

Social Poetics, Emotional Engagement and Cultural Critique in Istanbul: When Liminality Matters in the Social Movements¹

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The present article is based on the case-study of Esmeray, a Kurdish transsexual who migrated to Istanbul in the 1980s. It addresses the issue of her gender-related minority status, as well as her emigrational experience as an activist in a megacity. This experience appears to be constructed in terms of multiple displacements and of knowledge acquired by living in the old cosmopolitan centre of Istanbul. The discussion engages in an analysis of how the post-1990s combination of Turkish Islamism with neoliberal governance is received among local people. While economic and political circumstances have led to a stronger authoritarian economic rule, a counter policy of human rights protection has led to the growth of civil society activism and social movements. Esmeray became a key informant on account of the artistic way in which she exercises her feminist activism. Here, in an effort to respect my informant, I give the floor to her cultural artistic critique of authoritarian state ruling against social and ethnic minorities, violence against women and patriarchal values. The case of Esmeray can help us to understand the significance of embodied emotions in new social global and local movements that have taken place in Istanbul before and after the events in Gezi park (May-Summer 2013).

Keywords: Embodied space, social poetics, cultural critique, feminism, emotions, megacity of Istanbul

'Are you brave enough to let a transsexual dissolve your prejudice?

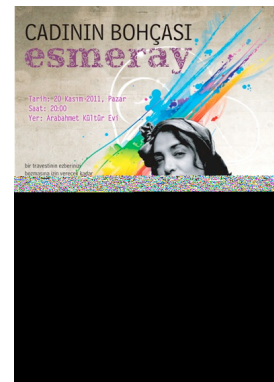
The story of being a woman, being a man: the story of a transgendered life; a journey from the east to Istanbul...men, women, queers, streets, bars, political, a-political, anti-political, the roads of sexuality

Sides men hide from women

Things that women don't realise looking in the mirror

Secrets that men and women keep from each other...'

From *The Bundle of the Witch: A Show With Many Characters*
by Cadinin Bohçasi Esmeray



The present study deals with the case of Esmeray, a Kurdish *transeksüel*² from Kars, who migrated to Istanbul in the 1980s. Through an examination of her autobiographical film,³ of

¹ In 2013, I published a version of this study in Greek (Tsibiridou 2013a) focusing on the emigrational experience of displacement and precariousness. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers, and to Italo Pardo and the editorial committee of *Urbanities* for their comments and suggestions as well as to my colleagues Eleftheria Deltso and Nikitas Palantzas for their detailed feedback and encouragement. Athena Athanasiou and Giorgos Tsimouris made useful suggestions on a previous Greek version of the present study. I would like to thank my friends and collaborators who helped in practical ways and also inspired me in the present analysis: a great many thanks are owed to Selma Sevski, Hilal Esmer, Yasemin Öz, Meric Özgünez, Pinar Gedikozer and Katia Marinaki. My debt to Esmeray is immeasurable. The responsibility for the argument, missing points or misunderstandings is, of course, all mine.

² I use here the Turkish word '*transeksüel*' following Esmeray, who usually uses it in her discourse even if she does not like it. As she confessed to me privately, she would prefer to avoid any term that includes the prefix trans- (such as *transgender*, *transvestite* or *transsexual*). She would rather not be discriminated through reference to her sexuality or gender. However, the present study does not enter

her recent stage performances⁴ and of her activism as a ‘leftist feminist transsexual’, I describe the process by which Esmeray became a key informant in my anthropological research. In an attempt to understand critically the performative modalities (social poetics, embodied emotions) of her activism,⁵ the analysis offered here draws primarily on her aesthetics of self-representation, leaving in the background other forms of discourse, such as our interviews. In terms of the politics of writing, I believe that, thus, I exert less power in translating my informant’s choices, agency and activism.

Esmeray’s social poetics and aesthetics are in many ways those of a discriminated persona – as a *transeksüel* and feminist activist, and Kurdish immigrant in Istanbul. They are extremely useful in attempting to understand critically how people engage with emotions when they perform activism in the centre of Istanbul.⁶ In other words, by investing on her ‘otherness’ as a transvestite, a Kurdish immigrant and a feminist, Esmeray exercises a cultural critique on sexual and gender prejudices and on social and ethnic discrimination. More specifically, since her double displacement from man to woman and from an Anatolian village to the megacity of Istanbul, she became a marginal/liminal person who experienced civic and gender discriminations, sexual abuse and violence, as well as economic poverty, social exclusion and precariousness.⁷ In a way, she has constantly experienced the neoliberal condition of precariousness as an impoverished Kurdish immigrant and as *transeksüel*, who

into the discussion of those categories in the Turkish and the global cultural and political context. On this topic, see Robert and Kandiyoti (1988), Selek (2001), Kadiyoti (2006), Akin (2009), Öktem (2008). For an interesting anthropological survey regarding ‘transgender studies’ and relevant political activism after the 1990s, see Valentine (2007).

³ *Me and Nuri Bala* by Melissa Önel, released in 2010.

⁴ Esmeray has produced two autobiographical plays. *Cadinin Bohçası* was first staged in 2007 at the Bilgi University 2007, followed by its sequel, *Cadinin Köpçesi* in 2009. Both plays are actually stand-up comedies and have been presented in university campuses and coffee-theatres in Turkey and recently in Germany and France.

