush lobby of the Pera Palace there is scuttling and confusion. They are carrying out a man in a flock-coat who wears on his head a black astrakhan cap. There's blood in the red plush arm-chair; there's blood on the mosaic floor. The manager walks back and forth with sweat standing out on his brow; they can mop up the floor, but the chair is ruined. French, Greek and Italian gendarmes swagger about talking all together each in his own language. The poor bloke's dead, sir, says the British military policeman to the colonel who doesn't know whether to finish his cocktail or not.

Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan. He was the envoy from Azerbaijan. An Armenian, a man with a beard, stood in the doorway and shot him. A man with glasses and a smooth chin, a Bolshevik spy, walked right up to him and shot him. (qtd. in Fortuny 105)

Dos Passos's memory of the Pera Palace is not one that speaks of promising adventures, nor of thrilling excitement. The murder he witnesses is a token of a collision of political and ethnic forces, publicly played out on the "stage" of the hotel lobby, but speaking of the long-lasting trauma of "the 'Armenian' issue, a determinedly imprecise euphemism," as Kim Fortuny asserts, which is still used today "to avoid placing blame for the unresolved problem of the Armenian diaspora that began during World War I" (106). Rather than analyzing the politic turmoil behind the assassination, Dos Passos depicts the effects of the murder on the hotel's clientele and furniture. In this transnational gathering, the hotel is not a safe haven anymore. Dos Passos's famous camera eye technique captures a moment that speaks of the

modern condition of Istanbul in 1921 [that] is not the same as that of Paris, London, or New York. Rather than an interim between world wars, in which nations took the opportunity to rebuild themselves, in the case of Europe, or recreate themselves, in the case of the United States, Turkey is simulta-

neously under foreign occupation, under Greek invasion, and mired in civil war. (Fortuny 125)

Dos Passos does not explain this, but here and in the course of his account he does show the confusion of allegiances that happen to fatally collude in this particular time and place: the shift in power from Ottoman to Allied, the Kemalist Nationalists led by Atatürk fighting both, and minority populations such as the Armenians struggling to assess their loyalties. As such Dos Passos's *Orient Express* "creates space for conflicting points of view," and it is the Pera Palace that symbolically marks "both the real and imagined boundaries" of this precarious political ambience (Fortuny 107, 116). In a similar manner, Ünel does not directly relate to historical events, but rather uses the individual fates of persons as well as innuendo through gossip and rumor as techniques to allude to the social backdrop. One striking moment is Evelyn's sojourn in the harem, which, at the same time, evokes notions of Oriental fantasies and the transnational clash of differing views on gender relations.

"Where memory is, theatre is:" Harem as Memorial

Besides the central locus of the hotel room, *Pera Palas* features another locale by way of contrast: the harem. While the hotel represents the influx of European modernism, the harem emblemizes the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. And yet, the ostensibly striking dichotomies are both reinstated and called into question in Ünel's play. Whereas in the semi-privacy of the hotel room new and modern constellations of gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality are being initiated, the harem's ambience seems to belong to a cultural climate that is on the verge of being historically undone. Again, Evelyn is the character that serves most as mediator here: several times she moves between the Pera Palace and the harem. Her initial discontentment with the intrusion of Europeanness into the Pera district in general and into the Pera Palace in particular lures her into accepting the invitation of one of the pasha's daughters, Melek, to stay at the harem of her father, Ali Rıza Efendi. The fifteen-year-old Melek is about to enter an arranged marriage, and she persuades Evelyn to leave the "one meager little room" of the hotel to stay with her at the harem: "Oh, please say yes! I would be so happy! We could watch the sunset every evening over the Bosphorus. And we will talk about Turkey and you will tell me all about England and we will take walks in the garden" (6). This vision

of cultural exchange and sororal leisurely activities intrigues Evelyn, and her first reaction to the harem is one of tourist curiosity promising exotic thrills:

This was beyond belief! No European that I knew had been asked to go stay in an actual harem. I was to have the opportunity to live as a real Turkish woman, to see what transpires behind those carefully guarded doors, the great mystery of the eastern world. I was so happy and terrified that I was unable to sleep that night. (7)

Once there, however, instead of the Orientalist fantasy of living "as a real Turkish woman," she quickly adapts her vision of mystery to the realities she encounters, and that is above all a highly gendered and strictly segregated arrangement:

The large dwelling is divided into two sections. [...] The harem for the women and the *selâmlık* for the men. A man, unless he is a husband or small boy, is forbidden to enter the harem at all times. And the women have access to the *selâmlık* only through the unfortunate invention called the lattice, more commonly referred to as the cage. In other words, they are allowed to look, but not be seen or heard. (13)

Evelyn is under constant surveillance by the other women and being taken care of by Bedia, a young slave who in the play's middle time frame has married and is mother of Orhan, who in turn is Murat's father. While Evelyn continues to relate her observations in prose intersections, the women of the harem give voice to their own, mostly ironic, observations of Evelyn. Her claim to value independence over marriage, for example, does not make sense for Adalet, an older woman: "*Istiklâlmi? Salak gâvura bak*. [Independence? What a silly infidel; (translation provided by Ünel)] (Laughs. To the other women.) She says she likes her independence. It's because their men are no good in the bedroom. Why else would a pretty thing like that still be a virgin at her age?" (16). Only Melek's half-brother Cavid, who is eighteen and therefore actually too old to still be in the harem, takes Evelyn's side: "I like her. I think she's right to want her freedom" (17). According to Melek, Cavid, to whom I return later, "goes to those meetings where they discuss the issues of women in Turkey and how things should change and that sort of thing" (26).

