

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF TRANS WOMEN IN TURKEY

by

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Submitted to the Institute of Social Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Sabancı University

July 2018

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF TRANS WOMEN IN TURKEY

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DATE OF APPROVAL: July 9, 2018

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ABSTRACT**IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF TRANS WOMEN IN TURKEY**

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Cultural Studies, MA Thesis, July 2018

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Keywords: transgender, identity construction, group-making, intimacy, passing

This MA thesis focuses on the lives of trans-identified individuals in Turkey based on a small-scale group of predominantly Istanbulite trans women in terms of their making sense of and negotiating a trans identity. The self-identified “friendship group” consists of trans women of all walks of life producing, reproducing, and transmitting interminable knowledge/discourse on transgenderism on-site and online. This research analyzes in the respective chapters the crucial aspects of trans identity construction: group-making, intimacy, and passing. This thesis investigates in every chapter how these aspects of trans subculture contribute to these women’s understanding of their trans/womanhood to create a space for themselves as active agents. This study explores how trans women construct their identities against the backdrop of living in increasingly conservative Turkey and in a larger context of identity politics.

ÖZET

TÜRKİYE'DEKİ TRANS KADINLARIN KİMLİK İNŞASI

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Kültürel Çalışmalar, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Temmuz 2018

Tez Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. Cenk Özbay

Anahtar Kelimeler: trans, kimlik inşası, grup oluşturma, mahremiyet, gibi gözükmek

Bu yüksek lisans tezi, ağırlıklı olarak İstanbullu olan küçük bir grup trans kadının, trans kimliğini anlamlandırmaları üzerinden, trans kimlikli Türkiyeli bireylerin hayatlarına odaklanmaktadır. Trans kadınların kendileri tarafından “arkadaşlık grubu” olarak tanımlanmış bu grup, hayatın her alanından trans kadınlardan oluşmakta ve trans kadınlıkla ilgili bilgi ve söylem üretmekte ve iletmektedir. Bu araştırma, ilgili bölümlerde, grup kurma, mahremiyet ve trans kadınların, cisgender kadınlar olarak toplum içine karışmaları konularını analiz etmektedir. Bu tez, ilgili bölümlerde trans altkültürünün bu yönlerinin, trans kadınların kendilerine alan açmak amacıyla trans/kadınlığı anlamlandırmalarına nasıl katkı sağladığını araştırmaktadır. Bu çalışma, trans kadınların, muhafazakarlaşan bir Türkiye’de ve kimlik politikası arka planında, kimliklerini nasıl inşa ettiklerini keşfetmektedir.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank all of the trans women who made this thesis come through. This thesis is written for you, by someone who you deem to be one of you. I am so grateful for your cooperation for the thesis, and for your friendship and support during this double difficult pathway of both writing a thesis and transforming myself. With your invaluable help, hereby, I finally complete this research and come closer to my dream of becoming an academic. I am thankful to all my thesis committee members, Cenk Özbay, Ayşecan Terzioğlu, and Maral Erol Jamieson, for their insightful comments, and constructive feedback. I am grateful for bearing with my annoying, yet, justifiable slow-pace in this exhausting ordeal. Thank you Aslı and Lara, my cohort members, who finished their theses earlier than me and showed me that a thesis can be submitted, disproving that infamous tweet which claimed that people work on the “cursed” topics of space, memory, and gender never get to finish their theses. Thank you, all my thesis-writing fellows (Ceren, Ayşe, I see you!), who said that they “have not even started yet” to calm me down when I asked them about how many pages they wrote. Thank you Berkay, for reading my uncompleted chapters and still providing much-needed encouraging comments when I was too scared to send them to my professors. Thank you, Suleman, who pushed me for every deadline –from TOEFL registration to PhD applications. Thank you, Laura and Janine, for our dinner table conversations about our precarities and future anxieties. Thank you, my queer friends of Sabancı whom I bored with my Tinder stories and deteriorating romantic life when I wanted to get away from the thesis blues. Thank you, cute Sabancı campus cats I played with every day –one of the few things that could appease me and make me less grumpy. Thank you, my family, who kept supporting me despite our complicated relation. Lastly, thank you, the boy who gave me a prêt-à-porter 23-year-old beautiful woman, with arguably a good dedication, and certainly lots of trust issues and anxiety problems.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Objectives and Framework

Gender, sexuality, and desire have always piqued an insatiable curiosity in my mind from the very early ages on, albeit forcibly for most of the time. As a gender non-conforming child with an ascribed identity of “boy,” it had always been an uphill battle for me to make sense of the criticism and correction doled out to me because of the toys I played with, colors I gravitated towards, or the way I acted and spoke. This incessant lived experience of diverging from the norm, and being punished and reprimanded for it, reached its crux when I became an adolescent –a phase in which I was now inescapably expected to perform a modicum of normative “maleness,” at which I persistently failed. This botched coming of age story formed the beginning of my academic interest in gender, sexuality, and desire. In my case, the personal had become the academic. While I will expand upon my own story of gallivanting through identities in the following chapter, I would like to start off the thesis by explaining the goals of this study and how it relates to the phenomenon of being a transgender person in Turkey.

One the aims of this thesis, in broader terms, is to eventually contribute to the lives of trans women by stimulating an intellectual debate around the fundamental qualities and idiosyncrasies of trans lives I present in every chapter: trans sociability, the inherent intimacy embedded in the transition process and larger trans way of living, and the contentious topic of passing as a cisgender woman. I want this thesis to be a step towards a more trans-visible and trans-inclusive society by presenting insight into these subjects through trans women’s own perspective. On a more personal level, due to its prolonged duration, this study is also an aide-memoire where I track my own trajectory and the changes of the trans women around me. It is also a work that appeared in a context in which I started to raise concerns about conducting my personal and academic life safely and meaningfully in the transphobic and homophobic country I have lived all my life which turned out to be hostile to who I am and what I value. Therefore, it functions in a way both as an embryonic auto-ethnography and to fulfill a social responsibility towards

social equality. Sexual dissidents and gender non-conformists have been designated for lower-rank positions and deprived of the authority to speak for themselves. This is a thesis where trans women speak about themselves and other trans women, and this stands as an important characteristic of my research as discourse production (which, for David Valentine, is also the production of that very identity) on transgenerness is dominated by medical establishments, sometimes with pathologizing accent. In terms of framework, as a thesis dealing with identity politics/identity construction, hereby, I question the “imagined” trans community, using the term Valentine glosses. This is what propelled me into writing this thesis.

In this thesis, I examine the identity construction of trans women in Turkey by looking at three vital façades, through which, I argue, trans-identified women construct their identity: group-making, intimacy, and passing. Taking my cue from Valentine’s use of “imagined community,” which he describes as “... imagining of one group, where other putative members might not imagine themselves as belonging to such a community, or might not even know that such a community exists,” I attempt to understand how a group of people who have come to be identified as “trans(gender)” make sense of this identity (Valentine 2007, 103). In the second chapter, I discuss my own relation to transgender identity as a transgender researcher. I discuss how I have come to understand the category I work on and how I ended up becoming a subject of that category I attempt to make intelligible, hence where my knowledge is situated. In the third chapter, I look at what I call group-making to demonstrate how online and on-site sociability play an indispensable role for trans women. I contend that sociability figures in as a remedy for trans women whose existence and needs are marginalized in cisgender system. To cope with that problem, trans women consciously strive to create online and on-site spaces for themselves to share information on transition and stay in solidarity with each other. I then go on to explain the proximity trans women employ in their relation to each other, using intimacy as a governing concept. I argue that transition process requires a particular way of finding and sharing information on bodily modifications that can be provided by close relations among trans women that I call intimate. Lastly, I discuss how passing, a measurement tool of the cisgender-heterosexual normativity to validate or invalidate trans women’s womanhood, figures in the lives of trans women. This research fills the gap within a recently developing transgender studies field by presenting the ways trans women make sense of their identity through the data collected and analyzed by a transgender researcher. With a non-medicalizing and non-essentialist approach I adopt in

this research, I open the space for transgender women to negotiate, or “imagine” trans individual and communal identity on their own.

To understand the objectives and the content of this study, I believe that looking at both past and current socio-political contexts is crucial as this will show the reader where and how trans women have been situated as citizens and gendered subjects. Even though my informants’ and my positionalities are highlighted throughout the thesis, the reader will be able to have an overall understanding on the lives of trans-identified women in Turkey.

1.2. A Brief History of LGBTI+ People in Turkey

The existence of what is today put under the rubric of LGBTI+ or queer people in Turkey is not new. The existence of “same-sex” relations can be traced back to the Ottoman period, during which “homosexual” practices enjoyed a relative liberty (Delice 2012, 327). With the early Europeanization process “same-sex” sexual practices were looked down upon; however, the Ottoman Empire did not penalize this practice. The early Republican period did not penalize homosexuality either; the new Turkish Republic was too busy with state-building and it simply ignored this subject while “homosexuality” continued in urban and rural areas (Özbay 2015, 870). Until the 1970s, “queer” people enjoyed a relative freedom: The Turkish classical music singer Zeki Müren received great adulation with his non-normative attire that challenged male gender performance (Özbay 2015, 870), and trans women enjoyed a relative freedom in certain streets of Beyoğlu where they were able to work in brothels, even with other trans women coming from abroad (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 70). Another breaking point was when Bülent Ersoy, another Turkish classical music singer, and an up-and-coming rival of Zeki Müren, came to the public scene. Ersoy challenged both legal authorities and the public with her openly played out gender transition (Ertür and Lebow 2012, 398). However, when a conservative party came to power through a coalition with a leftist party and the interior ministry was held by the conservatives, trans women’s moderate leeway in Beyoğlu was heavily damaged and the brothels were banned (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 71) although a popular night club was opened in the same district (Özbay 2015, 870) which takes place in many senior trans women’s narratives as being frequented both by trans women and gay men. However, with the infamous 1980 coup, “men appearing in women’s cloths” were banned from stages as entertainers (singers and dancers), which was perhaps the second major sector through which trans women and feminine gay men (people whose employment in

other sectors was difficult) made their living (Eşsiz 2012, 200). From this juncture on, like the members of legal and illegal leftist organizations, trans women were clamped down upon as well. Trans women were collected and sent away from Istanbul's city center to the uninhibited places in the peripheries (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 12-81). They were also arbitrarily arrested and held under custody for days, humiliated, and tortured. Only when a neoliberal government came to power did the Turkish political, as well as cultural, arena become demilitarized: Bülent Ersoy, who went through gender confirmation surgery meanwhile in London in 1981, played an important role in the revoking of the ban in 1988. In tandem with this, it was permitted that one's civil status could be changed with a sex change operation (Ertür and Lebow 2012, 423). With the creation of the Radical Democratic Green Party, LGBTI+ issues (more specifically, homosexuality) came under discussion, yet, did not receive much support from other parties (Çetin 2016, 10). The 1990s marked as a decade during which gay men dominated the activist scene, in contrast to trans women's dominance in the 1980s (Çetin 2016, 11). With neoliberalization and urbanization, institutionalizing the movement gained importance (Çetin 2016, 10). In this line, the first pride parade was attempted and several LGBTI+ associations were founded in that decade. However, in 1996, trans sex workers (along with other disadvantaged groups in society such as Roma and Kurdish people, street children and animals) were "cleaned" from Istanbul's center as part of the preparations for the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (UN-HABITAT II) (Selek 2014, 132-133). Meanwhile, a more neoliberally-integrated gay and lesbian culture continued to develop in Istanbul with the opening of bars and cafes along with demands of political recognition (Özbay 2015, 871). As modern gayness became globalized, gay people in Turkey started to adopt a western gay identity (Özbay 2010, 647). With the AKP arrival to power in 2002 and its initial commitment to join the European Union, the movement was able to mobilize and institutionalize more easily until the mid-2000s, when the party labeled as "conservative-democratic" began to present its more conservative side. Some high-ranking AKP officials made insulting remarks about LGBTI+ people (Engin 2015, 843). Against all odds, a Euro-American influenced gay, lesbian, and trans culture is growing in Turkey with sundry ways of sociabilities, subcultures, and online meeting venues. Still, Turkey remains a country where the killing of trans people is high (Engin 2015, 842) and trans people are forced to surgically alter their bodies in order to gain legal recognition as female citizens. Moreover, Istanbul's

pride parades have been declared illegal since 2015, and the participants have been dispersed with police violence every year since then.

1.3. Current Situation: A Part of a General Clampdown

President Erdoğan recently spoke out against “the marginals” in Beyoğlu saying that they need to behave with propriety if they want to remain in this country (Cumhuriyet 2018). Istanbul’s Beyoğlu district is known to be the center for not only the city itself, but for dissident citizens of all stripes. Aside from being one of the contemporary enclaves for sexual minorities, the area had historically been a center for especially sex worker trans women until they were systematically forced to desert it in the 1990s. The district is home to outcasts and minorities –including sexual ones– as well as hippies, artists, and a large number of foreigners. Beyoğlu had been the very center of LGBTI+ and trans pride parades until they were declared illegal. The district still hosts numerous of LGBTI+ events, nowadays those at smaller scale and in an almost clandestine fashion.

Utterances against LGBTI+ people by the officials of the ruling part are strong premonitions for upcoming encroachments on the lives of sundry “marginals.” Especially after the botched coup attempt and the ensuing state of emergency which has kept being prolonged for 2 years, the government is taking no prisoners against any kind of opposition and riding roughshod over anyone outside their electorate. Its stab at creating a homogenous Turkish society that is comprised of doormat citizens is taking its toll on marginalized people. Such rabble-rousing speeches function as a way of cowering LGBTI+ citizens as well as the political organizations daring to include them in their agenda alike. The now-president’s speeches have always been awash with verbal attack on non-conforming people, from women without headscarves to women practicing birth control to mixed-gender student apartments to anchorwomen wearing décolleté. These exhortatory speeches and actions arguably have a ripple effect on ordinary people, resulting in verbal and physical harassment on streets by the henchmen straining on the leash to do so.¹ Against this backdrop, women’s, LGBTI+, and students’ movements keep

¹Right after the botched coup attempt, security forces (not necessarily the police) started to control people at many checkpoints, including subway stations. I had a small argument about the checking of my bag at one of these checkpoints. A random man who saw me arguing with the security person and perhaps who just could not wait a few seconds more to pass through the checkpoint himself, interjected and threatened me publicly with approximately the following words: “Look, they call you lady and they show you respect but I won’t show you respect!” (“*Bak, sana hanımefendi diyor, saygı gösteriyor; ben saygı göstermem!*”) Luckily, the verbal harassment did not reach to a physical confrontation.

soldiering on against a torrent of legal and social restrictions imposed upon them by a long-standing political agenda, now in the throes of establishing its own “pious generation” (*dindar nesil*) (Hayward 2018). The LGBTI+ movement’s grievances have been intentionally stonewalled on the grounds of “national and moral values” of the country. The smorgasbord of problems has not even been addressed legally; they are merely rendered trivial or invisible. The constant discursive one-upmanship of the “pious generation” supposedly ready to kill or die for whatever patriotic reason over the LGBTI+ people or other “marginals” relegated to be an only a “color” of the country –if they are to remain quiet– has created a legal barrier for LGBTI+ people to addressing their grievances within political organizations and NGOs. Political parties and other political organizations are keeping mum on LGBTI+ rights out of fear of being demonized (Bianet 2017). Trans issues atrophy to almost nothing among a boatload of more “serious” problems the country is dealing with. Consequently, non-normative people become once again a fodder for an authoritarian leader attempting to consolidate his base with pat remarks, as nationalist rhetoric has always worked as a crutch to repress pariahs. Given this situation, more restrictions on individual liberties and violation of human rights conspicuously loom, and LGBTI+ citizens become increasingly leery of the country’s future.

Aside from arenas that are traditionally considered for political activism, there are only a paltry number of venues for trans women –and perhaps optimistically, a few more for LGBTI+ individuals, if that– to socialize online and on-site. While gays and lesbians might visit more cafes and bars, places for trans women shrink (Selek 2014, 97). Similarly, although new online meeting opportunities arise for queer people around the world and certainly LGBTI+ people of Turkey make use of these online venues, some of these applications/websites are being banned in Turkey. These spaces are diminishing even more for trans sex worker women, many of whose profession requires them to cruise on the streets or sell their services online. This situation renders the “personal is political” even more tangible in the modern Turkish society.

I have described the hardships prevailing in the current Turkish socio-political arena to better show the context in which this thesis is created and what it aims to do. However, this does not mean that the LGBTI+ movement in Turkey has been completely subdued. In fact, the “movement,” even before morphing into a movement, has been full of resilient people who have resorted to many ways to survive. Since the subjects of this

thesis are trans women, I will underscore the position of trans women, who are the most “problematic” part of the larger LGBTI+ community both because of a non-normative identity and an “indecent” way of living and working. They are the ones who have had to fight most visibly to be able to create a living space for themselves. Aside from transitioning from male to female, most trans women –especially in the “advent” of them– had to engage in sex work. This is sort of a double bind in which becoming a woman without having to engage in sex work was almost impossible due to being left with financial instability (being disowned by family, being fired from jobs, being harassed at home and work, being bullied at school). Although reliable statistics are difficult to come by, speculatively, the vast majority of trans women in Turkey are making a living in sex work (Engin 2015, 842), either self-employed or working under mother-daughter kinship or pimps. Accounts from senior trans women show us that even the ones who were employed in the entertainment industry (one of the two main areas allocated for trans women) as singers, dancers, or bar girls had to engage in sex work one way or another. In addition to those who are directly and openly engaged in sex work, there are a relatively smaller portion of trans women who are employed in outside of commercial sex yet will occasionally resort to commercial sex when the opportunity arises in a clandestine and side-gig fashion. Sex work, by and large, has come in the form of prostitution in brothels and on the streets, but a tiny number of trans women have acted in erotic movies as well (Eren 2017). Thus, their profession and their relative visibility (they need to be visible as sex workers to attract clients) leave them as open targets for assorted assaults, from individual crimes to systematic cleansing. Turkey notoriously ranks high among the countries in which murder of trans people reach to horrifying numbers. A considerable number in the younger generation of trans women attending universities and working in cafes, bars, and LGBTI+ associations are making the public eye more familiar with trans women. In terms of location, trans women no longer live concentrated in particular streets of Beyoğlu and Cihangir, two of İstanbul’s most expensive venues. Many of them cannot afford to live in downtown Taksim, Beyoğlu’s center, but they still try to live in the outer vicinities such as Dolapdere, Tarlabaşı, or even Kurtuluş and Osmanbey together with other low-income people. There are a high number of sex worker trans women living in the city’s newly-built and relatively cheaper areas such as Beylikdüzü and Halkalı. Those who are able to earn more from sex work can afford living in more modern and expensive districts such as Kadıköy, often with the company of another trans woman for economic and security reasons.

