RECONSTRUCTING THE TRANSGENDERED SELF AS A MUSLIM, 
NATIONALIST, UPPER-CLASS WOMAN: 
THE CASE OF BULENT ERSOY 

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Winter of 2007. Another Sunday night, a new episode of Popstar Alaturka, a Turkish version of Pop Idol. Minority and human rights activist Hrant Dink has recently been assassinated by an ultranationalist youth and Turkey is experiencing one of the few notable instances of spontaneous collective action in the past two decades. It has been only days since tens of thousands of people marched in the streets, chanting, “We are all Armenians!” to express their sympathy for Dink and the Armenian community. Hence, the TV show opens with the popular Armenian folk song “Sari Gelin”—which, later in the evening, will lead to a rather long and interesting monologue by one of the jury members. This member is a glamorous lady in her fifties, wearing a haute couture dress revealing her long legs and shapely breasts. She expresses her discontent with the slogan “We are all Armenians!” Underlining the fact that she is “the Muslim daughter of Muslim parents,” she emphasizes that no one can ever make her say she is Armenian or Christian. Claiming that it would be more acceptable if the slogan had been “We are all Hrant,” she deems it intolerable for a Muslim person to say that s/he is Armenian—and therefore Christian. 

But who is this glamorous woman who seems in desperate need to underline her Muslim, nationalist identity? For readers who take an even slight interest in Turkish popular culture, the answer would be quite obvious. The person is Bulent Ersoy: a self-proclaimed expert on classical Ottoman music—though a singer of the popular genre arabesk—one of the first Turkish men to undergo sex change and the very first one to ask for a female passport, and a hater of transgendered prostitutes. Ersoy has been an extremely popular public figure in Turkey since the early 1970s and is very likely to remain so. 

Following Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” in this essay I seek to trace how Bulent Ersoy
has “become” a Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman. In doing so, I aim to understand the strategies that define spaces of abjection reserved for transgendered individuals in Turkey in the post-1980s and examine the tactics for survival that are available to them. I will try to explore Ersoy’s personal history in the context of events in Turkey since the 1970s and discuss the cultural atmosphere and dynamics of gender in the country in the light of Ersoy’s narrative.

A YOUNG, FLAMBOYANT MALE SINGER

The renowned singer of classical Turkish music Bulent Ersoy was born as Bulent Erkoc in 1952 in Istanbul. Named after a soccer player, Bulent was the only son of an urban middle-class family. He was introduced to classical Turkish music by his grandfather, who played the zither, and his grandmother, who played the lute. Shown to have talent, he took private lessons with acclaimed musicians at an early age and later attended the conservatory. While he was still a student, he began singing professionally under the stage name Bulent Ersoy—the name Erkoc, meaning “brave ram,” was probably too masculine for this rather androgynous young man, so it was replaced by Ersoy, “brave lineage.” Ersoy is also easier on the tongue.

Ersoy’s first record came out in 1971. At that time, nightlife in the big cities, especially Istanbul, mainly consisted of Greek tavernas and nightclubs called gazinos. Those nightclubs provided the middle- and upper-classes with hours-long programs bringing together several singers as well as comedians and belly dancers. There would often be one lead singer, called an assolist, who would take the stage last and sing classical Turkish music. The extremely competitive atmosphere made it difficult to become a lead singer. At the time, many established lead singers sang arabesk, a genre influenced by Turkish folk and Middle Eastern music, that had come out in Turkey in the 1950s and 1960s. Martin Stokes, one of the leading experts on arabesk, claims that it is “a music inextricably linked with the culture of the gecekondu, literally the “night settlements” which mushroomed around Turkey’s large industrial cities after the Menderes government program of rural regeneration in the 1950s produced a large rural labor surplus” (1989, 27). To the urban elite, arabesk was a new and lower-quality musical form. In this context, Ersoy decided to use this dissatisfaction with arabesk and constructed his public image as a
“classicist.” In other words, he appropriated Turkish classical music and made it his trademark so as to win a place in a highly competitive market. He catered to an audience that wanted to consume “authentic” or “elite” classical Turkish music as opposed to the “popular,” “commercial” variety. With a singing style extremely similar to that of Muzkveyen Senar—a popular singer of classical Turkish music who at the time was at the height of her career and, in some sense, Ersoy’s patron—he became the lead singer at Maksim, the most prestigious nightclub in the country. He was the second lead male singer at that time, after Zeki Muren (1931–96)—a flamboyant queer male singer, as was Ersoy. In fact, one could argue that Ersoy had appropriated an image with which the audience was already familiar, through Zeki Muren, who maintained it until the late 1960s, when he adopted a style that was an interesting combination of Elvis and Liberace. In other words, while Muren was adopting a new image, Ersoy was taking on Muren’s previous one. After Ersoy established his name in the Turkish music scene, he started singing arabel, for financial reasons (Tulgar 2004). This increased his both popularity and income immensely.