Evelyn launches a campaign to 'educate' Melek in a modern, feminist thinking that is both at odds with the harem's overall politics and with Melek's personal wishes. Evelyn does not understand why one would want to marry, "a man you have never met," and she thinks that "[i]t must be terrible

to have to share your husband with another woman,” to which Melek retorts that “that’s not done anymore. Things are changing” (25, 26). She has faith in her father’s authoritative goodwill: “Papa would never make me marry a bad man or a man who is ugly or old. I trust Papa” (26). In the course of Evelyn’s stay at the harem, however, she at first tries to keep a benevolent and distant engagement, and in contrast to her initial wish to “live as a real Turkish woman,” she now jokingly fears that “I’m becoming a Turkish woman” (25). This dilemma becomes apparent when she meets other expatriated fellow countrymen such as Sir Robert Cave from the English Embassy, who warns Evelyn about her safety and lectures her about the Turk’s boorishness:

After all, Miss Crawley, we know that these are rather primitive people who do not understand our way of living. And I don’t suppose you understand theirs. How do you feel about living in the house of a man with more than one wife? A house where concubines, not servants are employed, and where people use their fingers to feed themselves. (34)

Evelyn is outraged by this blatant xenophobic judgment upon a people that she so dearly embraces and tries to get to know and understand. Hence, although she has strong inhibitions about women’s social restrictions, she cannot tolerate Cave’s roundabout repudiation of Turkish customs and character:

Your callowness and condescension are an embarrassment to my country. What do you know about the harem? Next to nothing, I assure you. Do not think I’m unaware of the Englishman’s fascination with the harem. When the subject arises at our polite embassy parties, all the eyes of the men light up with curiosity. Wouldn’t you like to have a house full of beautiful women ready to satisfy your every whim? [...] Let me tell you something, Sir Robert. If I took you in there it would be an utter disappointment to you because it is entirely different from your childish, misinformed fantasy of it. A harem is a home just like any home. (35)

Whereas she articulates her disregard of Cave’s warnings to his face, she takes up some of his arguments when later encountering Ali Riza. Interestingly, she links her discussion of Melek’s lack of emancipatory interest to the realm of politics, now accusing Ali Riza of blindly succumbing to the European hegemony by joining in signing the armistice:

You are an educated, worldly man and you still treat your women exactly the same despicable way Europe, and particularly England, treats your coun-

try. As a commodity. Something to be bought and used for your own selfish purposes. [...] You are naïve, Ali Rıza Efendi. The armistice was signed by a single English official in the name of the allies. They have divided Turkey amongst themselves. And you have put your signature on that obscene document! (60)

The harem episode can be taken to speak of Ünel's awareness of the pitfalls of Orientalist fantasies. One such hazard is to take the slow progress of feminism as a sign of Turkey's stubborn social backwardness. But one has to take into account that older Ottoman models of feminism have been discarded and forgotten by the radical inauguration of the Turkish Republic as a nation modeled on European standards. In fact, already in the nineteenth century, a gradual emancipation of upper-class women was taking place in Ottoman society.⁴ As Şerif Mardin states, altogether "there is a remarkable unity in Ottoman upper class concern for the emancipation of women as seen in the Ottoman-Turkish literature of the time" (137).⁵ With the transition to a Westernized political hegemony and the adaptation of the Latin alphabet

4 Halide Edib Adivar (1884-1964), for instance, was the first important Ottoman novelist and, as Mardin asserts, "her openness to the world of Western ideas was the consequence of an upbringing that took place at the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) and was not the result of Young Turk innovations" (137). She took her education at the Robert College, a U.S.-American founded private school that prominently figures in Ünel's play as well: Kathy, Murat's mother, teaches there, and Orhan, Murat's father, went to school there. Edib had particularly strong links to the United States, since she was the leader of the *Wilson Prensipleri Cemiyeti*, the Wilson Principles League, which sealed the surrender of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The League, a group of Istanbul intellectuals with Edib as only woman, was launched to urge President Woodrow Wilson to protect Ottoman Turkey. As Perin Gurel reflects, the letter "was an appeal for tutelage in the new methods of empire the United States had perfected (e.g. industrialization, professionalization, and liberal developmentalism), sent by an intelligentsia that still imagined an ethnically and religiously diverse Ottoman state" (353). Wilson, however, due to his outspoken hatred of the Turks, never replied to Edib. Owing to Atatürk's famous speech in 1927, called *Nutuk* (i.e. "speech" in Turkish), in which he openly demonized Edib "as a woman in bed with the United States" (Gurel 364), her 'fame' rests on her plea for an American mandate, largely disregarding her important role as spokesperson for women's rights.

5 Amongst other examples of Ottoman feminism is "[t]he first defense of the rights of women (which) appeared as early as 1891 in Fatma Aliye's *Nisvan-ı İslam* [i.e. *Women of Islam*, R. P.] [...] The rapidity of the emancipation in upper-class families may be gauged by the date at which the first Ottoman emancipated femme fatale, who would have done honor to F. Scott Fitzgerald, is made to appear in Turkish society. This heroine, the

in 1928, former cultural practices including early feminist writings in Arabic were quickly forgotten. In addition, Turkey's modernization, although based on a European model, is not entirely in synchronicity with the Western historical periodization. While the demise of German and Austrian empires at the end of the First World War, for example, can be taken as synchronous to the break-down of the Ottoman Empire, the interwar years and the founding of the Turkish Republic is not analogous with seemingly parallel European developments in nation building. In many ways, the origins of Turkey as a nation state are based on a belated colonial endeavor of European powers, especially the British.

