



KADIR HAS UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
PROGRAM OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

**AFFECTIVE CONTOURS OF TRANSFEMINISM:
CHALLENGING GENDER IN TURKEY'S
CONTEMPORARY ALTERNATIVE THEATRE**

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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

ISTANBUL, SEPTEMBER, 2024

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Master of Arts Thesis

2024

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A thesis submitted to
the School of Graduate Studies of Kadir Has University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in
Communication Studies

Istanbul, September, 2024

APPROVAL

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In addition, I acknowledge that any claim of irregularity that may arise in relation to this work will result in a disciplinary action in accordance with the university legislation.

AHMET BERKEM YANIKCAN

Date (23/07/24)



To my dear friend Elif Şebnem Günaydın

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis represents the final stage of my research within Prof. Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay's European Research Council Starting Grant-funded project, *Staging National Abjection: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas*. I am grateful for the generous support of the European Research Council and especially for the thoughtful guidance of Prof. Altınay, whose mentorship has been essential throughout this project. His feedback, encouragement, and advice have been invaluable to me during my time as a researcher on his project. I can never thank him enough for all the experiences this project allowed me to have in different parts of the world. I would also like to thank Prof. Afife İdil Akın for her constant support and kindness during my time as a master's student at Kadir Has University. I am equally grateful to my defense committee—Prof. Emine Fişek, Prof. Bess Rowen, and Prof. Özen Baş—for their time, thoughtful contributions, and support throughout my writing process. Together with my advisors, Prof. Altınay and Prof. Akın, they have all contributed to the development of this thesis and provided me with valuable insights and guidance that have shaped my work.

As the starting point of my academic journey, I am deeply appreciative of my time at Boğaziçi University and the incredible experiences I had with the faculty of Western Languages and Literatures. I would like to acknowledge the irreplaceable contributions of Prof. Emine Fişek, Prof. Aslı Tekinay, Prof. Işıl Baş, Prof. Aylin Alkaç, and the entire department, who played an essential role in shaping my academic path. Their guidance has been instrumental in helping me grow, and to always view myself as a work in progress. I owe special thanks to Prof. Fişek, whose kindness and support made it possible for me to pursue graduate school and envision a future in academia.

During my time as a master's student in Communication Studies at Kadir Has University, I was fortunate to learn from and be guided by exceptional faculty members. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, Prof. Özen Baş, Prof. Levent Soysal, Prof. Dikmen Gürün, and Prof. Defne Tüzün for their support and the knowledge they shared in media studies, communication studies, cultural studies, and performance

studies. Their insights and encouragement have significantly enriched my academic experience.

I wrote this thesis, with its many versions and revisions, in both Istanbul and Berlin. My time at Humboldt University was particularly valuable for working on the early drafts, and I am grateful for the opportunity to study there as an exchange student. The change of environment and access to new academic resources greatly influenced the direction of my research. I would like to extend my gratitude to Prof. Beate Binder at Humboldt University, who generously offered her time and guidance through our readings and discussions. Her insights not only shaped my thinking but also deepened my understanding of the broader context of my work. My time in Berlin helped me gain new perspectives in life, and I am thankful for the academic and personal growth I experienced during that time.

I am incredibly thankful to my colleagues and friends—Şeyda Nur Yıldırım, Gamze Tosun, İlyas Deniz Çınar, Rüya Kalıntaş, Cihangir Can, and İlhan Çamiçi—for their continuous support and camaraderie during our time together in the *Staging Abjection* project. I owe particular thanks to Şeyda Nur Yıldırım and Gamze Tosun, whose generosity and kindness have saved me countless times in ways I could never fully repay. Their patience and help in navigating the challenges of my research and personal anxieties have been truly vital, and I am endlessly grateful for the time they invested in me.

Beyond my thesis and academic life, I want to acknowledge the profound impact my dear friends have had on my life over the past three years. Their unwavering support for my aspirations and their patient understanding of my anxieties have been nothing short of magical. I am incredibly fortunate to have friends like Işıl İlkter, Tahir Kıran, Melis Duman, Nergis Çebi, Hazal Haydar, Özge Cebeci, Sena Özkan, and Ilgın Acar, who have always been there for me. I truly could not have asked for better companions. Finally, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to Willem W. Meijer for being a constant source of love and support, and to my family, who has always been by my side, offering unconditional love and encouragement. I am forever grateful for their presence in my life.

AFFECTIVE CONTOURS OF TRANSFEMINISM: CHALLENGING GENDER IN TURKEY'S CONTEMPORARY ALTERNATIVE THEATRE

ABSTRACT

The increasing visibility of transmisogyny and transphobia, alongside the trans-exclusionary feminist discourse, necessitates a nuanced affective analysis to understand the complex emotional landscapes within trans representations in Turkey's contemporary alternative theatre. This study, grounded in affect theory, examines the strategies employed in trans performances. Amid heightened transphobia and conservative politics, alternative theatre emerges as a crucial site for the resistance and creative expressions of marginalized voices. This research delves into the melodramatic elements prevalent in contemporary alternative theatre in Turkey, assessing how affects like melancholia, sadness, and suffering are often privileged in mainstream narratives, which leads to reinforcing stereotypes and limiting the portrayal of trans experiences. Close readings of key performances by artists like Esmeray Özadikti and Seyhan Arman highlight the diverse affective registers employed by transfeminist artists, including humor, irony, anger, and resilience, to disrupt dominant narratives. This analysis explores trans affect as not only an individual experience but also a social and cultural phenomenon shaped by broader power dynamics. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concepts of "affective economies" and the "sociality of emotions," this thesis examines how emotions circulate within Turkish alternative theatre. Supplemented by archival research, this study combines affect theory with performance studies, queer and trans studies. In this way, it aims to contribute to a cautious understanding of trans representation and advocate for a broader recognition of the affective and political complexities inherent in trans performances. This approach challenges reductive narratives and highlights the diverse emotional dimensions that constitute trans lives and experiences, ultimately enhancing the discourse around trans visibility and representation within Turkey's sociopolitical landscape.

Keywords: transfeminism, trans performance, affect, alternative theatre, melodrama

TRANSFEMİNİZMİN DUYGULANIMSAL ÇEVRESİ: TÜRKİYE’NİN GÜNCEL ALTERNATİF TİYATROSUNDA CİNSİYETE MEYDAN OKUMAK

ÖZET

Trans-dışlayıcı feminist söylemlerle birlikte artan transmizojini ve transfobinin giderek görünür hale gelmesi, Türkiye’nin güncel alternatif tiyatrosundaki trans temsillerinin karmaşık duygusal manzaralarını anlamak için incelikli bir duygulanım analizini de gerektirmektedir. Duygulanım kuramına temellendirilmiş bu çalışma, trans performanslarında kullanılan stratejileri ele almaktadır. Artan transfobi ve muhafazakâr politikalar arasında alternatif tiyatro, ötekileştirilmiş seslerin direniş ve yaratıcı dışavurumları için mühim bir alan olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma, trans deneyimlerinin tasvirini sınırlandıran ve stereotipleri destekleyen melankoli, üzüntü ve acı gibi duygulanımların ana akım anlatılarda önceliklendirilmesini inceleyerek Türkiye’deki güncel alternatif tiyatrodaki yaygın olan melodramatik unsurları araştırmaktadır. Esmeray Özadikti ve Seyhan Arman gibi sanatçıların kilit performanslarını yakın okumak, transfeminist sanatçılar tarafından kullanılan mizah, ironi, öfke ve direnç gibi, hâkim anlatıları bozguna uğratan çeşitli duygulanımsal ifade biçimlerini belirginleştirmektedir. Bu analiz trans duygulanımını bireysel bir deneyimin ötesinde geniş kapsamlı güç dinamikleriyle şekillenen sosyal ve kültürel bir olgu olarak incelemektedir. Sara Ahmed’in “duygulanım ekonomisi” ve “duyguların sosyalliği” kavramlarına dayanan bu çalışma, Türkiye alternatif tiyatrosunda duyguların nasıl dolaşımında olduğuna odaklanmaktadır. Arşiv araştırmasıyla desteklenen bu çalışma, duygulanım kuramı, performans çalışmaları, kuir ve trans çalışmalarını bir araya getirmektedir. Böylelikle, trans temsillerinin daha dikkatli anlaşılmasını ve trans performanslara içkin olan duygulanımsal ve politik karmaşıklıkların daha kapsamlı tanınmasını savunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, indirgeyici anlatılara meydan okuyup trans yaşamlarını ve deneyimlerini oluşturan çeşitli duygusal boyutları vurgulamakta ve sonuç olarak da Türkiye’nin sosyopolitik bağlamında trans görünürlüğü ve temsiliyeti etrafında şekillenen söylemleri güçlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: transfeminizm, trans performansı, duygulanım, alternatif tiyatro, melodram

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DJ: Disc jockey

JDP: Justice and Development Party (Turkish: AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)

Kaos GL: Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association

(Turkish: Kaos Gey ve Lezbiyen Kültürel Araştırmalar ve Dayanışma Derneği)

LGBTQI+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, and Intersex. The “+” symbol represents other diverse gender and sexual identities.



1. INTRODUCTION¹

In recent years, the growing visibility of transmisogyny and transphobia—manifested in conservative legislative attacks on trans rights and the emergence of trans-exclusionary feminist discourse—has coincided with increased attention to trans suffering and deaths within broader political and social discussions. This heightened awareness reflects not only a response to new threats but also the ongoing activism and cultural productions of trans communities and allies, often centered on identity politics. The complex reality they face, marked by both incremental progress and persistent adversity, necessitates an affective analysis to fully grasp their emotional complexities and lived experiences. Mainstream discourse often simplifies this reality, highlighting either celebratory tokenization or violent oppression, thus obscuring the rich and nuanced affective landscape of trans existence.

In discussing the affective contours of trans life, Hil Malatino argues that the full spectrum of emotions experienced by trans individuals, including fatigue, numbness, envy, rage, and burnout, often goes unrecognized in dominant narratives that tend to focus on the catastrophic and tragic aspects of trans life (2022). Understanding this complex affective landscape is crucial for analyzing trans performance, as it provides a more complete picture of the lived experiences and emotional realities that inform and shape creative expression. By delving into the nuances of trans affect, we can uncover the ways in which performance becomes a site for negotiating, expressing, and resisting the multiple and often contradictory forces that shape trans lives. This analysis allows us to move beyond simplistic narratives and engage with the full spectrum of affects that constitute the trans experience.

In this thesis, I examine how trans affect is not only an individual experience but also a social and cultural phenomenon shaped by broader power dynamics. For that reason, Sara

¹ This thesis is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme for Research and Innovation (grant agreement No. 852216 STAGING-ABJECTION). I am grateful for the generous support of the European Research Council.

Ahmed's concept of "affective economies" and "sociality of emotions" also become integral to analyzing how emotions circulate and are valued within the specific context of alternative theater in Turkey (2004, 8). I use the terms affect and emotion by recognizing their distinctions and interrelations. Affect "arises in the midst of inbetween-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1). It emerges from the intensities that "pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise)," as they resonate and circulate within and between bodies and the world (ibid.). Therefore, affect is not merely an emotion but a force—often subtle and almost imperceptible—that exists "beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing" (ibid.). It drives us toward a movement, thought, or extension, or even suspending us in a state of neutrality (ibid.). Unlike emotion, which is typically associated with a conscious, identifiable feeling, affect is more diffuse and operates at a pre-conscious level, accumulating across relationships and disruptions in relationships. It traverses the boundaries between bodies—not just in terms of physical boundaries, but through their potential to "reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect" (ibid., 2). This means that affect is intimately tied to the ways bodies encounter the world, both in belonging and non-belonging, through a complex interplay of forces that are often ambiguous and mixed, shaping the very texture of experience.

Within the affective framework of this thesis, I aim to illustrate how certain emotions, such as sadness and suffering, are often privileged in representations of trans individuals, while others, like joy and resilience, are marginalized or ignored. This differential valuation of emotions creates an "affective economy" that reinforces existing power structures and shapes our understanding of what it means to be trans. By integrating Malatino's and Ahmed's theories, this thesis aims to uncover the intricate ways in which alternative theater productions in Turkey engage with and potentially challenge these affective economies. It seeks to understand how the circulation of affects on theater stage contributes to the construction of narratives about trans identity and experience. Furthermore, it explores how trans artists and activists might strategically deploy other affects in their work to disrupt dominant narratives and create new affective possibilities for understanding trans lives.

The term ‘trans performance’ is multifaceted and subject to various interpretations. While acknowledging the categorical challenges and questions this umbrella term raises—particularly regarding who performs trans identities and in what manner—this thesis primarily focuses on alternative theatre productions and dramatic texts both *by* and *about* trans individuals. The nuances within trans performance are nonetheless valuable for understanding the complex relationship between trans visibility and affect. To examine how trans experiences are shaped by and expressed through affect, trans performances emerge as an important site of inquiry. This approach is particularly crucial in conservative and authoritarian settings, where trans rights are disproportionately less recognized, and where competitive authoritarian regimes and the New Right often exploit transphobia (and homophobia) as a tool of governance (Graff and Korolzcuk 2022). In such contexts, the problematization of affect in trans experiences—the ways in which emotions are regulated, suppressed, or manipulated—becomes central to understanding how trans visibility is contested and negotiated in dramatic texts and performances.

In the context of Turkey, the number of performances and dramatic texts centering trans experiences is relatively small but gradually growing, particularly those written and directed by cisgender individuals. While acknowledging the risks of reinforcing a cis-made versus trans-made binary, analyzing the affective dimensions of these works—which often rely on melodramatic conventions and share similar dramatic structures—offers a critical lens for evaluating their contribution to and potential limitations in representing trans experiences. Rather than focusing solely on the emotional content, such as sadness or joy, it is essential to consider the broader affective forces at play—those intensities and resonances that circulate within and between bodies, shaping the experience of both performers and audiences.

In general, these performances follow two trajectories, each claiming empowerment, resistance, and agency through different emotional registers: one shaped by melancholia, loss, and vulnerability, and the other driven by resilience, defiance, and empowerment, both working to challenge and transform dominant narratives. This dual categorization does not merely reflect the full spectrum of emotions expressed in these performances but rather the underlying affective forces that drive and sustain them. By applying this

affective lens, we can move beyond simple identity-based categorizations and delve into the more complex ways these works evoke, negotiate, and challenge the emotional and affective complexities of trans lives. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how these performances operate within a sociopolitical context where trans rights are contested and often suppressed, illuminating the potential of affect as a means of both representation and resistance.

The lived experiences and emotional realities of trans individuals, shaped by a multitude of factors, are dynamically expressed and explored through performance. These performances, engaging with the body's capacity to affect and be affected, enact what Brian Massumi calls "affective politics," highlighting the relational nature of affect as a mode of connecting and being connected (Massumi 2021, xxxviii). This framework underscores the transformative potential of trans performances to evoke diverse responses, fostering an "aesthetic politics" that holds contrasting alternatives in a state of creative tension (ibid., xl). Such performances challenge simplistic narratives, encouraging a deeper, more nuanced engagement with trans experiences. Therefore, analyzing the affective contours of trans performances not only enriches our understanding of trans visibility and representation but also aligns with a broader political and aesthetic project of recognizing and sustaining the diversity of lived experiences within the Turkish sociopolitical landscape, a context marked by the ongoing social and political marginalization of trans and queer individuals.

1.1 Alternative Theatres in Turkey

Alternative theater does not have a singular and stable definition within the Turkish context despite having a long history. In that sense, it is a challenging pursuit to offer a unifying definition for alternative theaters, especially after 2000s. However, considering its significance for this thesis, it is important to provide a brief overview of how these alternative theatres came into existence. The origins of alternative theater can be traced back to the emergence of independent theatre groups during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The infrastructural deficit associated with the lack of shortage of dedicated theater spaces and buildings led theater practitioners, who lacked necessary support from the

state, to creatively repurpose unconventional spaces such as exhibition halls and apartment buildings into makeshift theaters. While this early adaptation was driven by necessity, it laid the foundation for theater companies to begin experimenting with new staging techniques and performance styles (Karagül 2014, 5). In the 1980s, the experimentations of private theatres began to explore new forms of artistic expression and independent pedagogies (Fişek 2020).

During the 1990s, Istanbul-based groups like Bilsak Tiyatro, Kumpanya, 5. Sokak Oyuncuları, and Stüdyo Oyuncuları aimed to establish independent spaces for theatrical expression, research, and education. This movement has gained momentum in the twenty-first century, with new venues like GalataPerform, Kumbaracı50, DOT, Moda Sahnesi, İkinciKat, MekanArtı, and Şermola Performans competing for public attention (Fişek 2018, 349). The alternative theaters of the 1990s onward embraced their non-traditional venues as part of their artistic identity. This period saw the rise of theater groups that not only questioned the established norms of theatrical space but also redefined what it meant to create alternative theater in Turkey.

Alternative theaters often formed in the repurposed and often modest spaces of Istanbul, such as converted apartments or large parking areas, many of which became known as Black Box theaters (Karagül 2014, 8). These spaces were characterized by their flexibility, allowing for dynamic staging and seating arrangements that fostered a more intimate and interactive experience for the audience. The use of such spaces also embodied a key tenet of alternative theater: the idea that any space could become a stage, challenging traditional Western notions of theater architecture and audience engagement. After the 2000s, alternative theaters have continued to evolve and increasingly distinguished themselves from state-funded institutions through their autonomy and focus on the interplay between different national identities and the politics of memory in Turkey (Başar 2014, 187; Fişek 2018, 349). Often established with limited resources or through collective efforts, these venues in urban centers like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir have become hubs for diverse audiences, from students to activists (Başar 2014, 202). These theaters often operate with limited financial resources; therefore, they rely heavily on the creativity and dedication of their members. Despite these challenges, they have become

critical sites for the exploration of local playwriting, the development of new pedagogies, and the interrogation of social and political issues.

