

Strolling Through Istanbul's Beyoğlu: In-Between Difference and Containment

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Abstract

In this essay, I evaluate Istanbul's Beyoğlu as a hybrid and negotiated space and investigate how the imaginary and lived experiences of space enable as well as constrain transgressive everyday practices and identity politics. Through analyzing memories, imaginations, and experiences of Beyoğlu, in particular its drag/transsexual subculture, I explore the ways in which the past and present interact under the dynamic of globalization and (re)produce Beyoğlu as a space of difference and containment. Beyond the intricacies of Istanbul's sex trade, night life, and queer subculture, I propose that the singular district of Beyoğlu, given its geographical, historical, and social location, operates as a microcosm of the tensions and negotiations between East and West, local and global, past and present.

Keywords

hybridity, memory, difference, transvestites, Pera, Istanbul

The spirit of Istanbul is hidden in Beyoğlu.

—Beyoglu.net (n.d.)

Turkey is said to have more transvestites per capita than any other country in the world except Brazil (Economist, 2008). Many of them live in Istanbul, often subject to harassment and beating, and are driven into prostitution (Amnesty International, 2011). In contemporary Istanbul, there are official (licensed and rigidly controlled brothels and clubs) and unofficial (private rendezvous houses, bars, backstreets, and deserted parks) centers of sex traffic. Among several prostitution zones of the city, Beyoğlu, the historical district on the northern side of the Golden Horn, holds a preeminent position. The first legal brothels of the Ottoman Empire opened in this area in the 1870s (Özbek, 2010). Since then, Beyoğlu has been one of the most popular red-light districts in Istanbul (Bartu, 1999). Today, with its numerous nightclubs and bars catering to heterosexuals and gays, as well as sex shops, massage parlors, and prostitutes of all sorts, Beyoğlu lives true to its notoriety as “the capital of the illicit world” (Selek, 2001, p. 91).

The area, which was called Pera prior to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, had long been the cosmopolitan hub of the Ottoman capital. Pera was established in the 13th century as a Genoese trading colony, fully autonomous from the Byzantine Empire. When Fatih

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Mehmet (the Conqueror) captured the city in the 15th century, the colony formed an alliance with the Ottoman Empire but maintained its independence. For about 300 years, Pera remained non-descript. In the 18th century, increasing trade between the European states and the Ottoman Empire, accompanied with a will to modernize Istanbul, triggered a major socioeconomic transformation of the area. By the end of the 19th century, Pera, with its Levantine architecture, European-style shopping and entertainment venues, and mostly non-Muslim population, had turned into Istanbul's "Frankish town" (Yumul, 2009, p. 58). Located at the heart of the capital of the Muslim world, Pera came to stand for "a place of marginality, of 'otherness,' and 'foreignness'" (Yumul, 2009, p. 63). Today, the empire and its eclectic subjects long gone, Beyoğlu continues to exist as a border space, a microcosm of the tensions and negotiations between past and present, East and West:

The hundreds of secondary veins connected to this main artery host a bohemian, cosmopolitan, emancipated, and controversial atmosphere with hundreds of café-bars, restaurants, theaters, cinemas, drinking shops, patisseries, bars, hotels, art galleries, and shops as well as the culture centers and schools of different countries, a variety of religious temples, and consulates of many countries. . . . There is nothing new about this for Pera has for centuries served as a cultural and intracultural centre, bringing and refining new impulses to the Ottoman Empire, neighboring countries, and the Turkish Republic. With its commerce, life-styles, building and entertainment Beyoğlu constitutes an open air museum of Turkish "westernization"—a term invented in Turkish to signify modernization under western influence. Nobody can make a comprising approach to the cultural problematic between the west and the east which has been on stage for over three centuries, without understanding Beyoğlu's synthesis. (Beyogluweb.com, n.d.¹)

In this essay, I evaluate Istanbul's Beyoğlu as a hybrid and negotiated space and investigate how imaginary and lived experiences of space enable as well as constrain transgressive everyday practices and identity politics. Through analyzing memories, imaginations, and experiences of Beyoğlu, in particular its drag/transsexual subculture, I explore the ways in which the past and present interact under the dynamic of globalization and (re)produce Beyoğlu as a space of difference and containment. In discussing Beyoğlu's hybridity, I loosely follow Lefebvre's (1974/1991) framework. Lefebvre theorizes production of space as consisting of three interrelated moments: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. Spatial practices are associated with capitalist production and result in particular configurations of physical space. Representations of space are conceived spaces as expressed in maps, images, and models. Representational spaces are the spaces of inhabitants and users, and entail real and symbolic experiences that overlay physical space.

In my analyses, I stroll through time and space to unpack and problematize moments of (re) production of Beyoğlu as an in-between space. In connection with Lefebvre's concept of representations of space, I look at historical and contemporary representations of Beyoğlu as they appear in travel narratives, literary texts, media, and official discourses, and reveal the district's multiple and conflicting imaginations. I also discuss various spatial practices (such as looting houses, shops, and churches of non-Muslim residents, demolishing historical buildings and constructing a boulevard, and forcing transgendered people from the area) to trace the role of ideology and capital in shaping Beyoğlu's physical landscape. I use Lefebvre's representational spaces to explore how lived experiences, as exemplified in the performances of drag queens or protests against a proposed ban on drinking outdoors, shape and are shaped by sociospatial dynamics and contribute to Beyoğlu's hybridity.