⁵ On this issue I am in line with the main ideas argued in the works *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *The Predicament of Culture* (Clifford 1988) which raise questions on power, representation and hermeneutics involving anthropologists and their informants. In addition, I found inspiring Michael Herzfeld’s study (1997) of his privileged informant, the writer Nenedakis, as well as the collective volume *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986). However, the outstanding ethnography by Paul Rabinow *Reflexions of Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) is the main work that always made me search for alternative ways of critically understanding the other and the self and for writing respecting the Other’s devices. Rabinow was looking for informants with an element of ‘otherness’ in their own society in order to establish a critical dialogue with anthropological hermeneutics.

⁶ This fieldwork started in 2008 and was funded for 4 years (2009-10, 2012-13) by the Research Committee of the University of Macedonia. The project focused on people and on space as lived experience in Beyoğlu. This project, still in process, has firstly focused on Amargi, a feminist association where I met Esmeray, and later on different artistic and discursive events (*Becoming Istanbul*). For relevant publications on this project, see Tsibiridou (2013a, 2013b) and Tsibiridou and Palantzas (2014).

⁷ The word ‘precariousness’ has usually been used to describe the economic and the wider instability under neoliberal governance. See, for example, Spyridakis (2014), Athanassiou (2011), Atasoy (2009).

has been subjected to multiple exclusion from citizenship virtues, from the right to work (except for engaging in prostitution), as well as from the right to a home and to the use of her mother tongue. By engaging in social poetics, Esmeray's activism opens an interesting discussion in political anthropology. She links gender constructions, sexuality and citizenship to the liminal condition of people who transgress normality, sexually, ethnically and socially. This encourages us to pay attention to the dynamics of discrimination and to the power practices that Esmeray, as an ambiguous and liminal person, both submits to *and* subvert. However, the move from a form of public social activism that makes use of old methods (old jokes and grotesque ironic comments) for new purposes (feminist activism) to a modern one (autobiographic theatre and film) in order to fight old stereotypical assumptions (violence against women and patriarchal values) derives from her engagement with, as she says, a Western feminist critique and leftist ideology. Esmeray's liminality gives her the power to transgress dominant gender assumptions and social discriminations when she decides to use her otherness positively, with the aim to construct a useful cultural critique for the benefit of the majority of the population.

As Esmeray openly declares in the advertisement of her theatrical plays, her move to Istanbul at the age of thirteen marked her life. She experienced this migration as a rite of passage; the one-way journey to Istanbul was part of the necessary displacement that all boys in her Kurdish village in the Eastern provinces of Anatolia went through at the start of their adolescence. However, it is not coincidental that, following her displacement, all her experiences as a liminal person (sexually, ethnically, economically and socially) have, in anthropological terms,⁸ been constructed and deeply transformed in the controversial space of Beyoğlu.⁹ This neighbourhood, characterized by Western modernity in the Ottoman Empire, was firstly inhabited by non-Muslim minorities (up to the 1960s), and has since been populated by people engaged in the illegal sex industry and by transsexuals, immigrants, artists and political activists. Moreover, in the 20th century, its central Taksim square became the main centre for social protest. However, after the 1980 *coup d'état* in Turkey (Öktem 2011) and under AKP's governance, both the Beyoğlu neighbourhood and Taksim square were reclaimed by neoliberal and Islamist real-estate gentrification projects for entertainment, shopping and commercial enterprise generally.

Istanbul, and in particular the Beyoğlu neighbourhood where Esmeray has been residing for the last twenty-five years, seem to play a predominant role in the consolidation of multiple experiences of liminality in terms of urban space (Low 2003, Pardo 1996). Here,

⁸ I am trying to broaden Victor Turner's concept of 'liminality' (1969) in order to include recent modalities of permanent passage and instability that some people are experiencing in their everyday life. In modern times, people coming from minorities experience multiple discriminations and, under neoliberal governance, people from the majority increasingly risk to experience precariousness (Tsibiridou 2013b). For further interesting cases on marginality, minoritization, liminality and transgression in the Mediterranean context, see the indicative works of Pardo (1996), Tsibiridou (2000, 2007, 2011) and Spyridakis (2014).

⁹ We cannot avoid the association with liminality and in-between condition of people who are accused of transgressing normality in the ambiguity of the district of Beyoğlu.

since the 1980 *coup d'état* the neoliberal agenda has included the further impoverishment of Turkish migrants who, under pressure from the above mentioned gentrification projects, have been forced to move to ghettos and to the poor settlements at the outskirts of the city or to live as outcasts at the edges of Beyoğlu, beneath the Tarlabasi highway.

These impoverished people are often of Kurdish or Roma origin. As a *transeksiuel* living in Beyoğlu, for Esmeray neoliberal governance generated additional problems, such as the exclusion from the neighbourhood in which she lived and worked since 1975 under conditions of mutual tolerance with the local population.¹⁰ Thus, these impoverished people are gradually becoming invisible. The gentrification project has included, among other things, the closing of official brothels in 1986 (Altınay 2008), practices of redevelopment and intensive consumerism (Navaro-Yashin 2006, Atasoy 2009) and the commodification of the urban-space through real-estate projects, market expansion and touristic development.

To all the aforementioned civil and social exclusions we need to add Esmeray's intentional choice to act as a feminist fighting the militaristic Turkish state and the hypocritical patriarchal habits of the majority of the Turkish population; two phenomena that feed each other (Altınay 2004, Kaplan 2006, Kandiyoti 2006).