1.4. Social Scientific Literature

The Turkish literature on transgenderism, for the most part, has been affected by the Euro-American-centric cultural production and the medicalizing discourses due the presence of several points: 1) the use of “homosexuals/same-sex” as an umbrella term to talk about trans women, even when trying to make distinction between homosexuals and trans people; 2) use of the term “sex change” and its variations and a general biological determinism/essentialism; 3) not regarding sufficiently the most common emic term, *lubunya*.

Trans literature in Turkish academic circles is still inchoate, especially when compared to the North American cultural production in which “transgenderism” was born (Valentine, 32). Speculatively, the fact that transgenderism has not yet become a societal phenomenon calling for attention in the eyes of Turkish society could be a reason behind the negligence on the issue in academia. The only times trans people have been seen as a flavor of the month were the times in which Turkish TV channels lacked interesting content and broadcast to their audience how trans prostitution was degenerating the youth and how aggressive trans sex worker women were towards their neighbors, clients, and the police. In the 1990s, the TV programs did not even call them “women” aside from sporadically addressing the trans (Kare 2014)² guests as “lady” (*hanımefendi*); they were simply, sui generis, chimerical³ creatures called “transvestites” (*travesti*) or just *bunlar* (these). The fact that trans people and LGBTI+ individuals were seen as differences who needed to be tolerated, and not acknowledged as citizens whose rights have been violated, can also be considered as a factor in the lack of literature. The newly-minted trans literature, aside from the much-vexed medical literature on transgenderism, is written by LGBTI+ people (or, what is called “LGBTI+ allies”) themselves who have a personal stake in the issue.⁴ Trans people like myself have been even less engaged in academic

²This particular TV program was relatively a positive one compared to other bigger TV shows of the time hosted by famous journalists Savaş Ay and Uğur Dündar, who did not treat trans women as equal citizens. Whereas the host of this program managed to utter some sentences like “crime against humanity” when he heard the accounts of maltreatment from trans women, and “You do not have right to do that; this is a crime.” when he heard lunatic demands from the “concerned neighbors” that trans sex worker women should be collected by the government and forced to live in a secluded place away from families. It is daunting to see how these cis-men (not interestingly, all the aggressors are cis-men) flaunt about carrying guns, threaten and attack trans women while still shamelessly making claptrap complaints about how a travesti called one of them a slaphead (*keltoş*) to the program’s host.

³In the 2018 Oscar winning Chilean movie *Una Mujer Fantástica*, or *A Perfect Woman*, the heroine, named Marina, is described as a “chimera” by the ex-wife of her boyfriend who was not able to make sense of what she was.

⁴In a similar fashion, gay, lesbian, and Kurdish people are taking the initiative in the cultural production regarding their respective identities. This not inherently wrong; it simply is quite telling in that academia is seen as an arena in which oppressed identities attempt to render their problems more palatable.

production since only a precious few of them have been able to make it to university education at the expense of a later transition.

One primal work is called *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak*, which historicizes trans women's presence starting from around the 1950s with accounts of senior sex worker trans women. The book was created by İzmir-based trans women's association *Siyah Pembe Üçgen* (Black Pink Triangle). The book shows how the previous transgender generation in Turkey struggled for their very existence against a backdrop of exclusion from family, having to engage in mandatory sex work, and being constantly harassed by the security forces –other characteristics apparently significant in constructing one's identity that I do not cover in my research (Çetin 2016, 8). The book presents very similar accounts from sex worker trans women: escaping from family in their childhood, being sexually harassed in the family circles and during whole their lives, arriving in Istanbul, finding people like themselves in Beyoğlu, and doing sex work.

80'lerde Lubunya Olmak presents accounts of trans women's childhood memories where they “felt like a girl,” and almost inseparably and sometimes interchangeably, this meant that they liked men. Desiring men almost came with the territory of “feeling like a girl” or vice versa. Some accounts show that the women had been desiring men since the age of 5 or 9, associating themselves with other *travestis* as early as 13 years old, and starting sex work willingly around the age of 14 (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 27-127-184-190). This is of importance in that it goes against the contemporary transgender discourse which claims that sexual orientation and gender identity has nothing to do with each other; they are completely different concepts. Whereas for these women, these two are intertwined and reciprocally affect each other (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 24-33). While my informants do not talk about sexual intercourse in their early childhood, their narratives of “feeling like a girl” and “liking boys” coalesce into their take on womanhood. In that respect, the book relates to my own research showing both childhood as an early step in womanhood and desiring men and blurring the boundaries between gay and transgender that are thought to be mutually exclusive (Valentine 2007, 4).

This oral history project shows how the women's lives intersected with the notorious 1980 coup d'état, as the title of it suggests, and the subsequent threat, torture, and exile they faced at the hands of the security forces. It also shows how changing political leaders and office holders affect their space in entertainment and sex work, their choice to undergo the “sex change” operation, and their treatment in medical institutions

(Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 200). This is an example of states' exerting a violent biopower over trans people in conspicuous ways and attempting to subjugate non-docile bodies, a topic which remains outside the scope of this thesis. Still, as Çetin argues such systematic oppression from the security forces and state in general helped the formation of a collective identity (Çetin 2016, 8).

Pınar Selek's *Maskeler, Süvariler, Gacılar: Ülker Sokak: Bir Altkültürün Dışlanma Mekanı* by a resilient trans ally and political activist who helped trans women residing in Ülker Sokak when they were systematically being forced to leave the area. Selek, in her foreword for the book's second edition, says that "Ülker Street is not far away from our street. Those who do not know shall learn as well (Selek 2014, 24)." She wrote her master's thesis based on the work she did with trans women which later gave birth to this book. Her engagement with trans women is not purely academic; she is the epitome of an engaged researcher. What is notable about her work is the way she expresses her positionality in her book: how she started to write this book on the request of the trans women who she deemed to be her friends when they are in a pinch, how she might not be objective (something she does not believe in) given the fact that she is opinionated about the police, media, and nationalists, how she consider herself as a *witness* to an exclusion operation, how she was suspicious about objectifying research methods, yet optimistic about researcher women's alternative methods, and how she aimed to produce knowledge *with* the research group –not just *on* them. She does acknowledge the fact that her being sympathetic to the "transvestites and transsexual" (her friends) made her open to believing everyday information communicated by these people, such as the accounts of a nostalgic, romanticized past on solidarity. For these reasons, her work has been of great importance and an exemplary study.

Like these two books, the Turkish literature on the issue chiefly focuses on sex worker trans women as a big number of trans women are actively engaged in sex work and supporting themselves by that means. Unfortunately, there are no scholarly or non-scholarly works focusing on non-sex worker trans women's lives. Work presenting trans women outside of sex work have, for the most part, focused on the LGBTI+ plus movement in general. Rüstem Altınay's article, "Reconstructing the Transgendered Self as a Muslim, Nationalist, Upper Class Woman: The Case of Bülent Ersoy," stands as an exception, perhaps since its subject, the famous Turkish classical music singer Bülent Ersoy, is herself an exception. Altınay focuses on the life of "Diva" nicknamed Bülent

Ersoy, and through her movies, TV appearances, and public speeches, analyzes how she constructs her identity as a Muslim, Turkish, nationalist, wealthy trans woman without letting medical discourses on transgenderism define her. This sort of discourse analysis, especially with regard to identity construction, is highly significant for my work, as I research the ways in which trans women deploy various discourses to “normalize” and “womanize” themselves in the society.

Selin Berghan’s *Lubunya: Transseksüel Kimlik ve Beden*, which was based on Berghan’s master’s thesis, attempts to cover the lives of what she calls, “transsexual”s. With specific questions directed towards understanding transsexual women’s meaning-making of their identity and constructing their bodies, this study discovers the peculiarities of the transsexual category as a distinct gender identity.

Deniz Kandiyoti’s “Pembe Kimlik Sancıları” also tackles the transsexual phenomenon: transsexuals’ self-identification, what they do to become a woman, their relations to the institution of medicine, *Lubunca*, and sex work (*hayat*). This study too analyzes transgender as an identity issue.

Berfu Şeker’s *Başkaldıran Bedenler: Türkiye’de Transgender, Aktivizm ve Altkültürel Pratikler* is a substantial work bringing together various trans-themed pieces by queer academics, students, activist, and artists. The book, which is based on a conference held in 2010 allows queer and trans identified people to speak for themselves and looks at the trans identity, in past and present and within different axes of power. It relates to my own research in that transgender and queer people disseminate discourse on transness in lieu of medical establishments.

In addition to these major works, young researchers and junior scholars productively engage in academic production on LGBTI+, gender and sexuality studies. Many of these works come from the authors’ senses of activism and personal stake and investment in the subjects they are trying to make intelligible. The topics they handle are also intertwined with each other, as they are parts of the imagined LGBTI+ identity.

1.5. Non-Academic Endeavor

Even though many trans identified women do not choose to be in academia, or, more realistically, cannot achieve that for far too obvious reasons, trans women’s stories are being relayed to larger audiences via various media. In addition to the small amount of Turkish language movies starring trans characters, there are other platforms directly

used by trans women themselves or which present them as the heroines. Theater plays such as *Cadının Bohçası* (Witch's Bundle) by Esmeray, *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* (Being a Lubunya in the 80s) by Sumru Yavrucuk, *Kadınlar, Aşklar, Şarkılar* (Women, Love, Songs) by Ahmet Melih Yılmaz, and *Küründen Kabare* (Fake Cabaret) by Seyhan Arman are examples of such venture. Although Sumru Yavrucuk is a cisgendered woman and Melih is a cisgendered man, they are telling verite stories in these one-person shows that many trans women can relate to. On the other hand, Seyhan Arman and Esmeray are trans women conveying their own (and collectively owned, so to speak) experiences in a tragicomic fashion. Although these plays, all of which I was lucky enough to see, are not academic materials, they certainly are materials for academia. As the society encounters the transgender phenomenon through movies and theatres as such, academic work and political interest in the imagined group will surely rise.

In addition, social media has allowed trans woman to introduce themselves to larger audiences and there are currently a few trans women figures with a significant online following. However, this is far from the extent that North American trans women are using online platforms for content production and disseminating knowledge on transgenerness. Especially Youtube and Instagram have become important tools through which trans identified people make money and gain fame. While North American social media celebrities broadcast their transition and detransition process, coming out stories, surgeries, hormone replacement therapy, psychological situation, sex and romantic life, familial relations, date-gone-bad postmortems, "Q&A"s, "He Didn't Know I Was Trans!!!" and whatnot, trans women of Turkey have yet to engage in such vocation – except a few trans women who attempted this but had to stop their undertaking due to online harassment.

1.6. Non-Turkish Literature

Literature on trans women outside Turkey is certainly older and more branched out. Euro-American, especially North American literature takes the lead in trans cultural production and academic work on trans people. During my literature review for my thesis, several scholars have had a significant influence on me which made me question the discourses disseminated by the inchoate LGBTI+ activists and associations, with regards to transgenderism and how it is different from other identities. For my thesis, I was initially interested in working with Turkish trans sex worker women who also frequently called themselves *eşcinsel* (homosexual) and *lubunya*, a more encompassing, yet

politically non-intelligible term to define feminine-presenting, masculine-desiring people who are assigned male at birth. David Valentine and Don Kulick, in their respective works *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* and *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* delve into this issue by sharing the accounts of people who are put under the rubric of transgender, yet, as Valentine says, not “schooled in the language of transgender” –people who are in a disadvantageous position in terms of race and class.

Kulick’s work, more correctly, accounts of his informants, show quite important similarities to those in *80’lerde Lubunya Olmak*. These similarities point to a stark difference between Euro-(North) American centered understanding of transgender and those outside that geography. For example, Kulick says that

“No North American or European memoirs of transgenderism mention early erotic interest in members of the same sex as a motivating force in the perception of one-self as transgendered. Quite the opposite; that erotic feeling for males might be a motivating force for sex change is consistently and explicitly denied. Transsexualism is about gender, we are reminded time and again in those accounts, not about sexuality (Kulick 1999, 48).”

In both books, trans women relate that they desired men (to be more specific, they desired to be anally penetrated) and initiated sex with them even though the experience might be hurtful. In addition to that, there are other similarities following the path of what trans women of Turkey around the 1980s suffered. Kulick claims that Brazilian *travestis* appeared in large numbers only after the military regime was abolished in the mid-1980s (Kulick 1999, 142). As this was the case in Turkey’s military regime in the 1980s, trans women suffered a greatly. Even the techniques of exclusion during and after these regimes display similar qualities: Both Turkish and Brazilian *travestis* became the targets of cleansing campaigns, they were randomly attacked by the police on street, their hair was cut by the police, and they were sent away from the cities in which they worked (Kulick 1999, 142).

Valentine’s work is one of the most famous studies on transgender identity politics and construction. *Imagining Transgender* leads the reader to question the imagined boundaries between actually fluid and enigmatic identities. It interrogates how a particular identity came into being as a consequence of the combined efforts of activists, scholars, law makers, and medical institutions. Therefore, it has an indispensable place

for transgender studies as it questions the very term transgender under the rubric of which transgender studies scholars create their works. In this way, it is trailblazing research.

Harold Garfinkel's "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an "Intersexed" Person" focuses on a trans woman's endeavor to be assigned for vaginal reconstruction surgery by claiming that they were born intersex. In this study, Garfinkel uses his famous ethnomethodology to understand how trans people develop strategies to access certain medical treatment or to get what they want from a certain state institution, like the military. I, too, apply this method not just for trans women's encounters with doctors, but in every part of their lives to understand how they make sense of their being and deeds. The study is crucial in that it presents gender identity as something managed and achieved as opposed to relegating gender identity to an essence. How Agnes, the "intersexed" (actually transgender) person of the research, constructs herself almost as a "biological" woman with a small mistake caused by nature by negotiating with doctors show similarities to how my informants build their identity as "normal" women in society.

1.7. Research Questions

I position myself as a representative of the very group of trans women who are the subject of this thesis and a larger "imagined" transgender community. Positioning the researcher in relation to their participants is important in terms showing the possible strengths and weaknesses of the research caused by the power asymmetry, categorical differences, and the expectations of the both parties from each other. Therefore, I have to point out that as a trans women, some of the information comes from my "insider position," as Sally Hines puts it, along with the interviews and the participant observation. In the context of my own identity fluctuations, fitting in fiascos, transition process, along with the literature review for this thesis, the following questions shaped the framework of this study:

Do trans people have specific ways of conducting their life compared to cisgender people? Why and how transgender people come together? What do they talk about in online and offline groups? Do they feel a need to talk about what they talk about with people "like themselves"? Who do they deem to be like themselves? In other words, who gets to be in transgender groups and who stays outside? What is the place of intersectionality in the formation of such groups? What is the role of an imagined sameness in childhood and psychological problems? How much proximity does the very "nature" of transition require trans women to adopt? Can we call this proximity intimacy?

What is the purpose of intimate relationings for conveying knowledge on transition process and for negotiating friendships among the trans community? What is the place of so-called passing in trans women's life? Is passing merely a momentary act or can the concept be broadened as to cover one's past? What does passing mean for cisgender people and how do perceive trans women who are "able" to pass and those who "fail" in or opt out passing?

Taking my cue on Butler's work, I also wondered "Which bodies come to matter –and why?" I wondered why my transitioning, transcending, transgressing mattered: Why the T mattered to the extent it has been mattering since its genesis. Certainly, some of the questions are not directly addressed in this thesis; however, they formed somewhat of an intelligible mess in my head that I will try to tidy up throughout this study.

1.8. Methodology and the Field

I have spent a lengthy, and more importantly, intense, period of time conducting this study, and even a longer and similarly intense period was spent for my quest to understand my own identity which has always shaped my academic area of interest throughout my university education, including the subject of this thesis. The actual "fieldwork" in which I met my interviewees in person and started getting to know their lives begun in December 2016. However, I had already been in the same bustling WhatsApp group with some of my informants from the summer 2016 on, where I had a chance to familiarize myself with them by means of interminable online interaction the group offered. Moreover, prior to my acquaintanceship with the trans women I worked with for this thesis, from the early 2015 on I have been already trying to acclimate myself to the lives of trans women on social media, especially those who engage in sex work, as this was my initial area of interest. As a formerly self-identified gay boy who participated in the foundation of his university's first LGBTI+ community (later turned into an official student club) I was a part of the "community" although with less knowledge and awareness for the trans issues.

At the start, my research aimed to collect data on trans sex worker women online as I did not have any trans sex worker friends I kept seeing in person, nor other trans women for that matter. Although when I began to embrace a trans identity I knew nobody neither as a friend, nor as a gatekeeper, I naively thought that me being a trans woman would help me to communicate with sex worker trans women –I was to realize straight away that this was not the case, at least with my method. My "method" of the time

included trying to reach out to sex worker trans women on dating applications which they almost exclusively used for *koli*, meaning sex work client in *Lubunca*. To my chagrin, as a “new girl” with no reference, recognition, or credibility who is ready to polish off sex worker women’s valuable time which they can use to spend on their work, I was rejected. Sometimes I was not even rejected; I was blocked on the spot, or simply ignored. Women I had been watching in live broadcasts all knew each other, either closely or just by name through co-working and/or trans kinship; yet, I was simply no one. This situation, which was at initially a poor prospect for my thesis-in-the-making, has brought a question mark to my mind, and I began to ponder the issue of differences in trans identities. I also learned from this experience that I needed to first build rapport and have convenience in terms of participant selection to be able to conduct a form of research that I planned to.