The focus on autonomy and independence claims of alternative theatres is reflected in their commitment to addressing the complex interplay between different ethnic identities and the politics of memory, particularly in a setting like Turkey where the politics of identity are deeply contested. Moreover, these theaters serve as vital platforms for marginalized voices, including those from the LGBTQI+ community, and for the representation of trans experiences, which have become increasingly central to the discourse of queer and trans rights advocacy in Turkey (Başar 2014, 180). The alternative theater scene, particularly in urban centers like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, has become a hub for diverse audiences from students to activists, who are drawn to its innovative and politically engaged productions. These theaters provide a crucial space for the negotiation of identity and belonging, offering a counter-narrative to the often conservative and homogenized representations found in mainstream Turkish theater. In short, alternative theater in Turkey represents a dynamic and evolving field, rooted in a history of resistance and experimentation. It continues to challenge the boundaries of traditional theater, both in terms of content and form, while also reflecting the broader social, political, and cultural currents of the country. By embracing the fluidity of space and the diversity of voices, alternative theaters in Turkey remain vital to the ongoing dialogue about identity, politics, and art.

1.2 Historical Background of Queer and Trans Experience in Turkey

The history of trans and queer experiences is intricate and multifaceted, interwoven with broader social, political, and cultural currents that have shaped these identities over time. While an exhaustive exploration of these experiences, both within and beyond the realms of theater and performance, lies outside the scope of this thesis, it is essential to provide a contextual framework that captures the key historical dynamics at play. By tracing the evolution of queer and trans identities, particularly within the last two decades, we can better understand the emergence of their representations in contemporary Turkish theater. This historical contextualization is crucial for grasping the social and political forces that

have both marginalized and empowered these communities which offers insights into the complexities of their visibility and the cultural narratives that surround them.

The Ottoman Empire hosted a rich tapestry of performance cultures which reflected its diverse cultural heritage and interactions with Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Performances intertwined with non-normative sexual cultures, such as the *köçek*, dancing individuals, who were assigned male at birth, providing artistic and sexual entertainment for men, and the shadow theater *karagöz*, which features intersex characters, themes of group sex, and trans identities, played a significant role in the Ottoman performance world (Altınay 2021; Andrews and Kalpaklı 2006; Avcı 2017; Schick 2004). In the nineteenth century, Ottoman sexual discourse underwent a notable transformation. The scholarly interpretation of its impact on cultural life remains debated. Some scholars argue that a strict orthodox Islamic dogma that condemned same-sex practices gained prominence, and European encounters led to the Empire's queer sexual cultures being framed as shameful (Ze'evi 2008, 48). After a long period of sexual and gender diversity, a rigid binary gender paradigm and heteronormativity gradually solidified, resulting in a period of silencing and a discursive gap (ibid., 36). Others, however, challenge this era of silencing, demonstrating how the Ottomans did not simply adopt the dominant European sexual paradigm but actively negotiated and contested it, leading to a diversity of sexual paradigms and both continuities and transformations in sexual cultures (Artan and Schick 2013, 188; Sarıtaş 2018, 10).

Beyond the performance of dancing for entertainment purposes, *köçeks* constitute an integral part of trans identities in the Ottoman Empire. The term *köçek*, derived from the Turkish word “küçük” and Persian variation “kuchak”, meaning “little, young, child”, referred to dancers who were assigned male at birth but were trained from a young age to perform in ways that intentionally blurred traditional gender lines (Arvas 2021, 160). These dancers, often selected from non-Muslim communities, were trained to embody a form of androgyny that destabilized the binary gender norms prevalent at the time (ibid., 171). Unlike simple cross-dressing or female impersonation, *köçek* dancers occupied a liminal space between genders, using a blend of masculine and feminine attributes in their performances to challenge and obscure their assigned gender (ibid., 161). *Köçek* dancers,

from the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries, were recognized as both a social and erotic class, characterized by their captivating yet socially stigmatized androgyny, which was prominent in both public life and the realm of poetry (ibid., 171).

The cultural narratives around gender and sexuality in Ottoman Empire began to change dramatically with the rise of European influence and the internal pressures to modernize and align more closely with Western norms. As Ertuğ Altınay notes, “sexuality emerged as a concern in the encounters between Europe and the Ottoman Middle East between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries” (2018, 250). This period saw a growing stigma against same-sex desires, largely driven by European travelers who “presented the Ottoman homoerotic culture as a source of shame” and Ottoman intellectuals who, in response, “propagated heterosexist norms” to counter these Orientalist narratives (ibid., 250). The Tanzimat² reforms, aimed at Europeanizing the Empire, further accelerated the heterosexualization of public culture. By the time the Republic of Turkey was established, this transformation was nearly complete with strict regulations on public morality, the banning of köçek performances, and the censorship of traditional arts that had once embraced queer elements.

The Republican era’s perception of queer and trans subjectivities in Turkey was deeply shaped by the state’s efforts to create a modern, Westernized nation-state that severed ties with the Ottoman past. The period following the establishment of the Republic in 1923 was marked by extensive legal, cultural, and social reforms aimed at fostering a homogenous national identity aligned with heteronormative ideals. This transformation involved the erasure of the diverse sexual and gender expressions that had existed in the Ottoman Empire, as the new regime sought to establish a secular yet implicitly Sunni Muslim nation-state. In this context, non-normative sexualities and gender identities were pathologized, marginalized, or rendered invisible. The nationalist archival and historiographical practices of this period contributed to the suppression of queer and trans narratives because they were seen as incompatible with the state’s vision of modernity. However, this suppression was not total. Figures like Reşad Ekrem Koçu, engaged in a

² Tanzimat (meaning “Reorganization” in English) refers to a series of reforms implemented in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876, aimed at modernizing the empire’s institutions and centralizing its administration.

melancholic form of resistance through their archival practices, which preserved and highlighted the subjugated knowledges of queer and trans lives in his *The Encyclopedia of Istanbul* (Altınay 2015, 92). By documenting and writing about the stories of queer relationships and gender nonconformity, Koçu challenged the dominant narratives of the Republican period that sought to deny the existence of such identities. His work provided a sense of historical continuity and a genealogy for queer subjects in a context where their existence was increasingly ignored or punished by the state.

Koçu's archive offers valuable insights into the formation of queer subcultures centered around nightclubs in Istanbul, particularly through his focus on queer subjects. He provides detailed descriptions of the *köçeks* who performed in Istanbul's *meyhanes*³, including their physical characteristics and the rigorous training they underwent. His writings capture various queer and trans experiences, shedding light on how these identities were perceived in the twentieth century. For instance, in his encyclopedia, an article by Bürhaneddin Olker describes Carlo Maria, a trans performer who came to Istanbul between 1963 and 1965 as part of a French revue named Caroussel. The article reflects the period's rigid binary understanding of gender, referring to Carlo Maria as a "girl boy" and employing masculine adjectives to describe them. These accounts contribute to understanding how queer histories and identities intersect with places like Beyoğlu while highlighting the area's significance in shaping queer and trans cultural narratives in the recent history of Turkey.

Parallel to the references on the connections between nightclubs and *meyhanes* in Istanbul, Beyoğlu, as a space, presents an important historical narrative for the queer and trans communities. It developed as a historically cosmopolitan hub with a strong European influence, housing non-Muslim communities such as Levantines, Armenians, Greeks (Rums), and Jews. This area became associated with both high culture and a thriving underworld, where backstreets were dominated by the lower-class people, including sex workers. The sex economy, primarily controlled by non-Muslim groups due to religious restrictions on Muslim women, flourished during times of economic hardship,

³ Meyhane is a traditional restaurant that offers a variety of alcoholic beverages, mostly rakı in Turkey, along with meze, side dishes or appetizers, and traditional dishes in the Balkans, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran.

such as the Crimean War and World War I (Zengin 2011, 46). The influx of White Russians after the 1917 October Revolution further transformed Beyoğlu into a lively entertainment district (ibid.).

Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, nationalist policies led to the Turkification of Beyoğlu, which dramatically reduced its non-Muslim population. Events such as the population exchange⁴, the “Citizen, speak Turkish!”⁵ campaign, the wealth tax (Varlık Vergisi)⁶, and the 1955 Istanbul Pogrom⁷ contributed to this demographic shift. By the 1960s, internal migration had changed Beyoğlu’s cultural landscape and its cosmopolitan character. The district also became increasingly ghettoized, with Tarlabası gaining notoriety for sex work and illicit activities, which led to frequent police raids. The 1960s also saw the emergence of *lubunya* (queer and trans) communities, especially around streets like Abanoz, which became known as gathering places for these marginalized groups.

During this time, queer communities often moved and lived together as a community, particularly in areas like Abanoz Street. However, in 1978, under the administration of Saadettin Tantan in Istanbul Police Department, these queer communities were forced to leave these areas and relocate to places like Dolapdere, where they were also not welcomed (Siyah Pembe Üçgen 2013, 12). The military coup in 1980 intensified their struggles, with many trans women being forcibly exiled from Istanbul and subjected to severe restrictions on their ability to find housing and employment. The stage bans that accompanied these severe measures took away the source of income from many trans performers for almost a decade, thus forcing them to pursue sex work for their survival (Altınay 2008, 214). Additionally, media representation of LGBTQI+ individuals was

⁴ The 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey was a compulsory exchange of ethnic Greeks in Turkey and ethnic Turks in Greece, mandated by the Treaty of Lausanne.

⁵ Initiated in 1928, the “Citizen, speak Turkish!” campaign was a state-sponsored initiative aimed at promoting Turkish as the only language spoken in public spaces in Turkey, which pressured non-Turkish speaking minorities to abandon their native languages.

⁶ Implemented in 1942, the Varlık Vergisi was an extraordinary wealth tax levied primarily on non-Muslim citizens in Turkey, leading to severe financial hardship and forced labor for many minority families.

⁷ The 1955 Istanbul Pogrom, also known as the Istanbul Riots, was a government-instigated attack against the city’s Greek minority, resulting in widespread looting, destruction of property, and forced emigration of thousands of Greeks from Turkey.

heavily censored and derogatory which continuously labeled them with dehumanizing terms. The state further persecuted LGBTQI+ individuals with police brutality and arbitrary detentions. Despite some legal advancements, such as the legalization of gender-affirming surgeries in 1988, the period was marked by systematic violence, exclusion, and survival under harsh conditions.

From a sociopolitical lens, following the 1980 coup d'état, the decade was characterized by a contradictory coexistence of severe political repression and emerging cultural liberalization in Turkey. The military regime's crackdown on dissent led to widespread censorship, mass arrests, and executions, silencing the opposition left (Gürbilek 2011, 4). Simultaneously, economic changes and the influence of global capitalism fostered a rising consumer culture and newfound cultural pluralism (ibid., 5). This created a complex social landscape of restricted political expression alongside newfound freedoms, where media and advertising industries gained significant power, shaping a society driven by consumption and desire.

For queer and trans individuals, the 1980s and 1990s were particularly difficult due to state-sanctioned repression and discrimination against the LGBTQI+ communities. Trans people faced arbitrary police actions, including raids, detention, violence, sexual assault, and extortion by police and hospital staff. Places like the Sansaryan Han, Istanbul's Police Headquarters, and the Cankurtaran Venereal Diseases Hospital, or "Can Can," were notorious sites of abuse, where trans individuals were often detained and exploited (Selek 2011, 178). The military regime's attempts to forcibly relocate trans women from Istanbul to remote areas, a practice intensified after the coup, further exemplifies the state's hostility (ibid., 185). Although legislative changes, such as the 1988 amendment for allowing sex reassignment surgeries, marked progress on the outside, the queer and trans community never achieved acceptance and equality.

The 1990s marked a significant turning point for the LGBTQI+ movement in Turkey, characterized by the emergence and organization of various LGBTQI+ groups, despite ongoing socio-political challenges. Key organizations like Kaos GL founded in 1994 in Ankara and Lambdaistanbul in 1993 in Istanbul were established during this period to

advocate against homophobia and transphobia. While the oppressive atmosphere lingering from the 1980 military coup continued to pose challenges, these organizations fostered community and resilience among LGBTQI+ individuals. Despite facing systematic violence, the LGBTQI+ community's efforts in the 1990s laid the groundwork for a more organized and visible movement, combining activism with cultural and social initiatives, such as creating LGBTQI+ friendly spaces and producing queer-themed media.

In the 1990s, along with Pürtelaş and Bozkurt Streets, Ülker Street in Cihangir emerged as a vital cultural and social enclave for Istanbul's queer and trans community which became a subcultural space of community and empowerment for a while after the years of displacement from areas like Abanoz and Tarlabası. However, fueled by neoliberal policies and international investments in the 1990s, the rapid gentrification movement of Cihangir marked the beginning of the end for this queer enclave as well. Beyoğlu Güzelleştirme Derneği (The Association for the Improvement of Beyoğlu), in conjunction with local authorities, played a key role in this process by promoting the area as an attractive residential district for the elite, leading to the systematic targeting and displacement of trans women.

The 1996 United Nations Habitat II Conference⁸ further accelerated these efforts (Zengin 2011, 27). Police forces, under the leadership of the infamous police chief Süleyman Ulusoy, or as more commonly known as “Hortum Süleyman,”⁹ launched brutal raids aimed at purging the area of its transgender population. These raids, often involving hundreds of police officers, were justified as moral crackdowns but were also influenced by corrupt deals with brothel owners like Matild Manukyan, who perceived the trans sex economy as competition (Selek 2011, 130.) Despite resistance efforts within the

⁸ The United Nations Habitat II Conference was held in Istanbul in 1996. It was a global summit focused on urban development and sustainable human settlements. In Istanbul, the conference's preparations led to aggressive “clean-up” operations, which targeted marginalized communities, particularly trans women in Cihangir.

⁹ Hortum Süleyman was a notorious police chief in Istanbul during the 1990s, who was known for his brutal treatment of marginalized communities, particularly trans women and sex workers. His moniker, which translates to English as “Süleyman the Hose,” referred to his use of water hoses as a form of torture during police raids. He played a significant role in the violent displacement of trans people from Cihangir as part of the gentrification efforts surrounding the 1996 United Nations Habitat II conference.

community, the majority of trans women were forcibly removed from Cihangir, which culminated in their near-complete displacement from Ülker Street by the mid-1990s.

This displacement not only fractured the spatial integrity of the trans community but also symbolized a broader struggle against gentrification and state violence. While it was once a symbol of trans resistance and community, the street became a site of vulnerability as gentrification pressures increased. The gentrification policies led to the transformation of Cihangir into a hub for the people from upper echelons of the society, which further facilitated the rising rents and the influx of art galleries, cafes, and restaurants while pushing out the trans residents. Although this period marked the loss of a concentrated trans community, it also led to the emergence of the current fluid and dispersed forms of living across Istanbul, reflecting both the challenges and resilience of the trans community in navigating the urban landscape.

1.3 Contemporary Trans Performances in Alternative Theaters

Partly due to the longer legacy of queer activism, advancements in media and communication technologies, and the availability of global funding, the past fifteen years have seen a surge in queer activism and cultural production, including in the realm of theater (Altınay 2018, 267). In this context, one-actor performances with minimal stage designs offer cost-effective solutions that allow small theatre companies or individual actors to travel easily and reach a broader audience. Among these one-actor performances, those created and performed by trans women are central to the discourse of queer and trans rights advocacy in Turkey. The first theatre performances by a trans woman include the singer, actor and activist Ceyhan Fırat Hızal's autobiographical performance based on her book *Bacak Böcek Oyunu (A Game of Legs)* (1996) as part of the Vienna-based Theatre des Augenblicks's collective stage performance *Transşans (Transchance)* in 1999 (Öztekin 2021).

The precarity faced by trans and queer individuals in Turkey has complex historical roots, particularly following the stressful period of 1980 military coup, which triggered significant social, economic, and political transformations, including the rise of

neoliberalism and political Islam. These changes established a socio-political landscape that has significantly impacted the queer and trans communities in Turkey. In this context, the conservative government of JDP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) has further intensified these challenges. However, despite this ongoing adversity, Turkish alternative theatre has emerged as a crucial space for resistance and expression with over twenty performances and dramatic works in the past decade that explore and represent the experiences of the trans community. Most of these performances deal with a shared narrative of contemporary Turkish history. The violence of military dictatorship during the 1980s and the Turkish government's brutal gentrification policies since the 1990s resulted in the forced migration of trans people in urban centers like Istanbul and Ankara, creating a core experience of trans marginalization in modern-day Turkey. This experience has influenced various works in theatre and performance, including the trans autobiographical texts and performances of Esmeray Özadikti. Her works *Cadının Bohçası* (2006) [*The Witch's Bundle*], *Yırtık Bohça* (2012) [*The Ragged Bundle*] are among the first productions about trans experience in the 2000s. Later, she continued her performances with *Kestirmeden Hikayeler* (2014) [*Stories Before Cutting*] and *Olsun* (2023) [*Let It Be*].