However, there is an enigmatic aspect to this hybridity. As much as Beyoğlu asks us to recognize the complex interrelations between East and West, it does not easily lend itself to a bifurcated analysis. Unlike Edward Said's pessimistic dichotomy where West never really meets East and the discursive power of the West over the Orient operates only in a hegemonic fashion, the

hybridized spaces of Beyoğlu facilitate transgression and possibility. Yet Beyoğlu is also a place of contained difference, where transgression is possible but not necessarily emancipatory. As typified in the experiences of the quarter's transvestites, hybrid spaces, too, need their others, as boundary markers. It is such construction of hybrid spaces and their others across the centuries and through the forces of nationalism, religion, and globalization that I now examine.

Reading the Present Through the Past

In her letter of February 1718, the English travel writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu describes the unusual residents of Pera in the following, compellingly offensive way:

Pera [is a collection] of strangers from all countries of the universe. They have often intermarried, [forming] several races of people the oddest imaginable. There is not one single family of natives that can value itself as unmixed. You frequently see a person whose father was born a Grecian, the mother an Italian, the grandfather a Frenchman, the grandmother an Armenian and their ancestors English, Muscovites, Asiatics, etc. . . . This mixture [produces] creatures more extraordinary than you can imagine. Nor could I doubt that there were several different species of men, since the whites, the woolly and the long-haired blacks, the small-eyed Tatars and Chinese, the beardless Brazilians, and, to name no more, the oily-skinned yellow Nova-Zemblers have as specific differences under the same general kind as greyhounds, mastiffs, spaniels, bulldogs or the race of tiny little Diana, if nobody is offended at the comparison. (Montagu, 1994, p. 111)

The "odd residents," not the topography of the district, captivate Lady Montagu; she implies that the district encapsulates the cultural and ethnic diversity of Europe and Asia, from the British Isles to the Caucasus Mountains. While her use of ethnic clichés and racist jargon binds her to the ethos of her age and aristocratic position, she clearly admires her exciting new neighbors, privileging them as antidotes to her own confessed Anglo-Saxon "stupidity." In another letter of 1718, Lady Montagu notes that the languages spoken in the district comprise a "Tower of Babel . . . Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Slavonian, Walachian [sic], German, Dutch, French, Italian, Hungarian . . . ten [of which are spoken] in my own family" (Montagu, 1994, p. 122). Ottoman Turks remain curiously absent in her description. Indeed, they are perhaps the only ethnic group between the English Channel and the Caucasus that is not present. Through this overdetermined absence (the lack of Ottomans at the political and cultural center of the Ottoman Empire), Lady Montagu underscores Beyoğlu's singularity. Only in this district, according to her, will one "see the fantastical conjunction of a Dutch man with a Greek female . . . natures opposite in extremes . . . [with their] differing atoms . . . perpetually jarring together in [their] children" (Montagu, 1994, p. 112). Reading Lady Montagu's letters, we would believe that Beyoğlu is indeed a place of difference and possibility.

In the almost 300 years since Lady Montagu's letter, has "her" singular district changed? Is the ethnic composition of contemporary Beyoğlu the same as that of imperial Pera? In their historical walking guide to the city, titled *Strolling through Istanbul*, Hilary Sumner-Boyd and John Freely (1972) comment extensively on the district's past, especially the European communities that surrounded each embassy compound. According to the authors, the Ottoman sultans gave land to various states from the 16th to the 19th centuries, authorizing the presence of autonomous communities adjacent to the imperial capital. Among other "Nations," the Venetians, Swedes, French, and Russians built lavish embassies in vernacular European styles, pursued their trades, worshipped in their own churches, and were largely subject to their sovereign laws within their Pera enclaves (Sumner-Boyd & Freely, 1972, pp. 432-433). Much of this population was concentrated along the main artery, named (in French) the Grande Rue de Pera.



Figure 1. The Grand Rue de Pera during 19th century, postcard.

The enclave's physical structure began to change in the mid-19th century. Newly emerging ideas about a modern urban order in Europe proved appealing to the Ottoman Empire's reformist elite who were interested in creating an image of Istanbul as a Western city (Çelik, 1986). Pera, a microcosm of the ethnic, religious, and cultural heterogeneity of the empire, was set as a model. A municipality charged with the task of creating a European bourgeois landscape was established. The municipality's activities included regularizing the street network, collecting garbage, and regulating commercial enterprises. By the end of the 19th century, along the two sides of the Grande Rue de Pera (Figure 1) one could observe many shops, including the city's first department stores, cafes, night clubs, and restaurants that catered to foreign inhabitants and minorities as well as the Ottoman upper classes. The district's embourgeoisement included lavish European-style hotels, modern multistory apartment buildings, and even a subway system. With the changing physical landscape, new forms of urban sociability—walking in the Grand Rue de Pera, sitting at cafes, shopping at *bon marchés* or just window shopping—flourished (Yumul, 2009).

Resulting was a sense of "Europeanness," and various social groups and classes interpreted this differently. For the Young Ottomans critical of reforms, these developments were indicative of European domination. There was also resentment among conservative Muslims who regarded Pera as a space of immorality. Yet for reformist Turks, Pera represented an escape into a freer and tolerant way of life. The accounts of European travelers reflected a similar ambivalence. According to a 19th-century British traveler, "the city which was once Byzantium is now neither Europe nor Asia, but a combination of the worst elements of each" (Elliot, 1893, p. 15). But for another traveler, it was the ambiguity that made Pera appealing: "Bewildering, enchanting, repelling are the streets of Pera. . . . One experiences a dozen of sensations or more in the flash of an eye-glance. . . . Attraction and repulsion succeed each other, as wave follows wave" (Dodd, 1903, p. 379).