At this juncture, with the advice of my friends, in the fall 2015, I found out about an exclusively trans group therapy which I irregularly keep attending up to this day. These meetings, which are therapy sessions for trans women and men held by an LGBTI+ association called SPOD, have provided me with the opportunity to meet the subjects of this study, who now happen to be my friends. Right after the first meeting, I exchanged numbers with a trans woman, who later informed me about a trans women’s WhatsApp group and asked me whether I would like to join. Upon my answer, my new friend added me to this group called *Diğerleri* (Others). I became a member, although a silent one in group with a constant surfeit of text messages over a short span of time.

In this research, I use the convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. I met my first participant in fall 2015 when I attended SPOD’s (an LGBTI+ association located in Istanbul’s Taksim) monthly trans group therapies. Although I did not attend the event for research purposes back then (I attended to find friends and inform myself about the transition process); she enabled me to get to know other trans women through the WhatsApp group she was already in. Through her referral of me to the online group, I had the opportunity to meet, who would later become, the rest of my participants. The sample include women at the various stages of –what they call– “the process (*süreç*).”

For this research, I resorted to participant observation and in-depth interviews. I conducted unstructured to semi-structured interviews with 7 women: Esra A., Esra B., Ela, Seçil, Alya, Yaman, and Demet. For ethical reasons, I assign pseudonyms for each participant in lieu of their chosen names.

My first interview lasted more than 5,5 hours in a single day at Esra A.'s apartment: First, I interviewed Esra A. alone (65 minutes) before other women arrived. Then, I interviewed Esra A. and Ela in a group interview (182 minutes), and lastly Esra A., Esra B., and Ela in another group interview (90 minutes) as the other two women arrived. My second interview took place in Esra A.'s apartment in Kadıköy again as this was a convenient place for us to talk about transness without feeling uneasy about it. In this interview, I conversed with Esra A. and Esra B. (104) at the same time. This was followed by an individual interview with Seçil (43 minutes) at a Starbucks in Taksim, a group interview with Alya and Yaman in a café (136 minutes) in Kadıköy, an individual interview with Alya at another Starbucks (35 minutes) in Kadıköy. I completed my interviews with Demet at an LGBTI+ friendly café in Taksim (76 minutes).

Some of the interviews were group interviews and some were individual interviews. Since I made my interview request through the WhatsApp group, some of the women wanted to be interviewed together, as they saw the interview as an activity of getting together with friends.⁵ Therefore, they chose to be interviewed as a group or individual. For instance, I interviewed Esra A. in her apartment individually; however, when Ela and the Esra B. came in, she continued to talk as I interviewed other two women separately.

1.8.1. Where is the field?

Fieldwork of this study covers online and onsite spaces, former of which I have already mentioned. I have met my informants and other trans women in various kinds of spaces. First trans women I met was when I was trying to postpone the mandatory military service Turkish male citizens must do. Although I did not go the military institution to be exempt from the service once and for all (I had deferred that ordeal to be dealt with later), this was what ended up happening. In these occasions, I had the opportunity to listen to the lives of young trans sex worker women who were trying to prove to the Turkish state that they were women and not suitable for the service. I got to know the most trans women (along with trans men) in transgender group therapies with some of whom I cultivated more profound friendships. I finally met my first group of interviewees in the house of one of them: Esra A. She later continued these gatherings in the form of convivial soirées

⁵The relations between the women affected the form of the interviews. Since Esra A., Esra B., and Ela were closer friends among the group (they were actually the WhatsApp group's moderators) they demanded to be interviewed together as a form of socialization with each other.

where only some selected friends are invited to enjoy the company of each other while being hosted with utmost decorum. Esra A.'s semi-regular meetings provides women with comfortable socialization: Scented candles are lit, pre-drink snacks are ready on the table, beer is cold, salad is prepared by her, pizzas are ordered from a nice restaurant, and music is on the background. This is especially important because people who attend Esra A.'s home parties form the core group I socialize with; I follow their trajectory, I hang out with them, I interview and observe them. In addition to these venues, myriad sorts of LGBTI+ events, such as trans group therapies, nightouts and parties, along with demonstrations form the fieldwork of research. Lastly, I consider the time spent in a particular laser hair removal saloon of which clientele is predominantly trans sex worker women as an important part of my fieldwork.

1.8.2. My Positionality: “And this is Hazal, our academic.”

When I formally asked group members if they would be willing to work with me for my study, I was already “one of the girls,” rather than a researcher who attempted to probe into their lives for the sole purpose of conducting a research. Although in the latter method the researcher can still build rapport, I have realized that working with trans women requires an even higher degree of trust-building, as well as genuine amicable relations –basically, a friendship. If I was not a trans woman myself, I would not have been able to join these exclusively trans online platforms which contributed enormously to my existing knowledge on trans women. If I was not an educated, passable trans woman with a career goal outside sex work, with relatively flexible temporality and arguably good temperament, I would not have attained the proximity I have to some of my informants.

Some of the trans women I worked with previously participated in academic and activism projects and they were able to compare their experiences with the one they were having with me. At some point, a psychiatrist wanted to have sessions with some of my informants whom she reached out via the LGBTI association which hosts the monthly meetings. Some of my friends participated in the therapies; while some were content about it, my main informant Esra A. told me that she “felt like being interrogated.” She told me that she favored my method of research emphasizing that I spend time with them. Neither her, nor the other two psychiatrists working with the association are considered friends and/or invited to any trans group activity; they are simply seen as professionals although they too are allegedly from the “community.” I am their friend whose company,

as far as I know, they enjoy and ask for. I am also a friend whom they think of as an up-and-coming academic, and feel pride in. This relation is also a quid pro quo in that they will help a friend with candor who is going to represent them on the academic arena more authentically and hopefully for the better.

Some researchers might approach this degree of proximity cautiously; however, trans women I work with do demand interaction, at least through the WhatsApp groups when face-to-face interaction is not possible. They expect each other to participate in online conversations in a quick, friendly, and responsive manner. They also expect members to attend meetings if possible. At the beginning of my WhatsApp group socialization as relatively a quite member, when I write a message, others would often make jokes about me saying that I “finished my quota for this month.” This gradually changed as I became more acclimated to trans socialization. Especially the founder of the first WhatsApp group frequently underscore that the group consists of friends. She also criticizes the other “renegade” WhatsApp group, which is an offspring of schism but now seems to have gotten even bigger than the first group, as it became something different than a friendship group where people get together and share something in person.

When I first started getting to know my other interviewees, Esra A would always introduce me as Hazal (my chosen name I use in my social life instead of my legal name) highlighting that I was a trans woman and an academic, referring to me as research assistant, scientist and so on. I would correct her saying that I was just a master’s student; however, I still feel the attention and respect she nurtured for me in deference to my vocation. In the same vein, when I contacted with a famous trans woman to interview her for a term paper, she accepted my request stating that she valued a lot the fact that I, as a trans woman, was researching on trans women and contributing to trans visibility at universities. Up to this day, when trans women find out about a fellow trans woman who studied at the top universities and strives for producing knowledge on transgender, they flatter me with nice word and this part of my identity comes to forefront –quite opposite to my relation to cisgender people where my transness becomes the focus of my entire being.

I have also come to realize that a prolonged fieldwork with trans women, especially with those belonging to a same group of friends, has significant benefits in terms of gaining a deeper understanding on the topic. First of all, a fleeting research with a mere focus on interviews and skirting the participant observation, might receive less

then authentic data as some trans women repurpose their stories when they know that the interviewer seeks a story. For instance, when I interviewed a famous trans person without a previous acquaintanceship, she chose to give me a story not necessarily wrong but dissimulated. I went to the interview having known some information about her and having read the interviews she gave to certain media; therefore, I was able to realize the pattern she followed when she was aware of she was the addressee of an interviewer who was going to write about trans image. Second, a persistent participant observation shows the changing opinions of the informants over time. For instance, an unmalleable anti sex work informant might one year later decide to ask for “gifts” from every man to “punish” them, after her ex-boyfriend started to ignore her and she kept receiving maltreatment from men in general. Only a closer following of her transition has enabled me to observe her wavering about a particular subject given certain conditions. Third, when relationships wear weak, people tend to divulge information about their former friends which they were not willing to reveal initially. This should not be taken as taking advantage of intra-group fights; it is an important insight one gets through prolonged research that will help the researcher understand the group dynamics. A research devoid of these characteristics might concomitantly tend to dovetail its findings based on the initial hypothesis due to a lack of understanding of the intricacies and mercuriality of the informants’ lives. This is especially the case with my informants: All of my informants have been transitioning, at most, for a few years. Many women, including myself describe these early stages of their womanhood as a late puberty in which there is a strong element of volatility and complexity. Thus, womanhood is for them/us is a site of learning and experimenting. Especially in tandem with their bodily development, the ideas they present and the practices they engage in might differ gradually as they progress in social life as women.

Sally Hines acknowledges that if there are common experiences between the researcher and the participant, this might positively contribute to the rapport level, hence, the data gathered. She also asserts that transgender investigator might have an “insider position” that might, again, contribute positively to the trust between the researcher and the participant. She follows claiming that the inside knowledge the transgender researcher holds might also allow them to ask different questions (Hines 2009, 81) possibly resulting in more rounded perspective.

1.8.3. Difficulties in the Field

In addition to intra-group problems that might result in as difficulties in conducting the research, there is a far more pharaonic problem for trans people, and any gender-variant and morally non-conforming citizens for that matter, especially under the neoliberal Islamist government that has been holding power for about 15 years. Although I will not be belaboring here the Islamist clampdown of LGBTI+ individuals in detail, it is important to discuss it as it relates to my research field directly. LGBTI+ individuals and associations have been cowed by ever-increasing Islamist encroachment which has particularly intensified after the botched coup d'état in 2016. A martial law was promulgated after the coup attempt, under which, it became even more easier to cancel any sort of LGBTI+ mass demonstrations for security reasons and “moral and religious sensitivities of Turkish people.” LGBTI+ and trans pride parades that have gathered large masses and have been conducted most peacefully, have been banned since the coup attempt. Recently, all the LGBTI+ events were banned in the capital Ankara, and a movie screening was also banned in Istanbul (Osborne 2017).

In this environment, it becomes a challenge for me and my participants to gather in LGBTI+ events. Considering the fact that LGBTI+ people, especially those who display uncompromising behaviors and looks, have been subjected to verbal and physical violence. People are afraid of being taken into custody and putting into jail. Especially the violence directed to transgender women in the last decades are still poignantly fresh in memories, trans women are concerned of their bodily integrity.

1.9. Terminology

For I am about to delve into politics of identification, it is crucial to talk about the terminology at this very juncture. (Terms specific to the theme of passing will be glossed in the respective chapter.) Trans-identified women employ various words to gloss their recondite, yet, piquant forms of being. Trans women of this thesis can broadly be described the way Connel describes “transsexual” women:

“By “transsexual women” I mean women who have been through a process of transition between locations in the gender order, from earlier definition as a boy or man toward the embodiment and social position of a woman—whatever the path taken and whatever the outcome (Connell 2012, 857-58).”

I am using the term identity as Ken Plummer uses. Particularly, I deploy the transgender identity in this research as an attempt of being “...forged around relationships and conscious choices over the life one wishes to live and one wishes to be (Plummer,

Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds 2003, 160).” Similarly, I use the term identity because of the reason Plummer articulates its relation to self-construction: “Identities may well matter more once they are an issue of self-construction; they even become a basis for politics as the recent developments in the women’s, gay and black movements show most clearly (Plummer 2003, 160).”

My informants use the terms “trans woman” or “trans” for their self-identifications. Most of these women are directly or indirectly in relation with LGBTI+ associations and use these two terms as politically acceptable self-identification terms. *Lubunya* (also *labunya*, *libunya*, *lubinya* (Kandiyoti 2012, 281)) is also another, yet, more encompassing and involved term for feminine-acting, masculine-desiring people who were assigned male at birth. Although it seems like *lubunya* was one of the main self-identification terms used by the subjects of my thesis prior to the advent of “trans(s)exual” or “transgender,” it is now currently used by my informants as a facetious term.⁶ Prior to the widespread use of “trans/gender (woman),” trans women (along with feminine-presenting men) were called with the derogatory term of “*dönme*” (one who turns/transitions) (Kandiyoti 2012, 281), “*kadın kılıklı*” (woman-appearing), “*nonoş*” (approximately, effeminate) (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 13), *şorolo* (Soydan 2018) *tanju* (Gürsu and Elitemiz 2012, 32, Selek 2014, 94).

Some of the women I worked with also previously identified themselves as *cd* (crossdresser), and they only use the term *travesti* (or the more pejorative acronym of it, *tro*) on a lark, for example, when they are teasing each other. They would not normally use these terms when introducing themselves in social life. (An exception could be the use of *travesti* in dating applications when the words trans or transgender do not seem to be understood by the potential partners. The women must then explain further that they are not sex workers (if they are not) since the word *travesti* is well-known, yet, strongly associated with sex work.) As opposed to the pejorative words above, *travesti* was a form of self-identification dominating the ‘90s while the current “T” of the LGBTI+ was “TT” –*travesti*, and *transeksüel* (transvestite and tran(s)exual). Then, in contrast to the Western understanding of the word, *travesti* was not used in the meaning of someone who enjoys wearing women’s clothes; it simply meant a pre-operative trans woman. Lastly, some

⁶As Pınar Selek also touches upon, *Lubunca* was initially an Aesopian language (106) for trans women. It has been used by gay men mostly for fun (Selek 2014, 106). Similar to that, I can say that my informants’ superficial adoption of the language is far from the reasons why trans women started to employ such a language in the first place.

trans women who enjoy having a penis (not necessarily to penetrate the partner) and some trans-attracted men use the phrasing “*saplı/kulplu sultan*” (Kandiyoti 2012, 284). The traction of the use of this phrasing seems to be quite low and the term is considered by many who do not use it, incredibly pejorative, just like the words shemale or tranny. Shemale is also used by some trans women and by some trans-attracted men, along with some trans-exclusivist feminists and transphobes in tandem with other words like “he-she.” Then again, by a small number of trans women “shemale” and “ladyboy” are also used, especially by some sex worker trans women and/or women seeking sex online. While perhaps shemale or ladyboy might not be the first word choices they would like to identify themselves with, these words have a certain intelligibility level especially in pornography and sex tourism and some trans-identified people might use these terms, especially online to find clients/partners who are lured by these terms. Not to forget, there is a website for trans-identified women named “Shameleturk.” Similarly, the word tranny is used both as a quite derogatory slur and a word of endearment by some trans people.

During the fieldwork, based on non-fieldwork personal experience, and while reviewing the literature I have witnessed that some of the people placed under the transgender purview use the word “*eşcinsel*” (homosexual) for themselves (Valentine 2007, 3). Similarly, these people use “homophobia” (*homofobi*) when they talk about the fear and phobia directed against them. During the ‘80s and ‘90s, *eşcinsel* (homosexual) was a term used for trans women (Soydan 2018). (It was like the umbrella term for everyone who were not cisgender and/or heterosexual. The word cisgender or non-trans did not appear until the 1980s and 1990s; instead, the term heterosexual was employed as the opposite term for trans.) While some scholars and activists now regard these usages as false identifications due to trans women’s lack of education, I believe that this does not reflect the whole picture. I think that this is a sign of trans identified women’s positions within a complex web of power relations. As Valentine claims, “People who resist to being identified as transgender are considered to be transphobic, “working with the master's tools,” or have false consciousness (Valentine 2007, 99).” According to Valentine, the current concept of transgender has enabled the following (Valentine 2007, 140-141); and my thesis is a part of this general academic/cultural production pursuing to further these aims: 1) “First, an understanding of gender variance as socially valid, publicly claimable, and free of the stigma of pathologization;” 2) “Second, as transgender gains hold in academic and popular discourses, it has enabled the coalescence of an emerging field of transgender studies which, like other fields of critical inquiry,

challenges the claims of scientific, objective knowledge;" 3) "Finally, transgender has reframed the moral and ethical questions in terms of the negative impact of medical, religious, scientific, and legal practices and theories on transgender lives."

1.10. Why My Work Matters: Contribution

Stephen Whittle, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, maintains that being trans makes him a "part of the cultural crisis of the new millennium (Stryker and Whittle 2006, xiv)." Bold as it might sound, Whittle's words summarize the position of transgender as a controversial theme. My thesis, too, claims to be a part of this cultural crisis with an aim to possibly demystify the intricacies around this phenomenon by conveying trans women's lives to a larger audience. Whittle also explains why the works of trans academics and activists are important –*The Transgender Studies Reader* being one of them:

"There have been endless reasons given by psychologists for why trans people exist, but these are almost always shown to be based upon poor experimental procedures, using narrowly defined subject groups without relevant control groups, and with emphasis on issues that trans people would argue are not relevant (Stryker and Whittle 2006, xiii)."

Likewise, Ellen Lewin, in their journal article titled "What is Queer? Who is Queer?" attributes to feminist anthropologists "two important things" that I believe I lay emphasis on:

"We demanded a commitment to accountability in ethnographic research, a priority that has realized itself in new standards of reflexivity in our work. Who is writing this? What is her motivation? What is her standpoint? We also insisted on putting the voices of the people we studied, the informants or interlocutors or "natives," front and center, thus attempting to minimize the extent to which we spoke for them and thereby rendered them mute (Lewin 2016, 605)."