Following in the footsteps of pioneers like Esmeray, one-actor performances have emerged as a significant platform for exploring trans experiences within Turkey's alternative theatre scene. Among the most renowned examples of these productions is Ebru Nihan Celkan's 2012 play, *Kimsenin Ölmediği Bir Günün Ertesiydi* [*After the Day Nobody Died*], which has become a popular performance concerning trans experience in Turkey over the past decade. This one-act melodrama was directed and performed by Turkish cis woman actor Sumru Yavrucuk, who received several prestigious awards in Turkey for her role in 2013. In 2020, the play was recorded by a Turkish trans actor, Ayta Sözeri, as part of an audio theatre project by Podacto and released for online audiences in 2021. Other key one-actor plays include Şamil Yılmaz's *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* [*Women, Loves, Songs*] (2013), Berk İnan's *Ben Senin Bildiğin Erkeklerden Değilim* [*I Am Not Your Typical Man*] (2015), and Seyhan Arman's *Küründen Kabare* [*Cabaret of Sham*] (2017) which is a performance that portrays a trans woman's experiences through the medium of cabaret. On this list, Uğur Kanbay's *Eylül* (2018) is among the latest

productions that gained popularity following the tragic suicide of Eylül Cansın, a trans woman who met her untimely end by jumping off the Bosphorus Bridge in 2015.

In addition to these one-actor performances, other plays with trans characters in Turkey's alternative theatre and dramatic literature worlds have become popular for exploring trans experiences in Turkey. Ufuk Tan Altunkaya's *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* [*Being Queer in the 80s*] (2013) and *90'larda Lubunya Olmak* [*Being Queer in the 90s*] (2014) are some of the most widely known productions that continue to be staged within Turkish diasporic communities. Other examples include Voltrans theatre group's *Kimyam Tenime Uymuyor* [*My Chemistry Doesn't Match My Body*] (2010), Ali Cüneyd Kılıcıoğlu's *Düdüklü Tencere* [*Pressure Cooker*] (2013), Ahmet Sami Özbudak's *İz* [*Trace*] (2013), Kemal Hamamcıoğlu's *Garaj* [*Garage*] (2013), Başak Kıvılcım Ertanoğlu's *Diva* (2014), Murat Mahmutyazıcıoğlu's *Sevmekten Öldü Desinler* [*Let Them Say She Died of Love*] (2017), Ata Tuncer's *Kraliçe Gece* [*Queen Night*] (2017), Kılıcıoğlu's *Mahallemin Şahane Baskısı* [*My Neighborhood's Fantastic Pressure*] (2018), Banu Kaptanoğulları's *Seni Seviyorum Cinayeti* [*The "I Love You" Murder*] (2018), Baba Sahne's *Taxim* (2022), and Nuray Uzunöz's *Gecenin Sesi* [*Voice of the Night*] (2022) (Karalı 2015, 18-19; Uzundemir 2022, 219).

1.4 Melodrama and Its Relationship to Trans Performance

To understand the complexities of melodrama's role in representing trans experiences, it is essential to examine the genre's historical and cultural context. While the term "melodrama" is often used broadly and sometimes conflated with other genres, its core characteristics include a heightened focus on emotional expression, moral conflict, and the empathetic portrayal of characters navigating social and domestic challenges. Melodrama's deep ties to "structures of feeling" and "social and domestic ideologies" have made it a potent force in shaping modern political discourse globally (Buckley 2018, 16).

In the Turkish context, melodrama's emotional impact is particularly significant. The genre rose to prominence during the Westernization period of the Ottoman Empire in the

nineteenth century, when European dramatic styles heavily influenced Turkish theater. According to Mehmet Fatih Uslu, melodrama emerges as a distinct theatrical genre where the stark contrast between good and evil is emphasized through exaggerated expressions and clear moral dichotomies in the Ottoman Theatre (Uslu 2014, 102-107). Uslu underscores that melodramas are characterized by their portrayal of good and evil sharply separated from each other, where the boundaries between innocence and villainy are clearly delineated (ibid., 112). This moral clarity, is not merely a dramatic device but a political tool, making melodrama a significant medium for conveying ideological messages during its period of popularity. The exaggerated style served to underline the intense moral undertones of these plays, ensuring that the audience left with a reinforced understanding of the binary oppositions between good and evil. Furthermore, Uslu indicates that the political and moral effectiveness of melodrama was deeply rooted in its ability to articulate and solidify these moral binaries in the minds of the audience, functioning as a “political strategy” for the Ottoman intellectuals (ibid., 97).

Melodrama has been one of the most prevalent affective modalities in modern Turkish culture, routinely informing a wide range of fields such as literature, music, film, television, and theater/performing arts. Scholars, mostly in the discipline of film studies, have focused on melodrama as an ambiguous hybrid of a genre/modality in the Yeşilçam era of Turkish cinema. A discursive label mobilized to refer to Turkish film production from the 1960s to the late 1980s, Yeşilçam (meaning Green Pine) takes its name from a street in Beyoğlu that housed film production companies and studios. According to Behlil, Yeşilçam was one of the most productive film industries in its apex which actively molded the Turkish “national imaginary” (2021, 167-168). Based on an economic model called “the bond-system,” which deferred payments to film crew post-release if a film had profited (Akser 2018, 156), Yeşilçam filmmakers produced *konfeksiyon* (ready-made) films to meet the demands of audiences, cinema owners, and all manner of personnel involved in filmmaking, including star actors (Erdoğan 1998, 261). Through its narrative structure, emotional tone, and aesthetic style, melodrama was a crucial and popular genre in Yeşilçam films. Its use in the rapid production schedules and the frequent recycling of plot elements reflects how melodramatic conventions shaped the films’ emotional appeal and thematic focus.

Melodrama in Yeşilçam films often depicted class differences and conflicts, portraying the lower classes with sympathy while maintaining a more critical, though varied, stance towards the upper classes depending on the narrative context. This dynamic has led some scholars to interpret these films through Marxist themes of class struggle and polarization (Kılıçbay and İncirlioğlu 2003). Although featuring many variations and hybridizing with genres like romance, comedy, social realist village films, and even action-adventure films, the melodramatic modality in Yeşilçam films generally reinforced conventional gender roles, societal norms, and local cultural characteristics, mostly positioning them in a clash with modern, secular, and Westernized ways of life (Mutlu 2010, 420). Melodrama remains an immensely popular emotional mode in Turkish culture and is increasingly utilized across various subgenres of the Turkish television industry. It also serves as a key national signifier in marketing these series and programs to international audiences.

When considering melodrama and its genre conventions in Turkey, it is essential to acknowledge that its influence extends beyond theater into film. The melodramatic mode has dominated Turkish cultural expression for decades, particularly through Yeşilçam cinema, shaping how the self and the other are represented. While melodrama's tendency to depict victimization is often seen as problematic, it is also important to acknowledge that it has served as a potential avenue for mainstream recognition. In a cultural landscape where mainstream recognition is often difficult to access for marginalized subjectivities—queer, trans, ethnic, or religious margins—melodrama has provided a platform, albeit an imperfect one, for bringing these experiences into broader public consciousness through the Yeşilçam cinema.

In theatre, the genre of melodrama has undergone significant transformations since its origins in the Ottoman Empire, where it was deeply intertwined with the empire's modernization efforts. Initially, melodrama in the Ottoman context served as a tool for conveying clear moral lessons and promoting societal progression, often through a narrative that emphasized resolution and moral clarity. Ottoman revolutionists adapted the form to articulate their visions of an ideal Ottoman public, making it a political and

social instrument. However, it is important to acknowledge that the melodrama of that era is not the melodrama of today. Over time, the genre has evolved and shed some of its earlier didactic simplicity by becoming more complex and varied in its application. In contemporary Turkish alternative theatre, particularly in performances about trans people, melodramatic conventions persist but in a form that reflects the changing cultural and political landscape. These plays that instrumentalize melodramatic elements often simplify complex trans experiences into tragic and sad narratives by prioritizing their emotional responses over the nuanced realities of trans lives. This dynamic, rooted in the genre's history, continues to shape the portrayal of trans experiences and raises critical questions about the control of narratives and the emotional economy within the theater space.

While the prevalence of melodramatic conventions in alternative theatre productions about trans people does not inherently delegitimize their artistic merit, it raises important questions about the dominance of certain affective strategies and the potential limitations of relying primarily on melodrama to represent trans experiences. In particular, the reliance on melodramatic tropes, such as heightened emotional displays and cathartic expressions of trans suffering can risk obscuring the complexities and diversity of trans lives. It is important to acknowledge that within Turkey's contemporary alternative theatre scene, transfeminist theatre makers may also employ melodramatic elements, but their work often incorporates a wider range of affective registers, drawing on humor, irony, anger, and joy alongside sadness.

By analyzing the affective politics of melodramatic performances about trans women in Turkish alternative theatre, we can explore how these works often evoke compassion in cisgender audiences and critics. While compassion can be a powerful emotion, its deployment in these contexts often serves to make the plays more palatable for mainstream consumption, potentially reinforcing hegemonic power structures by framing structural injustices in ways that maintain the status quo. As Lauren Berlant notes, melodrama can be a powerful tool for shaping "national sentimentality," conveying an empathetic engagement with others' suffering and sadness (2001, 53). However, Berlant also critiques how the dominant public sphere can amplify subaltern suffering, with

compassion serving as a distancing mechanism for privileged spectators (2004, 4). In the Turkish context, trans performances often rely on this aesthetic of compassion to elicit empathy from audiences, potentially obscuring and reproducing the structural inequalities that contribute to trans marginalization. By critically examining these affective strategies, we can better understand the complex ways in which melodrama can both contribute to and limit the representation of trans experiences on the Turkish stage.

In theatre and performance studies, theories of witnessing examine how spectators engage with performances. Caroline Wake categorizes witnessing into primary, secondary, and tertiary forms. These theories challenge the traditional active-passive spectator dichotomy and highlight the complex ways in which spectators engage with performances (Wake 2009, 5). She argues that primary witnessing involves a direct, immersive experience, akin to being present at a traumatic event, which leads to intense emotional responses (Wake 2009, 6). Secondary witnessing involves indirectly experiencing the event through others' testimonies and it allows for critical reflection (Wake 2009, 9). Tertiary witnessing involves observing the act of witnessing itself, often through imaginative or mediated experiences (Wake 2009, 13). Understanding these layers is crucial for exploring how spectatorship can foster deeper engagement and ethical reflection.

Just as the layered nature of witnessing deepens our understanding of spectatorship, the complexities of compassion similarly play a significant role in shaping our ethical engagement with performances. Like witnessing, compassion also consists of multiple layers and complexities. In reconsidering the significance of witnessing, the nature of compassion also becomes a layered subject in ethics. For Emma Willis, genuine compassion requires more than just sympathy for victims; it involves recognizing one's relationship to perpetrators of violence and avoiding "colonial empathy," where the observer's feelings overshadow the actual suffering of the victims (2014, 400). This form of empathy emphasizes shared responsibility and ethical witnessing which challenges the audience to engage with narratives of sadness or suffering in a way that fosters ethical reflection and communal responsibility, rather than passive or self-serving empathy (ibid.). Therefore, any generalization with regards to witnessing or compassion presupposes social and political dynamics of different contexts.

In the context of Turkey's alternative theatres, where most of trans performances in the country are staged, the ethical dimension of compassion becomes crucial for evaluating its limits in trans performances. While the audience of alternative theaters in Turkey is often politically aligned with progressive politics, including queer and trans rights, it is essential to acknowledge that this group is not monolithic. While a significant trend in its developing work is an examination of the relationship between collective and individual memory, and their impact on the complexities of national identity in twentieth-century Turkey, alternative theaters are not singular and homogenous entities (Fişek 2018, 349). Despite these audiences often sharing a political stance against majoritarian politics in Turkey, they remain diverse by encompassing individuals with a wide range of identities, backgrounds, and perspectives. This diversity, while a strength, also introduces complexities in how trans performances are received and interpreted. The sociopolitical standpoint of alternative theaters, combined with the nature of the political performances they stage, often attracts an audience predisposed to engage with and support trans narratives. However, this alignment does not automatically guarantee a nuanced or critical engagement with the material.

The impact of trans performances within the context of alternative theatres in Turkey carries a delicate significance. On one hand, these performances do not address the phobic majority; rather, they cater to an audience already inclined toward empathy and solidarity with trans and queer issues. This means that the performances are less likely to provoke outright hostility from their viewers. On the other hand, the pre-existing political alignment of these audiences presents the risk of creating an echo chamber, where certain problematic representations of trans identities may go unchallenged. In such a setting, there is a danger that even well-intentioned performances could inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or oversimplified narratives, rather than offering a deeper, more critical exploration of trans experiences.

The risk of creating stereotypical trans narratives underscores the critical importance of ethical witnessing within these spaces. Ethical witnessing, much like compassion, consists of multiple layers and requires a self-conscious engagement from the audience.

It is not enough for politically aligned viewers to passively consume trans performances; instead, they must actively locate their own agency within the sociopolitical critiques presented on stage. As Emma Willis argues, compassion involves more than merely sympathizing with victims; it requires an awareness of one's relationship to the broader systems of power and violence that shape these narratives. Similarly, ethical witnessing challenges the audience to move beyond a superficial or self-serving empathy—what Marjorie Garber refers to as the “access of pleasure” derived from another's pain—and instead engage in a deeper reflection on the shared responsibility and complexities of the suffering depicted (2004, 20).

1.5 Methodology and Chapter Outlines

In this thesis, I employ close reading as the primary method, analyzing selected dramatic texts and performances through the theoretical lenses of affect theory, while also employing theories of performance studies, queer theory, and trans studies. By examining the narratives, emotional registers, and performative strategies within these works, this study aims to uncover how they articulate and negotiate the affective experiences of trans individuals in Turkey's contemporary alternative theater scene. This theoretical consideration provides a critical lens for interpreting how these plays engage with the affective economies of transness, particularly the dominance of affects like sadness and suffering that are part and parcel of melodramatic representations, and their potential for challenging or reinforcing dominant cultural narratives about gender, sexuality, and identity. I also employ archival research to supplement this analysis, incorporating the historical context and production details of these performances to illuminate their significance and influence on queer and trans communities in Turkey. This thesis seeks to illuminate the complex and nuanced ways in which trans experiences are represented and embodied on Turkey's alternative theatre stage; thereby, challenging reductive narratives and highlighting the diverse affective dimensions of trans performance in contemporary Turkey.

In Chapter I, “Trans Historiography and Affect,” I investigate the representation and re-enactment of trans experiences within the broader context of recent Turkish history and

memory. To ground this analysis, I will trace this historical trajectory through a documentary play named *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak*. The play relies on the oral testimonies of four trans women who lived during period and offers valuable insights into how queer artists engage with issues of historiography and solidarity, particularly within the fraught political landscape of Turkey. A central focus of this chapter is the examination of *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak*, which undertakes to take part in queer and trans history writing in Turkey by adapting the oral history project with the same name. The performance is situated within a specific historical and political period, namely the 1980 military coup and its aftermath. By drawing on the lived experiences of trans individuals during this turbulent era, the plays contribute to a counter-narrative that challenges official historical accounts and amplifies marginalized voices. As the production emerged from a civil society project, it highlights the interconnectedness of theater and activism in Turkey. While not all trans performances originate from such projects, these plays demonstrate how theater can serve as a platform for documenting and sharing personal testimonies that might otherwise be silenced or erased.

As an example of documentary theatre, *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* makes a deliberate political intervention by staging the communal experiences and systemic abjection faced by trans individuals in Turkey during the 1980s. The play also utilizes the setting of the *pavyon*¹⁰ to explore the complex emotions associated with this traumatic period. This setting allows for a nuanced portrayal of both suffering and resilience, showcasing the power of music and performance to create spaces of belonging and resistance. By appealing to pathos through emotional monologues and musical performances, these plays foster an affective connection with audiences, inviting them to empathize with the struggles of trans and queer communities in Turkey.

In the second chapter, “The Limits of Cis Compassion,” I delve into the complex landscape of representations of trans experiences within alternative theater in Turkey. By focusing on popular productions such as *Eylül*, *Kadınlar Aşklar Şarkılar*, and *Kimsenin*

¹⁰ Pavyon is a type of entertainment venue in Turkey characterized by its lively atmosphere, diverse musical performances (often folk, pop, or arabesk), and varying reputations. Pavyons range from upscale to informal settings, attracting diverse clientele, and are an integral part of Turkey’s social and cultural landscape, although sometimes associated with undesirable activities.

Ölmediği Bir Gecenin Ertesiydi, I investigate the production and contextual backgrounds of these performances to elucidate their multifaceted impact on trans lives and visibility beyond the stage. While these plays ostensibly aim to challenge trans marginalization, their affective engagement with audiences—often relying on melodramatic conventions—can inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce existing power structures. By analyzing the affective strategies employed in these performances, this chapter reveals how they often portray trans suffering and sadness, frequently positioning trans individuals as objects of empathy or compassion for cisgender audiences.

I examine how *Kadınlar Aşklar Şarkılar*, while written and directed by a cisgender man, gains a new dimension through the later transition of its actor, Meli Bendeli. This situation complicates the notion of *transploitation*, emphasizing the fluidity of gender identity and the potential for cis-created works to be reclaimed by trans and queer individuals. By analyzing the affective impact of this play in light of Bendeli's transition, I challenge the binary categorization of "cis-created" versus "trans-created" works, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of authorship and representation in the context of trans performance. Through a close reading of these plays, I aim to contribute to a more critical and inclusive approach to representing trans narratives in Turkey's alternative theater—one that acknowledges the complexities of affect, challenges simplistic notions of compassion, and centers the agency and lived experiences of trans individuals.