As was customary for such singers, Ersoy, like Muren, also made a number of movies with popular female stars of the Turkish cinema. In these mainstream love stories, Ersoy would act the young, naive, maybe somewhat androgynous, yet heterosexual, man. This accorded with his public image. Even though, later, Ersoy would claim that her friends had always seen her as a woman, at the time Ersoy would be visible in the press with his fake fiancées, constructing his image as heterosexual and male. Yet, as Pinar Selek argues, Ersoy and Muren challenged the codes of masculinity in Turkey with their public personas (2007, 111). They did not have the masculinity of other male singers such as Munir Nured- din Sulu, Orhan Gencebay, or later, Ibrahim Tatlıs. Ersoy’s most significant attributes were probably his rather naive politeness and somewhat androgynous style. Thus, through a bodily and linguistic performance as a man who was openly gay in his private life, yet with a heterosexual public image, Bulent Ersoy opened a liminal sphere that challenged the codes of masculinity. According to Selek, this was why he was loved by women. In the Turkish movie Evlidir Ne Yapsa Yeridir, from 1978, women embark on a kind of feminist revolution; among their demands are male domestic help, new clothes, and listening to Bulent Ersoy.
EARLY POST-OPERATION YEARS

When Ersoy was physiologically male, he would usually wear a white tuxedo or a dark suit and bow tie. Unlike Muren, at the time, he never appeared in garments or accessories that challenged established masculine dress codes, such as mini-shorts, ostrich feathers, or sequins or wore hair-styles or jewelery that were normally seen on women. It was only after his hormone treatment began that he started to appear on stage in female attire. Arguably because Ersoy wanted to claim the female body, his costumes were particularly revealing. In 1980, after the military coup, when she was singing in a nightclub at the Izmir International Fair, Ersoy did not deny the audience its desire to see her newly developing breasts. Proving her femininity in this way resulted in her arrest and she served forty-five days in prison. In 1981, she underwent a sex change operation in London. This would change her life in ways that she probably never expected. Being a transsexual was not easy during the notoriously oppressive military regime. She had to go through several physical examinations as well as an exhausting legal case to be recognized as a woman. Her court defense was very significant for the construction of her public image as a transgender individual. She underlined that she was not an anarchist, but a loyal citizen who did not aim to do anything against the social order. By emphasizing her patriotism, she intended to avoid the fate of other victims of the military regime, during which 650,000 people were taken into custody, 230,000 were tried, fifty were executed, and 229 “died of unnatural causes” while in custody (Gunersel 2007).

Ersoy was not the only transgendered person who was at risk following the coup; and in fact, the trans community had been suffering from state violence since the 1960s. Back then, the community was quite small and most of its members lived in Istanbul (Cingoöz 2007). As their chances for employment were extremely limited, they tried to survive by either doing odd jobs or taking up prostitution. As prostitutes working in the streets, they were always easy targets for the police. In 1973, the first brothels for transgendered prostitutes was opened in Istanbul’s Beyoglu district. There, transgender people enjoyed relative security and regular health checks. In the late 1970s, the “social democratic” CHP government started a war against these brothels. It provided no alternative employment opportunity or any other support for the trans community, it just tore down the brothels—only for them to be reconstructed by the brothel workers. Transphobic policies intensified with the military coup
of 1980. For one thing, the brothels were closed down for good. It was extremely difficult for a member of the trans community to find an apartment; they therefore had to share hotel rooms. When the brothels were closed down, many of the workers were subjected to verbal and physical abuse. Some were held in custody for weeks, and some were reportedly killed by police and their bodies were thrown into a river (Gunersel 2007). The approach of the military regime toward transgendered prostitutes was similar to that of the social democrats, but harsher: not only were the brothels closed down, but the doors of the only other sector that employed transgendered people, entertainment, was now closed to them. Performances by all transgendered entertainers were banned, and many had to take up prostitution as well.