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, ambivalence gradually turned into distaste and hostility. When the Turkish Republic was established, Istanbul lost its capital status to Ankara, and all the embassies moved to the new capital. Along with its status, Istanbul's symbolism changed. As the new nation state put Turkishness at the core of its collective identity, Istanbul

was cast off as the symbol of the colonial, decadent, and multiethnic Ottoman past (Keyder, 1987). Pera, the epitome of cosmopolitanism, emblemized the threat to imagined nationalistic purity (Yumul, 2009). In 1925, 2 years after the establishment of the Republic, the name of the district changed from the Greek Pera to the Turkish Beyoğlu, and the Grande Rue de Pera became *Istiklal Caddesi* (Street of Independence; Kaptan, 1989). The language campaigns of the 1930s demanding citizens to speak Turkish, the Wealth Levy of 1942 imposed on non-Muslim residents, and the September 6 and 7 incidents of 1955 resulting in looting and damaging to shops, houses, churches, and cemeteries around *Istiklal Street*,² completed the Turkification of the area (Kuyucu, 2005). The result was a substantial decrease in the non-Muslim population and the disappearance of Pera's multicultural structure. In a broader historical context, the transition from Pera to Beyoğlu marked the transition from a multiethnic empire to a Turkish nation state.

With the rapid industrialization of the 1960s, Istanbul experienced an influx of migrant groups from eastern parts of the country. Beyoğlu became an attractive area for immigrants, who rented or illegally occupied the buildings abandoned by non-Muslim residents (Dinçer & Enlil, 2002). The cheap building stock attracted other ethnically and sexually marginalized groups. Transvestites and transsexuals as well as Roma people started to concentrate in the area. In the early 1970s, brothels for transgendered prostitutes were added to Beyoğlu's already prolific sex industry (Altınay, 2008). Changes in Istanbul's commercial morphology further affected the population structure. As the city's business center shifted, more-affluent residents moved to newer and trendier neighborhoods. In the late 1970s, Beyoğlu, with its seedy nightlife and association with drugs, petty crime, and marginal lifestyles, had become a tenderloin district. Its days as "a mark of civilization" (Scognamillo, 1990, p. 35) were remembered only by a few.

The structural transformations of the Turkish economy in the 1980s had a significant impact on the fate of Beyoğlu. The center-right government of Turgut Özal, an avid follower of neoliberalism, undertook the challenge of making Istanbul a "global" city. As part of this transformation, Beyoğlu became subject to a massive urban renewal project, which aimed to turn *Istiklal Street* into a pedestrian tourist zone and construct a parallel boulevard (Figure 2). Creating the boulevard (*Tarlabası Bulvarı*) required demolishing a large number of 19th-century buildings. According to the mayor, the demolition was necessary not only to ease traffic but to cleanse the area of prostitutes and drug dealers: "Areas that we demolish today are the center of sex trade. It has become dangerous to walk in these areas even during the day" (Hatipoğlu, 1986, p. 23). The official view of Beyoğlu as a place to be cleaned up, rehabilitated and, in parts, demolished provoked mixed reactions. For some, the buildings reflected a unique architectural heritage, a synthesis of European modernity and Ottoman traditionalism. For others, they symbolized the hegemony of 19th-century European capitalism and were reminders of a non-Turkish past. In the end, 368 buildings were knocked down and the new boulevard opened (Akbulut, 1993). The demolition brought some relief to traffic congestion but did little to lessen Beyoğlu's allure as a center of illicit pleasures.

Vidler (1994), in his discussion of the "architectural uncanny," argues that certain buildings or city areas can be the ghostly remains of "unwanted" memories. Their demolition might appear as a liberating act but often brings up the past that the act of demolition sought to erase. Following Vidler, I argue that such "unwanted remains" continue to condition and shape Beyoğlu. From the nostalgia of elderly *habitués* for the "European sophistication" of the past to the multifaceted revelry of the district's night scene, Beyoğlu still embodies difference. It is in the hybrid spaces of Beyoğlu that ethnic, sexual, and religious differences survive, struggle, and claim legitimacy. The performances of the garish drag queens of Aladdin's Lamp,³ a nightclub situated in a 19th-century building within walking distance of the former embassies and autonomous ethnic enclaves that occupy Sumner-Boyd and Freely's narrative, expose some of Beyoğlu's borderline identities.