In addition to analyzing the dramaturgical and performative aspects of these productions, I also explore the broader socio-political contexts in which they are embedded. This examination includes a consideration of the historical and contemporary challenges faced by the trans community in Turkey, as well as the role of theater as a site of both resistance and complicity in the face of societal norms and prejudices. By situating these performances within their broader cultural and political milieu, I seek to uncover the ways in which they both reflect and shape public perceptions of trans identities. Ultimately, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive critique of the representational strategies employed in Turkey's contemporary alternative theater scene, emphasizing the importance of varied and intersectional approaches to storytelling. By foregrounding the

lived experiences and perspectives of trans individuals, I hope to contribute to a more inclusive theatrical landscape that genuinely challenges trans marginalization and fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender identity.

In the third chapter, “Trans Voices: Side Affects and Challenging Sadness,” I delve into the works of Esmeray Özadikti and Seyhan Arman, two trailblazing figures in contemporary Turkish theater who have carved out significant spaces for trans representation on stage. Esmeray Özadikti, known for her autobiographical works, and Seyhan Arman, with her cabaret performance, challenge prevailing stereotypes and offer multifaceted portrayals of trans experiences. A key aspect of these performances is their active resistance to the melodramatic tropes that often confine trans narratives to stories of victimhood and suffering. By drawing on a diverse range of affective registers, including humor, joy, and resilience, Özadikti and Arman disrupt the simplistic narratives that often dominate mainstream representations. As Hil Malatino (2022) argues, these “side affects”—the complex and often contradictory emotions that exist alongside and beyond the dominant narrative of suffering—are crucial for understanding the full spectrum of trans experiences. In the context of Turkish theater, side affects become powerful tools for challenging the cisnormative gaze and creating a space for trans voices to be heard on their own terms.

Özadikti’s performances, particularly in *Kestirmeden Hikayeler*, are notable for their focus on the theme of transition. Rather than solely dwelling on the hardships and obstacles faced by trans individuals, Özadikti illuminates the transformative power of transition as a process of self-discovery, empowerment, and joy. By celebrating the resilience and agency of trans individuals, her works offer a counter-narrative to the often tragic and melancholic portrayals found in mainstream media. These performances not only entertain but also educate by representing trans lives for diverse audiences.

In short, this thesis aims to unpack the intricate ways in which trans experiences are represented in Turkey’s alternative theater, with a particular focus on how affect—both in its individual and collective forms—shapes these narratives. By engaging with a spectrum of affects, the study explores how these performances negotiate the complex realities of trans life within a socio-political landscape marked by both marginalization

and resistance. Considering the rich historical context of these plays, this exploration draws connections between the past and present to understand the evolving dynamics of trans visibility and representation.



2. TRANS HISTORIOGRAPHY AND AFFECT

Published in 2012 as a book, *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* is an oral history project by the Black Pink Triangle [Siyah Pembe Üçgen]. As a civil society project, this oral history project-based performance aims to develop a queer historiography and to create a memory of queer experience in Turkey during the 1980s. Based on the testimonies of nine trans women who lived through the 80s, the book provides a verbatim account of the social and cultural shifts around the 1980 Turkish coup d'état. After its publication in 2012, the book was adapted as a documentary play by Ufuk Tan Altunkaya's theatre company, Mekan Artı, in 2013. A video recording of the play with English subtitles was later made public on *YouTube* during the coronavirus pandemic. With the project's staged performance and its online distribution, the testimonies of queer individuals continue to bring past experiences of the queer community into contact with the social and political circumstances of present-day Turkey.

Following the publication of the first book, Black Pink Triangle published *90'larda Lubunya Olmak* in 2013, which was also adapted as a documentary play by Mekan Artı in 2014. The play narrates the organizational efforts of LGBTQI+ individuals amidst the chaos of the 1990s in Turkey, their struggles in Ülker Sokak, the pressures of the era, and the preparations for the first Pride Parade. This time, instead of having all trans characters like in the previous play, *90'larda Lubunya Olmak* comprises the intertwined life stories of three gay men and a lesbian woman along with two trans women. After migrating to Germany, Altunkaya began performing solo versions of *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* in Berlin, thereby extending the reach of the oral history project to a diasporic audience in Europe. In 2021, Altunkaya also established Tiyatro Berlin, and this ensemble started to stage a new version of *90'larda Lubunya Olmak* with a new production under the title *Pride '93*.

This chapter delves into the growing field of queer historiography onstage in Turkey. By focusing on *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* as a case study, this chapter studies how

contemporary alternative theatre performances serve as dynamic platforms for reclaiming and reinterpreting marginalized histories. Therefore, it centers on how trans and queer history in Turkey have harnessed the power of theatre to document, perform, and re-enact personal and collective narratives, particularly in the context of continuous political and social marginalization. The relationship between affect and historiography is central to this exploration. This chapter emphasizes how affects and personal testimonies are not merely subjective additions to historical accounts but essential components in understanding and representing the past.

2.1 Affect and Historiography

Affect actively shapes how individuals and communities perceive, remember, and interpret historical events. By examining the affective dimensions of historiography, trans and queer performances challenge traditional historiographical approaches by bringing to the forefront the lived experiences and emotional realities of marginalized groups. The role of affect has been an integral concept in queer historiography that shapes the way historians and scholars interpret and present historical narratives. Rebecca Schneider argues that the scholarship in queer historiography took an “affective turn” by challenging the temporal linearity that is part and parcel of the Western conventions of historiography (Schneider 2011, 35).

Often conceptualized through terms of viscosity and mobility, affect disrupts conventional dichotomies such as self/other and text/body by illuminating how emotions transcend individual boundaries, traversing temporal and spatial realms (Schneider 2011, 36). This cross-temporal movement of affect underscores its significance in historical narratives where it functions as a visceral bridge between past and present through embodied engagement with historical events. Affect theory, as elaborated by scholars like Sara Ahmed, emphasizes the “stickiness” of emotions, which circulate and adhere across temporal and spatial boundaries, influencing collective memory and identity formation (Ahmed 2004, 120). The performative dimension of historiography becomes crucial in understanding how history is not merely recorded but also lived and relived through reenactment. Schneider posits that live experiential practice, as a mode of critical

historical thinking, necessitates a continuous rearticulation of how lived experience can function as both subject and methodology of analysis (2011, 195). This resonates with Joan Scott's assertion that experience is always an interpretation and requires critical examination to comprehend its role in historical explanation (Scott 1991, 797).

Heather Love's exploration of negative affects like shame and melancholia in queer historiography reveals how these emotions serve as indicators of social trauma and exclusion. Love contends that affective histories are essential for understanding the profound effects of systemic oppression and for fostering new collectivities grounded in shared experiences of marginalization (2007, 20-21). The intersection of affect and historiography through performance thus challenges traditional historical narratives while offering novel ways of engaging with the past. History becomes a living, affective presence that continues to shape and be shaped by contemporary social and political contexts.

2.2 Affect and Historiography in Documentary Theatre

Theatre, especially documentary theatre, emerges as a crucial site where the affective and historiographical dimensions of history converge. Documentary theatre, with its emphasis on real events and personal narratives, serves as a powerful tool for historiographical intervention. It provides a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, for emotions to be expressed, and for alternative historical narratives to be constructed. In the Turkish context, plays like *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* and *90'larda Lubunya Olmak* exemplify this dynamic. These productions not only document the communal experiences of trans and queer individuals throughout two decades but also create a space where audiences can viscerally connect with the emotional weight of these histories. By anchoring productions in verbatim accounts, documentary theatre not only breathes life into historical events but also elicits emotional responses that shape audience understanding. This dual engagement with affect and historiography positions documentary theatre as a critical medium for exploring how historical realities are experienced, interpreted, and communicated.

The foundation of documentary theatre rests on the concept of “facticity,” which refers to the “indexical value of documents” that confirms the reality of historical events (Reinelt 2009, 10). This realist epistemology suggests that documents and testimonies serve as objective channels to reality. However, the experience of documentary theatre transcends mere factual representation, involving a phenomenological engagement where the audience co-creates the reality depicted on stage (ibid., 7). This dynamic interplay between the document, its mediators (playwrights, actors), and the audience underscores documentary theatre’s dual nature as both a reflection and a constituent of reality. In that sense, documentary theatre’s capacity to evoke emotional responses is central to its significance. The affective dimension is evident in its ability to provoke empathy, grief, solidarity, and other emotions that connect audiences to the historical events portrayed. Carol Martin identifies several functions of contemporary documentary theatre, including re-examining trials to critique justice systems, creating supplementary historical accounts, reconstructing events, combining autobiography with history, assessing the processes of history and fiction, and detailing the oral culture of theatre (2006, 12-13). These functions not only serve to critique and reconstruct historical narratives but also address the social experience of documentary theatre where audiences form an affective engagement and foster a deeper connection to the material.

The historiographical aspect of documentary theatre involves the representation and interpretation of historical events through theatrical means. It often challenges traditional historiographical methods by underscoring the subjectivity inherent in constructing historical narratives. This tension between objectivity and subjectivity is a defining feature of documentary theatre, as it grapples with the complexities of representing historical truth (Reinelt 2009, 8). By grounding narratives in real documents and testimonies, it provides a platform for audiences to engage with historical events on both intellectual and emotional levels. The interplay between realist epistemology and phenomenological engagement challenges traditional historiography and offers a more nuanced and emotionally rich understanding of history.

2.3 Trans Historiography on Stage: *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak*

Although the adapted performance of *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* does not include the names of the women, the performers follow the testimonies of Ahu, Belgin, Cansel and Filiz from the Black Pink Triangle's oral history book. Since the performance is a verbatim play which directly uses the actual interview materials in the book, I will refer to these characters by their names in the original source both to ethically acknowledge these testimonies in a context where they facilitate the transmission of queer and trans memory in Turkey, and to prevent rendering them as stereotypes. By recruiting cisgender women to perform the roles of trans women through method acting techniques, where they use their voices in lower registers, the production contributes to the ironic lack of trans actors on the Turkish stage, especially considering the subject matter's relevance to trans and queer history in Turkey. Nevertheless, the play is a critical production for trans performance in Turkey in terms of the kind and time of its production.

The year of the performance, 2013, parallels the beginning of a more oppressive period for queer and trans people in the recent history of Turkey. Following the Gezi Park Protests in the same year, the government of Justice and Development Party assumed a more oppressive position against queer and trans people vis-à-vis the involvement of queer individuals in the Gezi protests with more than 100.000 people attending the Istanbul Pride in 2013 and 2014, ultimately leading to the cancellation of Prides after 2015. In that sense, the timing of the performance and revisiting the oppressive conditions of the military junta in the 1980s, comes as a criticism and a warning of the worsening relationship between the current government and the LGBTQI+ community, especially in recent years.

The performance unfolds on a stage simulating a Turkish pavyon, where actors emerge as entertainers, performing *arabesk* hit songs from the 1980s and narrating their personal stories. Meanwhile, the audience, seated at tables around the stage along with a waiter, becomes part of this immersive pavyon experience. The performance directly highlights a nightlife space that was socially and economically crucial for trans visibility and survival during the 1980s. By using the setting of pavyon and the medium of musical entertainment to describe the painful and serious experiences of trans people, the

performance references to wide range of affects such as resilience, visibility, nostalgia, vulnerability, liberation, ambiguity, intimacy, camaraderie, desire, and belonging as it queers the historical narrative of trans suffering in Turkey. Therefore, this setting underscores the significance of pavyons for studying the social, political, and affective dimensions of the performance. While the pavyon setting of the performance intertwines an imagined pavyon audience with the actual audience, it offers multiple interpretations of the embodied relationship between the audience and the characters. Affect emerges in the in-between spaces, as intensities and resonances circulate and pass between bodies, both human and nonhuman, and it shapes interactions and relations beyond conscious awareness (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1). In that sense, the physical, visual, and verbal interactions, as well as the conditions in which these interactions transpire, between the characters and the audience becomes an important element for the affective analysis of the performance.

As the first step of this analysis, it is crucial to recognize that pavyon, as a nightlife entertainment venue, is entangled in a range of complex affects beyond the context of the performance. In Beyoğlu pavyons, disgust and fear are prevalent affects because these establishments cater to a lower echelon entertainment market, associated with marginalized groups, which challenges the neoliberal ideals of desirability, safety, and attractiveness (Ural 2017). However, in the context of *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak*, the play also brings into dialogue how trans women who performed in these pavyons formed an entirely different relationship with these spaces. In the beginning of the performance, the first woman, Ahu, talks about her early experiences at Vat69, a pavyon in Beyoğlu which is frequently mentioned in the play for its quality and popularity, by saying:

There was a club called Vat 69. It was the turning point of my life. [...] I was still a child, a 13-year-old boy, but my hands were being kissed there. Those mantis,¹¹ those beautiful people, the artists, my God, they were all there. People like Huysuz Virjin and Arzu Okay were always there. You admit to yourself, 'I don't want that life; I want this place. I don't want to go that way; I want to live here.' I have reached that level. I looked forward to every weekend. So that the weekend comes and I can go. (Mekan Artı 2020, 08:20)

¹¹ In Lubunca, “manti” refers to a young top man, who takes an insertive role in queer sexual relationships.

This quote sets the tone for how the performance approaches pavyons as a space that marks the moments of survival, visibility, liberation, and belonging for trans women throughout the rest of the performance. Affect, as understood in feminist and queer theory, encompasses a broad spectrum of emotions, feelings, and desires that are historically constructed and experienced through embodied sensations and psychic or cognitive processes, creating impressions through interactions between individuals and their environments (Cvetkovich 2012, 4; Ahmed 2004, 6). This quote elucidates the emotional resonance of the pavyon as a haven where trans women, like Ahu, encounter validation, camaraderie, and a sense of selfhood that sharply diverges from the rejection and isolation they confront in the external world. Ahu's description of Vat 69 as a "turning point" in their life accentuates pavyon's function as a transformative locus where the demarcations of identity are reconfigured, which is further underscored by the affectionate reference to the community and celebrities within its walls. This admiration not only emphasizes the sense of security and acceptance but also establishes a distinct dichotomy between the undesirable "outside" world and the desirable space of the pavyon. The act of having her hands kissed symbolizes a sense of recognition and desire absent in her external life which parallel the empowering feeling associated with pavyon. This affective allure is very compelling that Ahu actively chooses this version of her life which also represents a form of resistance to societal norms. Pavyon is thus constructed as a domain where trans women can embody their identities, resist societal pressures, and cultivate a community that embraces and celebrates them.

As Ahu opens the performance with Ajda Pekkan's popular arabesk cover "Dert Bende Derman Sende" (The Pain Is in Me, the Cure Is You), she initially talks about her childhood and how she became aware of her transness with the people in the village likening her to Zeki Müren, which becomes an integral part of how *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* differs in its affective approach to trans experiences. Although this reference to Zeki Müren might seem like a stereotypical element in trans performances—especially since other trans theatre makers, like Esmeray in *Cadının Bohçası*, have previously shared similar memories with Müren—the play takes a careful approach to recognize the diversity of childhood experiences. By weaving together different childhood experiences

in the monologues of three women, it avoids framing these memories as a particularly sad period in trans lives. In this context, Ahu's childhood memories underscore the pavyon's important role as a space of visibility. She begins her monologue by asking the lighting operator to switch the dim lights to a brighter yellow spotlight as she nostalgically recalls her childhood. In a reflective mood, she remembers the innocent moments of her life in the village, including how she wore skirts and headscarves when her brother's friends visited and how deeply her grandmother loved and favored her. The actor narrates these details with a smile on her face, highlighting how she was innocently playing in the garden on her own with emphasis on the embodied feelings of safety and protection when she refers to her grandmother with endearment and respect. These memories, conveyed within the pavyon setting, mirror pavyon's role as a context where trans women, like Ahu, could reclaim visibility and express their desires, and find a sense of belonging, much like the nostalgic protective embrace Ahu felt in her grandmother's care.

While the play foregrounds the pavyon as a vital space for trans women's self-expression and experiences, as a historical narrative it also depicts the harsh realities these women faced amidst shifting social dynamics. The 1980 military coup d'état emerges as a pivotal turning point, starkly juxtaposed against the glamorous nightlife performances to highlight the underlying pain and precarity of their lives. Due to the military regime's restrictions on trans performers, all trans entertainers were banned from stage which left them no other choice but to do sex work (Altınay 2008, 214). Ahu's narrative poignantly illustrates how the disruption of her stage career left her at the mercy of partners who ultimately succumbed to societal pressures to marry and have children.

Despite these serious and tragic details, *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* skillfully navigates these affective landscapes by employing the performative elements of the pavyon to facilitate a nuanced control over the audience's emotional engagement. In doing so, the play creates a layered performative experience where the actual audience of the performance is invited to step into the imagined role of a pavyon audience, engaging in a different affective exchange. This is achieved primarily through the performers' rendition of arabesk songs, a genre deeply intertwined with themes of loss and sorrow which were central to the emotional landscape of 1980s Turkey. As the performers sing and dance,

they blur the boundaries between their roles as trans women navigating the challenging world of 1980s and as pavyon entertainers. This duality constructs a layered relationship between the audience and the performers, where the audience is simultaneously part of the theatrical narrative and a reflection of the pavyon clientele—traditionally a predominantly male group seeking entertainment from the women who worked in those venues. By positioning the mixed and diverse real-life audience into the roles of pavyon patrons, the play subtly confronts them with the purpose of their attendance, questioning whether they are merely seeking entertainment or something deeper, thus creating an affective tension between amusement and compassion that underpins the entire performance.