Soon after I started my fieldwork in October 2008, I met Esmeray in the bookshop of the feminist association Amargi. In the following months I met her many times there and in the many cafés in Tünel, right in the heart of Beyoğlu. We engaged in several conversations and I participated in many group meetings. I attended Esmeray's performances and joined her at other social events (such as those surrounding the municipal elections). We also came across each other often in the Beyoğlu neighbourhood. I was attracted more by her personality, spontaneous sense of humour and optimism than by her exoticism as a *transeksiuel*. However, I needed to understand how her sharp and effective feminist critique touched her different audiences. For this reason, and because various social events were bringing together secular feminists, LBTs (lesbian, bisexual and transsexual) and religious women activists,¹¹ I decided to focus on the case-study of Esmeray. I hoped that I would be able to understand the impact of feminist critique and emotions, as they are used through local

¹⁰ The departure of Greeks extinguished the bright lights of Western modernity in the neighbourhood of Peran (meaning 'the place beyond'), now Beyoğlu. It was there that outlaws and people at the margins of society settled after 1973, some of them opening brothels with transvestites. Since the dictatorship of 1980, and the collaboration of the governing élite with neoliberal entrepreneurs, Western-type nightlife started gradually to return to Istanbul, transforming stores and private residencies in the district of Beyoğlu – especially around the spaces that came to represent the image of the area – into commodities; mainly, tourist attractions and places of entertainment (Navaro-Yashin 2006, Öncü 2006, Mills 2006, Aytar and Keskin 2003). Groups of activists and separatists are still active in the area. However, under constant police supervision, the main streets are cleared of transvestites, who are often pushed away, in the darker alleys behind the high street (Robert and Kandiyoti 1988, Kandiyoti 2006).

¹¹ It seems to me that their union, under the slogan 'Birbirimize Sahip Çikiyoruz' (keeping an eye on each other; see, on this, the detailed analysis by Eirini Avramopoulou 2013), brings out a new approach among the social movements: engaging with trans-individual emotional and embodied experiences.

social poetics in order to produce a cultural critique in terms of resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990). This kind of critique would appear to have become dominant in the broader social movements that contest not only authoritarian ruling and gender discrimination but also economic poverty and social exclusion of ethnic and linguistic minorities in the centre of Istanbul. To be more explicit, in addition to the claims of the social and political movements that developed between the 1960s and the mid-1990s, Beyoğlu has become the space *par excellence* for the rise of gender and sexual activism. The focus on Esmeray's case contributes to the debate among social science and political anthropology specialists on liberal and social rights. Her case-study shows how the imported counter-policy of human and sexual rights in the 1990s,¹² usually following the neoliberal agenda (Gledhill 2000), can become a useful vehicle for activist training and transmission of knowledge with the aim of reclaiming human and social rights. In other words, Esmeray's kind of activism helps to clarify how, despite political agendas (Benhabib 2011, Özgüneş 2012), human rights and civil society policies can inspire local people's practices; in particular, how people use local controversial priorities and social poetics of resistance in order to stimulate reactions and subvert stereotypes, assumptions, discriminations and economic and social inequalities.

Let us start by looking at how Esmeray experienced her multiple displacements in her urban experience.¹³ As I have indicated, such displacement included moves from the Anatolian village to Istanbul's old cosmopolitan neighbourhood; from a rich to a poor neighbourhood of the city and vice versa; from male to female; from 'childhood' to feminist activist adulthood; from an intimate home environment to the public scene of the stage. These experiences of displacement, narrated on the stage and on the screen, mostly take place in the urban space of Beyoğlu. In her own words, 'I come from a village of central Kars. There, seven-year-old girls must learn certain things before reaching puberty. What do these young girls learn? To weave carpets, to knit and to crochet. Well, I am a girl too'. On stage, she represents such practices using the appropriate feminine apparatuses. 'So', she added, 'I took my mother's head scarf, I stole my cousin's needle point, took some of my mom's yarn and began to crochet, competing with my sisters, trying to finish first! Whack! Something hit me hard on the head! What was it? My brother! But he didn't hit my sisters, just me! Then my mother came and grabbed my head scarf. Another whack and a slap on my face! This time it was my father who was hitting me. What was wrong? I run to the utility room ... I knit and I knit and I knit ... From there into to the living room. Then, I run to catch up with my sisters; then, suddenly, I freeze! Why did they hit me? My father never hit my mother, though he always yelled at her. My brother and cousins used to hit my sisters. Suddenly, the thought crossed my mind: "this means I am a girl too. Let them hit me. It's OK". So, I calmed down'. (Extract from the play, *The Bundle of the Witch*).

¹² The present analysis does not enter into the discussion of transgender rights per se, as other inspired studies have done in cases both within and outside Turkey (Akin 2009, Valentine 2007, King 1993). The politicization of this issue in Turkey after the 1990s leads us to look at the global impact and at the role played by this agenda in the local contest over urban space and rights (Soja 1999, 2005; Tsibiridou and Palantzas 2014).

¹³ On Urban Anthropology see the interesting Forum in *Urbanities* 3(2) 2013.