In the same vein, both my trans women informants and I are aware of the significance of our work, and hope that it would contribute to Turkish transgender studies, hence, the lives of transgenders of Turkey. Despite the academic knowledge production in this particular field is still in its rudimentary stages and has been almost exclusively dominated by non-trans individuals, the field seems to gain traction and diversify its range of researchers in the following years.

CHAPTER 2: MY OWN STORY: KNOWING THE “TRANS”

2.1. An Identity in Limbo

If I was asked a few years ago, I would say that I had absolutely no connection to the transgender community whatsoever. I would define myself, if I had to, just as a "beautiful kid" (*güzel çocuk*): With hindsight, it was perhaps an intentional gender neutralism; a description which allowed me to claim the “both” sexes that subsequently engendered a self-permission for me to do things that "boys/men" (my assigned identity) were not supposed to do. It also appeased my anxiety of losing my "boyhood," something, as far as I remember, I had been entrusted from a very early age on, so I had better not lose it. I could use some eyeliner, tinted lip balm, let my hair grow and straighten it, act flamboyant, and still not lose the socially upheld status of being a man. As a man manqué, I was not harvesting the privileges of that status, but perhaps the palmy days of being a man were yet to come –only it never did. After all, in my world of categorizations, I fell under the title of a "beautiful kid," and beautiful kids were given permission, by me, to do these things. But it seemed like nobody recognized this territory of pseudo-identification which proclaimed autonomy. The only people who used a similar description for me were some aunties (*teyzeler*) who were kind enough to call me a "gentle kid" (*kibar çocuk*) in family circles trying to make sense of my non-normative behavior when they witnessed or heard about a "male child" (*erkek çocuğu*) playing with Barbie dolls, performing belly dance, carrying a lace yarn and knitting needles in a plastic bag just like the women around him did, and styling his female cousins' hair. After years passed by and I came to be an adolescent, I felt I had to be something; I had to belong to a category which preferably had other members than me and some discursive credibility. There had to be a category in which I was supposed to be able to socialize with “people like me,” perhaps flirt with them, and basically do what I was not and “other people” were able to do in a world which excluded me. I have always liked men; that I knew, albeit I

struggled to embrace the fact. So, the word I needed to define myself with must have been based on that. I had penis, people I liked had penises. I was officially called "male," so were they. Then I had to be "gay." Homo-sexual, same-sexual. Having penis and testicles made our sex(uality) the same; we were the same. Aside from the omnipresent social and institutional oppression and discrimination, physical and symbolic violence, an expected never-gonna-end ordeal for acceptance by family and friends, I had to be done with identification struggles. I acted on my self-rescue from the ascribed title of heterosexual boy. I started to chat with men online for the purposes of getting to know them with the end of possibly having a relationship –sex included! It was no longer a sin, immorality, or aberration. It was my identity; I was a gay boy. In a few years I was going to find out that this is not how it always worked.

After a while I had none of the three apples that were supposed to fall from heaven. None for me. What had happened? It turned out that homosexuality and I had some problems. I thought having a penis provided me with the necessary "sameness," only to find out that it did not. I was "girlier;" this was neither favorable, nor fashionable. I could be a "feminine gay" then. Another nomenclature added: feminine –something that I had first heard from a(nother) "feminine gay" best friend. People on the nascent gay dating applications called me that too, when they explained why they were interested in me, when they were kind enough to say why they were rejecting me, or when they articulated although they are attracted to me they should not be seen in public with me. Now was I a feminine gay.

I was not able to make peace with my feminine gayness and its connotation in gay or heterosexual worlds either. I was struggling to understand whether I wanted and was able to be the "same" with my objects of desire or different from them or which of these options were more feasible for me. Being a "girly boy" is one of the worst things a boy can become in heteronormativity, and I had already experienced that by being subjected to all forms of symbolic violence, and inner and outer attempts of "correcting" my self for years. What was more surprising is that femininity made me despicably different as a gay man from other gay men. In the current homonormativity, femininity is a characteristic or a form of being based on which people were constantly and violently discriminated, ridiculed, and deemed undesirable. I was exclusively using several "gay," "male-to-male" dating applications and websites to meet new people for friendship and/or to find the one(s) for me. One could even see the reflections of the dominant femmephobia

on these virtual spaces. It bothered me incredibly that a "footprint" (a version of "like" specific to a dating site) for a "Great body!" was only a muscular, white body. There was not a footprint indicating that feminine bodies (nor fat, skinny, black, nonbinary, for that matter) were beautiful and desirable. Although the website had the option of "transsexual" among the available identities, it defined itself as "men who like men;" in tandem with the fact that one could only see idealized images/bodies of gay men in its cover photos. A tidy sum of users of these geosocial applications/websites did reproduce an encroaching homonormativity upon those whose gender performance, behavior, voice, bodily presentation, sartorial fashioning, choice of social and sexual company, mode of entertainment diverges from the normative expectations. Every time when I opened some of the several popular "male-to-male" apps/sites such as Grindr, Hornet (apps), and Planet (or Gay) Romeo (site and app) I was exposed to a barrage of hatred; a ubiquitous verbal violence (which has the potential to turn into a physical one) directed not just towards me, but to all and sundry. This was a stark evincement of homonormativity.

The aforementioned apps/sites did host users who either blatantly or hesitantly expressed their desires for "feminine/hairless passives," "*cd*⁷s," or "*travestis*" (*kadınsı/kılsız pasif, cd, travesti*); however, these people and their desires were seen as an infiltration into gay culture whose sexual/emotional desire should be directed to what was supposed to be male and masculine. Those who infringe this expectation are deemed to be socially and intellectually inferior to those to whom the homosexuality discourse was available and living as gay was an option. These people who had a predilection for femininity was called names such as "*kamyoncu*" (truck driver), or "*sikici*" (fucker) implying that they do not have a particular "taste" in choosing a sexual partner; they engage in transient sexual relations with feminine men/people because their socio-economic background inhibits them establishing intimate and/or sustainable relations with cisgender women. Therefore, in the dominant narrative, being with these socio-economically and intellectually inferior men who were unaware that they were "actually gay" was not something ideal.

Even though the fact that finding of my "true self" or coming to terms with what "I had been all along" does not fit in the mainstream transgender ontological discourse, and subsequently expressing it is considered as a faux pas, in not-so-politically-correct

⁷Widely used abbreviation of "crossdresser" in online sexual platforms.

environments, this has been vocalized by other transgenders, sometimes as a legitimate form of being, sometimes reprimanded. I have come across a video of Gani or Ganimet, a relatively well-known and a definitely controversial Turkish transgender of fifty-something-years-old (İştigal 2017). In this Youtube video titled “*Cemaatlerinizde saf tutamadım*,” which roughly translates into “I couldn’t form a rank in your communities” Gani talks about her transition from a gay identity to a trans woman. In the video, she articulates how she did not fit in the category of gay and felt as an outcast due to homonormativity. Rather than essentially and/or unchangeably “being” something, she has “become” something in a practical space where she felt most fits –albeit not squarely, as a non-normative trans sex worker:

“In fact, the first point through I passed manhood was gayness. As I said, in fact. Gays didn’t accept me either because they have their own rules, rules of being gay, just like heterosexuals do. ... This loneliness and lovelessness pushed me to (other) roads. I could have perhaps continued as a gay. In fact, you don’t identify it; you exist where you are accepted.”

My informant, Deste, now a self-identified trans woman in her early twenties, describes her making sense of her identity in relation to womanhood, men, desire below. One can see that she did not fit in the homosexual identity –an identity she did try to challenge:

“From 13 to 20, the term ‘gay’ (I didn’t use) much... I mean I would say I was homosexual. Because I liked men, and, well, I was a man. But I was a sui generis homosexual. I mean I wasn’t a man, that’s the issue, I was a different homosexual. I mean, I wasn’t, what is it called? I was girly, womanly. I liked men but for some reason gay men did not like me because I wasn’t a man. But I wasn’t able to articulate that. I was saying, I am a bit *lubun*⁸, I am *ibne*. There was always this male thingy in front of me, but I was like, beautiful, delicate, a jewel, a diamond, a pink horse. I was such things.”⁹

Here, I do not intend to claim that Deste was a gay boy turned into a woman, or that she was a woman who thought of herself as a gay boy. Even one of these options is the case, I simply would like to bring attention to the fluidity and permeability within this nebulous territory of identity politics. Accounts of me the *güzel çocuk* and Deste the

⁸Short version of *lubunya*.

⁹“13 yaşımdan 20 yaşıma kadar ‘gay’ terimini öyle çok sık... Yani eşcinselim diyordum. Çünkü erkeklerden hoşlanıyorum ve işte evet erkeğim falan. Ama işte biraz da kendi şeyime göre farklı bir eşcinseldim. Yani işte erkek değildim, işte olay o, yani farklı bir eşcinseldim. Yani böyle şey değildim, ne derler... Kızıydım, kadınsıydım, işte. Erkeklerden hoşlanıyordum ama nedense gay erkekler benden hoşlanmıyordu çünkü ben erkek değildim. Ama onu söyleyemiyordum. Şöyle diyordum, hani ben biraz daha işte, lubunum diyordum, ibneyim diyordum. Önde hep bir erkek şeyi vardı, ama hep işte, güzeldim, narindim, mücevher, elmas, pembe at falan. Hani böyle bir şeylerdim.”

pembe at might possibly lead the reader be leery of the imagined strict boundaries between gay manhood and trans womanhood.

2.2. Eylül Cansın's Suicide & Giving Bith To My (Current) Self

"Hello. I am sending kisses to all. This is my happiest day. But, today is going to be another beautiful day for me. I thank you all. I love you all. A lot of people were (supposed to be) my friends, but (it turns out that) they are not my friends. I leave everyone alone with their conscience, I can't do it any longer. I have learned that. As everyone wishes, I am doing what everyone wants (me to do). I kiss you all. (This is) 2015. I was born in 1992. Now I am supposed to be 24-year-old and I am terminating my 24th year. I kiss you all. I couldn't do it because people did not let me. I couldn't work, I wanted to do something, I couldn't. Do you understand? They impeded me. They treated me unjustly. I leave you alone with God, and currently I am heading to the Bosphorus Bridge. Tomorrow, you will see my name in the 3rd or 4th pages -can be 1st- of the newspapers. I kiss you all. May you all be entrusted to God. May you all be entrusted to God. My only wish, mom, I have a little dog in the house. I know that you will adopt and take a good care of it. Mom, I entrust it to you. Every time you look at it, remember me, okay? Only remember me and do not give it to anyone. It doesn't pee or poop at home. Do you understand? Doesn't pee or poo... I entrust it to you mommy. I entrust it to you. When you look at it, say "It is my child," do you understand? Don't get angry at it. It doesn't do anything in anyway. Don't get angry at it, okay, mommy? I love you so much. May you be entrusted to God, I kiss you all. My name is Eylül Cansın and this is going to be my last video and last outcry for you. I refer those who did wrongdoings to me to God's punishment.¹⁰"

On the night of January 4, 2015, Twitter was startled by the 02.39-minutes-long video of a young woman named Eylül Cansın preceding her suicide (M. Zengin 2015). Eylül Cansın was a 23-year-old trans woman who, through her Facebook account under the name Mehtap Zengin, shared her last video with her loved ones and followers, and committed suicide minutes after by jumping off the Bosphorus Bridge. I remember receiving the news through Twitter, and I got incredibly upset like many people who

¹⁰"Merhaba. Herkese öpücükler yolluyorum. Bugün benim en güzel günüm. Çok mutluyum. Ama, bugün benim için bir güzel gün daha olacak. Herkese teşekkür ediyorum. Herkesi seviyorum. Bir çok insan benim arkadaşımı ama, arkadaşım değilmiş. Herkesi vicdanıyla başbaşa bırakıyorum, ben artık yapamıyorum. Bunu öğrendim. Herkesin istediği gibi, istediği şeyi yapıyorum. Hepinizi öpüyorum. 2015. Ben 1992 doğumluyum. Şu an 24 yaşında olmam lazım ve 24 yaşımı sonlandırıyorum. Herkesi öpüyorum. Yapamadım, yapamadım çünkü insanlar bana izin vermedi. Çalışmadım, bir şeyler yapmak istedim, yapamadım. Anladınız mı? Bana çok engel oldular. Beni çok mağdur ettiler. Herkesi Allah'la baş başa bırakıyorum ve şu an Boğaz Köprüsü'ne doğru gidiyorum. Yarın gazetelerin üçüncü veya dördüncü olabilir, belki birinci olabilir, sayfalarında benim adımı duyacaksınız. Hepinizi öpüyorum. Allah'a emanet olun. Allah'a emanet olun. Tek isteğim, anne, benim evde küçük bir köpeğim var. Onu senin alacağını, senin çok iyi bakacağını biliyorum. Anne, onu sana emanet ediyorum. Ona her baktığımda beni hatırla, tamam mı? Sadece beni hatırla ve onu hiç kimseye verme. O hiç çişini kakasını eve yapmıyor. Anladın mı? Çişini kakasını... Onu sana emanet ediyorum anneciğim. Onu sana emanet ediyorum. Ona bakarken hep de ki "o benim evladım" de, anladın mı? Ona kızma. Yapmıyor zaten hiçbir şekilde hiçbir şey. Ona kızma tamam mı anneciğim? Seni çok seviyorum. Allah'a emanet olun, hepinizi öpüyorum. Benim adım Eylül Cansın ve bu size son videom, son haykırışım olacak. Benim günahıma giren, vebalimi alan insanları hep Allah'a havale ediyorum."

watched the poignant video. The event attracted so much online public attention that her names Eylül Cansin and Mehtap Zengin became trending topics on Twitter, and she became one of the most talked-about topics in other online platforms. Transcription and translation can barely give the real feeling the video exudes. It was excruciating to watch; yet, I do not know how many times I have watched the video. The video showed a young woman crying in the back seat of a taxi and talking about the hardships she had been going through, mainly the fact that she was not permitted to work.

Among unfortunately countless horrible news of trans murders, Eylül's suicide had turned the public eye, at least that of the online community, to the disenfranchised and precarious situation of trans women. Eylül was a young, normatively beautiful woman who committed suicide because she was not allowed to work. She had a very positive language even heading towards her suicide; she sent kisses to everyone, she thanked people, she did not use swear words. She did mention God; so, she must have been –at least– a believer which is a socially upheld value. She had a puppy, and she thought of the little dog's future even minutes before her suicide. She must have been an animal lover, a compassionate and tenderhearted person. She did "look like a woman;" she was "passable" with her facial features, makeup, hair, breasts, polished nails, and whatnot. Womanhood approved. There was not a mention of sex work video, although many had already taken it for granted (a biased attitude) that she was inherently a sex worker because she was a trans woman. But after all, "although" she was a trans, she seemed like a good person. "Although" she was a sex worker, she wanted to work. "Although" she did not complete all the requirements to be an acceptable person based on the normative moral hierarchy, she could be pitied at least. She had "good sides" to her to make up for her sexual identity and her occupation.

However, there was a riveting plot twist to the story which many people who expressed their reactions did not know about; and this was what arguably initiated my endless curiosity about an individual and collective trans identity. The people who did not allow Eylül to work were allegedly other trans women, and "work," in this context meant sex work. As the story unfolded, it was claimed that some trans women along with mafia-like men parceled out the areas sex workers used for cruising, and they threatened, harassed, beat Eylül, and forced her to pay tribute. Twitter was mostly unaware of that, but in the online trans "community" of Facebook, trans women were lamenting the bereavement of another trans woman and execrating the accursed fellow trans women

who were allegedly implicated in Eylül's suicide. From those days on, I began my pseudo online research by see-sawing between trans women's public Facebook profiles galore. At this junction, I gradually started to encounter the idiosyncrasies of what I would come to call “the negotiation of trans image through social media.”

There were huge discussions reaching hundreds of comments under certain Facebook posts where some trans women openly or in a disguised fashion, shared the names of the persons who were accused of having a role in Eylül's suicide, and they ranted on about how some trans women were degenerating and misrepresenting the trans community. I remember myself spending days inquiring about the suicide through social media –exclusively on Facebook– and reading the news and interviews about the tragic incident. I felt like a detective. I was analyzing the public profiles of those who were allegedly implicated in the suicide, those who accused them, the ones who wrote tirades about trans sex worker community's work ethics comparing how trans community was back in the day and how it regressed now. Then I felt like a researcher. This was, for me, how it all started.

However, I was not able to research the idiosyncrasies of sex workers' life and their use of social media in terms of both image and group making despite my keen interest and ensuing attempts caused by the exciting preliminary findings. I have been meticulously and ardently following many publicly available profiles up to this day to keep pace with intracommunity developments. Since I am not formally "friends" with any of the profiles I am following, I am only exposed to what the users let public audience to see. It is important to underline here that many of the profiles I was interested in were not just not-private profiles, but many of them were also accounts clearly stated in their posts (especially in live broadcasts) that they wanted their content to reach a larger audience to educate and familiarize them with trans women's presence. I am also not able to follow private Facebook groups of trans women such as *Trans Melekler* (Trans Angels), and I most certainly lack the information produced and transmitted through sex worker trans women's Whatsapp groups of whose existence I know through trans women's live broadcasts.

CHAPTER 3: GROUP MAKING AS A CONSCIOUS EFFORT: THE CASES OF “GIRLS OF THE NIGHT” AND “RAINBOW GIRLS”

"Welcome X. This is Girls of the Night. We are a social group consisting of trans women. We converse all day, and occasionally go out at nights. :) We openly and sincerely talk and share everything related to the trans womanhood process. This includes information about medical procedures and photos with nudity related to the (bodily) development during the (transition) process. None of us are sex workers; we are all part of the workforce or are receiving education. Thus, we do not like sex work talk here. We know that all trans women are very exceptional and delicate, thus, we do not condone any fighting among women. We are very talkative, if you want to be talkative with us, we would surely be very happy. :) But if nudity and an always-beeping Whatsapp disturbing to you, you can mute us from the settings and cancel the option to download the images."¹¹

This was the welcome message of *Gecenin Kızları*, or Girls of the Night, one and first of the two Whatsapp groups I will present in this chapter. As this text message with some interesting choice of words introduces new members to the online group, it also contains information which sums up the content of the rest of this thesis: After discussing two trans women's Whatsapp groups in terms of group formation and maintenance by delving into the specific qualities that unite or separate them as group (sex work being the most visible distinction point), I will proceed to the topic of transition with the controversial theme of passing/passability in the limelight, and I will continue with a chapter dedicated to intimacy, focusing on intimacy among trans women.