The tension between amusement and compassion becomes particularly evident in the scene following Ahu's melancholic breakup story, where Belgin directly engages with the audience, breaking the somber mood evoked by her performance of Bergen's¹² song. As the red lights shift to bright yellow, signaling a change in emotional tone, Belgin remarks, "What happened to you? You look like you've been run over by a truck. Scatter these clouds... Girl, you paid money for this! Have fun and laugh a little!" Here, Belgin acknowledges the audience's role as both observers of the performance and participants in the emotional economy of the pavyon. Her playful yet pointed comment, "Girl, you paid money for this! Have fun and laugh a little," highlights the transactional nature of the pavyon setting, where entertainers are expected to uplift and distract patrons from their sorrows. This moment underscores the regulatory function of the performers, who manipulate the affective atmosphere through lighting, direct address, and embodied acts like dancing. The shift from red to yellow lighting not only alters the mood but also serves as a visual cue for the audience to transition from passive consumption of sadness to active engagement in the entertainment. Hence, the play guides the audience through a carefully choreographed emotional journey.

The interplay between the emotional undercurrents of the narrative and the performance's role in regulating these feelings reinforces the documentary theatre's role in reimagining

¹² Bergen was a famous Turkish arabesk singer whose tragic life story and her emotionally intense songs made her an important cultural figure in Turkey.

historical narratives through affective engagement by creating a space where the past is not only remembered but emotionally relived and reinterpreted. In this context, *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* exemplifies how documentary theatre can harness the power of affect to create a historiographical experience that is both intellectually and emotionally resonant. By positioning its audience within the framework of pavyon culture, the play not only reconstructs the historical realities of trans women but also interrogates the ongoing dynamics of spectatorship and emotional engagement. The nuanced affective exchange between performers and audience serves as a reminder that history is not just a series of events to be recounted but a living, breathing narrative that continues to shape and be shaped by those who engage with it. In this way, the play challenges its audience to move beyond passive consumption, urging them to confront the emotional complexities of the past and consider their implications for the present.

This emotional and historiographical engagement is further deepened through the play's exploration of specific subcultural practices within the queer community. For instance, the second-stage performer, Belgin, recounts the various forms of torture experienced by both her acquaintances and the broader queer community in 1980s Turkey. Her testimony underscores the role of police brutality in shaping queer subcultural elements, as evidenced by her use of a *Lubunca* word that implicitly highlights the significance of language in fostering queer and trans solidarity. *Lubunca* (or *Lubunyaca*) is a covert Turkish jargon that has originated from the *köçeks* of Greek, Jewish, or Romani origins in the Ottoman Empire, which later adapted by queer and trans people for secure communication (Kontovas 2012, 34). It blends linguistic elements from various sources, including Greek, Armenian, and Romani, with a vocabulary focusing on sex, gender, and social identity, now widely used within the LGBTQ+ community. It continues to hold cultural significance for queer individuals in Turkey today. Therefore, the affective resonance of *Lubunca* is deep on stage, and its use transforms into a potent act of cultural resistance and solidarity. Whenever a character uses a term from *Lubunca*, the play evokes a sense of belonging and shared history among the performers and audience.

While recounting the violence they endured during the 1980s, Belgin remarks, "Nowadays, people in the community use *güllüm* for everything. *Güllüm* is not that.

When we were being beaten with a birch, we used to make gullüm so that we could forget the pain [...] Gullüm has a meaning” (Mekan Artı 2020, 21:30). Lubunca, within the context of the play, serves as an affective conduit that embodies the nuanced interplay of joy, resistance, and cultural continuity within the queer community. *Gullüm* refers to a particular form of humor used within the queer community, which often functions as a coping mechanism in the face of adversity. It is more than just casual exchange of jokes because it functions as a tool for survival, which allows individuals to temporarily escape or ease the pain of violence and oppression. In this context, J.L. Austin’s theory of performativity is manifest in how Lubunca functions not just to describe or refer but to do something—to enact belonging, resistance, and communal identity (1975).

As a hybrid language born out of necessity, Lubunca encapsulates the lived experiences of marginalization, yet it also transforms these experiences into a space of shared understanding and resilience. This transformation is crucial to understanding the concept of queer joy in the play—not as mere happiness, but as a complex, affective state that arises from the ability to endure and find solidarity in adversity. The use of Lubunca is inherently performative as it creates a communal space where affect is both generated and circulated, which allows for a collective re-negotiation of identity and belonging. In that sense, Lubunca is not just a tool of communication but an active participant in the construction of queer joy, as it fosters an affective environment where the community can assert its presence and celebrate its continuity. This affective dimension of Lubunca reflects the idea that affect emerges from “inbetween-ness,” where the capacity to act and be acted upon is heightened within the dynamics of queer interaction (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1). The play, therefore, positions Lubunca as a vehicle for affective exchange, where gullüm—a form of humor deeply embedded in the community’s linguistic and cultural practices—becomes a performative act of resistance and a reaffirmation of queer existence. This layered affective practice challenges the audience to recognize queer joy as a product of these interactions, where language and affect converge to create spaces of empowerment and continuity in the face of ongoing marginalization.

The play deepens its exploration of affective exchange by using humor and community dynamics to critique the complexities of queer suffering and survival. Following the

discussion of Lubunca as a vehicle for affective exchange, where gullüm serves as a performative act of resistance, the interaction between Ahu and Belgin adds another layer to this dynamic. Here, the affective exchange is not only about creating spaces of empowerment but also about holding each other accountable within the community, especially in the face of fame and perceived abandonment. When Ahu references Bülent Ersoy, a famous trans singer and iconic figure in Turkey, Belgin's immediate defense—"Bülent is a very old friend of mine" and "When I hear someone talking about her, I cannot just sit down and listen"—highlights the protective nature of a shared history. This moment reflects how deeply intertwined personal narratives are with collective memory, and how these memories serve as affective resources that bind the community together. Yet, the critique embedded in Belgin's assertion points to a critical examination of the ways in which fame can create distance between individuals and the struggles of their community. Belgin articulates this sentiment:

Bülent is a very old friend of mine. We lived through all those times together. It was before her transition. When we went out with her, we would rock the Vali Konağı Street. We lived through those coup times together. Bülent suffered a lot, too. But we suffered much more than she did. And everyone suffered a lot. So, what happens when you become famous? Does everyone have to retreat to their corner? But you can't escape from the past! Neither Bülent can escape, nor Mehmet Ali, nor Cemil can escape with that mustache. [Turns to Ahu] Put it this way! (Mekan Artı 2020, 33:33)

This nuanced critique is couched in humor, as Belgin accuses Ahu of being "madi," which can be translated as "shady," thus transforming what could be a bitter conflict into a moment of shared laughter and reflection. The audience's laughter during this scene reflects an understanding of the delicate balance between solidarity and accountability. This exchange underscores the play's ability to use affective practices like gullüm not only as a means of resisting external marginalization but also as a way to navigate internal community tensions. By playfully critiquing queer celebrities who seem to have withdrawn from community's affairs after achieving success, the play positions these figures within a broader conversation about the responsibilities that come with visibility and power. In this way, the play suggests that the affective practices within the community are not just about joy and resistance but also about ensuring that the bonds of shared experience and history are not weakened by individual success or neglect. This

layered affective critique, conveyed through humor and Lubunca, reinforces the play's broader exploration of how queer joy, survival, and critique are interwoven within the community's cultural and linguistic practices.

Lastly, Filiz is also an important character that becomes a visible element of the play's close inspection on the affective exchanges on the stage. Filiz's constant gum-chewing and the way she plays with her hair like a little girl add further depth to her characterization, subtly integrating elements of innocence and a childlike demeanor that contrast with the harsh realities of her life. These behaviors, while seemingly trivial, serve as powerful symbols of how Filiz navigates her traumatic past. The act of chewing gum and fiddling with her hair can be seen as nervous habits or comforting rituals that anchor her in moments of stress or uncertainty. These small, repetitive actions provide her with a sense of control and stability, helping her to cope with the turbulence of her experiences. This childlike embodiment—chewing gum and playing with her hair—creates a striking juxtaposition compared to the adult realities she faces. It suggests that part of Filiz may have been arrested in a stage of development where she seeks the comfort of these simple actions, perhaps as a way to hold onto a semblance of childhood that was likely disrupted by early traumas. In fact, she also gives away these details when she describes,

One day, my mother and I went to my aunt's. We went there for dinner, and we sat down together. Schools were closed. I had grown my hair. How beautiful I was... Then, my mother and I got on the public bus, and there was an old man with a beard there. He told me, "My daughter, you are so cute. Come and sit with your mother." My mother corrected him by saying, "That's not a girl, it's a boy." When the old man said that, my mother got really upset and took me to the barber and had my hair cut. (Mekan Artı 2020, 44:56)

The innocence she projects through these behaviors contrasts sharply with the stories she tells, such as the violence inflicted upon her by her brother, highlighting the dissonance between her outward appearance and the inner strength she possesses. This dissonance reinforces her complexity as a character, defying stereotypes that might otherwise reduce her to a one-dimensional figure.

Moreover, Filiz's narrative blends tragic experiences with humor, and illustrates how she copes with the harsh realities of her life. For example, when she talks about an extremely

traumatic memory where her brother burned her foot with a heated skewer, she does so in a way that is almost flippant: “Then my brother learnt and heated a metal skewer [...] My mother was crying, I was crying. He thrust the skewer under my foot real good. What should I do? I ran from home when it healed.” She skips to talking about her life after she ran away very quickly that she seems hasty as she does not emphasize the pain associated with this trauma. This casual delivery of a painful memory reveals the deep scars of violence that mark her life, but it also demonstrates her resilience. Filiz’s humor here is not a dismissal of her pain but a mechanism for managing it which transforms what could be a story of victimhood into one of survival. Her ability to shift the tone from tragic to light-hearted without diminishing the gravity of her experiences allows the audience to engage with her story in a reflective way.

Filiz’s quirky demeanor and playful performance style, while central to her character, are also indicative of how her traumas have shaped her personality. The seemingly naive and whimsical aspects of her character—such as her casual mention of eating green beans after recounting harrowing experiences—suggest a coping mechanism that has evolved from a life of hardship. These quirks, far from rendering her a stereotype, illustrate how Filiz navigates her past traumas. Her light-heartedness and sometimes childlike observations serve as a shield against the harshness of her reality which makes her both a tragic and a resilient figure. Ultimately, Filiz’s embodiment in the play defies the simplistic portrayals of trans women as either tragic victims or mere comedic relief, offering instead a complex representation that honors her strength and humanity.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the impact of trans and queer historiography in Turkey’s contemporary alternative theatre, particularly through the lens of documentary theatre. By examining *80’lerde Lubunya Olmak*, I explained how theatre serves as a dynamic platform for reclaiming and reinterpreting marginalized histories. The intricate relationship between affect and historiography underscores the importance of emotions and personal testimonies as essential components in understanding and representing the past. The testimonies of trans women from the 1970s and 1980s, as adapted in the play,

reveal the severe violence and oppression faced under the military regime and the subsequent political and social marginalization. The use of an oral history project by Black Pink Triangle, which was then adapted into theatrical performances, highlights how lived experiences and emotional realities of marginalized groups come to the forefront and challenge existing historiographical approaches.

This chapter also illustrates how documentary theatre, with its emphasis on real events and personal narratives, not only documents but also performs and reenacts these histories, thereby creating a visceral connection between the audience and the historical events. The performative dimension of historiography in the play disrupts conventional dichotomies and offers a more nuanced understanding of history, grounded in a realist epistemology. The affective responses elicited through this performance are not merely byproducts of the narrative but are integral to the historiographical processes of documentary theatre. By centering personal and collective memories, performances like *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* underline the significance of trans histories. This critical intervention addresses the erasure and marginalization perpetuated by mainstream narratives. The portrayal of trans and queer experiences on stage thereby serves both as a reflection and a critique of the socio-political conditions, highlighting the ongoing struggles and resilience of the LGBTQI+ community in Turkey.

3. THE LIMITS OF CIS COMPASSION

The relationship between sadness and compassion generates diverse dynamics in different contexts. This chapter expands on my article published in the special issue on sadness in *Performance Research*, Volume 28, Issue 5. I aim to reframe the extent of my article, especially in relationship with the special issue's conceptual framework that explores sadness, through recent scholarship in the field of performance studies, as a collective and politically potent affect. The editors of this issue, After Performance research collective, posit that sadness, rather than being a state to overcome, embodies a radical acceptance of our shared mortality and non-agency (2023, 1). They argue that this collective bearing with sadness can foster a profound sense of co-presence and solidarity, which challenges the dominant paradigms that equate political performance with measurable and effective action (ibid.). This discourse reconceptualizes performance as a practice of "bearing with" rather than solely focused on enacting change.

By exploring the role of sadness in performance, the collective experience of this feeling can foster a sense of solidarity that transcends conventional notions of political efficacy. This formulation of "bearing with" involves a sense of compassion that is explored as a mode of "feeling with, but not feeling for" others (ibid., 4). This approach to compassion critiques neocolonial and neoliberal frameworks that prescribe overcoming sadness through performative expression; however, it suggests that bearing with sadness can be a form of radical acceptance and political refusal (ibid., 6). In a way, this body of work advocates for a performance theory that values inaction, incommensurability, and opacity, thereby challenging dominant narratives of productivity and positivist change within the field of performance studies (ibid., 7). While this theoretical framework offers a compelling re-evaluation of sadness, it is crucial to critically engage with its applicability in contexts marked by severe social and political marginalization where the spectator's affective relationship with the performance needs further consideration.

In sociopolitical settings like Turkey, where trans identities are disproportionately marginalized and their rights are systematically ignored, sadness as a narrative device can risk reinforcing victimization and hopelessness rather than engendering empowerment or resistance. Lila Abu-Lughod critiques the tendency to idealize acts of resistance as inherently heroic, a notion she calls the “romance of resistance” (1990). She argues that this romanticized perspective overlooks the complexities of power and collapses distinctions between different forms of resistance. According to Abu-Lughod, resistance is often seen as a sign of “the ineffectiveness of systems of power and the resilience and creativity of the human spirit” (ibid., 41), which can obscure deeper questions about how power operates (ibid., 42). Instead of romanticizing resistance, she advocates for using it as a diagnostic tool to analyze power, uncovering the historically changing relations of power in which people are enmeshed.

Within this framework, by examining the forms and details of resistance, we can better understand the intricate workings and transformations of power relations over time. Thus, while acknowledging the innovative perspectives offered by the growing literature on sadness, this chapter seeks to interrogate the potential limitations of attributing such expansive political power to sadness beyond the specific socio-political landscape of Turkey’s alternative theatre, particularly in trans performances. By examining the limits of affective strategies employed in these performances, this chapter aims to highlight the necessity of a context-sensitive approach to different affects, one that accounts for the unique challenges and dynamics faced by marginalized communities.

To achieve this, I will analyze three key case studies from contemporary alternative theatre scene in Turkey that depict trans experiences: *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar*, where I will re-evaluate the play considering its narrative style, affective approach, and the significance of Meli Bendeli’s transition while highlighting the potential shortcomings of exclusively focusing on sadness as an analytical tool; *Kimsenin Ölmediği Bir Günün Ertesi*, critiquing its melodramatic narrative, the casting choice of Sumru Yavrucuk, and its impact on the representation of trans lives; and *Eylül*, discussing its melodramatic genre characteristics and the problematic portrayal of trans experiences. Finally, I will synthesize the insights from these case studies to highlight the limitations and potentials

of affective strategies in trans performances, which requires a context-sensitive approach to trans performances in Turkey.

3.1 Revisiting *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar*

In the published version of this chapter, I include Şamil Yılmaz's 2013 play *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* [Women, Loves, Songs] as another significant play and as an exploitative example about trans narratives in Turkey (Yanıkcan 2023). Since the publication of my article, my perspective on Yılmaz's play has evolved which leads me to revise both my analysis of the play and the "cis-made vs. trans-made" paradigm that creates another essentialist dynamic for theatre makers. Although the narrative style of *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* utilizes melodramatic conventions through exaggerated emotions, moral polarization, and the recurrent sense of fatalism, the play articulates a permeability for these categorical definitions while also highlighting the possibility of retrospective reclamation of trans narratives over time. In that sense, while still criticizing the common usage of sadness as well as its affective limits with compassion, I include this play in this chapter to cautiously acknowledge the potential shortcomings of focusing on sadness alone for an affective analysis of trans performances as well.

Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar was a solo performance by Meli Bendeli at Mekan Sahne and it aimed to explore the lives of various trans women. The play unfolds through a series of monologues, each representing a different woman's story, delivered by Bendeli as she interacts with the audience in a space designed to resemble a pavyon. These narratives delve into the women's experiences of love, loss, and survival, which highlights the societal rejection and violence they face, and the resilience they exhibit in their pursuit of affection and respect. The play employs a minimalist aesthetic and incorporates a set design with a few chairs and tables, dim lighting, and arabesk music to represent the pavyon setting. In doing so, it underscores the emotional weight of the stories, and eschews sentimentality in favor of a raw and direct portrayal of the trans experiences that it revolves around. Although the play does not explicitly use humor as an affective tool, the pavyon setting—much like in *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak*—creates a conscious connection with the audience. This connection is achieved by incorporating arabesk

music, which broadens the emotional spectrum beyond mere sadness to include feelings of nostalgia, resilience, devotion, and longing. Bendeli enhances this affective range by inviting the audience to sing along, thus enriching the narrative experience.

From 2013 to 2016, the play was staged for three seasons for 150 performances (*KaosGL*). In 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, the group made a video recording of the play accessible on YouTube, further enhancing its audiences. *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* is a one-actor performance dedicated to the childhoods, loves and deaths of trans women. The play was written by a cis male playwright, but its actor differentiates the production from most other examples of the genre. Although she had not initiated her transition at the time, Meli Bendeli is a trans actor who continues to pursue acting as a trans woman. Prior to her transition, she was an actor in one of the most popular television series in recent years in Turkey, named *Çukur* [*The Pit*]. Even though her successful performance of her role—Timsah [the Alligator] is the male leader of drug dealing mafia and a key antagonist in the series with his ruthless personality—became very popular, she currently struggles to continue her career because of her transition (Prime Team Media 2024, 07:00). In that sense, her role in *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* acquires a retrospective significance for her social transition and personal life as a trans woman and as an actor.

Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar employs melodramatic elements and melancholic themes common in many trans performances within Turkey's alternative theatre scene. However, its affective complexity, reflected in the fragmented narrative and cultural specificity, not only underscores the play's significant role in Bendeli's life and transition but also differentiates it by critiquing the societal and cultural frameworks that impose these narratives, rather than simply replicating them. In that sense, the first part of this analysis revisits how the performance explores the story of a trans child grappling with gender nonconformity through a theme of possession, which differentiates the play from the common aesthetics of suffering and sadness in other trans performances. To describe this early childhood memory, she says:

They say I used to stare into mirrors and, without any reason, start crying. Those who saw me claimed, "This child is possessed, we need to recite prayers to expel them." The religious elders declared, "A male jinn has possessed him. He's looking at mirrors from behind the boy's left

shoulder. In the place where the jinn is looking, there's a girl. The boy thinks this girl in the mirror is himself. This boy thinks he's a girl. The jinn's eye is on the boy in the mirror. The more he looks at the boy, the more he enchants the mirror, and the more he looks at the mirror, the more he enchants the boy. This jinn has chosen this boy as his wife." My mother was terrified by what she heard. She covered all the mirrors in the house with black veils so I wouldn't look at them. (Yilmaz 2013)

In re-examining the initial analysis of the play, it is essential to step away from viewing the Lacanian dynamics in the play as inherently pathologizing. My original focus on the mirror stage and the child's obsession with her reflection initially interpreted this scene as signaling a developmental disorder. However, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mirror stage is a regular part of psychosexual development, not a pathological condition (Lacan 2006: 97). The child's fixation on her reflection, rather than indicating a psychological disorder, can be understood as a representation of the ongoing dynamics of misrecognition that Lacan describes, where the self is perpetually caught in a process of misidentification with its external image.

The play portrays the child as being trapped in this stage, suggesting a sense of stasis or cultural illegibility instead of creating a pathologizing narrative. The confusion and anxiety surrounding the child's identity, as reflected in the supernatural and folkloric explanations provided by her community, highlight the external cultural forces that render transness illegible. The reference to jinns and possession underscores how the community struggles to make sense of trans identity, resorting to supernatural myths as a means of explanation. This, in turn, reflects a broader cultural critique within the play, which challenges the simplistic and reductive views of gender nonconformity prevalent in rural settings. Rather than centering the analysis solely on the affect of sadness as a marker of the child's experience, it is crucial to recognize the affective complexity at play. The child's interaction with her reflection and the community's response to her behavior are not just expressions of child's sorrow but also of the confusion, fear, and misunderstanding that the community experienced. While the people around the child are depicted as struggling to reconcile their traditional beliefs with the reality of the child's gender nonconformity, the narrator attempts to convey a sense of stagnation and uncertainty felt in the rural setting where the child lived.

In short, the play can be seen as critiquing the cultural frameworks that mystify trans identities by associating them with supernatural elements. The portrayal of the child as “stuck” in the mirror stage can be reinterpreted not as a pathologizing element but as an expression of cultural illegibility—a state where the community’s lack of understanding leaves the child in a liminal space. The child’s use of her mother as a new reflective medium, after the mirrors are covered and the well is blocked, suggests a continued search for identity and coherence within an environment that offers no clear answers. This revised analysis emphasizes the need for being cautious in focusing on sadness when interpreting the affective lengths of the play. Instead, it highlights the play’s engagement with the cultural challenges surrounding trans identity by referencing to the affective states of fear, confusion, stagnation, and uncertainty among the people.

In the second fragment of the play, the repeated phrase “Perhaps, I have been here for a thousand years” captures a profound sense of stagnation and temporal dislocation, reflecting the speaker’s entrapment in a cultural narrative that fails to recognize her identity (Yilmaz 2013). This stagnation is layered with other affects such as tiredness and resilience. The speaker’s monologue reveals a deep yearning that shifts between the mother, the lover, and the audience to highlight the fluidity of desire and the instability that defines her emotional state. Despite the overwhelming sense of tiredness and despair, the speaker’s resilience shines through as she recounts her relentless search for connection, enduring violence and isolation with a determination to survive. The direct address to the audience—“It’s you who I’m talking to. It’s you I’ve been waiting for”—functions as a moment of *interpellation*¹³, which hails the audience into a specific ideological position that obliges them to confront their role in the cultural narratives that contribute to this stagnation. This act invites the audience to move beyond passive observation or compassion and engage more deeply with the complexities of the speaker’s experience (ibid.).

In the third fragment, the speaker recounts her visit to her lover, who works as stuffed mussel seller across from the bar where she works. When narrating their first experience

¹³ I draw on Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation, which refers to the process by which ideology recruits individuals as subjects by hailing or addressing them.

inside the house, the play intricately navigates the ordinary and the extraordinary, embodying the interplay of affect as both intimate and impersonal (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). The repeated, mundane exchange—“Do you have stuffed mussels?” “Yes. Should I give you some?” “Don’t”—reflects the affective buildup that occurs in the in-between-ness of their interaction (Yılmaz 2013). This seemingly simple repetition holds a powerful emotional weight which reflects the complex interplay of affection and shyness. The affective landscape in this memory marks the characters’ belonging to a shared world of encounters. As she suddenly declares their willingness to die or live for one another, the play moves from an attunement to a surprising disorientation which reveals the intensity of their connection. This shift embodies the “bindings and unbindings” of affect, where the characters’ ordinary interaction is transformed into an extraordinary moment of emotional depth (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). The play’s navigation through silence, shyness, and bold declarations illustrates how affect accumulates and modulates through different intensities between the characters. The unique temporality of this scene, where time seems to stretch and condense simultaneously between silences, further reflects how affect extends into and out of these moments of connection. Ultimately, the play challenges the audience to engage with these affective exchanges, recognizing how the ordinary can give rise to the extraordinary in the shared space of relatedness and mutual recognition (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2).

By adopting a fragmented structure that reflects the nonchronological, nonprogressivist temporalities associated with trans experiences, the play resists a linear, teleological progression and instead presents trans experiences as a series of discrete, affective moments that defy easy categorization (Freeman 2010, 3; Amin 2014, 220). This fragmented narrative allows for a more careful exploration of trans experiences by highlighting moments of connection, love, and resilience alongside alienation and sadness, and thus resisting the pressures of *chrononormativity*, which tends to impose a hegemonic and normative timeline on experiences that do not fit neatly within societal expectations (ibid.). The play’s structure and the pavyon setting, which creates pauses and moments of transition between these fragments, allow it to foreground these experiences, which might otherwise be reinterpreted to fit a more conventional narrative arc. This approach emphasizes the importance of representing trans lives in their full complexity by acknowledging the discontinuities and ruptures.

3.2 *Kimsenin Ölmediği Bir Günüün Ertesi*

Ebru Nihan Celkan's 2012 play, *Kimsenin Ölmediği Bir Günüün Ertesi* [*After the Day Nobody Died*], has been one of the most widely known performances concerning trans experience in Turkey over the past decade. This one-act performance was directed and performed by Turkish cis woman actor Sumru Yavrucuk, who received several prestigious awards in Turkey for her role in 2013. In 2020, the play was recorded by a Turkish trans actor, Ayta Sözeri, as part of an audio theatre project by Podactio and released for online audiences in 2021. The theatrical production portrays vignettes from a single day in the life of Umut (her name translates to English as Hope), a sex worker in Istanbul. The play centres on the tribulations endured by trans women through Umut's melodramatic monologues in different episodes about violence and exclusion. The title alludes to the persistent hate crimes against trans people.

The play begins and ends with Umut's determined assertion to enjoy the day without performing sex work since it is the day after not a single one of her friends died. With Umut's first line—"It was the day after nobody died. Nobody...among us. We will make gullüm...as we wish. [...] I won't do sex work tonight"—the play establishes a deeply pessimistic tone that highlights fatality, danger, and being forced to sex work as defining characteristics of her life (Celkan 2013, 11). Furthermore, the play constructs a narrative in which transness is inextricably linked to suffering, alienation, and an overwhelming sense of despair. The affective landscape is dominated by sadness, with little room for other emotions or experiences that might offer a more complex or varied portrayal of trans life. When Umut describes how she used to pray to God, she sets the tone for a depressing conceptualization of transness. Umut's prayers evolve from a plea for "fixing" her perceived wrongness, to questioning the divine rationale behind her existence, to ultimately seeking survival and acceptance (Celkan 2013, 13). Although this transition seemingly suggests a linear progression to a more accepting state of mind, her perspective is steeped in self-loathing, confusion, and an eventual resignation to her circumstances. The affective resonance here is one of deep melancholia, where transness is portrayed as a burden, a source of perpetual suffering that shapes Umut's entire existence. The play's

depiction of Umut's relationship with her mother further entrenches this melancholic affect. The separation from her mother, framed as a consequence of her trans identity, underscores a narrative of loss and impossibility. The yearning to reconnect with her mother, combined with the absence of any resolution or hope for reconciliation, reinforces the idea that transness is synonymous with destruction—of relationships, of happiness, and of any potential for a fulfilling life.

Sadness becomes specifically important in Umut's description of an Istanbul Pride Parade that took place sometime in the early 2000s. In a scene with images of the Pride Parade placed on the wall with rainbow flags, she appears with a tambourine to talk about the day she attended the march. In this scene, she says:

It was so hot. Crowded. Have we ever been this crowded? When? Was it in 2000? They said there was a march. "We're going," we always go somewhere... Back then, I wasn't this comfortable. I could only wear tight t-shirts... A ton of makeup on my face. (A pause) When I look at photos from those days, I look so ugly, ten layers of make-up on my face, tacky as hell... Anyway, we went out to the march. Me... you... that boy of ours. "So," I said, "are we going to walk like this?" "Come on," they said... We walked. (The sound ends. She slowly stops playing the tambourine.) Funerals... The cemetery isn't this crowded. Always the same request: "Look, I swear to God. The one who doesn't pour J&B on my grave is a bitch, but you have to pour it during the prayer. Listen to me, you whore... did you hear me? If I leave any money or property after I die, give it all to a charity. They didn't accept it when I was alive, so when I'm dead, send it with a guy so they don't know where it came from. Listen, you bitch, keep this in mind! Okay?" When will it be my turn? (Celkan 2013, 18)

Her brief speech about the day does not reflect any sense of solidarity or focus on any hopeful aspect of the event. Instead, she quickly stops playing the tambourine and remembers how the funerals of trans people are different, with fewer people in attendance. Umut's recollection is marked by discomfort and alienation—she describes herself as tacky and criticizes her heavy make-up, which suggests a lack of focus on solidarity and belonging. This initial sense of unease sets the stage for a deeper reflection on the necropolitical realities that govern trans lives.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics elucidates the subordination of life to the authority of death, whereby sovereign entities wield the power to determine who is

granted the right to live and who is condemned to die (Mbembe 2003). This notion transcends the mere regulation of life, encompassing the mechanisms through which marginalized populations are subjected to conditions of existence so limited that they approximate a state of death. Mbembe asserts that necropolitics not only dictates the actual demise of individuals but also governs the social and political frameworks that render certain lives devoid of mourning, expendable, and susceptible to diverse manifestations of violence (Mbembe 2003; Stryker 2014). With reference to funerals, the play reinstates the somber tone by exposing the harsh reality and violence that trans people experience, even in death. The affective shift from the potential solidarity of the Pride Parade to the isolation of trans funerals highlights the inescapable sadness and anger that characterize the affective landscape under necropolitical regimes, where trans lives are continuously devalued. The scene's emphasis on the somber realities of trans funerals, without counterbalancing it with narratives of resistance or solidarity, raises important questions about representation. By focusing predominantly on the necropolitical aspects of trans existence, the play risks reinforcing a view of trans lives as defined solely by victimhood and exclusion, thus turning trans women into sad stereotypes on stage. This analysis underscores the importance of critically engaging with how trans narratives are portrayed to ensure that they do not simply reproduce the very power structures they claim to critique.

Beyond the play's insistence on sadness and pessimism that limits the representations of trans people on stage, casting Sumru Yavrucuk for the role is also an important choice. In the dramatic text, the playwright Celkan notes that "Umut's character must be performed by a *physiological woman*," implementing a transphobic gatekeeping mechanism that limits what a woman is to categorically cis definitions of *the* female body (Celkan 2013, 10; emphasis mine). While this insistence may result from Celkan's "naïve" intention to present trans women as no different than cis women, it is important to acknowledge the transphobic gatekeeping implications of this prerequisite. In her review of the performance, Seyhan Arman, a Turkish trans actor and activist, raises the question of why a cisgender woman was cast for the role while simultaneously deriding her own exclusion from consideration for the part (2013). Celkan's instruction and Yavrucuk's casting for the role highlights the authority of cisgender people over trans

narratives and trans acting in Turkey. Considering how rare it is for trans actors to be cast in non-trans roles and the limited number of productions featuring trans characters, such casting policies further limit the employment opportunities available to trans actors.

3.3 *Eylül*

In elucidating the impetus behind his 2018 play *Eylül*, Kanbay, who is both the playwright and actor in the play, invokes the tragic suicide of Eylül Cansın (Piroğlu 2019). The video of her last words as her suicide note became viral on the internet after she passed away. Although the play is named after Cansın, Kanbay underlines that it is not about her life story. Instead, he explains that the play is ‘a fiction and a compilation’ of the interviews he read and his research into trans experiences (ibid.). As a cis male actor and playwright, Kanbay underscores his intention to avoid agitating the struggles faced by the trans community while also candidly acknowledging his lack of prior personal engagement with individuals who identify as trans before writing the play. He even states how he felt ashamed of himself during the play’s writing process (ibid.).

While Kanbay attempts to clarify the ethics of representation, it is also important to underline the blurriness between the fictional and the real in *Eylül* as a key point that deserves a deeper exploration, especially in terms of its affective implications. Although Uğur Kanbay asserts that the play is not directly about Eylül Cansın’s life, despite actually evoking her tragic suicide in the play, it creates a complex dynamic that intertwines reality and fiction in ways that influence the audience’s affective engagement with the performance. On the one hand, this blurriness can be seen as a deliberate narrative strategy that allows Kanbay to distance the play from being a direct representation or reenactment of Cansın’s life. By emphasizing the fictional nature of the play, Kanbay seems to be attempting to avoid the pitfalls of exploitative or voyeuristic storytelling that often accompanies the dramatization of real-life tragedies, particularly those involving marginalized communities. This distance could be an effort to respect Cansın’s memory, avoiding the reduction of her life to a single narrative. However, this distancing also introduces affective tensions. The play’s audience, aware of the real-life events that inspired the narrative, might find themselves caught between empathizing with the

fictional character of Eylül while still grappling with the emotional weight of Cansın's real story. This dual engagement can amplify the emotional impact of the play, as the audience might project their feelings about Cansın's death onto the character of Eylül, even if the play is not explicitly about her. The use of Eylül Cansın's name, coupled with the play's tragic conclusion, can blur the lines between empathy and emotional manipulation, potentially reinforcing the melodramatic affect that Kanbay ostensibly aims to avoid.

To highlight the fictional nature of the play, Kanbay considers the play to incorporate different genre characteristics from the Ottoman improvised comedy genre *ortaoyunu* (middle play), especially in its utilization of tongue twisters to navigate the narrative, to epic theatre to tragedy. In *ortaoyunu*, tongue twisters are pivotal in blending narrative and performance which allows the characters to showcase verbal mastery while introducing an independent, often fantastical, narrative layer. This transition from performer to storyteller creates a duality of time and space as it enriches the theatrical experience by seamlessly integrating narrative into the performance (Metin Basat 2023). Indeed, in *Eylül*, the speaker, after beginning the performance with a children's nursery rhyme "Yağ Satarım Bal Satarım," continues to make use of various other tongue twisters and nursery rhymes throughout the play. These performances play a key role in creating temporal shifts in the play as the speaker moves between different times and experiences of her life. The *ortaoyunu* and melodramatic elements of the play are also accompanied by in-*yer-face* theatre, a style of theatre that mainly interrogates minority and LGBTQI+ issues, familial bonds, media and historical occurrences like the 1980s military coup on Turkish stage with more moderate levels of sex and violence compared to foreign in-*yer-face* theatres (Baş 2018: 122, 126).