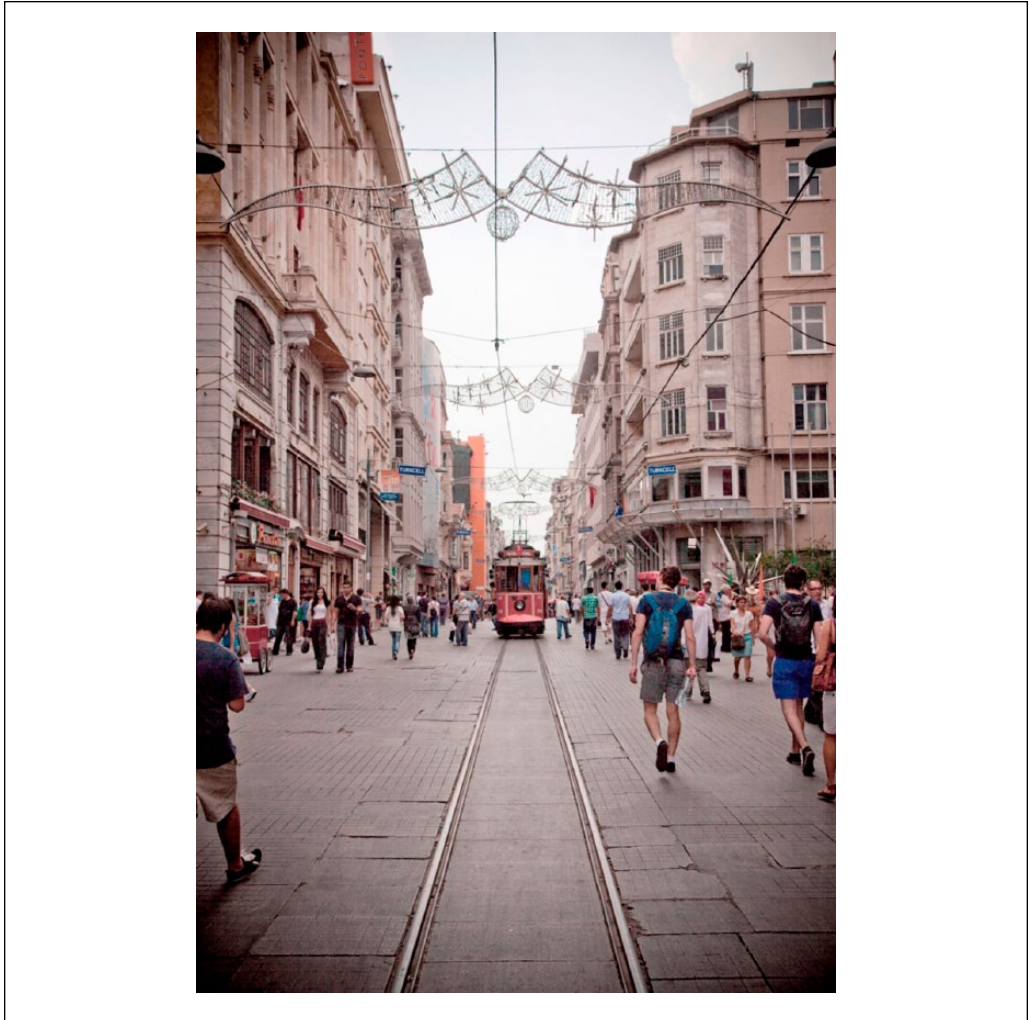


Figure 2. *Istiklal Street as a pedestrian zone, 2012, photo.*

Source. Author.

Aladdin's Lamp: Stylizations of Difference

Aladdin's Lamp commands an eminently ambiguous position in Beyoğlu: While the entrance to the nightclub faces a central artery, the club itself is concealed, hidden behind a long internal corridor. To enter Aladdin's Lamp, you need to traverse this bleak passage, offering yourself to the scrutiny of the bouncers, washroom attendant, and heavy-handed waiters who immediately assign you to a table. The structure of the club—its foreboding architecture and rehearsed staff—ensure that no unwanted visitor enters its enclave; one cannot stumble through the door for a quick cocktail. Everyone who comes to Aladdin's Lamp, or rather, everyone who is allowed to enter, has an investment in the club's meaning.⁴

With the exception of a spinning glass ball hanging from the ceiling, the club looks like a tattered rendition of a 1950s New York cocktail lounge. Upholstered booths and low tables surround the central dance floor-cum-stage and a long bar with stools faces the back wall. Everything in Aladdin's Lamp is dark: The lights are set very low and the carpet and fabrics are dreary.

Against this démodé and dingy backdrop, the drag queens take on added color and allure. The club is their stage; under the spinning ball they dance and prance, exhibiting their gaudy outfits, shapely bodies, and parodied routines. Despite the obvious staging, there are no drag shows. None of the queens sing, lip-sync, or occupy the floor exclusively. These ad hoc performers work the club collectively, seductively moving between patrons. In this movement, certain controlling waiters play pivotal roles as intermediaries between the performers and their audience. Even to the uninitiated, it is clear that they pimp the queens to interested buyers. At Aladdin's Lamp the Beyoğlu tradition of prostitution continues, but with an important twist: These drag queens are not officially registered brothel workers, but rather, homosexual entrepreneurs.

It appears that each of these entrepreneurs relies on stereotypes of contemporary femininity, from a severe character reminiscent of Sacher-Masoch's fetishized Wanda (the unattainable object of desire in the novel *Venus in Furs*) to a sexy *chanteuse* who seems to emanate directly from MTV (or its Turkish equivalent, *Kral TV*). Between Wanda and the *chanteuse*, other clichés busily market themselves, including career girls in sensible shoes, whores, and supermodels. Two individuals emerge from this mass of formulaic feminine characters: the Superstar because of her Turkish specificity, and Nuray, because of her drab appearance compared to the others.⁵

To understand the Superstar, one needs to be acquainted with contemporary Turkish popular culture. The drag queen clearly parodies Ajda Pekkan, the namesake Süperstar, a 60-plus-year-old heterosexual singer who has retained a youthful appearance through plastic surgery and hormones, accessible because of her wealth and privileged social status. With her short, spiky blond hair, svelte frame, thick pancake makeup, and short sequined dress, the drag Superstar seems to have walked out of Pekkan's latest music video. The real Ajda is indeed the stuff of tabloid magazines; her artistic performance and remanufactured body are constantly evaluated, praised, and ridiculed. But Ajda Pekkan's fame transcends the realm of Turkish pop music; although heterosexual, she has been a top icon of gays in Turkey for decades (Görkemli, 2011). She is perceived as having "a real gayness," "a body type that homosexuals would like if they were a woman" (Hocaoğlu, 2002, p. 230). Inspired by the attraction of gays to Ajda Pekkan, the drag Superstar at Aladdin's Lamp markets herself with a steadfastness unmatched by the other entrepreneurs. She displays her body aggressively in front of the men, refusing to relinquish her position until she captures their attention. In its commercial frame, the Superstar's insistence—her aggressive presence in front of potential customers—resonates with Pekkan's media savvy; both use the gaze of others to their own professional ends. On the stage of Aladdin's Lamp, the Superstar appropriates the drama that Ajda Pekkan enacts before the Turkish public.