Whereas Evelyn strongly argues against such a colonizing take-over, she seems to be unaware of other historical developments; and what is even more surprising, she is ignorant or does not acknowledge the tradition of—also female—Western tourists fascinated by Turkish customs, especially the harem, she is partaking in. Meyda Yeğenoğlu writes about this “desire to penetrate the mysteries of the Orient and thereby to uncover hidden secrets (usually expressed in the desire to lift the veil and enter into the forbidden space of the harem) [as being] one of the constitutive tropes of Orientalist discourse” (73). And while many male travelers have denounced “the hateful mystery of the harem and the veil” due to this trope of concealment, there have been accounts of female travelers—most notably Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—who have entered this hidden “inner” space (73). Much like these writers of former times, Evelyn could be said to serve as facilitator who voices the ‘forbidden,’ since according to Yeğenoğlu,

the only available means for the Western man is to rely on the Western woman's accounts of the harem's forbidden space, her description of the unveiled women, the details of their everyday life, etc. It is thus only through the assistance of the Western woman (for she is the only “foreigner” allowed to enter into the “forbidden zone”) that the mysteries of this inaccessible “inner space” and the “essence” of the Orient secluded in it could be unconcealed [...]. (74)

How trustworthy such accounts as Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*, written 1716-1718, are is beside the point here; what is striking, however, is the way

central character of Yakub Kadri [Karaosmanoğlu]'s *Kiralık Konak* [i.e. The Rented Mansion, R. P.] (1922), lives in the years immediately preceding World War I” (Mardin 137).

in which Evelyn fails in her self-ascribed role as a cultural emissary.⁶ She remains stuck in the gap between a sympathetic, but historically belated interest in the old Ottoman ways and her reluctance to acknowledge the Turkish modernization in any other way except as European and especially English colonial intrusion. Her final return to the Pera Palace, which she links to this—in her view—fatal Western imposition, marks the end of her self-proclaimed mission there. In turn, her excursion to the harem and the estranging experiences she relates to the audience renders this place a memorial—discarded as outdated cultural practice and yet lingering as crystallized spatiotemporal memorial site. *Pera Palas* therefore both recalls the harem as belonging to the nation's historical past and as casting a shadow on the other characters' respective lives.

Ünel's dramatic technique of simultaneous action at first seems to stress the presentness of all performance in the same way that Peggy Phelan asserts: "Performance's life is only in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance" (146). The suggestion that all actions across space and time are interwoven creates an atmosphere of the absolute present. And yet, contrary to such a notion, Evelyn's narrative role and her harem episode also suggest that here performance indeed "becomes something other." In Joseph Roach's words, this kind of performance "stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace. Hence flourish the abiding yet vexed affinities between performance and memory, out of which blossom the most florid nostalgias for authenticity and origin. 'Where memory is,' notes theorist-director Herbert Blau, 'theatre is'" (3-4).

Ünel's technique of compressing time and space through simultaneous action plays on such "vexed affinities between performance and memory," not only in the present absentness of the harem—as being absent in its utter historicity and yet present in its lasting effect on the inhabitants, visitors and descendants as well as literary documents—but also in his multiple casting method: the actors play different roles in different time frames. This creates an archival effect in the sense that the actors seem to carry traces of multiple characters within their corporeal enactment. This second moment of

6 For a longer discussion of Montagu's trustworthiness, see Poole "Das Kopftuch" as well as chapter 2.

present absentness—an actor embodying character traces of other spatiotemporal moments than the present—can be considered queer in that it disturbs ontological conceptions of time and space.

“a place without a place:” Queer Space

Ünel’s play abounds with sexual relations that have been considered misalliances in their respective times and places. There is Ali Rıza Efendi with his several wives, Orhan (son of former slave Bedi) and his American wife Kathy, their son Murat and his gay American partner Brian, Sema (Murat’s sister) and her married lover, and there are two striking single characters, Evelyn and Cavid. These relationships remain a thinly veiled secret (Sema’s), are highly disputed (Ali Rıza’s, Orhan and Kathy’s), not discussed at all (Evelyn’s and Cavid’s), or cause for long-standing rifts (Murat’s). *Pera Palas* therefore gives plenty credit to Jill Dolan’s claim that theater and sexuality are highly productive spheres of overlapping influence:

Sexual desire has long been a motivating narrative factor in plays and performances, the force that establishes or destroys relationships, that stirs jealousy and encourages infidelity, or that binds characters or tears them apart, regardless of their sexual orientations. Theatre is also a place of fantasy and longing, of fleeting exchange between spectators and performers. With its liminal status as both real and not, as ephemeral and transformational, theatre has long been a site where misfits and the marginalized have congregated. (3)

Dolan links the plot of a drama to communicative processes between actors and audience concluding that the space thus created—the theater as encompassing stage and auditorium—has the power to serve as safe haven for non-normative people. Ünel’s play *Pera Palas* was first produced at the Lark Theatre in New York, which was founded in 1994 “as a counterpoint to the prevailing commercial, commodity-based culture of theater” and soon “established itself as a platform for free expression and rigorous experimentation” (“The Lark”). *Pera Palas* was one of three initial productions, announced as a “tapestry of East, West, power, and sex.” The Lark’s mission, in line with Dolan’s claim, rests on the belief

in the power of theater, in the empathy that results from hearing a new story and the better world that emerges after a shared experience. [...] We recognize that differences in identity including age, background, class, gender, nationality, physical ability, race, sexual orientation and thinking style bring vibrancy to our organization and that such differences help us better connect with the stories that reflect our world. ("The Lark")

The Lark's production of *Pera Palas* in 1997-1998 certainly succeeded in presenting historically and geopolitically underrepresented perspectives on the American stage. Besides New York, *Pera Palas* was presented at the National Theatre in London (1999), the Gate Theatre in London (2000) and the Landestheater Tübingen (2000-2001), the Theater Kozmos in Bregenz (2001), the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven (2002), the Open Stage Theater Co in Pittsburgh (2003), the Antaeus Theatre Company in Los Angeles (2005), the Theatre at Boston Court in Pasadena (2005), and the Arcola Theatre in London (2007). Notably, there has been no production in Turkey so far. Ünel himself calls this irony, since it is a "love story for the city of Istanbul [and] it's my most frequently produced play" ("Sinan Ünel").⁷

Margaret Russett highlights the strategic role of the Pera Palace within the play, but also for the audience providing a possible reason for Turkey's disinterest in the topic: "[I]t is a fantasy of Eastern exoticism, designed explicitly for the West" (631). Is this an American play then, after all? Reluctant to enter the heated debate on the nationality of literature, I certainly concede with what Wai Chee Dimock writes about "American" literature being a shorthand for a complex tangle of relations: "Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures" (3). If indeed we want to read *Pera Palas* as American literature, then, according to Dimock's *Through Other Continents*, we should also read the play as containing "input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world" (3).