Throughout the two-act performance, the character of Eylül, a 28-year-old trans woman, regales the audience with a humorous and insightful account of her life, interspersed with witty digressions and interactive dialogues. Although Kanbay's intention was to deliver an unconventional narrative about trans people, the play still applies the same affective techniques and melodramatic strategies employed in previous performances on trans sadness in Turkish theatre—especially during the last half hour of the performance. During the first act, Eylül talks about her life in the forty-sixth street, an imaginary slum

in Istanbul by sharing her memories with her neighbor Reyhan, the story of how Reyhan influenced her to become a sex worker, and how she received an exemption from compulsory military service. The loud and cheerful tone of the first act gradually transmutes into a somber and melancholic narrative in the second act, in which Eylül narrates her failed love story and the tragic revelations like her rape by her father and her incarceration, culminating in her implied death at the end of the play. Even though the play wraps the inherent sadness and suffering that underpin its affective weight in humor and intimacy, each life experience Eylül shares on stage deepens the prevailing sense of sadness and melancholy. In the second act of the performance, Eylül describes her childhood memory following another nursery rhyme:

We'll sing it together again tomorrow dad, go to bed now! When I can't sleep, I'm late for school...
[Eylül performs the moment she was raped by her father] I couldn't go to the toilet for a week. We went to the hospital; the doctor told us that it was an anal fissure. My dad slapped me twice, saying "You'll never ride that bike again, you almost got run over by a truck because you were going to learn how to ride a bike!" The doctor saw the desperation in my eyes, he wanted me to tell him. I looked at the doctor and then at my dad. "My bike had four wheels, so my brother and I took the wheels off the side, that's why it happened," I said. [She loudly cries] But that's not why I'm this way. How could something like that happen? My dad did this to me because I was like this anyway.
(Kanbay 2022)

This rape scene is a pivotal moment that heightens the affective intensity of the play by utilizing in-her-face theatre elements. As Eylül moans, screams, cuffs her mouth, and heavily breathes while enacting the moment of rape, the audience confronts with the raw physicality of this traumatic experience. The use of a nursery rhyme, both before and after this violent moment, deepens its emotional impact by contrasting childhood innocence with the terrible experience of assault. This juxtaposition forces the audience into an unsettling proximity with Eylül's suffering.

The graphic portrayal of rape and the play's overwhelming focus on suffering risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes about trans women as victims of major traumas. While the scene is powerful, it can also be seen as exploitative, particularly in the context of the play's affective resonances which continue to get more intense following the rape scene. The play continues to narrate how Eylül was physically assaulted during sex work, which

led her to attack the man with a razor blade, and the violent moment of her incarceration. By centering trans representation around unending trauma, violence, melancholy, and helplessness, the play reduces the complexity of trans experiences, overshadowing narratives of resilience and agency. Furthermore, by playing a record of the news announcing Eylül Cansın's death at the end of the performance, the play facilitates a sense of compassion among the audience, inviting them to empathize with the tragic life of this trans woman, which further complicates the play's ambiguous relationship with Eylül Cansın. While the play distances itself from Cansın's story, it still leverages the affective weight of her tragedy by incorporating and appropriating her name and suicide within the performance.

Throughout this long narrative, the play presents various trans experiences compiled under a single character, Eylül. This approach to character formulation closely mirrors the composite character method used in sociology and anthropology, where a fictional figure is created by blending traits and experiences from multiple real-world individuals (Arjomand 2022). In the context of playwriting, this technique can be both illuminating and problematic. While it allows for a broader representation of diverse trans experiences, it also amplifies the risks inherent in the composite character method. This subjectivity can inadvertently flatten the complexity of trans lives, reducing them to a single, overarching narrative that may not fully capture the nuances of individual experiences.

In the case of *Eylül*, the play's attempt to encapsulate a variety of trans experiences under one character ironically leads to a new and problematic portrayal of trans lives. Although the play seems to strive for a narrative that resists the trope of trans suffering, it ultimately culminates in a tragic conclusion that reinforces the very stereotypes it seeks to avoid—turning Eylül into another sad trans figure who falls victim to rape, assault, incarceration, rejection, and loneliness. The in-her-face style, particularly in the scene where Eylül narrates her rape by her father while physically embodying the trauma, further complicates the play's relationship with contemporary Turkish theatre trends. In Istanbul's alternative theatre spaces, in-her-face theatre is often employed as a marketing technique, making its use in this context both powerful and controversial (Karagül 2015: 155). Thus, the play's approach to trans experiences is not only limited by its melodramatic narrative but also by its performative choices, which risk appropriating the

trans body on stage within a theatrical style that, while engaging directly with the sufferings of minoritarian and LGBTQI+ communities in Turkey, may inadvertently reinforce the very stereotypes it seeks to challenge.

3.4 Conclusion

The case studies in this chapter illustrate the varied ways in which affect is mobilized in trans performances. The nuanced portrayal of trans narratives in *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* highlights the possibility for changing significances of trans performances as well as the key contributions of different narrative elements and approaches to transness, which go beyond merely depicting the suffering of trans people. On the other hand, *Kimsenin Ölmediği Bir Günün Ertesi* exemplifies the limitations of affective strategies that rely heavily on sadness. The play's focus on melodramatic sorrow and the casting of a cisgender actress in a trans role highlight the problematic nature of cis compassion, where the emotional responses of cisgender audiences are prioritized over representing trans experiences. This case underscores the need for critical engagement with who tells trans stories and how, emphasizing the importance of nuanced representations and the avoidance of exploitative narratives. Similarly, *Eylül* presents another mixed picture, balancing innovative narrative approaches and conventional melodramatic tropes. While the play attempts to diversify the emotional landscape of trans performances, it ultimately reverts to tragic stereotypes. This highlights the tension between creative storytelling and the persistence of established affective frameworks, suggesting that true innovation requires a conscious effort to break free from these limiting narratives.

The socio-political landscape in Turkey necessitates a thoughtful deployment of affective strategies that do not reinforce existing prejudices or stereotypes. Instead, performances should strive to reflect the complex realities of trans lives, incorporating a range of emotions that acknowledge both the challenges and the strengths of trans individuals. While affective strategies hold significant potential for advancing trans representation in theatre, their effectiveness hinges on a careful, context-sensitive application. By moving beyond reductive narratives and embracing a broader emotional spectrum, trans

performances in Turkey can challenge stereotypes, promote inclusivity, and offer a more comprehensive portrayal of trans experiences. This approach not only enriches the artistic landscape but also plays a vital role in the ongoing struggle for trans rights and visibility in Turkey.



4. TRANS VOICES: SIDE AFFECTS AND

CHALLENGING SADNESS

As pioneers in one-actor performances about their personal narratives in Turkey's alternative theatre, transfeminist playwrights and actors offer alternative and more nuanced ways of expressing trans experiences than the emotionally intense and sad narratives of trans melodrama. Although their approaches do not necessarily eliminate suffering and sadness, they expand the conceptualization of trans individuals beyond melodramatic stereotypes. However, the number of trans writers or actors who are able to produce narratives about their intersectional identities and their relationship with the community is disproportionately small. Among the first productions about trans experience in the 2000s are trans actor Esmeray Özadikti's autobiographical works *Cadının Bohçası* (2006) [*The Witch's Bundle*], *Yırtık Bohça* (2012) [*The Ragged Bundle*] and *Kestirmeden Hikayeler* (2014) [*Stories Before Cutting*]. Following Esmeray, Seyhan Arman's 2017 production of *Küründen Kabare* [*Cabaret of Sham*] is another trans narrative that portrays the trans community's experiences through the medium of cabaret.

Transfeminist performances are significant examples of contemporary plays in Turkey's alternative theatre to incorporate an alternative affective repertoire, including joy, humor, fatigue, and sometimes even rage, into their narratives that address key socio-political dynamics behind the trans abjection in Turkey. By creating a humorous dialogue with the audience, these performances challenge the narratives of victimhood, trauma and adversity related to trans experience, thereby creating a more encompassing and nuanced depiction of trans lives. In this context, these plays do not fail to recognize and validate the obstacles and tribulations but also the victories and moments of sheer joy and profound connection, especially regarding trans women's feelings about transition. This recalibration of the affective spectrum not only enriches the representation of trans narratives but also invites audiences to immerse themselves in performances imbued with optimism, perseverance and a reaffirmation of identity.

Challenging the limited affective tropes available for trans experiences, such as dysphoria and euphoria, requires a more nuanced affective discourse. The focus on joy and positive emotions in transfeminist performances in Turkey is not an attempt to prioritize these over negative emotions, but rather to emphasize their significance in contrast to the stereotypical portrayals of trans characters, which often center around sadness and negative emotions. Recognizing that trans affects are not universal, but vary among individuals, is crucial for a respectful and inclusive discourse that honors the specificity and diversity of trans experiences (Malatino 2022, 3, 10). This expanded understanding resists the reductive narrative of transition as a linear journey from negativity to positivity, acknowledging the persistence of bad feelings before, during, and after transition (ibid., 2-4). Exploring the ordinary affects and their impact on trans lives highlight the need for a more inclusive and accurate representation that encompasses the full spectrum of trans emotional experiences (ibid., 5). This approach not only enriches our comprehension of trans lives but also informs advocacy and support efforts, which allows the development of targeted interventions that address the different affective challenges faced by trans individuals.

In this context, it is essential to recognize the significance of theoretical discussions on negative affects, both within and beyond trans representation as they focus on affects that have received limited attention within a specific setting. By situating emotions within broader societal and political contexts, Sianne Ngai argues that negative affects are not merely personal emotions but they have a political significance. For that reason, Ngai's discussion of "obstructed agency" is particularly relevant to trans experiences, where societal norms often limit the agency of trans individuals (2005, 3). These feelings, whether they manifest as paranoia, rage, or fatigue, reflect broader societal conditions that seek to regulate and control marginalized identities. Ngai's framework thereby allows us to see the political resonance of negative affects within hegemonic structures that frames these affects as both a reflection of and a resistance to the constraints imposed by society.

In studying trans affects, Susan Stryker's notion of "transgender rage" also complements Malatino's focus on negative affects by offering a perspective that views rage as a transformative force (1994). Stryker conceptualizes transgender rage as the urge to defy societal norms that dictate how bodies should be categorized and presented. This rage, according to Stryker, enables the establishment of new subjectivities regulated by different codes of intelligibility (Stryker 1994, 76). While Malatino emphasizes the affective toll of trans existence, earlier scholars like Stryker suggests that these negative affects—particularly rage—can be harnessed to resist societal norms and reclaim agency. By framing Malatino's side affects within the context of Stryker's transgender rage, it becomes possible to view these affects not only as responses to oppression but also as potential catalysts for the formation of new modes of being. Similarly, Harlan Weaver's concept of "transsomatechnic" offers a productive lens through which to view these side affects. Weaver argues that affect itself is a technology integral to embodiment, shaping both bodies and subjectivities in ways that resist traditional gender binaries (2013, 289). Weaver's framework develops the discussion by highlighting how these affects operate as technologies of trans embodiment, which interact with and alter the lived realities of trans people. This shared understanding and recognition of emotions help create a "trans affective commons," where empathy and solidarity among trans people can flourish (Malatino 2022, 9). Ultimately, this recognition is essential for fostering resilience and resistance against the systemic forces that generate these negative emotions (ibid., 9-10).

4.1 *Cadının Bohçası*

In her 2006 autobiographical one-actor play, *Cadının Bohçası* [*The Witch's Bundle*], Esmeray Özadikti narrates her journey from her village in Kars, a northeastern province close to Turkey's Armenian border, to Istanbul. At the center of the story is her coming of age as a Kurdish trans child and her negotiations of the politics of belonging in urban Turkey. Esmeray's autobiographical play includes not only a narrative of her own childhood but also stories about other people's childhoods. Building on her own experiences, Esmeray investigates the performative constitution of gendered and sexualized identities, especially in childhood, and how these performances reflect broader

sociopolitical dynamics that create the normative temporalities within which trans people are expected to live.

Esmeray's autobiographical performances blur the line between fiction and reality, adding a liminal quality to her plays. Her acting coach Ayça Damgacı, in the introduction to the published text of *Cadının Bohçası*, emphasizes this by describing the play as a work of "fiction" and "a dream" to highlight the imaginative nature of the genre and its role in self-representation (Esmeray 2013, 7). As Deirdre Heddon notes, "the binary between fictional/real is notoriously unstable" in autobiographical performances (Heddon 2007, 10), and the processes of selection and scripting of lived life lend political significance to these performances (ibid., 9). This genre is particularly important for marginalized individuals, offering a means to resist marginalization and objectification through self-generated speech (ibid., 3). By centering the "singularity of experience," autobiography highlights the unique voice of its subject, making it a foundational source for trans studies (Carter et al. 2014, 470).

Autobiographical narratives and performances not only provide insights into trans lives but also give trans individuals agency over their own stories by countering a transphobic culture that seeks to homogenize their experiences (Rondot 2019, 170). Unlike most other playwrights in Turkey's alternative theater scene who rely on emotional narratives of sad stereotypes, Esmeray asserts authority over her life without resorting to these tropes. Even through fictional elements, she claims her biography and its narration, often by using humor like a stand-up comedian, to counter the pervasive sadness often associated with the trans experience.

In her narration of her childhood, Esmeray expounds on perceptive insights concerning the performative formation of gender in Turkey as well as its intersection with her survival strategies as a trans child. Esmeray explains how the movies and series she watched on TV became a part of her imaginary games of impersonation that she played on her own as a child. Esmeray's childhood experiences with TV shows reveal her interactions with cis/heteropatriarchy in relation to her identification with other women and her experience of womanhood. When she narrates how she met her first boyfriend,

Fethi, Esmeray likens him to her cousin whom she fell in love with as a child, and to her favorite movie actors in childhood. In that moment, she remembers how she liked the men that she saw on TV:

When I was nine or ten years old, I was madly in love with Kenan Kalav and Kadir İnanır. [...] It was a childhood crush [...] there was a black and white *Çalılıkıuşu* [The Wren], you know, it was on. I would be Aydan Şener, hop on to branches, come down from trees, and wait for Kenan's arrival. There wasn't any furniture in the village, only cushions and rugs. I used to run from one cushion to the other, roll around in positions. (Esmeray 2006, 39)

Esmeray's relationship with the TV series and the actors creates a disidentificatory endeavor that she continues to carry out through her performance as well. José Esteban Muñoz develops the term *disidentification* in order to explain "the survival strategies" of a minority subject in negotiating with "a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz 1999, 4). Disidentification is "about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" within the universalizing and exclusionary cultural texts (ibid., 31). By narrating these games, Esmeray reveals how trans and queer children utilize or recycle the products of cis/heteronormative culture as a survival strategy.

In Esmeray's disidentificatory performance, there are two layers: her infatuation with the male characters and her identification with the female characters. In her performance, Esmeray describes how she would sweat and have fever after thinking about the male actors in her games of impersonation. In doing that, she reconfigures the cis actors' relationships on TV according to her own desires and interacts with the broadcasted material as a trans child. Muñoz describes disidentification as a vital tool for queer people of color and other minoritarian subjects because they live in a hostile public space where they need to follow a conformist attitude in order to survive (ibid., 5). Considering Kenan Kalav and Kadir İnanır's significance for the Turkish mainstream culture in Esmeray's childhood years as icons of macho masculinity, Esmeray's disidentificatory desire for these heterosexual men forms an integral resistance to her environment which strictly tries to punish her for her trans identification.

Esmeray's identification with Aydan Şener's character in *Çalikuşu* further complicates her disidentificatory performance. This 1986 TV series, based on Reşat Nuri Güntekin's quasi-feminist novel, portrays a melodramatic romance during Turkey's National Struggle (Milli Mücadele) period.¹⁴ While the protagonist in the series, Feride, comes from a privileged background and receives a Western education, Esmeray, as a lower-class Kurdish trans woman, lacks such privileges. Feride's autonomy contrasts with Esmeray's constrained life choices, turning Esmeray's impersonation of Feride into an act of resistance. By incorporating these narratives into her trans experience, Esmeray defies both her community's cisgenderism and her marginalized position in Turkey. In that sense, Esmeray's self-identification as a "virtuous Kurdish girl" can be seen as part of her disidentificatory engagement with the female TV roles. By blending her gender and ethnic identities, she reconstructs cis/hetero, upper and middle-class norms in Turkey through her performances.

Another significant figure in Esmeray's disidentificatory narrative is Türkan Şoray, an influential actress whose career spanned from the 1960s and continues to resonate beyond the 1980s. Esmeray recounts mimicking Şoray in the film *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım* (*The Girl with the Red Scarf*),¹⁵ a 1977 Turkish romantic drama. The movie tells the story of Asya (Şoray) and İlyas (Kadir İnanır), whose relationship is strained by İlyas's job as a truck driver. The film explores themes of love, tradition, and sacrifice, with Asya's red headscarf symbolizing her dedication. Şoray's portrayal of steadfast female characters helped shape idealized images of women in Turkish cinema, often reflecting social changes of the 1960s, such as migration and urbanization (Paça Cengiz 2020, 5488; Büker 1993, 73). By aligning herself with Şoray, Esmeray adopts a disidentificatory strategy and envisions herself as an idealized feminine figure despite the harsh realities that limited her life.