The study of Esmeray's cultural critique (her discourse and the embodied emotional experiences and performances) brings out specific relations of power and the attendant techniques, but also the ways in which all the aspects of such a critique are experienced by disadvantaged people who live precarious lives under conditions of discriminations based on gender, language, income, political ideology and active involvement with groups of resistance. Mostly as a *transeksüel* (Çinar 2011) and a Kurd, Esmeray experiences multiple macro and micro relations of power and authority in the family, in the village life, in the state and, as we will see later, in the city, in the market and in social relationships, such as friendship, professional networking and social movement.¹⁴ From an ethnographic viewpoint, it is worth insisting on the examination of the modalities that she adopts in order to claim her subjectivity and then sublimate the disadvantages of her liminal condition¹⁵ into a comparative advantage, either by breaking the circle of violence¹⁶ or by taking reflective action regarding her multiple traumatic experiences caused by patriarchal values in the family¹⁷ and by the recurring violent attitudes stemming, among other things, from the modern Turkish nation-state's militaristic ideology and practices.¹⁸ In self-reflective recollection, Esmeray represents her life on stage not so much to shock the audience but,

¹⁴ In Istanbul she was repeatedly raped by so-called friends, and since she stopped being a sex worker she has never been offered a proper job by those who claimed that she had a right not to be discriminated for her gender and sexual choices. It is not coincidental that, having trained in street theatre, only in Amargi, an association open to multiple sexualities, Esmeray found a new home and developed her feminist conscience. It should also be mentioned that Esmeray participated in collective activities in Beyoğlu in early 2000, when civil society, human and gender rights associations and artistic projects activism started to be generously funded by the European Union, International Organisations, Western consulates and cultural centres.

¹⁵ Such a liminality derives from the embodiment of permanently living precariously more than moving away from an unconventional status.

¹⁶ The cycle of violence Esmeray experienced as a woman (Altınay and Arat 2009), from her first sexual experiences (the multiple rapes) and the period of prostitution, culminated when two police officers beat and cursed her and forbade her to move through the safe parts of her neighbourhood in Beyoğlu. This was the defining moment when she ended her silence against state and male violence, especially targeting transsexuals. Esmeray started a legal battle against those two officers and succeeded in having them prosecuted and sentenced. While not seeing herself as someone who has achieved a major accomplishment, she decisively crossed from an undermining to an accusatory discourse, from the stage and the slavery of the streets to television and internet appearances and, recently, to having her own column in the left-wing newspaper *Taraf*.

¹⁷ In between her two autobiographical plays, she decided to produce Dario Fo's play, *Rape*, for a selected feminist audience. She appears on stage as a man and is gradually transformed into a woman. As she characteristically says, by re-enacting in a self-reflective manner the experiences of the raped body, she managed to make the audience cry for hours.

¹⁸ It has been observed that many Turkish men engage in violent behaviour when visiting transsexual brothels. There have been hate crimes; transsexuals have been murdered by being run over by cars when they were in public deserted areas in the company of a man (Kandiyoti 2006, Altınay 2008, Öktem 2011, Akin 2009). The circle of violence/patriarchy that Esmeray describes includes men who beat their wives, brothers hitting their sisters, mothers hitting their daughters and mothers-in-law vainly celebrating discrimination against their daughters-in-law.

mainly, to deconstruct the hegemonic assumptions routinely replicated, through banal habit, by the majority.¹⁹

In the Turkish context, the case of Esmeray becomes a political act of undermining and resistance, inspiring many people, mostly women – many with whom I met and talked. Contrary to Bülent Esroy,²⁰ another very famous transsexual in Turkey, Esmeray does not reassert the male-centric system; instead, she seeks to subvert the practices of the majority and the attendant mentality. She is causing an upheaval, involving the possibility of resistance to established gender, sexual and ethnic stereotypes.²¹ In contrast with Bülent Esroy's choices, she is not only contesting patriarchal values, gender discrimination, authoritarian ruling and the socio-economic neoliberal agenda; equally strongly, she is subverting the majority's hidden desires and hypocritical stance.

The displacement in space and gender that leads Esmeray to use social poetics to produce a cultural critique leads us to a discussion of social activism and resistance in the urban contest (Low 2003, Soja 2005) and of its engagement with emotions (Winegar 2012, Sitrin 2012a, Kazam 2011, Brown and Pickerill 2009). For her, liminality as a condition of life seems to shape her passage from disempowerment to empowerment only when she decides to engage with emotions and generosity. Thus she overcomes the dilemma between liberal human, gender and individual rights, on the one hand, and social and political rights, on the other. However, it is not by accident that liminal categories need liminal spaces for transgression of their internal dilemmas and ambiguities to take place. Beyoğlu, this ambiguous district of Istanbul with all the love and despise it generates in Esmeray, is becoming the marginal space of a passage from negative personal experiences and disempowerment to activist empowerment and the structuration of a meaningful offer to the majority. Let me explain how this is happening.

Displacements, Liminal Positioning and the Embodied Urban Experience

¹⁹ Looking at her work and discussing it with various Turkish women, I would suggest that this show does not function so much as a 'punch in the stomach' about the unknown and mysterious ways of life of the transsexuals, but more as a minimalist process of undermining the everyday-life routine of people in Turkey; in the family context in the provinces, and in the public space of the big city.

²⁰ Bülent Ersoy was the only one who kept performing after the pogrom started by Özal's neoliberal government, targeting transvestites in Istanbul. Taking the pink female identity (see footnote 25) in 1988, as a personal friend of the Prime Minister she transposed the symbol of neoliberal governance, as a Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman. At the same time, this case proves metonymically the obsession of modern Turkish society for purely homophobic solutions to sexual choices, betraying, however, the general collective repression of homosexual desire (Altınay 2008: 211-213), while ironically making visible those controversial and ambiguous hidden feelings and desires.