In this chapter, I contend that group making online has a crucial place in the *sui generis* way of trans living, allowing trans women to escape society's marginalization, and empower and inform themselves via the constant availability of physical/virtual presence of other trans-identified people. I will support my argument by expounding on the function and significance of these groups for the "exceptional and delicate" nature of

¹¹"Hoşgeldin X. Burası Gecenin Kızları. Biz trans kadınlardan oluşan bir sosyal grubuz. Bütün gün sohbet edip bazı akşamlar çıkıp buluşuyoruz. :) Trans kadınlık süreci ile ilgili her şeyi açık ve samimi konuşuyor ve paylaşıyoruz. Buna medikal uygulamalarla ilgili bilgiler ve süreç sırasındaki gelişim ile ilgili çıplaklık içeren resimler de dahil. Hiçbirimiz seks işçisi değiliz; hepimiz işimizde gücümüzde ya da eğitimimizdeyiz. O yüzden koli muhabbetinin burda yapılmasını sevmiyoruz. Bütün trans kadınların çok ender ve narin olduğunu biliyoruz, o yüzden kadınlar arasında kavgayı hoş karşılamıyoruz. Biz çok gevezeyiz, bizimle gevezelik yapmak istersen inan çok mutlu oluruz. :) Ama çıplaklık ya da sürekli çin çin eden Whatsapp seni rahatsız ediyorsa ayarlardan bizi sessize alabilirsin ve resim indirme opsiyonunu bu grup için kapatabilirsin."

trans women using my interviews and long-term participant observation. I will start with the distinguishing factor between the two groups, that is, for the most part, sex work. Then I will proceed with the commonalities upon which they deliberately or unwittingly build their identities. The reason I begin with what separates the two groups is that the latter group was born out of that specific contrast, that is their stance on sex work, and this is pretty much the only, albeit a major, difference between them. Attitude towards sex work does not only allow me to follow the groups' history with chronological convenience; at least for the first group *Gecenin Kızları*, this particular facet preponderates over other fragments of identity (such as socio-economic standing, passability, and sexual tendencies) which do play a role in group formation as well. Although these groups are specific cases, they are actually microcosms of a larger body of trans women in terms of certain aspects. This chapter will attempt to show how transgender "is a way of actively creating a community (Valentine 2007, 98)."

Although the community that I work with might still be called a virtual community (as well) based on Howard Rheingold's definition of it,¹² I would stop short of calling my work a virtual ethnography or nethnography. First of all, I am not only focusing "on the online aspect of the social experience, rather than the entire experience (Kozinets 2010, 5)." Second, unlike the advent of virtual communities in which "participants invariably were assumed to vigilantly maintain their anonymity (Kozinets 2010, 7)," my informants are not anonymous to each other and they do meet.

¹²"...social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Kozinets 2010, 8)."

3.1. Girls of the Night

Gecenin Kızları (Girls of the Night) is a Whatsapp group founded on July 1, 2016 by my key informant, Esra A. As of now (26.05.2018), the group has 23 members including myself.¹³ I have been a member of the group since November 10, 2016 –the day I met Esra A. in person for the purpose of conducting an interview with her.¹⁴ The number of members changes occasionally, as new members come and some leave; however, it is still a relatively small-scale community, commensurate with the population of trans-identified women, and those the group administrators find appropriate to join.

Girls of the Night was essentially founded as an online community of some of the trans women who attend the monthly group therapies of an İstanbul-based LGBT association called SPoD, *Sosyal Politikalar Cinsiyet Kimliği ve Cinsel Yönelim Çalışmaları Derneği* (Social Policies Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association). Esra A. told me in an interview that the group was actually started to organize a handful of women who decided to go out one particular night –hence the name Girls of the Night. After the event was over, the interaction still continued in the group, and the group became more than those disposable Whatsapp groups created to organize something, and deleted after the event is over. Although the group of trans women I work with has its roots in the monthly group therapies moderated by psychiatrists, it is not merely a contingent of SPoD gatherings. Esra A. defines the group in the following sentences:

"This isn't a charity group, this isn't an association's group. This is a group consisting of people who hangout in real life, are friends in real life –very good friends–, who sip coffees and converse in cafés, go places at night and drink some beer or alcohol."¹⁵

SPoD's therapy sessions are open to every person who identifies as trans (including non-binary and gender fluid individuals) and do not discriminate against participants based on their professions' perceived honor in the society. *Gecenin Kızları*, on the other hand, is exclusively for a conventionally-defined category of trans women

¹³The group's actual current title contains the word "*Gecenin*" or "of the Night," and some various bride emojis that stand for the word "*Kızları*" or "Girls" along with some sparkle and pink heart emojis. The group's profile image is a heart-shaped transgender flag although it occasionally changes.

¹⁴Prior to this group, I was a member of another trans women's Whatsapp group called *Diğerleri* (Others) founded on 18/12/2015 via which I established a distant acquaintance with Esra A. I have been a member of this group from 11/07/2016 on; however, due to losing member activity, the group is de-facto non-existent.

¹⁵"Bu bir hayır grubu değil, bu bir dernek grubu değil. Bu, gerçek hayatta görüşen, gerçek hayatta arkadaş olan, çok iyi arkadaş olan, gerçek hayatta işte bir kafede kahve içip sohbet eden, bir akşam bir yere gidip bira içip içki içip sohbet eden insanlardan oluşan bir grup."

who are not sex workers. Moreover, the group administrators can introduce other people to the group who do not or cannot necessarily attend the monthly therapies. Esra A. recounts the formation of the Whatsapp group as follows which shows that being a part of a community has a reparative effect –a point reiterated by many women:

“I felt like I was in my own home there (at SPoD) from the first day on. I realized that this (going to SPoD therapies) was something that I should have done way earlier. As I heard and saw what those people went through (I said) “Oh my God! I went through exactly all of these, and I was all alone!” There were such details in people’s stories that I saw myself in those. This meant that I was not alone. I always thought of myself as someone weird and as someone who should be embarrassed. When socialized, I saw that I was incredibly relieved. There were people like me and they were not murderers or thieves. They were really brilliant people and they went through exactly what I did. ... Then I started to see that socializing had a very therapeutic side for me. I mean the socialization at SPoD, the friendships, and the mutual sharing. I saw that people could strike up a friendship when faced with similar difficulties. Then I started to think: “Okay, this is therapeutic, but what if a community in which people could socialize more is created? A friendship group in which people could hang out during the day or at night, and could support each other?” “How can this happen,” I started to contemplate. I said to a few friends from SPoD “Let’s go to somewhere at night, hang out, and converse.” “How can we do this?” “Let’s create a Whatsapp group.” First I organized the folks to go out at night. That first night came the “Girls of the Night.” Then the group’s function was not over. Then we talk and converse, people have questions, they have this need to share and be in touch during the day. Suddenly the group took over these duties. It became a support group on its own. People started to add other people they know. We started to add people whom we know are truly trans. We started to add people whose presence we know would make the group better. It transformed into a support group by growing like this. I think it is the first in Turkey. Oh, there are groups where the working girls are organized. Though they are organized a bit differently. I don’t see myself close to them.”¹⁶

¹⁶“Orda ilk günden itibaren kendimi evimde hissettim. Yani çok çok önceden yapmam gerekenin bu olduğunu anladım. Oradaki insanların yaşadıklarını duydukça, gördükçe "Aman Allah'ım, bütün bunların hepsinin aynısının tıpkısını ben yaşadım ve yapayalınızım!" O kadar detaylar var ki insanların anlattığı şeylerde hep kendimi gördüm. Demek ki yalnız değilmişim. Ben kendimi hep aslında yapayalınız hissediyordum bu konuda, kendimi hep acayip, utanç içerisinde olmam gereken, çok öteki bir noktada tutuyordum kafamda. Ama bir gördüm ki sosyalleşince bana korkunç bir rahatlama getirdi. Yani benim gibi insanlar var ve bunlar canı, katil, hırsız değil. Hakikaten pırıl pırıl insanlar ve benim yaşadıklarımın aynısını yaşamışlar. ... Sonra bu sosyalleşmenin bana çok tedavi edici bir yanı olduğunu görmeye başladım. Yani SPoD'daki sosyalleşmenin, arkadaşlıkların, karşılıklı paylaşımların... Yani insanların hakikaten yaşadıkları benzer zorluklar yanında arkadaş olabildiklerini de gördüm. ... Sonra ben kendi kendime düşünmeye başladım. Bu terapi olmuş ama ya insanların daha fazla sosyalleşebileceği bir *community* olsa? İşte insanların gece takılabileceği, gündüz takılabileceği bir arkadaş grubu olsa? İnsanlar birbirine destek olabilse? "Bu nasıl olabilir" gibisinden düşünmeye başladım. Sonra iki üç arkadaş SPoD'dan, "Hadi akşam bir yerlere gidelim, takılalım, sohbet edelim, muhabbet edelim" derken... "Aaa, bunu nasıl yaparız?" "İşte bir Whatsapp grubu kuralım." Önce milleti organize ettim akşam çıkalım diye. ... O ilk çıktığımız "gecenin kızları." ... Ondan sonra grubun işi bitmedi. ... Sohbet ediyoruz, muhabbet ediyoruz, insanları soruları oluyor, paylaşmak ihtiyaçları oluyor, gün içerisinde temas etme ihtiyaçları oluyor... A-ah! Bu grup bir anda o görevleri üstlenmeye başladı. Yani support grup, destek grubu gibi görev üstlenmeye başladı kendi içinde. İnsanlar eklenmeye başladı, insanlar tanıdıklarını eklemeye başladı. Hakikaten trans kadın olduğunu bildiğimiz insanları eklemeye başladık. Bu grubun içerisinde olmasının iyi olacağını düşündüğümüz insanları eklemeye başladık. Böyle böyle gelişerek büyüyen bir destek grubu halini almaya başladı. ... Galiba

In fact, the joy Esra A. felt when she created the group was no surprise. Looking at his participants, Darryl B. Hill also claims that “Support groups and social clubs often helped participants see transgender as a possibility and refine their own gender (Hill 1997, 159).” As Esra A. says and as I know myself, these sort of support groups function as an important tool in other trans women’s lives as well.

In addition to her conscious endeavour to be in the same social circle as the people she deems to be "like her," Esra A.'s pursuit to be part of a community, or to form a community is not confined to the current Whatsapp group she moderates; this enterprise has a history. Esra A., as one of the two siblings of a wealthy Istanbulite family, had the chance to pursue her education in the US. She went to New York in her last year of her undergraduate education, and she completed her undergraduate and master’s degrees there in the 1990s –this was a quite an important time period and location for the emergence of a nascent transgender identity, and this had an influence upon Esra A. Although this turned out not to be the case completely, moving abroad was supposed to be a great opportunity for her as she had planned to live her true self without the interruption of anything or the intervention of anyone, i.e. her family who she was afraid to make upset by transitioning. She frequented, what she calls, “recently arising, radical, mariginal shemale bars,” as well as gay cruising bars, gay saunas, and “seedy” LGBTI venues which lent themselves perfectly for young Esra A. who was particularly fond of nightlife. More significantly, however, this allowed her develop an awareness and a sense of belonging. She became a habitu  of transgender scene for the intention of not just having fun but also learning more. She even visited these places under the profile of a “trans lover,” went through some sexual encounters,¹⁷ while she was still living under her must-be-protected male identity, and made observations. In these “shemale strip bars,” which she says that was what they were called, she “came to close contact, and started to see what sort of a thing shemale was.”¹⁸ She remarks that in New York she had the first experiences of special nights organized by certain bars, drag shows, community shows, crossdresser and transgender nights. So much so that when I asked Esra A. in an interview

T rkiye'de ilk b yle. He, Őeylerin organize olduĐu gruplar var, *working girllerin*. Facebook grupları falan var onların. Onlar biraz daha farklı organize oluyorlar ama... .. Ben mesela kendimi onlarla aynı kafada g rm yorum.”

¹⁷Esra A. says that since she was bisexual, this was possible for her. (She also occasionally says that she was an “alpha male.”) This statement was made when I first started to know her; nowadays she claims that her bisexuality is mostly replaced by a predominantly heterosexual orientation because of hormones. In one conversation with a lesbian trans woman who is not on HRT, she said that she wondered if hormones will change her sexual orientation as well, as this was the case with herself.

¹⁸“... Yakın temasta bulundum, o zaman ilk defa shemale nedir, nasıl bir Őeydir, onları g rmeye baŐladım.”

to tell me the story behind the group she established, she started by pointing out the fact that she had seen the community groups and support groups back in USA which might mean that as a have-been-around person, she had the sophisticated background to be able to come up with a similar organization.¹⁹

Perhaps as a not-so-surprising outcome of this quest, in the rudimentary stages of the Internet, she ardently sought interaction with people who are contemporarily placed under the trans rubric, and people who are sexually and/or emotionally attracted to them. She collected photos of crossdressers and shemales from their individual “home pages,” something she asserts was commonly used back in the days before the creation of dating websites and applications. In fact, in the late 1990s, she founded a Yahoo e-mail group named *Zenne* of which number of members reached thousands, and eventually, she claims, the mail group hit the daily newspaper *Hürriyet*.²⁰

“So I am constantly Googling. I am all about it, obsessively searching what cds (cross-dresser) are doing, what they wear, how they feminize themselves... Constantly, in an obsessed way. Back then, I accept myself as a cd, I think that I am a cd, and I am obsessively in search of how to better myself as a cd, how I can be more of a woman, how I can be more feminine, okay? Therefore I have my own archive, and this is an archive of harddiscs and harddiscs and harddiscs... It doesn't suffice. I have four or five harddiscs. Then I established this group so that I can share it (the archive) with people. After three or four days, the group suddenly became of three or four thousands of people. People also send, I also send (cd photos)...

Me: Three, four thousands of cds!?

Not everyone is cd. Cd lovers, too, are there, people who want to see the photos are also there... The horny are also there, real cds are also there... ... I am the moderator of it, I can let in anyone I want, I can kick out anyone I want, I accept (their requests). I had already made the group open, an open entry one, but the only the members could see (the images sent). I would make announcements about the content, (saying) "it is like this and that..." Well, "Zenne is a Turkish thing, it is about cds, those who like can send e-mail this and that way," I would say. People would follow and so on. Then this became a cause célèbre, it hit the newspaper. I saw this (the news), "on Yahoo Groups"

¹⁹I am of the opinion that this is the case, as she oftentimes speaks of her plans about organizing a transgender night herself, just like the ones she has seen abroad. She mentioned wanting to arrange a bar for this special night, where pre-transition people (like herself) will have the opportunity to come as men and change themselves into women inside by dressing up (perhaps even with the presence of a makeup artist that would be invited so that they can earn some money, too). In this plan, trans women of all walks of life (out and not out, younger and older, pre-transition and post-transition, passable and not-so-passable etc.) would entertain themselves freely and safely, and meet trans lovers they have difficulty meeting outside because of the stigmatization of emotional/sexual interest for trans women. Although this plan is yet to be fulfilled, given that Esra A. helped Ela arrange a bar for her fundraising night to contribute to her vaginal reconstruction surgery expenses, it is not completely unrealistic.

²⁰Pınar Selek mentions a group named *Zenne*, when she talks about “homosexual online organizing” in *Maskeler, Süvariler, Gacılar* (Selek 2014, 101). Although I am not sure if this was the same organization, when we look at the years and the content, what she talks about must be Esra A’s group, *Zenne*.

and whatnot... It appeared on Hürriyet, ok? A tiny piece, saying "transsexuals has formed a group, did this and that" and whatnot. Was that the year 2001 or 2002? I had just entered the finance sector, working in an institutional environment. I was frightened to death, with the fear that they can find me. As if I was doing something illegal. Do you understand? It's 2002, and I am just starting my career. So I am working in finance, these kinds of things cannot happen, cannot. It would be a very big handicap for me. Then again, I didn't have the heart to close the group, so I gradually reduced my posts, later I stopped them for good, I let the group alone, then it started to enter into a better process. But the group lasted for about four years. I started in '98 as soon as I came back to here (from US to Turkey). It lasted until 2002 or so. It lasted until 2002-2003. It was something! A group of three or four thousand, people sharing photos and whatnot... There are lots of people in Turkey who are interested in cds, transsexuals, travestis, this and that. Back then, everyone was using Yahoo groups, (as) the adult content is there. It was the only Turkish trans group there. And we hit the news to crown it all... ”²¹

When she elaborated on why she made such an effort she even deemed dangerous to her career, her response shows yet another time that transness and community making as a trans person is undeniably a deliberate endeavour stemming from a burning “need,” as Esra A. puts it. She articulates that she had to learn how to dress, how to pose, and even how to look –points that might be considered trivial for many who have chance to practice them in the natural flow of their lives. Esra A.’s experience in online connecting proves Darryl B. Hill’s claim that “Communication technologies generally provided a sense of connecting with others, alleviated the isolation and loneliness, and provided hope by showing that a transgender life was possible (Hill 1997, 167).”