In this political atmosphere, Ersoy was the only person who had the power to have her voice heard. What was striking in her attitude was that she was not making a claim in the name of queer people or the trans community—she was only trying to save herself. For one thing, she had found an interesting way to explain her gender status as a woman: “My mother thought I was a girl when she was pregnant with me. Maybe that is the reason why my male hormones did not develop.” With such comments, she was clearly rejecting transgenderism as an opportunity to deny established gender codes. She desired only to be accepted as a woman. She did not have any intention to fight against heterosexism either. In an interview with the newspaper Gunaydin April 1981, Ersoy said: “The people whom I find most disgusting are homosexuals. I am so glad that I am not one” (Ersoy qtd in Isiguzel 2000). With these statements and her own pseudoscientific theories, Ersoy claimed a female identity, and a strikingly homophobic one. But as far as the court was concerned, her efforts were in vain: her performances were banned, and she was unable to work in Turkey. Her right to work—a human right—had been violated. During this period, she had to work in Germany and France. She performed for Turkish migrant workers, singing what she now calls “market music,” a position of lower status for a singer who had worked at the most exclusive nightclubs in Turkey. Among other things, she had to sell her jewelry, and at one point, she attempted suicide. While her public performances were banned, she still made albums and low-budget films for video. In Turkey, she would occasionally perform in nightclubs, where she would pretend to be part of the audience and sing from her table. She also worked as a model and continued giving interviews. Thus,
she not only remained a popular public figure, keeping her fans remembering and missing her, but also persisted in affirming her female identity, in the clichéd heterosexual romances in which she acted, now taking the woman’s part, and in the erotic photographs for which she posed.

In 1988, Ersoy was permitted by the neoliberal government of Turgut Özal to obtain a female ID and work in Turkey. It is worth noting that she had become a showpiece for the government. Before her sex change, he was a very popular singer and the public had been longing for her comeback. By giving her a female ID and allowing her to perform in Turkey, the government achieved two goals. First, to increase their own legitimacy, they presented the case of Ersoy as expressing the epitome of personal freedom. Second, by granting Ersoy her work permit the Özal regime differentiated itself from the highly unpopular military regime that had preceded it. Thus, the neoliberal regime and its laissez-faire economic policies were legitimized in the eyes of Ersoy’s fans, especially Turkey’s new bourgeoisie, to whose tastes Ersoy catered, but also the general public. She had become the signifier of an era of freedom and tolerance.

The discourse of tolerance is crucial to understanding this process. Ersoy was given a female passport and the right to work not because this was her “right,” but because she was “tolerated” by the regime. The discourse of tolerance is strongly related to the construction of spaces of abjection and their use for the definition and celebration of the “normal” or “legitimate” spheres as well as the nation or the state. Ersoy, as a transgendered individual, was the Other who was to remain in an abject space, yet enjoy the “tolerance” of the regime.

Stokes notes that Ersoy made an album of classical Turkish music in 1987 “when the debate over the stage performance on [her] was at its height” and “this undoubtedly strengthened the case for the repeal of the ban” (1992, 227). After the ban was repealed, Ersoy again made a number of arabesk albums. It is feasible that Ersoy instrumentalized classical Turkish music to legitimize her singing in the eyes of people who did not enjoy arabesk.

When she managed to return to the stage, Ersoy climbed back to the top in no time. She resumed her work in prestigious nightclubs and gave concerts all over the country. Many of her songs became instant hits, and her films enjoyed success at the box office. The Turkish people had gladly accepted her back, and she enjoyed the support of the Özal family, particularly Semra Özal, the prime minister’s wife, leading to Ersoy’s
appearing in a televised official celebration even though arabesk singers were rarely given the opportunity to appear on state-owned television at the time (Stokes 1989, 29). But this time, Bulent Ersoy was neither a young flamboyant boy nor the femme fatale of her early post-operation years. Although she was still loved dearly by her fans, her sex change operation was seen as a threat to the heterosexist patriarchal state hegemony during the military regime. She was cornered and had to face the tools of the homophobic and transphobic regime, from medicine to law. When she was back on the stage, she refused to use her transgendered status as a way to challenge gender codes, heterosexism, patriarchy, nationalism, capitalism, or conservatism. Rather, she refused to acknowledge her transgendered status and gradually started to advance an identity as a conservative, Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman.

While she continued to sing at the most popular clubs and was dressed by some of the most prominent fashion designers, a significant change in her style became evident. Although glamorous, her costumes were not as revealing as they had been. She did not pose in lingerie or bathing suits anymore. She started to make films with important stars again.5 But unlike her actions in the low-budget films in which she acted in her early post-operation years, when she would appear in lingerie, she did not even kiss the male lead. It would be plausible to say that she was following in the footsteps of Turkan Soray. Arguably the most popular actress in the history of Turkish cinema, Soray had adopted what came to be known as “Soray’s rules”: Don’t undress, don’t kiss, don’t have sex in front of the camera (Buker 2002). Like Soray, Ersoy sought to present her sexuality as that of a woman, yet do it in a more discrete, almost “chaste” way to enjoy greater public acceptance in Turkey, where conservative Islam was on the rise, with the educational policies of the past three decades and the empowerment of the conservative Muslim small capital holders during the Özal regime. Her getting engaged with her boyfriend, Birol Gurkanli, in her early post-operation years also served to project the image that she adhered to the conservative heterosexual norms. Years later, in 1998, when she would marry the much younger Cem Adler, the public discussion would revolve around the age difference between the couple, rather than Ersoy’s transsexualism.