²¹ The French *Telerama* places her in the category of Istanbul's insubordinate women (*stambouliotes innsoumises*): www.telerama.fr/critiques/imprimer.php?chemin=http://www.telerama.fr/mondebouge2/9/7/2010.

Esmeray's transposition of her life on stage,²² I reiterate, aims at exposing the hypocrisy of the majority of Turkish society on issues regarding family and state violence towards women, minorities and subaltern people. The whole of her consciousness seems to stem from the moment she was displaced in Istanbul in terms of space, time, gender, language and condition. Her displacement as an internal immigrant from the countryside to the city, specifically to the neighbourhood of Beyoğlu, was determinant in the transformation of negative experiences into positive collective experiences that could be shared with the majority of the people. From 1986 to 2010 Beyoğlu was the place where she lived and worked. At that time this neighbourhood was transformed into a place of protest and resistance against the Kemalist militarist regime marked by a profoundly male-oriented dominance (Kandiyoti 2006, Altınay 2008). It was here that, in late 1990s, her consciousness took form and her feminist action began; it was in this neighbourhood that she trained in street-theatre and stand-up comedy before starting her own theatrical autobiographical performances. However, it was also in the streets of Beyoğlu that she earned her living, first as a sex worker and then by selling mussels. Here, she came face to face with the state's patriarchal ideology and its militaristic, suppressive practices; here, she was repeatedly subjected to police persecution and violent harassment by dominant males.²³ The streets of Beyoğlu became the place *par excellence* for the development of her multiple activist endeavours, while remaining the place where she works and lives precariously and provides her with the experiences that she transforms into emotional and artistic expressions. Operating in the marginal urban district of Beyoğlu and its continuously changing scenery of exclusions, discriminations, but also systematic infringements of standing prohibitions, makes her an individual who does not just 'liv[es] for the moment' (Day, Papataxiarchis and Stewart 1991) but transforms her multiple exclusions, which she conceptualises into positive meanings.

Esmeray begins her performance carrying a basket full of mussels as she crosses the Tarlabasi highway. The highway separates Turkey's poor internal immigrant sub-neighbourhood, inhabited mostly by Kurdish and Roma people, from the contemporary façade of the megacity – the Tünel district of Beyoğlu; that is, the former cosmopolitan district of Western Europeans in the Turkish rum millet (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 2006). This everyday routine of crossing between the ambiguous spaces of lower Tarlabasi and upper Istiklal,²⁴ identifies her as a multifaceted individual, due to her sexual orientation, language, poverty, origin, colour and activism. At first, Esmeray's move to the urban space of Istanbul and her adjustment to precariousness signified her crossing of gender boundaries and the

²² An autobiographical documentary was filmed in Beyoğlu, where I met her for the first time and all the other times that followed. I saw her re-enacting, walking, protesting together with other feminists, selling mussels, but also participating in the pre-election campaign of the feminist party, fighting for office in the 2009 local elections, when another transgendered friend of hers was a candidate.

²³ Under these circumstances she decided to start her legal battle against two police officers, an action that she took mainly for symbolic reasons.

²⁴ Both the Taksim square and the Istiklar Kaddesi street are meeting places for protesters, while artists and activists reside in the streets around them. The crowds crossing Istiklar like a river give one the impression of an endless flow. These features make this place potentially borderline, as shown by my field data and by other relevant research.

feminisation of her gendered experiences. It is in this neighbourhood that one day she decided to come out of the closet and then, in 1999, the year of the big earthquake, to leave the sex business altogether. She gradually acquired a Western expectation of building an individualised subjectivity, obviously feminised; she followed a path that, in Turkey is frequently chosen by people belonging to this transgender category (*path-dependence*). In the context of the modern Turkish society, male to female transsexuals embody feminisation in a context marked by cultural priorities and a bureaucracy that keep the two genders apart²⁵ and favour the male over the female.

‘Since I started wearing a skirt and revealed my identity’, Esmeray stated, ‘my close male friends began to tell me: “Don’t carry that table around, you’re going to get back pain”. Also, my girlfriends’ boyfriends started referring to me as ‘yenge’ [meaning the wife of a relative, an in-law], which used to upset me as I began to understand that this is the problem in our society. Men treat women as if they were incapable of doing things. Unfortunately, some women internalise this belief.’ In her discourse, she prefers to associate the problem of trans-sexuality with the broader discrimination against women in Turkey. As she says in a relevant interview in the Hurriyet Daily News, ‘As a transsexual, walking at night in Beyoğlu, I can be approached by a man and be asked “how much?”, for all transgendered people are whores in the eyes of society. That, however, does not mean that this is exclusively our problem. Unfortunately, men believe that a woman found after midnight in Beyoğlu is lost, a potential whore ... We experience difficulties on different levels, though they are all issues of social gender.’