²¹“Yani ben sürekli bir Google halindeyim. Benim bütün olayım o o anlamda. Yani obsesif bir biçimde hani cdler yapıyor, ne giyiniyor, nasıl feminize oluyor, yapıyorlar, nedir, ne değildir... Sürekli obsesif bir biçimde... Ben de o an bir cd olduğumu kabul ediyorum, bir cd olduğumu düşünüyorum ve bir cd olarak daha iyi nasıl olabilirim, nasıl daha kadın olabilirim, nasıl daha feminen olabilirim, sürekli bunun arayışında, obsesifliği içerisindeyim, tamam mı? O yüzden de bir kendi arşivim var, o arşiv de artık harddiskler harddiskler, harddiskler harddiskler... Yetmiyor, dört beş tane harddisk şeyim var. Ondan sonra insanlarla paylaşayım, böyle bir şey olsun diye grubu kurdum. Ondan sonra üç dört günden sonra, ooo bir baktım üç dört bin kişi oldu grup. İnsanlar da gönderiyor, işte ben de gönderiyorum... Ben: Üç dört bin tane cd!?”

Herkes cd değil. Cd seven de orda oluyor, o resimleri görmek isteyen de orda oluyor. Abazası da orda oluyor, gerçekten cd olan da orda oluyor. ... Onun da moderatörüyüm yani, istediğimi alabiliyorum, istediğimi gönderebiliyorum, kabul ediyorum. Yani ben grubu open yapmıştım, eee, open entry yapmıştım, ama sadece üye olanlar görebiliyordu. Ondan sonra grupla ilgili içerik şöyledir böyledir diye announcement yayınlıyorum. İşte Zenne Türk şeyidir, işte cdler üzerindedir, işte isteyen şurdan şu şekilde mail atabilir falan filan söylüyordum. İnsanlar takip ediyordu falan. Sonra olay oldu bu, gazeteye çıktı. Ben bunu bir gördüm, işte Yahoo grubu üzerinde falan bilmem ne diye... Hürriyet’e çıktı, tamam mı işte ufak bir yazı böyle, transeksüeller işte grup kurdular diye, bilmem ne yaptılar falan filan diye. Sene 2001 mi 2002 mi... Ben de finansa girmişim hani, gayet böyle kurumsal bir şeyde çalışıyorum. Ödüm patladı bana ulaşacaklar diye. Sanki böyle illegal bir iş yapıyormuş gibi oldum. Anladın mı? 2002, ben daha kariyerimin başındayım. İşte finanstayım, hiç öyle şeyler mümkün değil hani, olamaz yani. Hani bana çok büyük bir handicap olur o durum. Ondan sonra kapatmaya da kıyamadım grubu, yavaş yavaş azalttım önce gönderilerimi, ondan sonra iyice durdurdum gönderilerimi, grup ne hali varsa kendi haline bıraktım. Ondan sonra, öyle yapınca ben zaten daha iyi bir processe girdi. Ama dört sene falan sürdü grup. 98’de buraya döner dönmez başladım, 2002’ye kadar falan sürdü grup. 2002-2003’e kadar sürdü. Bayağı bir şeydi yani! Üç dört bin kişilik bir gruptu ve resimler paylaşılıyordu bilmem ne falan filan... Yani meraklısı çok Türkiye’de de o yüzden işte cdnin, transeksüelin, şunun bunun... O zaman da işte Yahoo grubuna herkes oraya bakıyor işte adult content orda. Ordaki de hani tek Türk trans grubu. Bir de haber olduk üstüne üstlük...”

3.2. Rainbow Girls

Rainbow Girls (*Gökkuşığı Kızları*), on the other hand, was founded by a few trans women who were enraged at the anti sex work attitude expressed by some members of Girls of the Night. They left the group in unison after a particular vehement argument, and founded their own group which is described by one member as “more integrating, more free, and more respectful.” The group was initially named *Lut Kavmi* (People of Lot) by the founder Dünya; however, after a discussion among group members, the majority decided that the name was not congruent with the trans representation they wanted to convey.²² Without much opposition, the group name was quickly changed to Rainbow Girls,²³ highlighting the “colorful” nature of trans women as well as their femininity. As of now (26.05.2018), the group has 35 members. Dünya calls *Gecenin Kızları*, “*eski grup*”(old group) and not “the other group” showing a definitive break with the ancien régime.

As might be expected, the new group initially showed similarities to Girls of the Night in terms of structure. However, the new group’s founder later chose to follow a different route of initiating new members into the group. She promoted the group in a Turkish trans Instagram page inviting trans women to join. She added new people to the group with whom the members or even herself did not necessarily have an acquaintance. As a result, the total number of its members competed with that of *Gecenin Kızları*, or sometimes surpassed it. Then again, this came at the price of more protean and fragile ties especially among the newer and younger members who do not have a previous acquaintanceship to make them bear each other’s obnoxiousness. They can easily get feisty and as a result of that the number of members fluctuates.

Members of Rainbow Girls occasionally defines the group as support group during online conversations. Although this is certainly a characteristic of Girls of the Night as well, Esra A. almost always underlines that “her group” is a friendship group. Hence, she does not care about having a small number of people as long as they are friends.

²²One of the women who adamantly opposed the name People of Lot, Esra B., had also told me in an interview that she was irritated by some members’ use of vulgar language and swear words, as well as by particular incidences where another member shared tantalizing photos wearing hijab, and narrated how she cheated on her boyfriend since she found these sorts of behaviors inappropriate and distressing as a Muslim woman.

²³Esra A. was interestingly offended by not being invited to the new group, since her allowing of anti sex work remarks as a moderator/founder was the reason of the split in the group. She often dubs the new group as “parallel group” (*paralel grup*), or “copycat group” (*kopya grup*) referring to its name.

3.3. Sex Work: “We are more special than (sex) workers.”

One of the members of the new group, 21-year-old Alya, who ditched the former group and is only a member of the new formation, describes the creation of Rainbow Girls with the following words which demonstrate perspicuously the main difference between the two groups:

“There are sex worker friends in the group. There are activist friends who work with sex workers. A close friend of mine has to do sex work. I view sex work as a form of labour. I personally think that it has no difference from being a waiter, a street sweeper, or a doctor. Yet, such arguments circulated in the group: “There are already solidarity groups of sex workers. We need to be different as Girls of the Night. Sex workers should not be in this group. Students and non-sex worker people should be in this group; people from every profession but sex work.” This sort of discrimination... Frankly, this infuriated me. What is the reason for this discrimination against the sex work? Why are we disturbed by sex work while we are not disturbed by (one’s) being a doctor, a street sweeper, or a nurse? I do not understand this. Second [thing that infuriated me] is that these conversations took place knowing that there were sex workers in the group. The fact that these (messages) were written without caring about those people, what they felt, made me very uncomfortable as I know a lot of people through social media or in person who are engaged in this work. No one does this job voluntarily. This sort of talk took place in the group. Then Seçil started to say such things: “I am against sex work, I would not ever do it. I would sell simit,²⁴ eat pasta (everyday) with my honor, yet never do it.” ... Of course I went crazy! Then there is Dünya, she does sex work as well. Dünya, too, got enraged. Then there is Demet; she is an activist, she does sex work, she works with sex workers. Do these people not need solidarity? Just because they have their own groups, how can we say “You are a sex worker and for this reason we cannot accept you into the group” to a sex worker woman who wants to join our group? I cannot do this because that person needs solidarity as much as I do. No matter what. Just because they have their own groups... What if that person was not able to reach those groups?”²⁵

²⁴Turkish bagel, one of the cheapest street food items.

²⁵“Grupta seks işçisi arkadaşlarımız var, seks işçileriyle çalışan aktivist arkadaşlarımız var, çok yakın arkadaşım seks işçiliği yapmak zorunda. Ondan sonra, kendi hayat bakımım olarak da seks işçiliğini bir emek biçimi olarak görüyorum. Garsonluktan, çöpçülükten, doktorluktan bir farkının olduğunu düşünmüyorum şahsen. Ama grupta şöyle tartışmalar döndü: İşte, “Seks işçilerinin kendi aralarında dayanıştıkları zaten gruplar var, biz Gecenin Kızları olarak bu konuda bir farkındalık yaratmak istiyoruz, işte grupta seks işçileri olmasın, işte sadece öğrenciler, çalışanlar, seks işçiliği dışında her meslek grubundan insan olsun ama seks işçileri olmasın,” gibi bir ayırım. Bu da beni çok sinirlendirdi açıkçası. Seks işçiliğinin bundan ayrılmasının sebebi ne? Bir doktorluktan, çöpçülükten, hemşirelikten rahatsızlık duymuyoruz da neden seks işçiliğinden rahatsızlık duyuyoruz? Ben bunu anlamıyorum. İkincisi, bu konuşmanın, grupta seks işçilerinin olduğunun bile bile yapılması. O insanları hiç düşünmeden, ne hissettiklerini hiç düşünmeden bunların yazılması beni çok rahatsız etti. Çünkü bu işi yapan bir çok insan tanıdım bugüne kadar, gerek sosyal medyadan gerek yüz yüze. Kimse bu işi keyfinden yapmıyor. Böyle bir konuşma geçti grupta. İşte sonra Seçil şey demeye başladı grupta, işte “Seks işçiliğine karşıyım, seks işçiliği yapmam, simit satarım, makarna yerim onurlu yaşarım, bunu asla yapmam.” ... Ben de tabii delirdim. Dünya var, Dünya da seks işçiliği yapıyor. Dünya da çok sinirlendi. Sonra Demet var, kendisi aktivizmle uğraşıyor, seks işçiliği yapıyor, seks işçileriyle çalışıyor. Yani o insanların da dayanışmaya ihtiyacı yok mu? Yani onların da kendi aralarında grupları var diye, biz nasıl bizim yanımızda olmak isteyen, bizim grubumuza dahil olmak isteyen seks işçisi bir kadına “sen seks işçisisin, bu yüzden biz seni gruba alamayız” diyebiliriz? Ben bunu

Esra B., a prominent and an active member of the new group, was also in the triumvirate of moderators of the former group with Esra A. and Ela. After having a direct argument with Esra A. and an indirect quarrel with Ela, Esra B. was removed from the position of moderator by Esra A, and she subsequently left the group with hard feelings. Esra A. explained the reason behind her taking action and removing someone from her post by saying that if Esra B. was to remain as a moderator, she would kick Esra A. out of the group.

In an interview when she was still on good terms with Esra A. and when there was just one Whatsapp group, Esra B. told me that she was uncomfortable with the presence of Dünya, who is now the founder of the new group and apparently a friend of Esra B.

Alya was certainly not fighting with a straw man when she criticized such an anti-sex work attitude. The aforementioned self-identified transexual Seçil (25) whom I interviewed is uncompromisingly against sex work and sex workers. She believes that sex work is a profession without honor and labour, and it is detrimental to the perceived image and the subsequent treatment of trans women in society. Seçil is intransigently opinionated on this subject and explained her stance with the following sentences:

“I think it is a profession without honour. Without honour and dignity. I see it as revolting. Both honourless and revolting. Because when we make the Pride Parade, we say “we are here, we are normal, we are equal to everyone” and so on. Yes, normal people, too, do sex work, that is something else. But trans’ carry this label (as sex workers) and for this label to be erased, sex work is needed to be renounced. There is no other way. Because people look at it this way: “Oh, these (trans women) dress like that just to do this (sex) work. Nobody thinks that way: “This (person) feels like it.” They do not see it that way. “For money, for sex work, they do it (transition),” (this is how) they see it. I look at sex work as negativity anyway, this is my personal opinion. Some people may say “They are also labourers” but to me there is no labour.”²⁶

yapamam. Çünkü o insanın da benim kadar dayanışmaya ihtiyacı var. Ne olursa olsun... Yani onların da grupları var diye... Belki o gruplara erişemedi?”

²⁶“Onursuz bir meslek olduğunu düşünüyorum. Onursuz ve haysiyetsiz. Yani midesizlik olarak görüyorum ya. Hem onursuz hem de midesizlik. Çünkü biz Onur Yürüyüşü yaptığımız zaman biz burdayız, normaliz, herkesle eşitiz vesaire diyoruz. He, normal insanlar da seks işçiliği yapıyor o ayrı konu. Ama transların üzerinde bir yafta var ve bu yaftanın silinmesi için bir kere seks işçiliğinden vazgeçilmesi gerekiyor. Başka türlü mümkünatı yok bunun yani. Çünkü insanlar şey bakıyor he bunlar bu işi yapmak için böyle giyiniyor. Kimse şey düşünmüyor, bunun içinden, bu kişinin içinden böyle geliyor. O gözle bakmıyorlar, para kazanmak için, seks işçiliği için yapıyor, hani o gözle bakılıyor. Ben de zaten seks işçiliğini olumsuzluk olarak görüyorum, hani benim kişisel görüşüm bu. Kimisi onlar da işçi onlar da emekçi diyebilir ama bana göre hiçbir emek yok ortada.”

Sex work as a degrading activity has become a cemented *idée fixe* in Seçil's mind that she says she would rather kill herself instead of resorting to sex work as a way of income, if she finds herself in poverty:

“I told this to Mrs. Şaheste (her therapist), too. I told her that if I cannot find a job, since I am not going to be able to do this (sex) work, I will starve automatically. And if I starve, I would not continue living; I would commit suicide.”²⁷

Similar points are reiterated by 46-year-old Esra A., who trotted out the argument that sex work is just easy money.²⁸ She dubbed sex worker women as “working girls” or “workers” (even when she is talking in Turkish), or prostitutes (*fahişeler*) when she wanted to make the distinction between her and sex workers more stark.

“I believe in this: We are more special than workers. Workers make up the 90% of the trans community, we are the 10%. We achieve the difficult. Why? Because sex work is taking the easy way out.”

She goes on saying that she was not able to come out to her family and transition because of the possibility that she might have been “kicked out” and thus would have had to engage in sex work. In this way, she sees herself as someone who achieved a very difficult task at the expense of a much earlier transition.

Moreover, Esra A., as an opulent and well-educated upper class woman, has another approach towards sex workers, which was not stated by other interviewees. She says that she wants to know “the quality and the level” of the person she is in contact with. This particular point, although it takes a minor part in her rant against sex work, conspicuously bespeaks the importance of one's socio-economic position in relation to sex work. She prefers to surround herself with trans women who have the wherewithal to at least reach a certain level of education and are able to work in “normal” jobs.

In addition to these point, Esra A. –and more subtly, some other members, several times spoke of a security concern for herself and her group as an explanation of her anti

²⁷“Ben bunu Şaheste Hanım'a da söyledim, ben, dedim, iş bulamazsam, dedim, o işi yapmayacağım için otomatikman aç kalırım, aç kalırsam da yaşamam intihar ederim.”

²⁸Although she does explicitly say that sex work is an easy money, she acknowledges from time to time the fact that some people have to do sex work as a means of earning their lives. In one of our recurring sex work discussions, she contended that the reason behind my views about sex work is that I was economically in a precarious situation myself (I was not out to my family and going through acute future anxieties at the time.) and could possibly resort to it when needed. When I asked her if she would change her opinions about me if I were to start doing sex work, she responded that nothing would change. Then again, I believe that if nothing would change in such a scenario, this would still be due to what I have already achieved up to this point in my life, i.e. my education and transition, which I know she values.

sex work attitude. She asserts that the police have the record of the mobile numbers of many sex worker women; thus, she did not want her telephone number to appear in the same Whatsapp group. Although, due to the systematic clampdown on LGBTI+ individuals, and even more so, on trans women who earn a living from sex work, this worry is indeed not far from being irrational, this seems to be only a minor reason behind Esra A.'s attitude towards sex work and sex workers.

Despite all these, Esra A. says –albeit unconvincingly– that she “loves working girls.” When I asked her about the anti-sex worker remark in the welcoming message of the group, she told me (and this information was confirmed by Ela) that it was actually Esra B. who wrote the whole passage when they were still friends as she was allegedly a former sex worker and does not want this information to be revealed. Esra A. adds facetiously that she is herself a woman with “slutty spirit” (*orospu ruhlu*) and used to have sex with several men in the same day. She underlines that it was Esra B. who wrote that message; and the reason behind this is allegedly the fact that she is now in a relationship with a man, and fears that revelation of her past might frustrate her plans about marrying him. She claimed that Esra B.'s boyfriend occasionally checks her phone and the Whatsapp group; this is why Esra B. had to maintain her image as a “chaste women” by trying to curtail “adult content” in the group.

Esra B., while she was still a member of Girls of the Night, expressed her opinions about sex work in a group interview with Esra B. She is a passable woman in her 30s with a relatively good education, stable income, and provincial origin. She works as an engineer in a municipality governed by the ruling party. She is still addressed as a male in her work environment despite the fact that she completely “looks like” a woman (based on the normative description of womanhood). In the same vein, because of her in limbo situation, she is subject to a sinister version of mobbing at workplace, such as not being informed about or invited to workshops and trainings that she is supposed to receive as an engineer which will improve her skills. When it comes to family relations, she is not completely recognized as the woman she is by her family but she is allowed to live with her “husband” in an apartment belonging to her father, with whom she is not on good terms. Although she, too, deals with a barrage of problems, compared to some other trans women who lack the skills and/or a university degree to be employed outside sex work, she has a slightly advantageous position, albeit not even close to that of Esra A. who can

live comfortably for the rest of her life even without working. The reason I point these out is to connect one's socio-economic stance to their perception of sex work.

She argues that although sex work is forced upon trans women and engaging in it is understandable to a certain extent as people have to earn their living one way or another, it has a pernicious effect to the image she would like trans women to portray.

Consequently, aside from their own distinctive features, *Gecenin Kızları*, and *Gökkuşağı Kızları* (even to some extent, *Zenne*) serve a similar function. This function is to provide a quotidian online (and to a lesser degree, onsite) good-natured interaction that will result in cooperation and support for the putative members of a trans women community against the backdrop of a cissexist system which doles out many problems to them on an every day basis.