Unlike the Superstar, Nuray's referent remains unclear. She neither enacts feminine clichés nor parodies images of popular culture. Against the glamorous backdrop of the Superstar, Wanda, and the *chanteuse*, Nuray looks humdrum in her unflattering simple skirt, blunt hairdo, and unmade face. Unlike the others, Nuray does not exhibit herself lewdly; rather, she dances by herself. On one occasion, perhaps because of the novelty of encountering a real woman at the club, Nuray spoke to me. She asked what I thought of her, specifically about her feminine authenticity, or to paraphrase her, whether she looked real. Nuray said that, unlike the drag queens at Aladdin's Lamp, she's a transsexual (later this story was carefully amended to become "getting ready for transsexual surgery"). Why then was she in the company of drag queen prostitutes? On the night following our conversation, I again saw Nuray, only now she appeared more aggressive, fixedly making eye contact with interested men in the booths. Her friendliness had appeared to evaporate, lost perhaps to economic necessity. Apparently, she participates in the sex traffic at Aladdin's Lamp, perhaps hoping to finance her surgery.

How should we read the drag queens at Aladdin's Lamp? Specifically, in what ways do the Superstar and Nuray add a dimension to Lady Montagu's 18th-century Beyoğlu of "mixed creatures more extraordinary than one can imagine"? While the Superstar, through the coding of her appearance and her assertiveness, seems to epitomize "the repeated stylization of the body [and]

repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame” that Judith Butler (1990, p. 33) locates at the heart of gender, she goes beyond simply reproducing Ajda Pekkan. The Superstar incarnates Butler’s ideas of imitation and contingency. Her svelte frame, coiffure, and pushiness—precisely those aspects of her serious drag performance that most resemble Ajda Pekkan—reveal the distance between sex and gender. Through her refined repertoire, this doyenne of Aladdin’s Lamp highlights multiple modes of artificiality, from the superimposition of gendered clichés onto sexed bodies to the carnivalesque proportions of invested gender identity.

If the Superstar underscores the constructed aspects of gender, especially clichéd femininity, then what possibly could the drab, “trans-fantasizing” Nuray reveal? In his book *Transvestites*, Magnus Hirschfeld (1991) writes,

No matter how much transvestite men feel like women when dressed in women’s clothing and women feel like men when dressed in men’s clothing, they still remain aware that in reality that is not so. . . . they know full well, and often are depressed by the fact that they do not physically belong to the desired sex they love. (p. 182)

At first blush, Nuray’s homespun simplicity, her everyday appearance in the midst of fantastic, feminized excess, seems to embody Hirschfeld’s notion of depression; Nuray knows that she *is not* what the other entrepreneurs ostensibly represent. Her appearance corporeally captures the fact that her desire is indeed different from drag queens. Rather than casting light on the artificiality of gender, Nuray struggles to convey her vision of authenticity, and assumed ontological state of *womanness* free from stylization.

Aladdin’s Lamp operates as a stage where the boundaries between authenticity and artificiality become blurred and queer bodies are displayed. Display stimulates desire; desire invites commodified pleasure. At closing time, the drag queens and patrons become part of a ritualized scramble. The lucky ones leave *à deux*, to consummate their “deals.” The unfortunates forlornly move to the restrooms, change out of their gaudy outfits, and remove their thick makeup. They have little time to prepare themselves for the streets beyond the safe enclave of the club. Police and thugs present very real threats on the street; verbal and physical harassment and abuse are common. The drag queens manage to survive in the tense borderline space of Beyoğlu, between tolerance and vilification, fetish object and freak, continuously negotiating the stringent norms of “masculinity” and “femininity” ingrained in Turkish society. But how has their stage, Aladdin’s Lamp, survived in a city governed by Islamist mayors since 1994?

Navigating Through Desire and Disgust

The results of the 1994 municipal elections, in which the Islamist *Refah Partisi* (RP, Welfare Party) gained control of governing Istanbul and many of its districts including Beyoğlu, sent shock waves through the secular population. After the election, a heated debate on Beyoğlu’s future began. For many secularists, the RP’s victory was the end of the Beyoğlu they had known, historically and culturally Istanbul’s door to the West. It horrifyingly foreshadowed the transformation of Istanbul into an Islamic city. Initially, these impassioned reactions turned out to be well founded. Istanbul’s new mayor, while still celebrating his victory, boldly stated that he would shut down the district’s brothels. He also ordered restaurant owners to remove tables set out on the sidewalks and decreed that curtains be put on restaurant windows to conceal heavy drinking. Secularists responded immediately. The following evening, they organized a restaurant sit-in; participants moved tables outdoors; drank beer, *rakı* (the favorite Turkish national drink), and wine; and demanded their right to socialize in public.