The feminisation of experience, with all its gender, ethnic and linguistic ambiguity, combines with Esmeray’s successive changes of names from a young age – both she and her twin brother, who died very young, were called Mehmet and, in Kurdish, Mihemet Nuri and Zeki respectively, while her mother would tenderly add the Azeri word *bala* (literally, child). When she started going out with groups of gay friends, one of them told her that she had a strange aura and called her Esmeralda, after the protagonist of a Brazilian soap opera. Some of her friends, though, had trouble pronouncing that name and called her simply Esmeray.²⁶ Recalling her first steps into the female way of being, Esmeray said, ‘the first day I wore a skirt and changed my name to Sigdem ... I called my mother. She never says my name, only Mehmet or Mihemet Nuri, never Esmeray. She just says: “Is that you?” ... Twenty years have passed since I last saw my father. I only wish I could hear my father calling me Mihemet Nuri one more time. That’s how he called me to express his love.’

The displacements experienced by Esmeray in the urban space include successive crossings from everyday life to virtual places and times; the cinema, the theatre, as well as different languages and codes; in other words, places of familiarity, idealisation and overcompensation; that is, places as utopias. Esmeray grew up with movie heroes of the

²⁵ See the distinction between pink and blue civic identity cards.

²⁶ Even if she does not make explicit this association, we cannot avoid to note the resonance with the famous Turkish singer of the 1960s, also called Esmeray, and with her well-known connotation as ‘dark moon’.

1970s. When the woman inside her comes out, she imitates Türkan Şoray's (a female Turkish cinema star) luscious lips, always ready to be kissed, as Esmeray says. However, her one and only true love seems to have been the short, hairy assistant chef with the provincial accent for whom she worked when she first arrived in Istanbul and who reminded her of Kadir Inanir, a movie star from the 1970s.

Esmeray experiences life in Istanbul between cruel everyday reality and home village dreamtime heterotopia. 'Since I cut my ties with my family', she says, 'I have dreamt of my village every night ... the places I used to tread, the soil, the entrance to the village ... the pastures where I used to graze the sheep, the rocks, the little stream ... that smell of multi-coloured flowers – amazing! When I remember that smell, those flowers, I wish to be buried there ... I went to the pasture and came back last night! That's how real that dream was! It was autumn. Everything was yellow, the grass had withered. I walked around the pasture, the empty houses; I heard the sound of running water. Suddenly I woke up! It was just a dream!... For two years I kept dreaming that I was going back to the village as a transvestite. Sometimes they accepted me, sometimes they didn't. When I dared to dress up as a woman they hunted me down. When I decided to come out of the closet, I realised that I could never come back to the village' (From the documentary, *Me and Nuri Bala*).

This in-between positioning feeds her liminality, which matters also in linguistic forms of expression and communication that show her flexibility to change codes, meanings and feelings. Her mother tongue, Kurdish, becomes a refuge. Usually, she sings nostalgically in Kurdish or tells jokes, ironically admitting absolute truths; 'You owe your life to your make-up powder!', she sings in Kurdish.

Esmeray admits that in surviving the street, the feminist discourse reclaiming political correctness is only a utopia. In a scene from her autobiographical documentary, while selling mussels in Beyoğlu she looks at the camera saying, 'What are you looking at, you idiot! Whether you like it or not, we use the language of the street out here. You know, we are trying to create a feminist language, to change the language of patriarchy. But on the street, you can't get hold of yourself. I just called that man an idiot! Because he is an idiot!' Then, she goes on singing in Kurdish about mussels as a metaphor for girls.

Eventually, when all her cruel and ambiguous experiences – such as the repeated rapes – become overwhelming, a river threatening to overflow, she steps on stage and gets it all out, off her chest. She acts, she says, in order to avoid being drowned by these experiences. She draws courage, in this exposure, from the support of the feminist audience and from the familiar environment of the café-theatre in Beyoğlu. Before she reaches the stage she comments, 'Are you sure you want to talk about this?'; 'I am sure. I have kept it in for so long. It's just a play after all, not everyone will know that it was me who lived all this ...'

Beyond Ambiguity and Liminality: When Emotional Heterotopias Encounter Cultural Critique

The foregoing suggests that to a certain extent the move to the theatrical stage is related to the multiple limits that Esmeray has been forced to transgress. Since her childhood, voices in her

body and in her community encouraged her to pursue gender crossing.²⁷ Furthermore, the material, social and symbolic conditions of living under the described extreme precariousness in Beyoğlu led her to construct her subjectivity around the dynamic condition of liminality – she experiences marginalization and minoritization syndromes, very much conceived in spatial, material terms.²⁸

The ability of individuals at the margins of society to transcend limits contingently can lead to utopias that may function, politically, as heterotopias and can be personally embodied in artistic terms as eutopias (from the Greek *ευτοπία*, meaning literally ‘perfect place’).²⁹ Perhaps it is not accidental that Esmeray’s expectation to be transported to another kind of everyday life was fulfilled under conditions of extreme fluidity in 1999, the year of the big earthquake in Istanbul. As I have mentioned, it was at that time that she decided to stop being a ‘sex-worker’ and step into the ephemeral and even more precarious way of earning her living as a street-seller and street artist in Beyoğlu.³⁰

However, her commitment to political activism seems to be generally understood as inherent to her funny temperament and to her devotion to the people around her. The observer quickly realizes the importance of the humour and sarcasm that she employs in her everyday life in order to define the aesthetics of her presence. Expressing her emotions and taking care of others are extremely important for her personal well-being and for the feminist groups to

²⁷ When Esmeray was a child she was associated, in her community, with Avrat Metin, a person from her village who stole clothes from women. The adjective *avrat* denotes a rough, masculine woman. As a child, Esmeray stayed away from boys’ games while feverishly engaging in girly activities. When she found herself in the big city, she associated with groups of homosexuals and was encouraged to express her suppressed feminine side. There, she experienced feminization traumatically; that is, as I mentioned earlier, through repeated rapes.