It is in this sense of connectedness that we can perceive Ünel's play as participating in a transnationalization of perceptions about the United States,

7 In her essay on the emergence of queer theater in Istanbul, Elif Baş asserts that although there have been a few queer theater productions, LGBT concerns still have rarely been spoken of on Turkish stages: "Taboos about gender identity have not shifted significantly through theatre, but at least small steps have been taken" (133).

which in turn connects Ünel to other writers articulating such views, especially within a Turkish-American context, one prominent example being James Baldwin. After spending much of the 1960s in Istanbul, Baldwin began comparing his experiences as a—black—American to the experiences of Turks, who in turn “helped him to redefine his vocation as a transnational writer,” as Magdalena Zaborowska asserts (203). Baldwin like many of his famous fellow American writers chose a life spent mostly abroad as an expatriate. But there is, as MaryAnn Snyder-Körber explains, a “narrower, expected, and [...] seemingly unproductive equation of international American modernism with a roster of writers running on a particular transatlantic route: generally, New York to London or Paris, but more rarely, to Marrakesh and never from Bratislava to Yonkers” (81). Baldwin is one of the writers who ventured beyond the predictable locales of the American modernist roster by taking up lodgings in Istanbul.⁸ Tanfer Emin Tunc and Bahar Gursel refer to Baldwin’s “‘rock star’ status” in Turkey as well as to other writers engaging in Turkish-American cultural negotiations such as Twain, Melville, or Hemingway to reassert an ongoing “transnational dialogue” between the two nations. This dialogue, they argue in their introduction to a collection of essays which examine American Studies from the Turkish perspective, takes part in the transnational turn in American Studies “by highlighting the current work that is being conducted by noted Turkish academics, American researchers, as well as foreign scholars working in Turkey, many of whom are living examples of transnationality” (22).

Accordingly, Russett’s claim quoted above that Ünel’s play has—only—a Western audience in mind, turns out to be highly arguable. But she implicitly points towards another crucial issue: the tension between concreteness and fantasy. And indeed, especially the hotel setting could be called realist in the sense that it actually exists as a “concrete” site; however, the dramaturgical layout of the play undermines any such notions of realism. In this, Ünel follows what theater critics have upheld, above all when speaking about theater experiences relating to marginalized subjects, such as LGBT people, namely

8 In *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973) by Turkish director Sedat Pakay, Baldwin affirms his transnational status: “I suppose that many people do blame me for being out of the States as often as I am. [...] perhaps only someone who is outside of the States realizes that it’s impossible to get out. The American power follows one everywhere. [...] One sees it better from a distance [...] from another place, from another country.” See my discussion of the film in chapter 3.

that "theatre doesn't just reflect reality [...]. On the contrary, [these critics] proposed that theatre creates what we consider reality by enforcing conventional notions of 'normal'" (Dolan 14-15). Realist theater, understood in such a manner, represents a closed-off world that not only separates actors/characters from spectators but also encourages audiences "to identify [with] and support worlds framed by conservative ideology that tends to marginalize, demean, or, worse still, exile or murder gay and lesbian characters" (15). A theater that goes against such realist conservatism, according to Dolan, favors postmodernist styles instead, which refuse "the conventions of fourth-wall domesticity" (15).

Ünel's multiple time and space arrangements may not altogether discard the fourth wall separating the stage from the audience, but they certainly disrupt standard notions of linearity, chronology, and spatial coherence. His hotel room scenes are highly versatile in this respect, due to the aforementioned enter-exit dynamic of the characters, which constantly forces spectators to reorient themselves in time and space. Furthermore, such passages seem to speak to each other: for example, Kathy and her sister Anne's conversation about how Kathy's future in-laws are treating her seems to correspond to Brian and Murat's concerns about visiting Murat's parents for the first time. The connection, of course, is a generational one with Kathy being Murat's mother, and intriguing parallelisms across time occur:

ANNE: But living with your in laws ...

KATHY: I don't mind. My mother-in-law is wonderful. She teaches me everything.

ANNE: You have a family here. It's your family.

KATHY: Yes. It's a good family.

ANNE: Come on. Dry your tears before Orhan comes and sees you upset.

(MURAT's getting ready. BRIAN enters wearing a tie.)

MURAT: You packed a tie? You look like you're going to church.