What appears, at first, as a debate over the extent and composition of nightlife, embodied in the discourse of the Islamists on one side and the secularists on the other side, can be read at a

deeper level as a reflection of the complex and ongoing struggle over the meaning of Beyoğlu, and in extension, Turkish identity. Turkey, for many Westerners and Turks alike, is perceived as an intermediary place, standing—geographically, socially, and culturally—at the intersection of West and East. Beyoğlu, with its multiple and opposing images and memories, epitomizes this peculiar hybridity. Next to a reading of Beyoğlu as a space of pluralism and European sensibility, there exists an image of *gavur* (infidel) Beyoğlu, awaiting religious and ideological conquest. For example, Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, an influential pro-Muslim agitator from the 1940s to the 1970s, describes Beyoğlu as a “den of disease” and claims that

Istanbul has been in the hands of the Turks since 1453 . . . [but] there is an exception to this: Beyoğlu . . . Beyoğlu has remained a tumor in the Empire’s brain, a syphilitic presence . . . Beyoğlu is the entryway of western imperialism. . . . It is a dagger on its side that sucks the blood, the labor, the essence of the Turkish nation, of all eastern nations. (Serdengeçti, 1949/1992, pp. 112-113)

Another Islamist writer regards the Westernized quarters of the city as “contaminated” and claims that “Pera, which is marketed as the symbol of Istanbul’s civilization and elegance with words like ‘culture,’ ‘civilizational heritage,’ and ‘nostalgia,’ is actually the place where our contemporary urban problems emerged” (Müftüoğlu, 1995, p. 9). Hence, when read from the conservative perspective, the RP’s taking of Beyoğlu’s governance represented not just an electoral success but a symbolic victory, an important step toward reclaiming Istanbul as “the last and only capital of the Islamic world” (Gür, 2002, p. 240). As noted by Bora (1999), “the goal to become an ‘Islamic superpower’ [has] always occupied a prominent place in Turkish Islamic thought” (p. 56) and Istanbul has played a key role in this narrative. However, to fulfill its goal, Istanbul first needed to become “secure, clean, and livable” (Kutlu, 1995, p. 29).

Beyoğlu’s transgendered community was among the first targets of a new wave of spatial reordering. In 1996, Istanbul hosted the United Nations Human Settlements Program (HABITAT) summit. Months before the meeting, a “cleansing” operation took place. A highly controversial part of the operation was the forced dislocation of transsexuals and transvestites from Beyoğlu. The police raided houses on *Ülker* Street, where many transgendered women lived. The attacks, which lasted over a month, resulted in breaking up the transgendered community; many were beaten up, some arrested, and others forced to leave their homes (Selek, 2001). Those critical of the operations believed that the key motivation behind the forced removal was “to make transgendered people’s lives, which had become visible and accepted in the neighborhood, invisible and non-existent for the HABITAT summit, an international gathering which would bring Istanbul into the spotlight” (Kaos GL, 2005, p. 11).

Yet, 15 years after the *Ülker* Street incident, transvestites and drag queens frequently appear in Istanbul travel guides, featured as colorful elements of Istanbul’s thriving gay subculture. For example, *gaytravel.com*, a virtual gay travel magazine, notes that “the gay scene in Istanbul is extensive and deserves several nights of focused effort to make sure you see the wide array of venues and clientele” (*gaytravel*, n.d.). *Time Out Istanbul* provides a two-page rundown of Istanbul’s gay scene, listing popular bars, clubs, and *hammams*, many of which are located in or near Beyoğlu. Indeed, gay activities have become more visible in Istanbul in the past 10 years and Beyoğlu has emerged as an unofficially designated zone of Western-style gay culture (Bereket & Adam, 2006; Özbay, 2010). Emblematic of this development is Gay Pride Istanbul, which annually takes place on *Istiklal* Street. It is the only parade of its kind in a Muslim-majority country, and it attracts an increasing number of participants each year. About 30 people attended the first parade, which took place in 2003; that number has grown to about 10,000 people as of 2011 (NTVMSNBC, 2011). Every June, thousands of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered (LGBT) people and their supporters walk the street wrapped in rainbow flags and carrying signs calling for increased rights for and condemning violence against the LGBT community.

How do Aladdin's Lamp, *Ülker* Street, and the gay pride parade exist in the different temporalities of Beyoğlu? Since the 1980s, Istanbul has been experiencing the effects of transnational flows of capital, goods, people, and ideas (Öncü & Weyland, 1997). However, the goal of making Istanbul a global city gained momentum under the Islamic *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party) government. The AKP, a successor of the RP, came into power in 2002 and, since then, has been in control of the national assembly and the majority of municipalities across the country. The RP regarded globalization as a force threatening the moral-spiritual composition of the country and aimed to construct a "just order" based on Islamic principles. To this end, it called for a "step back from neoliberalism and a return to a more statist-developmental agenda" (Patton, 2009, p. 442). While this goal appealed to poorer religious segments of the population, it alienated the upwardly mobile, religiously conservative middle class who wanted to benefit from globalization. Envisioning that neoliberal and religious values could productively inform each other, the AKP avidly pursued a conservative neoliberal agenda, adopting a promarket and proglobalization stance and gained significant electoral support.

The AKP viewed urban regeneration as a means of cultural transformation. As Aksoy (2008) observes, the globalization of the 1980s and 1990s was mostly a real-estate-driven project and did not "penetrate the life-world of the citizens" (p. 75). The new round of globalization, however, is more a cultural project, with the aim of transforming public life. The AKP government clearly declared that "marketing Istanbul" is their priority (Kayaalp, 2008) and set to change Istanbul's image from an oriental to a global city, bringing together Eastern and Western cultures, civilizations, and people. Significant amounts of funds were channeled to finance urban renewal projects and organize internationally acclaimed artistic and cultural events. In August 2005, the front cover of *Newsweek* magazine ran the headline "Cool Istanbul," declaring it "Europe's hippest city" (Foroohar & Matthews, 2005, p. 32). About a year later, *The Observer* joined *Newsweek* to celebrate "Istanbul the cool" and promoted the city as an "escape" destination for "hip weekends" (Able, 2006). These and other reports painted a picture of Istanbul as a multicultural city vibrating with arts, culture, and "cool" lifestyles, emphasizing its booming creative industries, lively entertainment and nightlife, and lush shopping opportunities. Beyoğlu is cited as among the most fashionable and hippest areas of the city, offering a rich-palette of art, entertainment, and consumption possibilities (Figures 3 and 4).