In the late 1980s, Ersoy began to emphasize her Muslim identity, including references to Allah in her songs and during her performances, and she continues to wear a veil when she attends funerals. Her emphasis
on this aspect of her identity peaked in 1995, when she recited the adhan, the Islamic call for prayer, in her album Alaturka 95 and sparked a heated debate.

Normally, the adhan is called out by a muezzin from a minaret of a mosque five times a day to summon Muslims for prayers. In 1932, the Atatürk government imposed a Turkish-language adhan to replace the traditional Arabic, to promote Turkish as a liturgical language. This highly unpopular policy, implemented as part of the Kemalist project of modernization, was repealed in 1950. Today, although there are defenders of the policy among the Kemalist modernists, it is virtually impossible to hear the Turkish adhan.

By reciting the adhan in Arabic, Ersoy asserted her identity as a conservative Muslim. If she had recited the call to prayer in Turkish, she would have not only expressed her identity as a Kemalist/modernist but also led the media to focus on the language of the adhan. Instead, the media’s focus was Ersoy’s gender, and a huge debate started on whether a woman can recite the adhan or not. This gave Ersoy the opportunity to reaffirm her faith in Islam and also have others reaffirm her gender identity as a woman.

Ersoy’s use of language, especially her choice of vocabulary, was also significant for the performance of her identity. What makes her vocabulary choices significant is her extensive use of Ottoman words. Having been virtually eliminated from the Turkish language with the modernizing Kemalist language reforms, this vocabulary is normally available to only a few elderly people who come from families that have social, cultural, and economic capital, or to people who learned it in university Turkish or history departments or in one of the few private language courses. In any case, it is an indicator of status and, to some extent, class. However, as this vocabulary was eliminated by the modernization project, its use has conservative connotations as well. As these words are borrowed from Arabic or Persian, they may also have a religious connotation. It is also possible to interpret this vocabulary choice as playing with the past. Ersoy aims to use a language that has been forgotten. When she uses this particular vocabulary, she seeks to perform her identity in a particular way. She reconstructs the time, and performs her identity not only as a person who brings a long-forgotten knowledge from the past but also as someone who belongs to that past. By constructing herself as an element of the past, she probably contests the social rejection that she faced because
of her new status as a transsexual woman. This rejection of modernity is ironic because her sex change was made possible by modern medical technologies. By performing her identity as a conservative Muslim woman, Ersoy contests social rejection not only by rejecting a queer or transgender identity, but also by rejecting “modernity.”

The developments in Turkish media were particularly instrumental in Ersoy’s promoting her new public image. Previously, there was only state television; because her public performances were banned, Ersoy could not appear on television. Nor were there any private radio stations. Later, with the establishment of private stations for both television and radio, Ersoy started to appear frequently on television and radio. In fact, she even had her own talk show in one of the earliest private television channels, Kanal 6, owned by the Özal family. With the aid of these developments, Ersoy’s new public image was established quite firmly by the mid-1990s.

THE OLDER SISTER

In 1992, Ersoy made one of her most successful albums. There was a song in the album that would turn out to be very important for Ersoy’s personal history: “Ablan Kurban Olsun Sana” (Your Older Sister Would Sacrifice Herself for You). The song was about the sexual interest of an older woman in a younger person, but the most significant words it contained were those that formed the title. Using these lyrics as a term of affection in addressing her public, Ersoy was soon awarded the nickname abla (older sister). As noted by Sirman, while persons of the same generation and the same parents who are older than one are referred to as agabey (older brother) or abla (older sister) in Turkish, these words also serve as terms of address “not only with regard to persons one has filial and affinal ties to, but also with complete strangers. These terms provide a means of regulating relations between non-kin, thus extending the language of hierarchy and respect, age, and gender to cover a whole range of relationships within the society in general” (2004, 44). Ersoy’s being given the nickname abla meant two things. First, her gender status as a woman had been strongly affirmed by her public. Second, she had managed to gain respect. Even though Ersoy did manage to gain the respect and love of her public as a popular singer, this would not be the ultimate status she would aim at.
THE DIVA

In the summer of 2004, Ersoy gave a concert in the Cemil Topuzlu open air theater in Istanbul. In this concert, she sang only classical Ottoman songs that were familiar to few people. In fact, she claimed that the scores for some of the songs could not be found in archives and she had had to make transcriptions from memory. She wore a dress inspired by the caftans of the Ottoman sultans and a headpiece that resembled an Ottoman turban. Ersoy did not earn any money from this concert. What she gained was social status.