BRIAN: Same difference. Meeting my in-laws. (68-69)

Such scenes of intimate conversation have a special relevance because they relate to sexual and family matters in a transnational context. This is the case with Kathy and Orhan, who are about to get married, although Orhan shows signs of abusive behavior, and above all with Brian and Murat, who are used to being 'out' in the United States, while Murat's parents know nothing of their son's relationship with Brian. After Murat's traumatic coming-out to his parents ended in physical abuse by Murat's father Orhan, Murat had refused to

see his parents until he introduces Brian to them. In this sense, the hotel room is a safe haven for them, but it is also a proverbial closet. As such, the hotel room functions as a precarious liminal space, a contested middle ground between the public and the private, between being 'out' and remaining 'in.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the knowledge of this curious space between inside and outside an open secret, and she argues that the act of coming out is an endless repetition in view of ever-renewed social mechanisms of homophobia:

Living in and hence coming out of the closet are never matters of the purely hermetic; the personal and political geographies to be surveyed here are instead the more imponderable and convulsive ones of the open secret. [...] gay identity is a convoluted and off-centering possession if it is a possession at all; even to come out does not end anyone's relation to the closet, including turbulently the closet of the other. (80-81)

The reiterated moment of coming out as performative act, which has "a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions" (Sedgwick 80), is illustrated in Murat's second coming out to his father. Although the main purpose for visiting his home again after many years of exile is to reunite with his parents, once in Istanbul, he is reluctant to do so. The effect of the "pathogenic [open] secret" (Sedgwick 80) of the closet is too strong. Even though he came out to his parents years before, the violent reaction of his father has caused years of silence between them, and neither father nor son are willing to settle the stalemate. When Brian secretly takes action and contacts Murat's sister Sema, a meeting with the parents is set up, which after some initial exchange of niceties quickly escalates into violent verbal battling:

MURAT: Do you remember what I looked like nine years ago? Did you really look at me then? Did you hear my voice? When you walked up those stairs, your eyes popping out of their sockets, stinking stale of alcohol. Came to find me here, your nostrils flaring, your fists, your knuckles, the way you grabbed me, spat at me, spat at me! [...] Don't you remember what you told me before you chased me out of this house? You told me I was an embarrassment to you. That you were ashamed to look at the faces of your friends.

ORHAN OLDER: (*explodes*) Yes you were! You were an embarrassment. Then, and now and the whole time you were growing up! I wanted to pretend I didn't know you. I wish I wasn't even related to you. (92-94; original emphasis)

Instead of reconciliation, both father and son renew their deeply ingrained grudges against one another, and yet, it is Murat who reaches out to his father once again after the latter has fled home seeking refuge on the Bosphorus Ferry. There, on neutral territory, the father finally is able to make contact with his son by way of insisting on their similarities:

I'm trying to find something I've lost, Murat. Is it a scent? A sound? Something I once touched? You and I are alike that way, searching for the same thing. Do you think you'll find it? [...] I wish I could help you, Murat. But once you assimilate the ideas of another country, once you understand the essence, you have no alternative but to be alienated from your own. I stepped through that threshold when I was young and I've never found my way back. [...] You'll never forgive me, Murat. You know that don't you? (104)

Orhan, most likely referring to his marriage to Kathy and in consequence to 'assimilating' into an Americanness, assumes that Murat has experienced a similar self-estrangement after leaving his family and homeland to live in the United States. Orhan's initial meeting with Kathy is significantly set in the early 1950s, a period in Turkish politics in which, after the landslide victory of the Democratic Party in 1950, Turkey's foreign relations increasingly turned towards the United States: "Turkey in these years became a solid—albeit peripheral—part of the political and military structures the United States and its allies built up to safeguard the continued existence of democracy and free enterprise in their countries. This was a major break with the Kemalist foreign policy of cautious neutralism" (Zürcher 234). Against this transnational background of what Zürcher calls "Atlantic Turkey," it is not incidental that Orhan and Kathy are meeting in 1952, the year Turkey became a full member of the NATO, and it is no less accidental that this last conversation between father and son takes place on the ferry that connects the European and Asian parts of Istanbul (234).

In an essay relating her own experience crossing the Bosphorus on such a ferry, Turkish writer Elif Shafak has described this ferry as a queer space where all kinds of people come together for a moment, "crammed chock-a-block" in "a palette of shades of gray" (Shafak "Transgender Bolero" 26).⁹ Watching a transvestite listening to Ravel's "Bolero" on a walkman, Shafak experiences a queer spatiotemporal moment of transcendence which not only

9 For a discussion of Shafak's essay and yet another occurrence of the Bosphorus Ferry in her novel *The Saint of Insipient Insanities* see chapter 6.

conjoins silence and sound, melody and sexuality, self and other, individual and collective, but also the past and present of Turkish history. “Bolero” brings Shafak back the year 1928, the year Ravel composed the piece, which in turn reminds her of Turkey’s “turbulent days,” the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the fabrication of the Turkish Republic. As much as Orhan has felt the impact of foreignness through his transnational marriage, Shafak imagines the effect of European influences on the Turkish national psyche. At the same time, her queer moment on the ferry alerts her to the lack of queer thinking about Turkey’s past and present:

Among the ventures of the newly established Turkish Republic aiming to westernize and modernize its citizens as swiftly as possible was an attempt to discourage them from listening to traditional music and instead encourage them to enjoy Western classics, starting with, why not, “Bolero.” Everybody hated it. Fortunately, the endeavor was halted shortly after it began, but its impact, the spirit behind it, remained. [...] So little has been studied of Turkey’s militarist, masculinist, modernist genealogies. The path-breaking developments in gender studies and women’s studies, as well as in gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender studies, have been strikingly slow to inflect studies of the Middle East in general. Likewise, despite the salient contributions of several feminist scholars both in Turkey and abroad, the question of how individuals managed or failed to transcend gender zones in a society traversing civilization zones remains a marginal topic of research. (27)

Shafak’s claim that while modernization seems to constitute a radical break with the past, “when it comes to gender and sexuality, perhaps there are more continuities than discontinuities” (27-28) is reflected in Ünel’s play. Murat’s innate self-hatred, which may be suppressed while abroad but which surfaces when faced with his father, is a token of the lasting “masculinist” genealogies reaching back across the generations aligning him with the social situation Evelyn encounters. Murat’s repetition of a painful coming out mirrors “the story of state, sexuality and modernization in Turkey [as] a song in a repeat track mode, or else, a melody full of repetitions” (Shafak 28). And yet, as much as these processes of modernization required zoning strategies to demarcate the boundaries of gender and sexuality, of the public and the private, Ünel’s hotel play points to the volatile state of such boundaries. The moment Murat and Orhan share on the ferry is a singular one—queerly out of time and space, or, put differently, a space, “which draws us out of ourselves, in which the

erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us" (Foucault 23).