In the positioning of Istanbul as a global city, "cosmopolitan Beyoğlu" operates as an invaluable strategic asset. The sense of a cosmopolitan experience is in part evoked by its Levantine architecture, world-cuisine restaurants, and stores of global brands. However, it also derives from Beyoğlu's real and imagined potential for difference and transgression. As Rushbrook (2002) notes, one tool that cities use in their claim to be global is "their stock of 'ethnic spaces' . . . neighborhoods that present an 'authentic' other or others in consumable, commodified forms" (p. 188). In many places, queer space performs a similar function, "serving as a marker of cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and diversity for the urban tourist" (Rushbrook, 2002, p. 188). The queer space of Beyoğlu exists in a rather difficult balance, negotiating neoliberal and conservative imaginations of Istanbul. Queer identities become visible temporarily in Beyoğlu, but disappear elsewhere in the city. Similar to the stage of Aladdin's Lamp, Beyoğlu operates as a stage where strictly controlled and managed queerness can be performed, displayed, and consumed.

Conclusion

As Lefebvre (1974/1991) observes, space is not "a scientific object removed from ideology or politics" but a "political and strategic" category (p. 341). As such, space, constituted at the intersection of political, economic, social, cultural, and historical power relations, is implicated in the creation, negotiation, and performance of identities. Certain places—nightclubs, bars, or

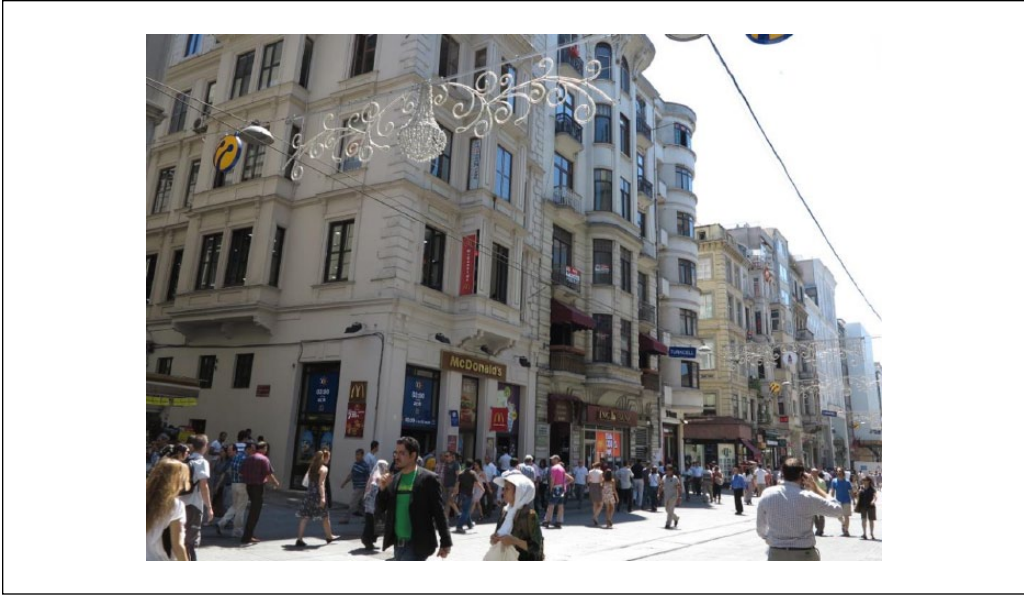


Figure 3. Shopping on the *Istiklal Street*, 2012, photo.
Source. Author.

streets—can be appropriated by certain social groups and become associated with particular lifestyles. In a similar way, memories, imaginations, and readings of places become the basis from which particular identities can emerge. Yet history is neither single nor fixed; it is always partial and manipulated, as consecutive generations change, destroy, and rebuild the past through the politics of the present. Alternative narratives of the past generated by different social groups create, reinforce, and seek to legitimize particular forms of memory, which become embodied in various spatial practices.

Throughout its history, Beyoğlu has been an in-between place, an enclave of difference and otherness. Yet it has also been a place of containment and repression. Strolling in Beyoğlu through time and space, we have been able to trace power relations and negotiations, and catch a glimpse of how boundaries and otherness are constructed, experienced, and contested. We have seen the rise of nationalism in the mid-20th century and the resulting Turkification of Pera and disappearance of its ethnic populations into memories. We have also seen that, since the 1990s, Islamist politics has been reshaping and transforming, at times forcibly, Beyoğlu in accordance with the logic of conservative neoliberal ideology.

Despite the fact that Beyoğlu now belongs to Istanbul, its eclecticism and otherness—historical, ethnic, political, and sexual differences—still haunt contemporary imaginations. Where ethnic populations (Lady Montagu’s “odd residents”) established the district’s symbolic boundaries in the past, and the tensions between Islamist and secular politics inscribe divisions today, the contained world of the Aladdin’s Lamp drag queens conflate Beyoğlu’s past and present. At one level, drag queens embody the district’s traditional decadence; at another level, they are indeed low others, subject to ridicule and hostility. Transvestites, Roma people, Kurdish immigrants (Beyoğlu’s current “odd residents”) remain as “undesirables,” tolerated within the dynamics of a new time–space relationship, but easily dispensable.