²⁸ This brings to the fore the classic anthropological concept of *material passage* related to a marginal condition, first expounded by Van Gennep (1909) in his analyses of rites of passage in rituals and myths.

²⁹ Perhaps she experiences utopia in terms of a *eutopia*. My artist friend Dany Stylides helped me to make this association. Eutopia was first conceived by the Renaissance humanist Saint Thomas More, and was further defined in terms of life after the end of the metropolis by the modernist architect Lewis Mumford in his *The Story of Utopias* (1928: 185-187). In my view, in the context of the contemporary megacity and its artistic definition, the concept of eutopia covers well the process of actualisation of the dream of plural non-homogenized subjects. Contrary to utopia, eutopia is achieved in a fragmented, smaller, present-oriented way; it is accompanied by feelings of temporary fulfilment and euphoria, and not exclusively in terms of expectations for the future.

³⁰ Internal immigrants work ephemeral jobs in points of passage, such as passenger docks, bus terminals, open markets and so on. These jobs have increased with the development of tourism, including trading in souvenirs and in local delicacies. Selling mussels in the street is a low-esteem, very low-income job; the sellers are usually young Kurdish boys or men. It was not by accident that Esmeray ended up doing this job. As ideologically like-minded friends hesitated to hire her, she started to sell mussels following the advice of an ordinary woman, her landlady. The latter replied to Esmeray’s objection that that would be a bizarre job for a transsexual woman saying that it was no problem, that Esmeray ‘was strong enough as man and could deal with attacks and harassment.’ Esmeray’s narrative on stage begins with a representation of this key event in her life experience.

which she belongs. She confided, ‘I have carried feminism in me since the day I was born, while I remember myself always trying to make others laugh.’

As Esmeray stressed during our first meeting, the title of her play, *Cadinin Bohçasi*, was not randomly chosen. It means the ‘bundle’, the ‘sack of the old witch’, of the ‘old woman’ who knows everything, the know-it-all, which is the term commonly used in Turkey to describe ironically polymath feminist women; it is the right button, the small clasp (*kopca*), that opens the bundle. Her autobiographical play expands on the irony and the knowledge and power related to women and to feminist activism. However, the metaphor of the old witch derives from the acceptance and transformation of the stereotypes on old women and feminists in the Turkish context. She transposes ‘traditional’ social poetics to a ‘modern’ artistic view. In order to deliver the modern feminist critique on stage, her statements on gender and patriarchy, discriminations against women, the encasements of macho masculinity in the habitual use of violence and aggression towards the weaker family members, and on Turkish society in general go beyond monotonous narrative. Esmeray invests on emotions. She passes from comic humorous and self-sarcastic scenes to deep, sad, traumatic experiences, thus provoking all kinds of feelings, from indignation to rage, from deep sadness to hilarious laughter and laughs of joy. She combines old social poetics of transvestitism and imitation with the modern drama techniques that she learned in another of her ephemeral conditions, while training in street drama. In Bakhtin’s terms, by investing on carnivalesque representations and performances, and by using humour and irony, she manages to stimulate people’s emotions, provoking her audience into self-criticism. As Esmeray and other informants from Amargi told me, when she performed at the University, on several occasions the University Council tried to stop her but, after watching for a while, they changed their minds and remained in the audience.

Esmeray’s being liminal, in a permanent marginal condition, is brought to a head by her everyday engagement with ambiguous feelings and her targeting herself through irony. She constantly deprecates herself for having gained weight, for being naïve about something or for some mistake in doing her hair; as she says, making others laugh is something that she has been doing since she was a child and that gives her immense pleasure. At the same time, she is very controversial about people like herself. For example, while talking in the backstage, she let slip that in a scene of her film she suggests that if they are late for a show ‘they’ (other transsexuals) should be kept outside the theatre as punishment; then, she almost immediately changed her mind, saying that she wished to perform one day ‘just for them’. To make a long story short, she admits that she addresses the majority – who must see themselves in the mirror/stage – with the expectation that increasing their sensitivity will induce them to stop reproducing both the negative, discriminatory stereotypes against women and the circle of violence, discrimination and exclusion against different others.

New Social Movements: Liberal Gender, Human and Social Rights³¹

³¹ On the distinction between human and social rights since the 1990s see Gledhill (2000) and Valentine (2007).

Through her stance in everyday life and on stage, Esmeray speaks directly about her constant precariousness. Her life is a paradigm of a ‘naked life’, in Agamben’s terms (1998); an example, that is, of a person who is minoritized for cultural, racial,³² social, linguistic and sexual reasons. She transforms herself into a critically thinking feminist subject by investing on emotions and artistic creativity. Thus, she communicates her personal traumatic experience and produces cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Clifford 1988), which becomes creative not only for her as an individual and for the category that she represents but also for the majority of the population.³³ As we have seen, her discourse, encapsulating local social poetics in a Westernized genre of art and critique production, is empowered by her penetrating insight and sarcasm vis-à-vis transgendered practices and stereotypes. Through this glocal cultural critique, Esmeray does not merely undermine the dominant hegemonies, questioning outstanding beliefs according to which men are violent and women passive; most significantly, she brings to light the continuum of representational functionality of socially and culturally constructed gender through multi-layered power relations in the family, in the broader society and in the state.