Michel Foucault has famously defined such heterogeneous spaces as heterotopias, oscillating between the real and the virtual, the here and there, the now and then, the present and absent, and between the deviant and the norm. Shafak's repeat melody and Ünel's transgenerational negotiation on the ferry link the heterotopia with the heterochrony in both accumulating and dissolving fixed frames of time and space. It is no surprise, then, that Foucault takes the boat to be such an "other" space "par excellence," "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself" (27). Given the geopolitical as well as cultural-aesthetic importance of the Bosphorus Ferry, Foucault's final comment on heterotopias rings a very special note: "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates" (27). Ünel uses the ferry as other space where—in contrast to the inhibitions of the domestic—a scenario of familial drama may be reimagined that otherwise has repeatedly proven to fail.

The ferry episode is only an interlude, but it leads to the play's finale in the hotel room of the Pera Palace with Murat and Brian deciding to stay on in Istanbul for an indefinite time. Murat's coming to terms with the demons of his past answers Evelyn's last worries, which are the last spoken words of the play: "Once again, I look out of my room in this European hotel, that I have, somehow, grown to like over the years. [...] Will this hopeful nation survive as a western country? [...] Only the future, the frightening, unfamiliar future will show us" (113). Even though Evelyn has made peace with the hotel's 'dubious Europeanness,' she remains unsure as to Turkey's future. Murat is that future, and as ambiguous as his character may be, he and what he represents is a marker of what José Esteban Muñoz has called a "queer futurity" that thrives on potentiality beyond the "prison house" (1) of the present:

We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. [...] Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. (Muñoz 1)

Ünel's playful configuration of blending time and space, realized in the synchronicity of the hotel room, takes part in such a queer aesthetics of futurity. This transnational site is open for an intermingling of people with

varying cultural, sexual, ethnic, and religious identities, and it is noteworthy that Ünel particularly chooses people with an artistic and educational background—Evelyn as writer, Kathy as teacher, Murat as photographer, Brian as artisan—who are willing to look beyond the present state of affairs. “Queer uses of time and space develop [...] in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,” Jack Halberstam argues (1), and indeed Evelyn, Kathy, and Murat in their respective temporal conditions are representatives of such notions of transgressing normative notions of social conduct and “conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification” (Halberstam 2). As such, they might also be called “extravagant strangers.”

“A kiss is just a kiss?” Extravagant Strangers

In his novels, Lawrence Scott, a Caribbean writer of German-French descent, who migrated between his exile in London and his birthplace Trinidad and Tobago, speaks of his exiled protagonists as “extravagant strangers.” Based on Latin etymology, “extra/vagary” relates to somebody, who moves outside of traditional boundaries. Scott believes that there are multiple intersections which make one an outsider in this sense, such as race, gender, religion, class, sexuality or age. Scott’s concern with “travelling outside the usual frontiers, the usual boundaries” touches upon “the characters in texts doing this travelling and [...] the text itself, [or rather] what becomes of the text” (13). Ünel’s play *Pera Palas* is such an extravagantly strange text, with several characters crossing national, cultural, and sexual borders. Ünel himself is an extravagant stranger, moving between various identities and refraining from being labeled this or that. “People generally tend to categorize me as Turkish-American playwright,” he says, “I find national identity to be increasingly irrelevant. [...] In terms of identity labels, I’d say I consider myself more ‘gay’ than belonging to any nation.”¹⁰ *Pera Palas* is the only play of his that openly touches on the Turkish-American connection.¹¹

10 Quoted from personal email correspondence with the author, other information taken from Ünel’s homepage <www.sinanunel.com>.

11 Except for *Cry of the Reed*, which is about a journalist abducted in Iraq and her mother in Konya, and *Chatal*, which deals with Western archaeologists excavating a Neolithic site in Turkey, Ünel’s playwriting interests lie more in American topics and settings, especially Provincetown (*Tolstoy’s Den*, *Off the Cliff*, *Lost Gospels of Blankenburg*, *Thalassa*

With Evelyn, Kathy, and Murat, *Pera Palas* features three characters who are obviously extravagant strangers in Scott's transnational understanding. There is, however, one more character that causes puzzlement: Cavid. He is the only character to appear in all three time frames and he is the most elusive of all. As a young man, he is the only male besides the Pasha to be tolerated in the harem. He therefore is a liminal character from the start, moving clandestinely between strictly gendered spaces. Furthermore, he articulates pronouncedly progressive opinions when he takes Evelyn's side against the other women in the harem: "I like her. I think she's right to want her freedom" (17). Act II starts with a long monologue by Cavid, who is the only one besides Evelyn to engage in this dramatic form. Here, he pronouncedly distances himself from the way he was brought up, especially his father's practice of polygamy:

Hello. My name's Cavid. Mademoiselle Crawley asked me to address you to-day. [...] I was a happy child until the age of five when my father married for the second time. The rest of my life passed in the bitter and hopeless state of watching my poor mother suffer and age over the years. [...] [A]ll I could think about was to leave that house forever and to never marry. [...] I pitied [my mother] but increasingly I became angry with her.