¹⁴ The National Struggle Period in Turkey (1919–1923) refers to the resistance against occupying forces following the World War I. It began with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's arrival in Samsun on May 19, 1919 and ended with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which recognized Turkey's sovereignty, leading to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey on October 29, 1923.

¹⁵ *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım* (*The Girl with the Red Scarf*) is an adaptation of renowned Soviet-Kyrgyz author Cengiz Aytmatov's novel, *Red Scarf*.

Esmeray's disidentification with TV characters serves as an affective resistance against the oppressive cis/heteronormative structures she faced. By reimagining herself through the personas of male and female TV icons, Esmeray creates an emotional and psychological space where she can assert and joyfully enjoy her trans identity. This process of disidentification allows her to channel her desires, fears, and aspirations into performative acts that subvert mainstream narratives and offer her a sense of agency. The affective significance of her joyful childhood games lies within their potential to transform her feelings of alienation and marginalization into acts of defiance and self-affirmation. By identifying with characters like Aydan Şener's Feride or mimicking Türkan Şoray, Esmeray not only critiques the dominant cultural texts but also reclaims her emotional and imaginative world. As a result, this emotional labor emphasizes the resilience and creativity of trans and queer individuals in navigating hostile environments.

4.2 *Kestirmeden Hikayeler*

As Esmeray's third autobiographic performance, *Kestirmeden Hikayeler* narrates her experiences before, during and after her gender affirming surgery. She opens the play by playing with the verb "to cut" to start talking about her surgery, which refers to the cutting of the penis. While she talks about her life experiences, her detailed narration makes *Kestirmeden Hikayeler* a didactic performance on the most mysterious aspects of male to female transition. Her performance is the only play in Turkey's alternative theatre that specifically centers around gender affirming surgery of a trans woman. In that sense, the play carves out a significant niche in Turkey's contemporary theatre beyond any affective and performative debate.

The beginning of the performance presents the arduous period of medico-legal processes during which Esmeray had to wait for years over bureaucratic barriers to be able to have her gender affirming surgery. These moments in her narration also include her perplexed feelings between anger and shock after each strange encounter she had in hospitals. While she makes the audience laugh with her funny conversations with doctors and therapists, she also maintains a serious tone when she discusses her changing feelings like fatigue

and rage in response to the nonchalant behavior of officials who do not respect the urgency of transition for trans people.

In her humorous narration, Esmeray explains how she decided to undergo her surgery in her 40s, during the 2013 Gezi Park Protests in Istanbul with her friends using her hospital room as a resting point during the protests. While not all queer and trans people live their lives radically different from cis/heterosexual majority, their lives have the power to “to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (Halberstam 2005, 1-2). In that sense, while Esmeray crafts a specific spatial and temporal dimension that presents the chaotic social upheaval among police vehicles, bombs, and stones as the backdrop of her transition, she sets up a layered juxtaposition between the personal and the social. As she describes her emotional changes after the surgery, she frames this period as her second puberty, a period that is not legible within the cis-heteronormative conceptualizations of time. Jack Halberstam introduces queer temporality as a framework that opposes the linear, future-oriented structures associated with heteronormativity, which then creates “a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now” (ibid., 2). Therefore, Esmeray’s decision to undergo her gender-affirming surgery during a time of national crisis becomes a significant example of queer temporality by embodying and presenting her personal resistance to normative gender timelines of cis-heterosexism alongside the collective political resistance of the Gezi Park Protests.

The material and emotional characteristics of trans bodies transcend the limited categories of appearance or binary stages typically characterized as before and after transition (Vaccaro 2014: 97). As a result, the concept of trans joy emerges as a vital component in the theatrical representation of the trans body. For instance, in *Kestirmeden Hikayeler*, Esmeray specifically focuses on her experiences with transition, including intimate aspects of her daily life like masturbation and personal experiences with her genitals. Despite the stress of the medical and the legal processes leading to her transition, she crafts a humorous narrative about her experiences that engages the audience with laughter. By presenting the erotic details of her life and maintaining an authoritative position in her speech, her performance weaves the tangible and emotional facets of her transition into a joyful narrative about embodying her femininity. In that sense, trans

actors' performances do not only align with the broader aim of these plays to empower trans voices but also add material and emotional depth to the portrayal of trans experiences.

In the second half of her performance, Esmeray moves on to talk about her new experiences after the surgery. Through this performance, she explains how she developed a transformed relationship with her body as she adjusted to the new feelings. She describes her joy as she narrates how she figured out these new experiences, such as urinating or having an orgasm for the first time and awakened her doctor and friends late at night to share the happy news with them. However, within this joyful narrative, her performance does not consolidate any affective binary between pre-surgery sadness or post-surgery joy. Instead, she ends her performance by explaining how she feels deconstructed like every other trans woman, whose bodies are continuously under the pressure of other people's opinions (Esmeray 2022). Her feeling of deconstructed self exemplifies what Malatino claims by explaining transition with an ongoing and non-linear nature. He argues that transition does not have a clear endpoint but is an ongoing process that involves continuous negotiation of one's identity and embodiment (2022, 33-34). Therefore, Esmeray's performance highlights the complexity of trans experiences, where joy and struggle coexist, and the process of self-discovery remains constant, which defies any simplistic or binary notions of transition.

4.3 *Küründen Kabare*

Seyhan Arman writes *Küründen Kabare* as a work of fiction. Even before the play's premiere, Arman was a popular drag queen performing under the drag name Matmazel Coco. As a drag queen, Arman translates her experiences in drag entertainment and professional acting into *Küründen Kabare*. The play centres on the story of a trans woman, Serpil, or as she refers to herself, Deli Serpil from Diyarbakır, in her 30s. The production brings together Serpil's memories, songs and poetry through Arman's solo performance and Turkish actor Engin Alkan's occasional voice-overs to act as a presenter for Serpil and to provoke her at the same time.

Along with its affective register, the cabaret genre of Arman's play becomes a significant element of the performance. Cabaret has long held a significant place for the queer community as a crucial space for expression, solidarity, and resistance. For that reason, cabaret is not merely a genre or site of performance, but a mode characterized by fluidity, improvisation, intimacy, and spectacle. This mode blurs the lines between performer and spectator, thus fostering a communal atmosphere that is integral to queer world-making (Vogel, 29). The history of cabaret is intertwined with notions of gender, race, sexuality, and nationality, offering a platform for artistic expression and counter-discourses to dominant ideologies. Cabaret's contrasting moods infuses entertainment with social and political commentary that extends its impact beyond the performance itself (Vogel, 36). Furthermore, cabaret's relationship with emotions is characterized by a distinct approach that diverges from traditional theatrical practices focused on psychological realism and empathy (Double and Wilson 2006, 50). Instead of portraying characters through a lens of emotionalism, cabaret performers often present themselves or personas closely tied to their offstage selves, engaging directly with the audience (ibid.). Instead of portraying characters through a lens of emotionalism, this direct engagement blurs the line between the performer and the persona, and challenges traditional modes of spectatorship by emphasizing performativity over immersion. By inviting the audience to become aware of their own role in the theatrical encounter, the audience stops being a passive observer and becomes a co-participant in the performative act, where the boundaries between the performer's onstage and offstage identities are deliberately unsettled. Therefore, although the play does not have any references to her drag persona, Matmazel Coco, Arman's use of this genre allows her to incorporate a reflection of her drag character as an entertainer within the performance. By choosing the cabaret genre, Arman intentionally distances her performance to avoid seeking compassion from the audience and instead aims to confront them.

Through cabaret, Arman draws on the performative conventions of cabaret, which allows her to break the fourth wall by directly addressing and confronting the audience. This act of confrontation is a critical aspect of cabaret's performativity, as it disrupts the spectator's expectation of passive reception and instead demands an active and reflective engagement with the content. In that sense, Arman intentionally distances her performance from seeking compassion from the audience. Instead, she leverages the

genre's inherent characteristics to challenge the audience, positioning them as active participants who are compelled to engage critically with the performance. This approach emphasizes the performative nature of the experience, where the audience's gaze is redirected from mere empathy to a deeper reflection on the sociopolitical undercurrents of the performance.

The play's title is also significant in terms of evaluating the genre conventions of the performance. *Küründen* is a Lubunca word that means "sham" in English. The title of the play refers to itself as a fake cabaret because instead of being a conventionally entertaining performance, the play's subject matter deals with Serpil's struggles as a trans woman. On the play's web page, Arman invites her audiences to her performance by saying, "Of course, only if you're ready for this encounter. No worries, I will not create a drama by saying 'What have you done to me'; after all, even if it's a sham, it's still a cabaret" (2017). Even though the play does not exclude struggles and intimate details of trans experience in Turkey, it is interwoven with a level of trans joy that is performed through humorous moments and witty exchanges from Serpil's life as a sex worker, a telemarketing agent and a radio DJ to different experiences from her romantic life.

The play begins by narrating the childhood story of Serpil by emphasizing her experiences in transition and its effects on her adult life. Nevertheless, Arman refrains from constructing her narrative around a sad affective engagement with the audience. Even as she recounts profoundly distressing moments of the trans experience in Turkey, she maintains an overarching emphasis on joy in her performance through a humorous and conversational tone. The ending becomes particularly significant in reflecting how the play's approach to death and physical abuse differs from other narratives about trans women. At the end of the play, Serpil narrates her dispute with one of her clients during sex work, when she ends up getting stabbed and left to die. Following Engin Alkan's voice-over announcing statistical information regarding the number of trans women who became victims to hate crimes in Turkey and its disproportionately higher rates compared to Europe, she quickly leaves her sad contemplation of her own death and addresses the audience. She explains:

Not every trans story ends with death. I am one of the lucky ones ... people are killed every day over things they cannot choose in this country. Should the voice-over also give the statistics of women who fell victim to homicide just because they were women? There is no need. I think we all know who gets killed and why, as well as how to stop this. (Arman 2019, 19)

Instead of assuming a hopeless tone and invoking a sense of compassion from the audience, Serpil confronts them by underlining the social and political aspects of these crimes and invites the audience to consider broader power dynamics that lead to oppression and injustice. Here, Serpil directly challenges the narrative trope of the tragic trans figure, which is often visible both in popular media and theatrical representations. This moment in the play provides a lens through which to evaluate the melodramatic limits of other works analyzed in this thesis. It serves as a benchmark for assessing whether these works perpetuate harmful stereotypes by emphasizing suffering and despair or whether they offer a more careful portrayal that resists emotional manipulations. While she ends her performance by asserting her determination to survive, she avoids invoking an overly idealistic or utopian vision of hope either.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the pioneering contributions of Esmeray Özadikti and Seyhan Arman to the alternative theatre in Turkey by focusing on how their works reconfigure the affective landscape of contemporary trans representations. By moving away from the melancholic and often melodramatic narratives that dominate portrayals of trans experiences, these artists offer a more nuanced and multifaceted approach that challenges both the conventions of the genre and the expectations of their audiences.

Esmeray Özadikti's autobiographical performances, *Cadının Bohçası* and *Kestirmeden Hikayeler*, illustrate the potential of a personal narrative to disrupt normative cultural texts. Rather than simply recounting her life, Esmeray engages in a process of reimagining and reinterpreting her experiences, using humor and disidentification to construct a narrative that resists the pathologizing gaze often directed at trans lives. Her performances challenge the linear and emotionally charged narratives that stereotypically frame trans stories by offering a complex portrayal that blends joy, resilience, and defiance. This

approach not only amplifies her voice as a trans woman but also redefines the possibilities of autobiographical performance as a form of resistance against social and cultural norms.

Similarly, Seyhan Arman's *Küründen Kabare* harnesses the cabaret genre to create a space where trans narratives can be expressed with a distinct affective tone. By integrating elements of humor, satire, and direct audience engagement, Arman subverts the expectations of both the genre and the audience. Her performance does not seek to elicit pity or compassion; instead, it confronts the audience with the realities of trans life while simultaneously celebrating moments of joy and resilience. This approach also disrupts the melodramatic conventions that often dominate trans representations and offers instead a narrative that is rich in affective complexity and that refuses to be reduced to a single emotional register, even when it is a narrative that includes experiences with sad and violent moments.

The broader argument that emerges from these performances is a critique of the dominant affective modes in trans representation, which often prioritize sadness, melancholy, and trauma as the primary lenses through which trans lives are viewed. By offering alternative affective registers—such as joy, humor, and defiance—within the mainstream aesthetic and representational features of the contemporary alternative theatre scene, Esmeray and Arman challenge the inclination to frame trans experiences within narratives of suffering, sadness, melancholia, and fatality. Their works suggest that the emotional complexity of trans lives cannot be fully captured by the sad representation. Instead, these performances invite audiences to engage with trans experiences in ways that acknowledge both the struggles and the moments of empowerment, connection, and joy that characterize trans existence. In that sense, the chapter highlights the importance of expanding the affective repertoire available for trans narratives in theatre. By moving beyond the binary of dysphoria and euphoria, these performances contribute to a more inclusive discourse on trans lives, one that honors the full spectrum of emotions that define the human experience. This shift in focus—from a narrative centered on suffering to one that embraces a wider range of affective possibilities—marks a significant departure from the mainstream trans performances and offers a different framework for understanding trans representation in Turkey.

Ultimately, the works of Esmeray Özadikti and Seyhan Arman not only enrich the cultural and affective discourse of Turkey's alternative theatre but also challenge the broader assumptions about trans narratives and temporalities in the performing arts. By constructing their performances with an awareness of the affective diversity of trans lives, they open up new possibilities for how these stories can be told, received, and understood. Their contributions serve as a critical reminder that the affective landscape of trans representation is far more complex and varied than conventional narratives suggest, and that theatre has the potential to reflect this complexity in ways that are both empowering and transformative.



5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the affective contours of transfeminism within Turkey's contemporary alternative theater. By close reading the selected trans performances and dramatic texts, I have endeavored to reveal the complex ways in which trans experiences are articulated and mediated on stage. Through a critical examination of affective strategies, this study has shed light on the broader socio-political contexts that shape trans visibility in Turkey. The central focus of this thesis has been the critical analysis of the affective economies that dominate trans representations in Turkish theater. Sadness and suffering are frequently privileged in these narratives, reflecting a cultural tendency to frame trans lives within a melodramatic register. This emphasis on negative affects can risk oversimplifying and reducing trans experiences to a one-dimensional portrayal of victimhood, which limits the public's understanding of the full complexity of trans existence.

To examine the differences in affective registers, this thesis highlights how trans actors and playwrights like Esmeray Özadikti and Seyhan Arman resist these reductive narratives by employing a wider range of affects, including joy, humor, resilience, and defiance. Esmeray, in particular, stands out not only for her contributions to trans representation but also for her intersectional representation of her identity. In *Cadının Bohçası*, she intertwines her identity as a Kurdish trans woman and as a migrant from Kars with broader socio-political issues, offering a multi-faceted portrayal that underlines what is usually missing in mainstream trans representations. By bringing together a narrative around her diverse identities, Esmeray's work exemplifies the potentials of performances with an intersectional focus to offer more comprehensive and inclusive representations of trans lives that do not repeat the existing approaches and narratives.

While also pointing at another gap in mainstream trans performances, the element of intersectionality in Esmeray's performances underscores the importance of recognizing and representing the diverse identities and experiences that shape trans lives. This

approach not only enriches the field of trans studies but also contributes to a more inclusive and representative theatrical landscape. By challenging the dominance of a single narrative, Esmeray and other transfeminist playwrights and actors demonstrate the power of theater as a medium to reflect the diversity and complexity of trans experiences in Turkey.

This thesis has also underscored the necessity of revisiting performances over time to grasp the evolving significance of these works, or to reexamine the material and its affective dimensions with a self-reflective approach that recognizes both the potential and limitations of affective analysis. As demonstrated through my analysis, revisiting a performance after a time may lead to a deeper understanding of the shifts in affective dynamics and the socio-political contexts in which these performances are situated. This temporal aspect of affect suggests that affective analysis can also be an ongoing and changing method, rather than a static one-time observation.

This thesis has highlighted the need for more intersectional performances that engage with other marginalized identities within the trans community. While Esmeray's plays critique the stereotypical portrayal of trans women as sex workers—a narrative frequently perpetuated due to the prevalence of representations that equate transness with sex work—transness itself has become stereotypically associated with trans women in mainstream representations. This narrow focus underscores the importance of diversifying trans narratives to include a broader spectrum of experiences. While the focus has primarily been on the narratives of trans women, future research could explore performances that address the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and disability within trans experiences. Such an intersectional approach would not only deepen the understanding of trans lives in Turkey but also challenge the limitations of current theatrical representations.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in the representation of trans men and non-binary experiences in Turkish theater. The existing dramatic literature and performances overwhelmingly focus on the narratives of trans women, with few exceptions like *Kimyam Tenime Uyumuyor* and *Ben Senin Bildiğin Erkeklerden Değilim*.

This imbalance may reflect broader social patterns of erasure and marginalization that highlight a critical area for future research and artistic exploration. Addressing this gap requires a concentrated effort to expand the affective and representational scope of trans performances. Future studies might explore how different affective registers are articulated in performances centered on trans men and non-binary individuals. Furthermore, considering how non-binary identities also challenge traditional gender binaries on stage, these new areas of research and representation could further enrich the critical dialogue around trans representations in theater.



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