Before the concert, she accepted an interview with the well-known journalist Ahmet Tulgar from the daily newspaper Milliyet. Ersoy was rarely giving interviews at the time, so even the existence of the interview was a sign of something important. In this interview, Ersoy claimed that she had caused a revolution in the 1970s by singing classical Ottoman music in nightclubs, yet betrayed her revolution as well as classical music by singing arabesk to be more popular and earn more money. Her desire was to “apologize to music.” In other words, she was no longer satisfied with her status as an arabesk singer. She had earned enough money and could afford her albums to be less popular—which did not really matter at a time when most people could download music from the Internet anyway—but she wanted to regain her status as a classicist. This concert project was a result of this concern. With the costume as well as the songs she chose to sing in one of the most prestigious concert halls in Istanbul, underlining her status as a singer who could sing songs from the thirteenth-century that were known and understood by few, yet could fill that concert hall. With this performance, she claimed the past; just as she was legitimizing her identity with reference to the past in her use of Ottoman vocabulary while trying to avoid the rejection she might experience because of her transsexual identity, which is a modern, present-day possibility.

This was the beginning of a new era for Ersoy’s public image. To the amusement of some, a term from classical music of the West was appropriated, and Ersoy became “the Diva” of Turkey. In many respects, not much had changed in the way she performed her identity. Yet things had intensified and her new title and her role as a member of the jury in Popstar Alaturka had provided her with a new forum to perform her identity.

Probably, the biggest change in Ersoy’s public image was her
approachability. She had already gained respect as the Older Sister, but being the Diva was something else. There was no real change in her music after the concert in which she sang classical Ottoman songs. In her television show as well as her concerts, Ersoy kept singing arabesk and pop music. But her expertise in a musical form that her public neither really knew nor could really stand, yet recognized as an indicator of status, as it was appreciated by a small elite group, did improve Ersoy’s status.

In the construction of the Diva, class was also a key issue. Among signifiers of class were gift giving, conspicuous consumption, and discourses concerning consumption. Beginning with her relationship with Gurkanli, Ersoy had been famous for her lavish gifts. These became more and more visible after she became the Diva. Although expensive, some, such as the ring she gave her close friend Oya Aydogan on her birthday, fit within the established norms of gift giving in contemporary Turkish society; others, such as the bracelet she gave her patron Muzeyyen Senar when she was hospitalized, did not. All these sumptuous gifts helped to construct Ersoy’s identity as an upper-class person. Her own expensive jewelry and clothing as well as shopping trips to Europe added to the indicators of class, yet the discourses concerning her consumption practices were even more influential. It was especially so in the case of jewelry. Even though jewelry has traditionally been a signifier of class, it is not always possible to tell whether it is real or fake. Ersoy started to insist that she never wears fake jewelry and to reveal the price of each and every piece she has.

As the importance of nationalism and Islam in Turkish public discourse has increased since the 1980s, the significance of these elements in Ersoy’s construction of her identity has increased as well. Since the 1980s, Ersoy has been telling stories of rejecting European offers of citizenship. In 1997, she scolded a French interviewer who asked her about the ban on her public performances, saying that “it is a matter of domestic policy.” But her aggressive response to the Dink incident, described at the beginning of this essay, was unprecedented. With it, she allied herself with the ultranationalists at a critical time in Turkish history as well as expressed her identity as a nationalist Muslim. With practices such as breaking her Ramadan fast on a live broadcast, she persisted in constructing a Muslim identity.

The last key aspect of the identity of the Diva was her womanhood.
Even though her gender identity as a woman had largely been accepted, she still had a past to deal with. When her old friend, and new enemy, Sacit Aslan said that Ersoy had done her military service—which is compulsory for all men and only men—she furiously rejected the claim. She asserted that “her status” did not allow her to do military service, and waving her pink identity card, she said that she was “as female as Semra Özlal.” Here, she was using the female identity card (that was begrudged to her for so long) as a weapon with which to claim her womanhood. The reference to Semra Özlal is also striking. By saying that she was “as female as Semra Özlal,” Ersoy not only claimed womanhood but also made a claim for power by equating herself with the former first lady, with whose help she had managed to get her pink identity card and work in Turkey.

The media helped Ersoy in the reconstruction of her past. In Canlı Hayat, a television show presenting interviews with famous people and reenactments of important moments in their lives, Ersoy’s pre-operation years were played by a young girl. Since her early post-operation years, Ersoy had been telling stories of how she would perform a female identity as a child. When he was alone at home, he would put on makeup, wear his mother’s clothes, and take her cigarettes and cigarette holder and “pose like a woman” in front of the mirror (Tanis 2005). She would also claim that her friends had always seen her as a woman. In this show, the past had been reconstructed and the biggest “mistake” in Ersoy’s life had been corrected: she had never been a man.