No woman of any dignity should be asked to permit a second wife to enter her home. This practice must change! But this change will not come about if you, the women of this country, won't do something to change it. (With disgust) I stand here looking at you in your veils and I think you're despicable. Can't you see how Europe laughs at you? Why do you put up with this iniquitous situation? Why do you still wear those veils, the symbols of servitude? Why can't you come out and free yourselves? (36)

Here, Cavid takes a most outspoken political stance that is clearly aligned with the Turkish process of modernization as propagandized by Atatürk. In the course of the play, however, this stark pro-European view mellows and alters. Although he seeks Evelyn to help his half-sister Melek out of her unhappy marriage, he also accosts her for representing the British nation after the armistice: "How can you still stand here, have you no shame? Your evil government is calling us traitors. We're sent to exile as though we're an embarrassment, as though six hundred years of rule never happened! [...] I don't

My Heart, Portals), the lives of Russian artists (*Pathétique, A Mad Person's Chronicle of a Miserable Marriage*), or general gay issues (*New Life, Single Lives, The Three of Cups*).

want to go to Europe!” (107). Increasingly, he considers himself an outsider, not only concerning his home country but also in a more general and encompassing way. When Kathy first meets Orhan’s parents in 1952, Cavid is also present, purposely acting as mediator between the generations and cultures. By now a man past his prime and having returned after years of enforced exile, Orhan introduces him to Kathy as “our most unfortunate Cavid.” Cavid counters: “I am not unfortunate, merely displaced. In place as well as in time. [...] But I’m a stubborn progressive. Many years I lived in Europe” (38). Cavid’s reflective model of existence oscillating between self-chosen empowerment and reactive submission resonates with Edward Said’s concept of the intellectual expatriate who finds it possible “to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from the centralizing authorities toward the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and comfortable” (380). In yet another direct address to the audience, Cavid comments on his experience as refugee in a foreign country:

This was the saddest day of our lives. To leave our beautiful Istanbul, the magnificent tulips, the sad melodies, our sunsets over the Bosphorus. All in one day gone. It was more than any of us could bear. [...] We were lost in France, like orphans without food or shelter. [...] But I went on [...] and nearly twenty years after our departure, I was permitted to return to my beloved city again. [...] But I was old now. I was poor, homeless (108)

Cavid’s experience as refugee is similar to Hannah Arendt’s account of Jewish refugees fleeing from country to country, being treated as pariahs, and facing the challenge to balance between being assimilated—turning into “social parvenus [...] ready to pay any price in order to be accepted by society”—and consciously remaining outlaws “in a topsy-turvy world” (119). Arendt’s radical stance calls for keeping one’s identity even in the face of humiliation.

In terms of historical transitions and transnational existence, Cavid is extraordinarily self-conscious and outspoken. While embracing progress, he abhors his nomadic life as a result of such ‘progress.’ He is, however, strangely silent, when it comes to his personal life. Assuming that he has never married, there are also no clues as to intimate relationships of whatever sort. In a most striking scene at the very end of the play, he appears in his younger version to Murat in a dream. In answer to Murat’s question “Who are you?” he announces himself as “I’m your loss, I’m your sadness” (110–111), stressing a link between the two men that is not blood-related but that relies on being soul

mates. In a dialogue, constantly interrupted by Kathy and Orhan's dispute about the deadlock situation of their marriage, Murat and Cavid speculate about what the future might bring for each:

MURAT: You don't know what the future holds.

KATHY: And I can't forgive myself. For not leaving you. Now.

MURAT: Your sadness is a gift. Soon you'll be free. You'll overcome destiny. You'll make your own future.

KATHY: Why won't I leave you? Now?

CAVID: But who will I be? Will I ever know again who I am?

ORHAN OLDER: If you met me today, Kathy, would you still marry me?

MURAT: Yes, you will.

KATHY: Yes.

MURAT: Have courage, Cavid. You belong everywhere. (*MURAT kisses CAVID*)

ORHAN: I'm your destiny.

KATHY: Oh, yes.

ORHAN OLDER: You are everything to me.

MURAT: I release you now. So go. Now. Go. (111-112)

Not only do these conversations crisscross each other, subliminally commenting on one another, they also transcend time and place, and the linear logic of a historical course of events. Kathy in her younger age talks to her husband in his older age, and simultaneously Cavid and Murat communicate in a dream across the span of several decades. Furthermore, contrary to the surface logic according to which Murat in present time 'calls' for late Cavid as a distant soul-mate, it actually is Cavid who in his dream before being sent into exile invokes a future-to-be Murat. Accordingly, the dream exists for both of them: they share an intimate moment beyond any spatiotemporal logic. The older Cavid dimly recalls this dream he had as a young man: "The next morning I woke with an unfamiliar feeling. I couldn't remember the dream. But I had hope. What was the dream I'd had? What was setting me free?" (112). Young Cavid, on the brink of becoming the extravagant stranger that he will be, summons a soulmate from the future, a gay, bicultural man, who sends him on his wanderings and seals the promise of becoming with a kiss. The intermingling confirmation of love and destiny, reconfirmed by Kathy and Orhan, reflect on this kiss, which I take to be queer in the sense of transgressing the normative logics of the here and now.

What needs to be taken into account, furthermore, is that this kiss actually happens on stage; although the kiss between Cavid and Murat is the

climax of a dream Cavid recalls having and thus cannot be taken as a kiss of this 'real' world, we do witness two real men kissing. The corporeality of actors performing such a kiss reinforces the overall notion of Ünel's play that events from different historical settings are intermingled and relate to each other. This is even further enhanced by Ünel's casting wishes. For example, he suggests a cross-gender casting for some characters such as Bedia: "The actor who plays ORHAN OLDER also plays BEDIA OLDER, his mother" (iii). Again, this encounter interweaves different time frames as well as, in this case, gender performances not only because Bedia is played by a male actor, but because the same actor also plays Bedia's son in a different time frame. Such a practice of cross-gender casting helps to destabilize cultural gender scripts, and therefore adds to the political posture of the play on the corporeal level, namely the performance of cross-dressing bodies on stage. Herewith, Ünel disengages the body from the role, which on the one hand highlights the artificiality of gender norms these characters enact, and on the other hand insinuates resemblances between characters across gender and generation.