Esmeray’s autobiographical narrative involves experiences of living dangerously through a process at once traditional, capitalist and postmodern; a process marked by an aggressive character that delimits both space and body.³⁴ In turn, this process implies that of intensive precariousness in terms of ‘minorization’,³⁵ which in the shift from modern to post-modern times is produced by dominant political and hegemonic assumptions, as well as by exclusion on the basis of class, ethnicity, language, colour and religion, and is intensified by neoliberal governance. As such governance engenders precariousness across the spectrum of human endeavour, people belonging to the majority increasingly tend to conform to the minority’s state of exception. A key question is what motivates people like Esmeray to turn the traumatic experience of being in a permanent state of minority and precariousness into a positive cultural critique for the majority.

It is commonly held in transvestites’ circles in Turkey that ‘none of us has Esmeray’s strength’ (Akin, 2009). In short, I would put to the reader that Esmeray embodies both Judith

³² See the distinction between white and black Turks. Esmeray is aware of that discrimination too because she has a dark skin.

³³ Esmeray’s perspective belongs to a new, bolder critique, as does the film *Majority* (Çoğunluk 2010), by the up-and-coming Turkish director Seren Yüce. Yüce criticizes society by focusing on the patriarchal bond between father and son, thus staying away from the one-dimensional and stereotypical orientalism that used to focus selectively on the female gender.

³⁴ On primary accumulation, the entrenchment of property and the female body, see Federici (2005).

³⁵ The process of ‘becoming a minority’ is central to almost all my previous research interests (See Tsibiridou 2000, 2007, 2009 and 2011). The contemporary tendency in political anthropology (Mukherjee 2011) and social theory to distinguish between glocal neoliberal governance by the élites and the experience of precariousness of subordinate people beg for a re-examination of the concepts of ‘minority’ and ‘liminality’. In this context the current concept of ‘precariousness’ needs to be problematized in order to address its multiple meanings either in the theoretical framework provided by the anthropological concept of ‘liminality’ (see, Spyridakis 2014) and/or in that provided by the concept of political and legal ‘minority’ (Tsibiridou 2013b).

Batler's theoretical position on gender performativity and the precarious life of people living in-between and experiencing multiple exceptions and exclusions (Batler 1990, 2004). Esmeray becomes a paradigm when, while asking for subjectivity, she invests in her otherness, thus encouraging the necessary motivation and inspiration to engage in activism for human, gender and social rights. I feel, however, that there is more to this. The 'Esmeray paradigm' appears to be opening new ways for us to understand the will to engage in urban protest through an investment in emotions pertinent to local trans-individual sociality, care and generosity. Esmeray's experiences as an individual originating from a subaltern group and as the target of multiple submissions, exceptions and exclusions do not prioritize only issues of visibility and recognition for LGBD people; her priorities as a feminist lead her to be useful to other transgender people – women and homosexuals – who experience patriarchal, family and militarist state violence and discrimination. Her life becomes a powerful lens through which we can understand not only the modalities of dispersed power (Abu-Lughod 1990), but also the alternative engagement in social activism through emotions, as exemplified by the new social movements in Latin America over the last twenty years (Gledhill 2000, Sitrin 2012b, Brown and Pickerill 2009). In both cases, the circumstances of precariousness, accelerated through neoliberal governance, matter equally. A similar case is given by new uprisings in Mediterranean urban settings, where alongside equality and freedom people ask for 'dignity', defined glocally through emotional aspects (Tsibiridou and Bartsidis 2014 forthcoming).

Beyond the dilemma between liberal and social rights (Gledhill 2000) and individual and collective rights, Esmeray promotes generosity and love, inspiring both her audiences and her companions (*arkadaslar*) to transgress the old taboo of modernity, which excluded emotions from political engagement and social movements.³⁶ I experienced this the very first time I met her in the Amargi feminist bookshop; significantly, a feeling since confirmed by feedback from people inspired by her love and generosity for others.

Esmeray has now stopped crossing daily from one world to the other, from the lower side of Tarlabasi all the way up to Beyoğlu and Taksim square. She lives on a Marmara island because she needs quiet and silence when writing her columns for the leftist newspaper *Taraf*. She continues to travel and perform, but now has more time for herself and is admittedly looking younger and more beautiful than ever. Recently, we watched her documentary on a day she stayed in, as she often does, knitting something for the son of an old schoolmate of hers, saying to the camera, 'Perhaps there isn't a better education in respecting difference than to have in your life a transeküel "aunt"'.

Three years later, in May 2013, other transsexuals were notably present next to religious and secular people protesting in the Gezi park. Such proximity in a public space was something that, apart from the women's platform of 2008, had never been thought of before.

³⁶ This brings out a key deficiency in the literature, as morality was excluded from the analysis of politics. Addressing such a deficiency helps to question the legitimacy of governance and of its relationship with citizenship. For further discussion on this issue, see the contributions to *Anthropology in the City*, edited by Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato (2011).

Moreover, sharing *iftar* (the dinner of love during the Remazan) as they did, justifies, in my view, Esmeray's prophetic activism and her investment in generosity and in the politics of love. I have the strong feeling that all this was 'only the beginning of a beautiful friendship'. In other words, a new trope to motivate people against authoritarian ruling and a will to reframe the 'political' through the new social movements by engaging with emotions of love and care.

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