The in-between hybridized spaces of Beyoğlu that facilitate transgression bring to mind Foucault’s heterotopias. It is possible to think of Beyoğlu as a heterotopia “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place . . . several sites that are in themselves incompatible” but “function in

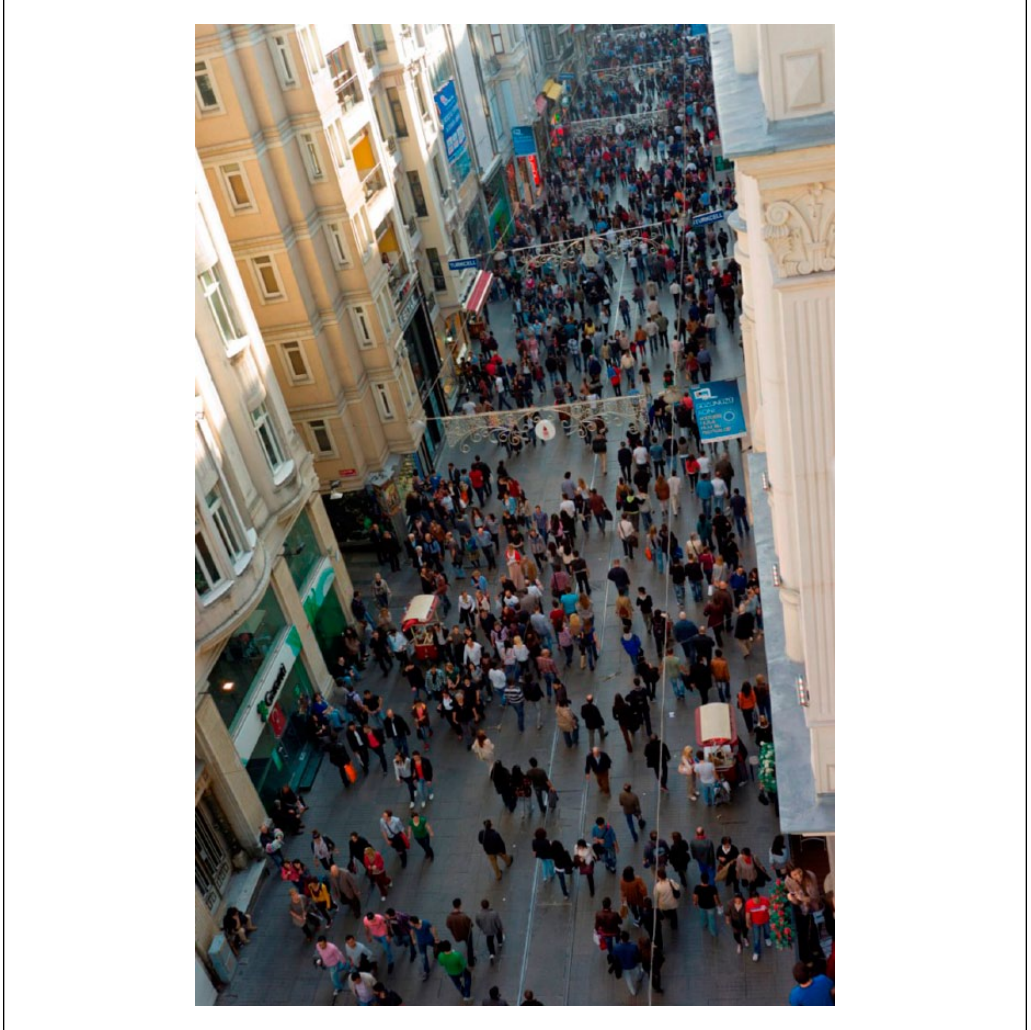


Figure 4. Crowds cruising *Istiklal Street*, 2012, photo.

Source. Author.

relation to all the space that remains” (Foucault, 1986, pp. 25, 27). Beyoğlu is indeed an ambiguous place, a microcosm of people of diverse sexual orientations, ethnicities, and class positions. However, this hybridity is not necessarily liberatory but bounded by the exclusionary ideologies and identity politics at operation at the time. In this regard, Beyoğlu appears closer to Kevin Hetherington’s (1997) conceptualization of heterotopias as spaces where different kinds of social ordering, which can be either transgressive or hegemonic, are tried out. With its multiple, layered, and contested ordering, Beyoğlu exists as a space of contained difference, both enabling and inhibiting transgression. And it is such complex ordering of Beyoğlu across the centuries that makes it of interest; desirable, intriguing, and worth protecting.

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Notes

1. This text is now removed from the website.
2. The incident was provoked by false reports that Atatürk's birthplace in Thessaloniki, Greece had been bombed and resulted in destruction of Greek-owned properties.
3. Aladdin's Lamp captures the Near Eastern flavor and interpretive possibilities of the actual name of this club. I have chosen to use this pseudonym throughout the essay to avoid any issues with the management of the club, its customers, and the drag queens whom I discuss. In addition, I refer to the drag queens by suggestive names that describe an aspect of their demeanor.
4. This includes myself. I, too, have an investment in the club and its cast. In the course of the research, I became an intermittent regular who was automatically allowed to enter.
5. I observed these people on several occasions at the club. The Superstar and Nuray always maintained the same character, unlike some of the drag queens and transvestites, who changed identity from one evening to the next.

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