In an episode of Popstar Alaturka, Ersoy proved that she could not only claim a female identity but also claim the body of a particular woman. Like most stars, Ersoy occasionally undergoes plastic surgery, such as liposuction and face-lifting. In one episode of the show, she had recently undergone a series of plastic surgery. Having also borrowed the makeup artist of fellow singer Ebru Gundes, Bulent Ersoy had a striking resemblance to Gundes, a member of the jury on the show. Her class and status had enabled Ersoy to undergo plastic surgery in Germany, and also to borrow this makeup artist, which made it possible for her to claim not only womanhood but also the body of a much younger woman.

Popstar Alaturka also provided Ersoy with a new tactic to construct her identity. As a member of the jury, Ersoy was given the opportunity to criticize the contestants. Her comments were not limited to their singing. She would make sometimes friendly, sometimes harsh comments about
their bodies and physical practices. She would often give examples from her own body. When the jury was discussing why one of the contestants preferred costumes that they found too conservative, Ersoy said that some women cannot wear dresses with a deep cleavage, as their bodies were not as fit for it as was hers. Later, she called a girl over and made her bend over, examining her body. Through these practices of criticism and evaluation, Ersoy constructed herself as an expert on the “ideal” female body and bodily practices and deemed her own body, at least in some respects, as the ideal body for a woman. It seems clear that Ersoy has internalized the restrictive discourses on gender and the body rather than resisting them. She constantly reproduces them while she constructs her body as desirable if not perfect and criticizes the bodies of the contestants of *Popstar Alaturka* as well as of other women, including the guests on her talk show, within the framework of stereotypes about gender and the body.

**The Anti-Militarist Mother with No Children**

Although the preceding section was intended to be followed by the conclusion, a very significant incident in Ersoy’s life occurred while this essay was in review and has led me to add one more section on Ersoy, as the anti-militarist mother with no children—an identity she briefly seemed to claim, then abandoned in haste.

An episode of *Popstar Alaturka* in February 2008 was devoted to soldiers who died in an operation to northern Iraq. While the host of the show and Ersoy’s fellow singers sent their condolences to the soldiers’ families, along with nationalistic and militaristic messages, Ersoy took an unexpected stance. Acknowledging that she could never be a mother, she stated that if she had a son, she would never send him to the army. This is a fairly popular discourse among Turkish mothers. Although they can’t say it in public, as it is a crime punishable not only by the law but also by nationalists, many Turkish mothers tell their friends, relatives, or sons that they would never let them perform compulsory military service. In other words, while expressing her feelings about a war in which “Turkey has been instrumentalized by big powers,” Ersoy sought to perform her identity as a mother by shifting the focus from reproductivity to feelings. This was a quite dangerous move, especially when combined with an anti-militarist comment. Fellow singer Ebru Gundes took the microphone to say that she could be a mother and she would only be happy to be the mother of a martyr if it was her destiny. Ersoy had opened a position that
she could not fulfill and Gundes had used the opportunity to perform her identity as a nationalist mother, although she had no children either. But this would not be all. A public prosecutor filed charges against Ersoy for disparaging the military (Bax 2008). Interestingly, Ersoy enjoyed the support of many Turkish intellectuals, as well as—to her distress—the Democratic Society Party (DTP). As an antinationalist party that represents Kurdish people in the parliament, DTP was probably the last party whose support Ersoy would appreciate and enjoy. Still, the party’s parliamentary group’s deputy chairman, Ahmet Turk, praised her courage, the mayor of Batman offered to name a street after Ersoy, and her albums started to fly off the shelves in the southeast, where the majority of the population is Kurdish (DHA 2008). By contrast, a member of parliament from the ruling Justice and Welfare Party made fun of Turk and Ersoy, remarking that had Turk been as brave as Ersoy, he would “have his thing cut off” as well. This attitude was not unique to him. Thousands of people were making fun of Ersoy’s transgenderism on the Internet. The one time she tried to perform her identity in a slightly different way, she was insulted by a member of parliament and thousands of people, and faced time in prison.

Ersoy was cornered once more, this time by the wrath of the government and nationalists, and the love of the Kurds. Therefore, she held a press conference. Stating that all she wanted was a “solution, instead of death” Ersoy reaffirmed her loyalty to the republic of Turkey. Arguing that “Turks are a soldier nation” and “one may give the God-given life for the motherland, for the nation” she stressed that she was not the public face or supporter of any group. Thus, she reembraced nationalism and militarism while rejecting any affiliation with or sympathy for the Kurdish community. Later, she stated once more that she was going to leave her wealth to the Turkish Educational Foundation (a secularist, nationalist foundation for education) and the Mehtecik Foundation (a militarist, nationalist foundation that caters to the needs of disabled war veterans and the families of soldiers who lost their lives). Ersoy’s choice of institutions was of particular significance, as the other queer star of Turkish music, Zeki Muren, had also left his considerable wealth to the same institutions. It appears that Ersoy was aiming at the acceptance that Muren always enjoyed in regard to the state and the military.