Besides such cross-gender casting choices, Ünel suggests that "[t]he actor who plays BRIAN also plays CAVID who appears to MURAT in a dream sequence at the end of the play" (iii). Without further elaboration on this choice, Ünel tightens the web of innuendos here with regard to Cavid. Since Brian is the most 'out' character of the play in terms of his gay sexuality, having Cavid and Brian cast by the same male actor brings Cavid's ambiguous sexuality in closer proximity to queerness. Again, the kiss we see on stage becomes an even stronger queer moment through the double-casting of Brian and Cavid: we literally see them as only one and the same man kissing Murat.¹²

- 12 Kissing scenes are not to be taken lightly. Although famously, just before Rick and Ilsa embrace for their big dramatic kiss in *Casablanca* and Dooley Wilson sings the iconic words "A kiss is just a kiss," film and stage kisses between men remain a disputed topic. Referring to Andy Warhol's film *Kiss* of 1963, Linda Williams asserts that a male-to-male kiss privileges "the surplus perversion of a protogay kiss that shows the engagement of the whole body" (Williams 335), and therefore alludes to the way such kisses make us aware of the genital sex that may accompany it. Williams's Freudian terminological use of 'perverse' in opposition to 'normal' sexual acts refers not to an aberration of a heterosexual norm when two men kiss, but to the representational ('perverse') substitute of a kiss for a ('normal') sexual act due to overt censorship or implicit censor practices that continue even today. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner relate the underlying coercive sexist ideology to a "national heterosexuality" as the mechanism by which "a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship" (qtd. in Hariman and Lucaites 128).

Ünel's play features two men kissing and yet it is only a dream kiss. For Cavid, this dream kiss may be a sign of what his life will come to be: lived in a perpetual closet, always remaining the extravagant stranger. For Murat, however, this kiss means something different altogether: it seals his link to his abjected Turkish heritage, making the potential for a renewed home in Istanbul feasible. It is here that the Pera Palace and its confined hotel room setting most notably signifies a queer utopian space in stark contrast to what Matthias claims for hotels and the fictions set therein, when she writes that "hotels are not utopian spaces. Even in the most positive cases, they remain artificial sets where dreams can be acted out but not taken outside hotel's walls into 'real life.' [...] Hotels are there to please, not to change" (7). On the contrary, Murat has changed in the course of his temporary stay that might stretch for a yet undefined time span. Murat together with Brian disrupt the heteronormativity of the space via queer performativity, announcing the imminence of a queer future.

Referring to the iconic "Times Square Kiss," the 1946 photograph of Alfred Eisenstaedt depicting a sailor kissing a nurse on V-J Day, which "is a picture of personal intimacy in a public space" (123), Hariman and Lucaites explain that this kiss icon exemplifies in action what Berlant and Warner describe: "A man kissing a woman in the nation's most famous town square to celebrate military victory is a perfect case of heteronormative citizenship" (128). And precisely because the image enacts such a normative ideology, it can serve as template for challenge as best can be seen in the most famous appropriation of the kiss in the cover illustration of the 1996 *New Yorker* by Bill Blitt, which shows two uniformed men kissing on that very square. Obliquely referring to President Bill Clinton's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy allowing gays, lesbians and bisexuals to serve in the military as long as they remain in the 'closet,' i.e. silent about their homosexuality, the picture 'outs' what usually remains hidden in public: men kissing men. The cover thus "creates a sense of scandal, but by showing how supposedly deviant behavior fits seamlessly into the public model of heterosexual normality, it challenges conventional beliefs" (Hariman and Lucaites 129). Much like this "man-on-man public kissing constitutes a paramount political performance" (Morris and Sloop 3), queer kisses on stage have remained taboo until very recently (see Stuart; Morris; Clum 11), which agrees well with Ünel's gender politics in general and his gay kiss on stage in particular. Just as Murat's father claims it is okay for his son to announce his gayness and yet is too repulsed to look Murat in the face, the scandal of the staged gay kiss is both asserted (the kiss is visible on stage) and disclaimed (it is a dream kiss). The sight of two men kissing can still be perceived as a transgression of the given gender order since, "[a] kiss, to paraphrase the old song, isn't just a kiss. Hence its theatrical power" (Clum 11).

Notably, 1993 was the year in which the increasingly visible Turkish LGBT community attempted—and failed—to organize a gay and lesbian pride conference in Istanbul. Originally approved by the Interior Ministry, the event was supposed to be linked to the Gay Pride activities across the globe, but it was banned at the last minute by the governor of Istanbul on the grounds that it would be “contrary to Turkey’s tradition and moral values,” which led to the detention of 28 foreign delegates who then were deported to Germany. As Hakan Gecim writing for ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) explains, the “most striking result of this event was the establishment of Lambda Istanbul which is one of the most important LGBT organizations in Turkey.” Lambda’s creed is “to reach homosexuals who have not yet made their coming out process and help them, to establish solidarity within the gay community, to fight the prejudice of the media and society, and to help gays in Turkey to develop their identity and work for equality and liberation” (qtd. in Murray 4).¹³ Murat in Ünel’s play has come a long way, evolving from a traumatized expatriate to somebody who reconnects with his home. His journey is similar to Ünel’s own experience while writing the play which was to be his “love story for the city of Istanbul.” “Writing Pera Palas was a truly cathartic experience. As a dual citizen of two vastly disparate worlds, I always felt psychically divided. This play was the first time I felt those two aspects finally joined together. And it was a dance. A wild, and wonderful dance—and writing it was thrilling” (“Sinan Ünel”).

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13 For more on the development of the LGBT community see chapter 1.

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