3.4. Commonalities

The groups consist of trans women from almost all walks of life. Some women in the group work as engineers in different branches of the field, and there are engineering students. There are university students who both study and work as sales associates or baristas. There are university students who study in private schools, and there are other students who attend state universities. There are women who can afford to study abroad, or have regular recreational trips abroad, yet, there are those who hesitate to go out because they are cash-strapped. There are "ablas" (older sisters) who drive a Mercedes, and yet there are also ones who have to "wait 1.5 hours for a bus for a ten-minute-long distance." There are some group members who have made a successful career in finance sector and became a vice-manager, and there are others who deliver pizza. There are the ones who "pass" and live as women and received their female id cards, and there are women who did not start their transition, or are at the very early stages of it. There are the ones who manage to transition in their serious work environment, and meanwhile there are those who are fired because of their transition. There are civil servants, IT people, designers, and academics on one side, and there are people who are retired and/or unemployed on the other side. Some of these women hold unyielding religious and traditional values, whilst some of them are conspicuously irreligious or intersectional feminists. There are those who have a predilection for penetrating men, there are lesbians who live happily with their women partners, and there are those who completely embrace the normative sexual expectations of a heterosexual cisgender woman. Some women are married to men, some had been married to a woman, and some of them currently live with

their long-term or short-term partners; on the other hand, some of them complain about not being able to find a significant other. Some of them are uncompromisingly monogamous, some are quite polyamorous. Some of them are activists, and are working with LGBTI+ and feminist networks; on the other hand, there are the ones who stay silent when police curse, beat, harass, and threaten them. While some women already plan their future narratives of living stealth,²⁹ and what to tell their future husbands about the scars on their would-be constructed vagina after the so-called sex reassignment surgery to blend into the society as cisgender women, others do not care about "being known" (as trans women). All these fragments of identity might not be present at the same time and at the same group because of the member circulation, changing profiles of the groups, fluxional alliances, personal squabbles and bigger schisms among the women; what I wanted to make clear, however, is that it is not easy to describe the groups as monolithic and stereotypical.

Despite the fact that every individual stands at different points of myriad of axis in terms of passability, education, activism, political views, social class, ethnicity, religiosity, and sexual tendencies even in these small-scale social circles, the women claim a common denominator rendering them a "group"³⁰ which is being a trans woman. Even though some activist women who are up to date with current discourses on transgenderism enunciate that everyone's trans experience is different, many of the group members stress the shared pains and joys en route to trans womanhood. One should not forget that these women's positions under various social categories are interconnected with their embracing of their own and other's gender identity and sexual orientation. That is to say, intersectionality of various fragments of their identity (in addition to those of gender and sexuality) shapes the women they have become or aspire to become. For instance, a trans woman coming from a conservative Muslim family might waver between Islam and Christianity trying to find space for her identity in religions, and eventually ends up covering her head. Likewise a trans woman studied sociology at university might be employed as a professional activist. Similarly, a rich trans woman who does not have to work can take her time to create and administer an online socialization group for other

²⁹Going stealth means for a transgender person to not reveal their trans identity and live their life as a cisgender woman.

³⁰The word "community" does not appear often when talking about "the group," and this is especially the case with Girls of the Night. However, sex worker trans women do use the wordings "*camia / trans camiasi*" [or sometimes *ortam* (environment), *alem* (world)] which might equate to "community / trans community" when talking about themselves. This contrast might stem from the fact that many group members already perceive trans women as "exceptional and delicate," and they perceive those who do not engage in sex work even more exceptional, thus underlining their uniqueness, minority, and alterity even in a larger trans folks.

trans woman. Likewise, a trans university student can opt for writing a thesis on trans women. Their meaning-making of transness and relations with other trans women are affected by the intersection of different axes of power operating in their lives. However, the marginalization of trans identity and the subsequent need to navigate this peripheral realm practically only with other trans women render gender and sexual identity rise above other positionalities.

The prevalent perception of transness in the group is an essentialist view, in which transness is considered to be a trait or form of being one brings to the world from birth, that is to say it is biological, and it can be scientifically proven that one is not just gallivanting through the gender spectrum.³¹ According to this view, transness cannot be chosen or changed; it can only be hidden or delayed until an unknown point in the person's life when it forcibly evinces itself, or to the expense of a regretful lifetime of not transitioning. By the same token, transness, that is often described as "condition" by my informants, must be addressed by striving to find one's true self, and the way out for this is to transition from the gender assigned at birth to the desired gender. Most of the time, trans people shows signs of nonconformity with their assigned gender/sexual identity from the very early ages on in their childhood. In this paradigm of transness, the individual transitions for the sake of finding their true self and lives the rest of their life in peace by means of medical help. Esra A., who is the chief purveyor of this perspective, describes transness as follows:

"Actually, transexualism is a mental illness that has a number in a psychiatry book, because there is a description in a psychiatry book. And the number of this description is 302.85.³² This transexuality has conditions. When you fit in these conditions, your psychiatrist directs you to an endocrinologist by giving an approval for you to be treated."³³

As opposed to Hill's participants, Esra A. does see her condition as a mental illness and she is clearly influenced by the institution of psychiatry. However, like a minority of his participants, for her "... medical technologies, mainly through their system of

³¹This approach is particularly deployed by those who foresee that they would have hardships explaining their situation to their family, or in work or school environments. Although some women desultorily acknowledge that transgenderism does not necessarily have to have biological roots, the former approach is genuinely embraced and if not, deliberately used as a strategy to negotiate and legitimize their identity to an outer and wider cis-world.

³²Gender Identity Disorder in Adolescents or Adults

³³"... Aslında transeksüellik de bir psikiyatri kitabında numarası olan bir ruh hastalığı diye şey yapıyor. Çünkü psikiyatri kitabında tanımlaması geçiyor. Ve bunun da tanımlamanın şeyi 302.85. Bunun transeksüelliğin koşulları var. Bu koşullara uygun olduğun zaman seni, işte, psikiyatristin endokrinolojiye yönlendirip hani bu şekilde bir tedavi olman yönünde bir approval veriyor, bir onay veriyor."

classification and diagnosis, offered an answer to the question “what am I?” and hope for a better future (Hill 1997, 175).”

3.4.1 Childhood as a Clandestine and Incipient Womanhood

Many women I have spoken to or whose narratives I have heard or read, reiterate resembling memories of childhood as a phase in which they discovered that their proclivities were different than their "normal," cisgender peers. This difference –the different predilections for certain toys, colours, clothing items, child's play, idols, choice of company, objects of desire– comes at the price of ridicule, belittlement, a sense of loneliness and guilt, verbal and physical violence, exclusion, harassment, rape, and self-harm. Being a woman, and establishing oneself as one in public discourse, within a legal and social system which insistently states the opposite for them, appears as a continuous and conscious challenge which figures in the accounts of all of my informants –even beginning from their childhood. Darryl B. Hill, in *Understanding, Knowing, And Telling Transgender Identities*, talks about how his informants narrate childhood memories in which they “gained a good deal of knowledge about their gender by how others positioned them or through gender-typing or categorization (Hill 1997, 142).” Similarly, almost every trans woman who participated in the oral history project *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* accounts how they were gender-typed by their family and relatives, often through violent means. My informants' accounts also show a similar process:

In the vivid childhood/pre-puberty memories of Alya (21), Yağız (23), Esra A. (46) and Seçil (25) I have found intriguing details resonating an early womanhood that they knew had to be kept secret. All of these persons perceived themselves as girls or girly (*kız gibi*) in their childhood, or they at least were aware of that they were not boys. They were also aware of the fact that they were not interpellated as girls/women by anyone else. Therefore, these incipient women that they were going to reveal to the world years later, had to be lived, then, in a clandestine and fragmented fashion. The women would learn what they were doing was not accepted, and this would lead to self-denial, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies which I will discuss next.

“When I think about my childhood, in retrospect, when I look at old photos, I would actually see myself as a girl in the mirror. With my behavior, style of dress, memories left in my mind, I was always like a girl but I just was not aware of some things. I started to like men at the ages of 7-8, I fell in love with a boy named Doğukan from my neighbourhood. Then I thought this was perceived normal by people. There was not any problems, such as a man can fall in love with man. I was just living my life very well, I did not have any

issue about my body. When I looked at the mirror, I could see myself as a woman. My voice, my body... I did not have any dysphoria about my penis in those ages and because I was in pre-puberty I was comfortable with my voice and body. Until puberty. When I think about the first times of puberty, it was a horrible phase for me, I'll tell you that. When my beard appeared for the first time, when people first started to say "You are becoming a young man!" or "You are growing a beard, you are entering manhood!" I was supposed to be happy but on the contrary, it was turning into a big chaos for me."³⁴

In this excerpt, in spite of the fact that Alya wavers between calling her former self a girl (*kız çocuğu*) and man in the flow of the conversation, based on the rest of the interview and other conversations, pre-puberty childhood was an important phase for her in which she gradually realized the juxtaposition between her inner "girlhood" and an outer "boyhood."

Similarly, in the same group interview, Yaman shared her childhood memories in which she knew what she saw "normal" was not perceived as such by other people, and she had to keep her practices as a secret. This fragmented life, aside from triggering so many problems later, caused her to develop strategies, including self-harm, as to hide her early womanhood from everyone.

"I would wear (my mother's clothes) just to feel normal. Then I would do my homework, for example, just irrelevant. I was doing that just to be able to feel natural. Then I would keep in my mind: "How was it (the cloth) folded? How was it placed? How was it in the drawer? I would put everything back just neatly, without any stain, without nothing. I would put on my deodorant as well so that if I sweat, there wouldn't be any smell, nothing would be noticed. Anyway, I was careful. I was behaving paranoiacally and thanks to this no one ever suspected that I might have had anything about it."³⁵

³⁴"Çocukluğuma indiğim zaman şu an, yani şu ana göre hatırladığım kadarıyla eskiden fotoğraflara baktığım zaman aslında aynada kendimi hep bir kız çocuğu olarak görüyordum. Yani hareketlerimle, giyim tarzımla, fotoğraflara baktığım zaman işte kalan anılarımla düşündüğüm zaman hep bir kız çocuğu gibiydim ama bazı şeylerin farkında değildim. İlk erkeklerden hoşlanmam 7-8 yaşlarında olmuştu, mahallemden Doğukan diye bir çocuğa aşık olmuşum. Ama o zamanlar bunun insanlar tarafından falan gayet normal karşılandığını düşünüyordum. Gayet hiçbir sorun yok, hani bir erkek bir erkeğe de aşık olabilir gibi. Gayet güzel bir şekilde hayat benim için gidiyordu, bedenimle alakalı bir sorunum yoktu. Aynaya baktığım zaman gayet kendimi bir kadın olarak görebiliyordum. Sesim vücudum... Çünkü o yaşlarda hani penisle alakalı bir disforiyam yoktu o zaman, ergenliğe de girmediğim için sesimden vücudumdan dolayı gayet rahattım. Ta ki ergenliğe kadar. Ergenliğe girdiğim zamanı hatırladığımda, benim için çok korkunç bir süreçti, öyle söyleyeyim. İlk sakallarım çıktığı zaman, ilk insanların işte "delikanlı oluyorsun," işte "sakalların çıkıyor, erkekliğe adım atıyorsun" dedikleri zaman bundan mutlu olmam gerekirken tam tersi git gide bende büyük bir kaosa dönüşüyordu."

³⁵"Ama hani sırf normal hissetmek için giyiniyordum. Daha sonra ödevimi yapıyordum mesela, hiç alakasız. O da doğal hissedebilmek için kendimi öyle bir şekilde davranıyordum. Ve daha sonra aklımda tutuyordum: Nasıl katlanmıştı, nasıl konmuştu, çekmecedeki nasıldı? Aynı şekilde tertipli bir şekilde koyuyordum her şeyi, hiçbir lekesi olmadan. Deodorantımı falan da sürüyordum ekstra olarak, terledim, bir koku bir şey farkedilmesin diye. Neyse, dikkatliydim. Çok paranoyak bir şekilde davranıyordum buna ve sayesinde hiç kimse hiçbir zaman hiçbir şekilde şüphelenmedi bende bununla ilgili bir şey olduğundan."

Just like Alya, for Yaman, too, puberty was also a phase in which one “loses” certain qualities and comes to terms with a changing body. For Yaman, for instance, the most visible sign was her loss of high-pitched voice which was replaced with a low-pitched one during puberty.

“I realized it that way, more than “Oh, I am growing beard!” or this and that. I realized that I was no longer able to scream. Somehow this was the proof for me, I was able to use my voice as I wanted, I had that quality to my voice... When I realized that I lost it, this was the shock of puberty for me. More than getting hairy and whatnot, I wasn’t able to scream.”³⁶

Esra A. memories follow the same pattern in which her womanhood is not acknowledged by her family.

“So, as I told you, I knew it from the ages of 4-5. I have very early memories. I would pull the duvet on my head completely leaving a small hole, and think that I was a princess trapped in a cave. That's how I would sleep. I have crazy memories like that. I was 5-6 years old. Girls would play house (*evcilik*) and they wouldn't let me play with them, because I was like a chubby, 'boy'. I remember saying (this) deep inside: "Okay, I will grow up to be a woman, you'll see!" So I have these kinds of silly memories, throughout my life. Again, I was in elementary school, and my grandmother was talking to my mother. (By the way) We are two male siblings and I am the senior one. Then my grandmother said –and I was present in the room– "It would be perfect if you did (meaning "gave birth to") a daughter. What are you going to do with two boys?" and so on. And I was crying out inside: "I am your daughter, I am your daughter!" But of course, I can't say it out loud. I have memories like these.”³⁷

In the same vein, in Seçil’s memories of being a girl figure in as something she used to be jealous of as this was how she perceived herself but was also forbidden to her.

“It is something I realized when I was little. The first thing that comes to my mind about this issue is this: There is a place called Galeria in Bakırköy, and there is an ice-skating rink in it. My mother had taken me there, I had wanted it so much. You know, you hire ice skates for ice-skating, we hired them. The place was mixed, with boys and girls. Others hired tutors, my mother was not that rich, so she didn't do such a thing. I just did it on my own. So I entered,

³⁶“Benim şöyle bir farkındalığım oldu sakallarım çıkıyor şu çıkıyordan çok, onlardan önce benim çığlık atamadığımı farkettim. Nedense benim için o kanıttı hani sesimi istediğim gibi kullanabildiğim, sesimin o özelliğinin bende olduğu. Onu kaybettiğimi farkedince o ergenlik şoku oldu bende. Hani bir kıllanıp bir şey oldudan çok çığlık atamadım.”

³⁷“Valla ben dedim ya 4-5 yaşından beri biliyorum, eee, yani benim çok erken anılarım var, eee, hani, eee, uyumak için yatakta yorganı kafamın üzerine tamamen çekip şöyle ufacak bir delik ordan açık bırakıp, ondan sonra, mağaraya sıkışmış bir prenses olduğumu düşünerek uyurdum yani. Böyle deli anılarım var. İşte kızlar, beş altı yaşındayım, kızlar evcilik oynar, beni almaz, çünkü hani böyle tombik bir erkek çocuğuydum hani ben. Ondan sonra "Sen erkeksin, seni almayız" falan halindeler, tamam mı? Ben de içimden şey dediğimi biliyorum. Yani hani "İyi, ben de büyüyünce kadın olurum, görürsünüz siz!" falan... Böyle abuk subuk anılarım var yani, bütün hayatım boyunca yani. İşte ortaokuldaydım, anneannemle annem konuşuyor. Biz iki erkek çocuğuz, büyük olan benim. Ondan sonra anneannem diyor ki –ben de odadayım ama hala– işte anneme, "Ya," diyor, "Bir de kız yapsaydın ne güzel olurdu. İki tane erkek napıcan?" falan. Ben içimden haykırıyorum "Kızınız benim kızınız benim" diye ama tabii ağzımdan çıkmıyor. Ondan sonra, eee, hehe, böyle anılarım var.”

there were girls, they were getting tutorship with their teachers, and I got very jealous. But I was jealous because of this: "How nice, they are girls. In the look of a girl. Why am I not like that?" From that moment on... Alas, I was very little! I was 8 years old. 7-8... So I had just started primary school, around that period. Always these kind of things happened. When we visited someone, and if they had daughter, I would directly go to her room, and apply her creams or makeup. They would think that I was being mischievous, since I was a kid, plus I was a boy. So this is what it is. There is something like that since then. I always knew it, but I also somehow knew that I had to keep it secret."³⁸

Seçil was in a long-term relationship with a boy in her adolescent years. She contends that this situation made her defer the questioning of her sexual identity and/or sexual orientation as she was only interested in that person. However, she continues, only after they broke up she came to realize that she would always see herself as a girl when she looked at the mirror, using of the metaphor of "looking at the mirror" just like many trans women talking about their childhood retrospectively.

In "A "Fierce and Demanding" Drive," Joanne Meyerowitz reports that many transgender women seeking "sex reassignment surgery" reiterated similar stories via letters they sent out to doctors (Meyerowitz 2006, 366). In these letters, trans patients wrote that they felt alienation and revulsion in relation to their bodies, and some of this gender dysphoria evinced itself in their childhood, similar to the stories my respondents narrated (Meyerowitz 2006, 355-366). In the same vein, they recounted a penchant for what is assigned for "the other sex" starting from early childhood, and this proclivity for toys or the activities of "the other sex" is accompanied by years of ridicule (Meyerowitz 2006, 366).