This example shows that while identity may not be a mere survival tactic, Ersoy’s public performance of her identity is strongly related to
survival in an hostile environment. Her transgenderism was such a sensitive issue that whenever she would do something that might challenge her established public image, she would be dispossessed of her womanhood and relive past stigmatization and humiliation.

CONCLUSION
This essay is being written in late 2007, twenty-six years after Ersoy’s sex change operation. According to a recent study, 23 percent of urban gay/lesbian/bisexual identified people confirmed having been subjected to physical harassment and a distressing 87 percent confirmed having been subjected to verbal harassment (Ercivan et al. 2006, 112). On the cultural level, the popular drag performances of Seyfi Dursunoglu, which he has been presenting for more than forty years in nightclubs and more than thirty years on television, have been banned from television by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (Dundar 2007). The charge was that he promoted homosexuality to youth. This was not the only homophobic act by the council. Gay fashion designer Barbaros Sansal’s talk show Töphü Igne was banned for the same reason. Virtually all depictions of homosexual physical intimacy on television, including kissing, are penal offenses. As a result, foreign shows such as Dawson’s Creek or Six Degrees are often censored and Turkish productions have very few queer characters. As far as politics are concerned, there have been no openly gay politicians who have entered parliament in the history of the country. Even though the population is quite high in the big cities, only a handful of transgendered individuals work in the professions and, to my knowledge, none work in the public sector. All others work as indirectly forced sex workers. And, leaving any affirmative action aside, the government even refused to ban “discrimination based on sexual orientation” in the new draft constitution.

In this sociopolitical and cultural context, there is only one transgendered person who enjoys success and popularity. Bulent Ersoy has two shows on prime-time television and earns millions of dollars every year, adding to her significant wealth. While she is indeed a talented singer and is highly knowledgeable about classical Turkish music, I contend that she owes her popularity, at least to some extent, to her earlier image as a heterosexual man and the tactics she employs against the strategies of the hegemony in contemporary Turkish society.

Like the first queer star of Turkey, Zeki Muren, Ersoy started her
career with a heterosexual male image. Yes, he did not have the masculinity of other male singers, but he was in the press with his fake fiancées, and he acted as heterosexual men in movies. He attained fame as a heterosexual man. Muren had never dared to deny heterosexuality in public, although he was openly gay in his private life. His first stage performance was 1950, wearing a tuxedo. He had to wait for twenty years to become arguably the most popular and respected singer in the country to challenge the established dress codes for men with a costume he named “The Prince from Outer Space”: platform heels, a miniskirt, and a sheer cape, with earrings and a kind of tiara. Muren had probably expected to use science fiction as an excuse for drag. If the prince was from outer space, it wasn’t plausible to expect him to share the same codes of masculinity with earthlings. But things did not exactly work out that way. Muren had created a huge scandal and journalists were saying that he was “wearing women’s clothes” (Alpmann 2006). People had started to question his masculinity. At that time, Muren took an interesting turn and, leaving science fiction aside, chose to legitimize drag with the aid of history and nationalism. He said that his costume was inspired by Turkish heroes such as Baytekin and referred to Sultan Selim 1, who allegedly wore earrings. After that incident, Muren never performed in drag again, and even in his fifties he was holding meetings with the press at which he declared that he had “had affairs with 104 women” and that the allegations of homosexuality were nothing but ugly lies.

The sex change operation did not allow Ersoy to stick to a heterosexual male identity. Interestingly, when her hormone treatment began, Muren insulted her by asking, “I can walk with my head up, can Ersoy?” Being more successful in his bargain with the heterosexist hegemony, Muren did not refrain from allying with it to mock his rival. Soon, Ersoy was also going to adopt the language of the heterosexist hegemony, develop survival tactics that actually reproduce this hegemony and its strategies rather than resisting them. This can be interpreted as a bargain with the hegemony. I believe that this bargain is what gives Ersoy’s story its particular significance. With the aid of the power she gained as a “heterosexual” man, Ersoy had the privilege to bargain with the heterosexual hegemony. This seems rather different from what Duggan calls “homonormativity” or Puar’s concept of “homonationalism,” as the privileges Ersoy enjoys as well as the political views she defends are far from reflecting anything about the trans community in Turkey. While Ersoy enjoyed the
support of the first lady, transgendered prostitutes were being tortured by the police, and they were being killed in the streets of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. While Ersoy had two shows in prime time, LGBT organizations were being closed down by the state. Other than recognizing their new gender identity, the state has done nothing for members of the trans community. As noted earlier, there are only a handful of transgendered individuals in Turkey who are employed in any sector other than prostitution (Ogunc 2007).

Because of limited prior research, it is difficult to make any general statement about the political affiliations of the trans community. Berghan (2007) shows that they either tend to be apolitical or affiliate themselves with the Left. In fact, there are a couple of well-known leftist transgendered activists, among them Demet Demir, who was a candidate for parliament from a small leftist party, and Esmeray, who defines herself as a Kurdish feminist. LGBT organizations in Turkey, such as KAOS-GL and Lambdaistanbul, also tend to affiliate themselves with the Left. By performing her identity in the way that she does, Ersoy differentiates herself from contemporary leftist Turkish transgendered activists, as well as from transgendered performers such as Dana International, who embraces her transgender identity and openly supports the community, and performance artists, such as Kate Bornstein, who use their status to criticize heteronormative society and its tools, particularly medicine and law. Here, it is worth noting that while Ersoy has been embraced by the state and her public, she is openly rejected by one particular group: the trans community. These people, many of whom did identify themselves with Bulent Ersoy in their childhood and adolescence—particularly because she was the only transgendered person in the media—now feel cold toward her not only because of her homophobic and heterosexist comments and her apathy towards the problems of transgendered people but also because of her ultranationalism. In fact, Esmeray has said, “Bulent Ersoy is as transsexual as Michael Jackson is black” (Ogunc 2008). Thus, while Ersoy has rejected transgenderism and her transgender identity, she has in turn been rejected by the transgender community. While one may argue that this rejection was caused by the identity Ersoy chose to perform, it also serves the construction of this identity.

Bulent Ersoy, as a transgendered individual, has managed to survive and thrive in contemporary Turkish society thanks to the power she obtained as a “heterosexual” man, and only to the extent that she rejected
her transgendered identity and opportunity to resist the dominant hegemony. The more she reproduced the dominant discourses, including the homophobic and transphobic ones, the more social acceptance she enjoyed. When she dared to deviate from the norm, she would be reminded of the bargain not only by the state but also by the people. This is how Ersoy’s personal history has become the story of a Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman and seems bound to remain so.

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NOTES

1. Dink was a Turkish Armenian journalist and columnist who worked for Turkish-Armenian reconciliation and human and minority rights in Turkey. Being critical of both Turkey’s denial of the Armenian genocide, and of the Armenian diaspora’s campaign for its international recognition, Dink was prosecuted three times for “denigrating Turkishness” and received numerous death threats before his assassination by an ultranationalist.

2. Here, I borrow the terms “tactic” and “strategy” from Michel de Certeau (1984).

3. Previous political regimes had equally made use of popular singers as showpieces. At the time of Ataturk, it was Safiye Ayla, a young girl who grew up in a state orphanage. In the newly established republic of Turkey, Ayla was not only a beautiful voice but also a showpiece of the Kemalist revolution. Having grown up in a state orphanage, she was considered a daughter of the republic, someone who could represent the new woman with her education and professional success and also with her secular body. For Ayla as a leading female figure in the “Turkish Republican Enlightenment,” see Ergun 1997. For other biographies of Ayla, see Seckin 1998 and Gungor 2006.

4. This is especially important in comparison with an incident that took place under the regime of Kenan Evren. In Gergitre, a well-known Turkish comedy about the Roma community in Turkey made in the year in which Ersoy’s public performances were banned, one of the characters appears on the stage of a nightclub in drag and is immediately taken to police headquarters. As a member of the Roma community, he exists in a space of abjection and enjoys the “tolerance” of the state, personified in the police chief. But this tolerance is not absolute; it is negotiated. Petty crimes can be forgiven as mischief perpetrated by these childlike adults, especially because the crimes are of an apolitical nature. But when a male member of the Roma community appears on stage in drag, the situation is more serious, as transgendered people are less tolerable than the Roma. Therefore, the character has to promise the police chief that he would not do anything else that would be against “the moral order of the society,” in order not to lose the tolerance he enjoys and be punished as Ersoy was.
5. *Biz Ayıllamayız*, in 1988, and *İstiyorum*, in 1999, with their star-studded casts, helped Ergen in her comeback; the former also launched the career of Gulben Ergen, who became one of Turkey’s most popular stars.

6. A similar example of transgendered women legitimizing their existence with reference to the past—and using the examples of gay and bisexual men as well as transgendered individuals—can be found in the narratives of the transgendered people interviewed by Berghan (2007) and Kandiyoti (2002).

7. In Berghan 2007; Ögunc 2007; and Selek 2007, as well as numerous press releases by queer activists, transgendered individuals, virtually all of whom are sex workers, tell how it is not possible for them to find employment in any other sector, especially the public sector.

**WORKS CITED**


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