3.4.2. Psychosocial Problems and Suicidal Tendencies

Yaman, in addition to her suicidal thoughts like the other informants, resorted to self-harming to prevent herself from indulging in thoughts about her sexual identity and orientation so that this would not be found out by other people. When it was noticed by

³⁸"Çok küçükken farkına vardığım bir şey. İlk aklıma gelen şu, bu konuyla ilgili. Bakırköy'de Galeria diye bir yer var işte, orda bir buz pateni var içinde. Annem beni oraya götürmüştü, çok istemişim. Buz pateni için paten kiralyorsun ya, işte o pateni kiraladık. Ondan sonra kızlı erkekli karışık zaten orası. Başkaları hoca tutuyordu öğretmen tutuyordu buz pateni için, benim annem o kadar zengin değildi, benim annem öyle bir şey yapmadı. Ben kendim öyle saldırm çayıra mevlam kayıra... Girdim, şeyleri, kızları, kızlar vardı, buz pateni... Hocalarıyla ders görüyorlardı, ben çok kıskanmışım onları. Ama kızları şu yüzden kıskanmışım: "Ne güzel onlar kız. Kız görüntüsünde. Ben niye öyle değilim?" Ordan itibaren bir... Çok küçüktüm ya! 8 yaşındaydım, 7-8... Yani ilk okula yeni başlamışım, yani o dönemler. Böyle şeyler oldu hep. İşte misafir olarak bir yere gidince kız çocuk varsa hemen onun odasına girmek, onun işte kremlerini sürmek, makyaj malzemesini sürmek falan. Onlar benim yaramazlık yaptığımı zannediyorlardı hani, çocuk olduğum için, bir de erkek olduğum için. Öyle yani, o dönemden beri böyle bir şey var. Hep biliyordum ama saklamak zorunda olduğumun da farkına vardım bir şekilde."

her family that “somebody”³⁹ was using her mother’s makeup in spite of her efforts, she decided that she had to stop. She also decided that she had to build walls so that her practices and the feelings she carried would not be noticed:

“Together with this, I thought I had to be more introvert, and hiding this became an obsession in my head. Thus, I knew that, I searched it on the Internet –I was a very inquisitive kid: These gays, more feminine behaviours, how they were seen by the society... I was browsing the Internet a lot, I found it, I saw it, and I thought I must not have it (femininity). I was of the opinion that I would be ridiculed. Therefore I immediately started to question my way of speaking. “Is there any gayness or femininity? Then I must not speak.” So much so that I would keep my mouth closed. I started to do that so much that my mouth started to stink, just because I kept my mouth closed all the time.”⁴⁰

In later years, such practices continued in Yaman’s life. The feelings of uncomformity with her assigned gender did not fade away, and these thoughts that she needed to get rid of started to discomfort her so much that she began physically harming herself.

“When I attempted to think, when these thoughts come to my mind, I would punish myself. I would sometimes bite my arm. Because at nights, it takes me a lot to go into sleep, and I would also think a lot at nights, when I was a child. When such thoughts entered into my head I was like “No! Bite your arm!” or I would make myself cough. I would mistreat myself so that those thoughts would not come to my head. I became the worst enemy of myself.”⁴¹

Like Yaman, I also have childhood memories of shaking my head so fast, pulling my hair, and piching and biting my body when I found myself not able to escape from certain thoughts and desires I was not supposed to have. During puberty, when Yaman lost the degree of connection to her changing body, she started to neglet her self-care and personal hygiene.

“Another thing I did was this, when I became aware of puberty: This body will never go into the direction I want, no matter what I do. This is not my body, and together with this (thought), I started to care about nothing.

³⁹Her mother thought it was the cleaning lady.

⁴⁰“Bununla beraberinde zaten daha fazla içime kapanmam gerektiğini düşündüm ve kafamda bir takıntı oldu bunun saklanması. O yüzden, şeyin de farkındayım, internette baktım bu –araştırmacı bir çocuktum– o yüzden hemen bu gayler olsun, daha feminen davranışları olsun, nasıl toplum içinde görüldüğünü... İnterneti çok kurcalıyordum, buldum, gördüm ve bende olmaması gerektiğini düşündüm, benimle dalga geçileceği düşüncesindeydim. O yüzden hemen konuşma şeklimi sorgulamaya başladım. "Acaba bir gaylik bir feminenlik var mı? O zaman konuşmamalıyım," şeklinde. Hatta hani ağzımı kapalı tutardım. Bunu o kadar çok yapmaya başladım ki nefesim kokmaya başladı sırf ağzımı kapattığım için her zaman.”

⁴¹“Düşünmeye kalktığımda, bu düşünceler kafama geldiğinde kendimi cezalandırıyordum. Bazen kolumu ısırđığım oluyordu. Çünkü akşamları uyumam zaman alıyor ve akşamları çok düşünüyordum çocukken de. Bu tür düşünceler kafama geldiğinde (birkaç anlaşılmaz kelime) "Hayır! Kolunu ısır!" veya kendimi öksürtürdüm. Sırf o düşünceler kafama gelmesin diye kendime kötü bir şekilde davranırdım. Kendi en büyük düşmanım oldum...”

Brushing my teeth, bathing started to be less important. I was just doing these when I was about to go out so that people see me as healthy.”⁴²

As the years passed by, this practice of closing oneself to the outer world and neglecting personal care did not diminish; on the contrary, it increased. When Yaman went to Canada to study and started to live in a room and had to deal with other problems, this was the crux of it. She came to a point where she never left the room –even for urinating.

“I was a shut-in, a term my parents loved to use: shut-in. And when I didn’t go out... I didn’t want to go out in any condition. I would just leave the room to eat. As I was not leaving the room to urinate, I started to pee in bottles, and bottles of pee started to accumulate in my room.”⁴³

This habit only stopped briefly, when Yaman’s girlfriend of the time came to her room, and to her surprise, instead of getting angry and ditching her, she offered to help her and the couple cleaned the room together. However, she could only give up on this habit when her parents came to visit her in Canada. The situation exacerbated; when she came back to Turkey, and after having a vague conversation revolving around the topic of transness with her father, which revealed that he was against that, she contemplated suicide.

“I don’t know how many days after, but after that talk, I didn’t take keys, nor cell phone. I didn’t make any research about, what kind of a thing suicide is. It was a thought that passed through my mind a lot and I didn’t want it to be seen in my Internet history (referring to Alya’s search). I was paranoid regarding some matters, anyway. I went up to the roof of our building for some reason. My own life didn’t seem very meaningful to me. Everything went to the dogs and that thought (of suicide) was relieving. I wasn’t going to be a burden for these people (parents) because I saw myself as such. I am a burden for people, my family is having so many problems because of me, they are retired, if I study, they are going to pay extra money for me. I had also distanced myself from my friends because of that. And I sat at the edge of the roof. I was just sitting relaxed swinging my feet. But one expects this, as it is in the movies: Someone who comes running “Stop! Don’t!” or a phone call – I didn’t have the phone with me. But nothing happened. Nobody came, nobody saw. ... Nobody could hear, I could have ended there at that moment. But I told myself “This is a shitty situation. I am shattered, into million pieces, I don’t even see a whole. I don’t even know what I am. I got more and more

⁴²“Yaptığım başka bir şey de şu oldu ergenlik kısmını farkedince. Bu vücut ben ne yaparsam yapayım istediğim bir şekilde gitmeyecek. Bu, benim vücudum değil ve onun beraberinde zaten bir çok şeyi de önemsemedim hani. Dişlerimi fırçalamak olsun, banyo yapmak biraz daha az önemli oldu, sırf dışarı çıkarken bunları yapmaya çalışıyordum çünkü insanlar beni daha sağlıklı görsün.”

⁴³“Dört duvar arasında kapalı kalıyordum, annemlerin kullanmayı çok sevdiği bir terim: Dört duvar arasında. Ve dışarı çıkmadığımda... Herhangi bir durumda dışarı çıkmak istemiyordum. Yemek yemek için çıkıyordum. Tuvalet için çıkmamak için de şişelere işer oldum ve sidik şişeleri birikti odamda.”

broken. What am I going to do? If this cannot go worse, let me try a few more days.”, I said. I returned myself, I came back, knocked the door, “I forgot the keys,” I said, and stepped in.”⁴⁴

Alya accounted the same suicidal thoughts when she could no longer keep her gender identity secret.

“About that time because there was not anyone (close) around me, I came to the edge of suicide. What I was searching on the Internet was things about my identity and it was also about pain-free suicide methods. Cutting throat, hanging oneself, jumping off somewhere and whatnot. Apparently the most painless is hanging yourself. It is less painful. Or cutting your wrists. Falling asleep slowly, cutting your hands, your wrists, putting them under water so that blood leaves your body faster, falling asleep slowly and so on...”⁴⁵

When I asked Alya to talk about her coming out story, she started by saying that she did not come out; she was outed. Someday, while she was searching about suicide “as usual” on the Internet, a relatively close cousin of hers texted her, and Alya briefly told her about the situation she was in and that she was considering suicide as a way out. Without malicious intention be as it may, her cousin informed Alya’s mother about the circumstance, and this was the time when Alya took action and attempted suicide. She left home with the intention of getting a knife and kill herself after her mother tried to confront her crying. Fortunately, she stopped short of doing that thinking that her mother and sibling who already had to bear living in a restless home with an alcoholic dad, would be devastated with her suicide.

Like the other informants, Esra A. also narrates how she found herself at the verge of suicide in her young adolescence:

⁴⁴“Kaç gün sonra olduğunu bilmiyorum ama o konuşmadan sonra bir gün ne anahtar ne cep telefonu bir şey almadım, ben bir araştırma da yapmadım bununla ilgili nasıl intihar nasıl bir şey... Kafamdan çok geçen bir düşünceydi ve internet geçmişimde de görünmesini istemiyordum. Paranoyaktım bazı konularda, neyse. Bizim binanın çatısına bir sebeple çıktım. Kendi hayatım artık çok anlamlı görünmüyordu bana. Hani iyiye gideceğini görmüyordum, her şey kötüye gitmişti ve rahatlatıcıydı o düşünce. Bu insanlara da yük olmayacaktım artık, çünkü kendimi öyle görüyordum. Ben insanlara yüküm, ailem benim yüzümden bu kadar sorun yaşıyor, hani emekliler, okursam benim için artı para ödeyecekler, falandı filan. Arkadaşlarımdan da kendimi uzaklaştırmıştım bu sebepten dolayı. Ve hani çatıda, kenarında oturdum. Ayaklarımı sallarcasına öyle rahat rahat oturuyordum. Amacım geri dönmek değildi. Ve insan şey bekliyor, filmlerde olur ya "Dur, yapma!" diyen birisi koşup gelir veya bir telefon araması –telefon da yok yanımda. Ama hiçbir şey olmadı. Hiç kimse gelmedi, hiç kimse görmedi. ... Kimsenin duyduğu yok, ettiği yok, o an orda biterdi. Ama şey dedim hani, "Bu çok boktan bir durum," kendi kendime. "Paramparçayım, milyonlarca parça artık, hani bir bütün gözüküyor bile. Ne olduğumu bilmiyorum. Kırıldım da kırıldım. Bundan daha kötü artık olur mu ki? Ne yapacağım ki? Bundan kötü olmayacaksa bir iki gün daha deneyeyim." dedim, kendimi geri çevirdim, geri döndüm, kapıyı çaldım, "anahtarımı unuttuğum" dedim, girdim içeri.”

⁴⁵“Ben o dönemler artık çevremde kimse olmadığı için intiharın eşiğine gelmiştim. Yani internette araştırdığım bir kendi kimliğimle alakalı şeyler, bir de acısız intihar yollarıydı. En acısız intihar yolları nedir? İşte boğaz kesmek, kendini asmak, bir yerden atlamak falan. İşte en acısız kendini asmakmış sözde, filan. Daha acısızmış. Ya da bileklerini kesmek. İşte yavaş yavaş uykuya dalmak, işte ellerini, bileklerini kesip suyun içine sokup kanın vücudundan daha çabuk uzaklaşması, yavaş yavaş uykuya dalmak falan.”

“Then my dysphoria increased. I started to suffer a lot. But as opposed to (choosing transition), I am trying to be a man, such as sports, I am doing lots of sports, I am doing this, I am doing that... Oh, nothing works! Then I have sex with women, then, at last, around the age 23, 22, I came to the edge of suicide. Then, I had a childhood friend living in the opposite apartment building. The kid hanged himself; committed suicide and died. I am considering suicide and whatnot “what should I do,” “what is it” while I am in depression. Because there is no way out, there is nothing! Then I saw what his parents went through, I saw the sufferings of these people and I completely erased that thought (of suicide) from my mind. This (incident) directed me to restart. With that restart (I was like) “I should be a man, I should pursue the life of a man, I am a man, I am not a woman” but still (other) thoughts in my head. “You even couldn’t succeed being a woman, what kind of a thing you are! How can you not become (a woman) when you are living (in) these feelings!” and getting jealous of everywoman I see and whatnot...”⁴⁶

3.5. What Do They Talk About?

Group interaction is primarily relayed in the form of text messages, and to a lesser extent, photos, videos, voice recordings, and links to maintain and reinforce the communication. The subject of group interaction can vary; the women talk about everything but through the glasses of transgenderism. However, discussions are mainly about the topics that are deemed exclusively trans.

First of these realms is the intersection of trans lives with the institution of medicine. Trans women have almost an inseparable relation to the institution of medicine either by choice or as a mandatory path. Even in the welcoming message of Girls of the Night, it is announced to the newcomer that the discussions around medical procedures are a distinctive characteristic of the group. In Turkey, a trans woman who opts to follow the government’s route-to-womanhood, formally has to see a psychiatrist for a long period of time, and undergo vaginal construction surgery. Therefore, an expansive portion of the conversation is about SRS (sexual reassignment surgery).⁴⁷ Group members, especially

⁴⁶“Ondan sonra, eee, çok disforyalarım arttı, çok sıkıntılar çekmeye başladım falan filan... Ama, tam tersine erkek olmaya çalışıyorum, işte, spor, yoğun spor yapıyorum, şunu yapıyorum, bunu yapıyorum... Ay hiçbir şey etkili olmuyor! Ondan sonra, eee, işte, kadınlarla beraber oluyorum, ondan sonra, eee, en son artık bir 23 yaşında falan, 22 yaşında falan intihar noktalarına geldim ben. Eee, o zaman, bizim karşı apartmanda oturan bir çocukluk arkadaşım vardı. Çocuk kendini astı; intihar etti ve öldü. Tabii ben böyle kendi kendime intihar etmeye çalışıyordum falan filan böyle napsam nedir böyle buhranlar içerisindeyken... Çünkü bir çıkış yok yani bir şey yok! O zaman onun anne babasının yaşadığı şeyleri gördüm, insanların yaşadığı zorlukları gördüm ve o düşünceyi kafamdan tamamen sildim. Ve, eee, o beni tamamen bir *restart* etmeye yöneltti. O *restart*la ben erkek olmalıyım, erkek hayatı yaşamalıyım, ben bir erkeğim, kadın değilim diye ama kafamda sürekli düşünceler... Bir kadın bile olmayı beceremedin, sen nasıl bir şeysin, eee, bu duyguları yaşıyorken nasıl olamazsın falan filan gibisinden her gördüğüm kadını kıskanıp bilmem ne...”

⁴⁷The vaginal/genital (re)construction surgery or vaginoplasty (the forms I prefer to use) is called different names: While sex reassignment surgery and sex change surgery are perhaps the most common names of the procedure, it is also referred as gender confirmation surgery, gender realignment surgery, sex realignment surgery, and more

those who have a good handle on English constantly try to find more on this crucial surgery either by reading studies or patients' experiences. Some members even find and invite new members who went through the surgery so that the rest of the group can ask their questions, such as about the doctor, hospital, technique, recovery process, sexual pleasure/orgasm, appearance of the vagina, hormon intake after the surgery, and financing the procedure.

SRS is not the only surgery trans women want to have. A myriad of surgical procedures follow it, such as FFS, or, facial feminization surgery. Facial feminization surgery is oftentimes a series of surgeries that aim to turn one's masculine-considered features into feminine features based the person's wishes. These include operations such as jaw reduction, rhinoplasty, lip and cheek filling, forehead contouring and so on. The women also passionately engage in long conversations about these procedures, sharing what they plan to have, which member "needs" which procedure, and which doctor is best at which procedure. In addition to SRS and FFS, there are also surgery-included self-fashioning procedures such as vocal cord surgery, hair implants, breast enhancement, removal of testicles (outside of the regular vaginoplasty procedure), injections and implants for certain body parts and whatnot.

Another very most important juncture of trans lives with medicine is HRT, or hormone replacement therapy. Hormone replacement therapy is considered one of the requirements of transtitioning and includes increasing one's estrogen and repressing androgen levels. The purpose of this treatment is chiefly to acquire what is societally considered a more womanly figure as the treatment provides a redistribution of fat within the body. It is said to have other effects on erectile power and ejaculation, skin texture, hair growth, weight gain, emotional status, etc. Women of both Whatsapp groups also talk a lot about their hormone regimen. Many of them describe being on hormones as having a period everyday. The reason behind is that it said that cisgender women crave food (hence, gain weight), and become extremely emotional, sensitive and aggressive. Trans women on hormones, even though when they just started to take them and even the dosage is low, recall the same experiences. Perhaps as having these characteristics is ascribed to having a period for cisgender women in society, taking hormones is regarded as the cause of those for trans women by trans and non-trans people. I witnessed how

informally, bottom surgery, or "the surgery." Trans women who are contemplating to have this surgery may refer to this surgery by the names of the techniques as well: Penile inversion and colon.

trans-attracted men regard their partners' "irrational" behavior as due to hormones, and how trans women regard each other's aggressive behaviour as being due to hormones (*hormon kafası*). (While this is partly true and this situation is seconded by many women (Kulick 1999, 65), there is a psychological side to the issue as well in wanting to adhere to a norm. Many trans women like to have the characteristics of a cisgender women, and women in general are thought to be the emotional, impulsive, and even the "hysterical" gender.)

That is to say, they share information about when, how, in which form, and at which dosage they take hormones in order to achieve their desired body. In Turkey, people who follow the official route by doctors are only prescribed hormones which are in the pill form. Exceptions aside,⁴⁸ all women are prescribed Aldactone or Andorcur as androgen blockers and Estrofem as their estrogen. However sex workers tend to have their hormones in the form of needle injections, as it is believed that they are more potent, less harmful for the liver, and less intrusive for erectile power as they are not taken on a daily basis. In both groups, women inform each other about the pros and cons of hormones, encourage beginners to take them under a doctor's supervision, and discourage breakneck hormone users Esra A. dubs as "drug abusers." Unfortunately, all over the world, some trans women overuse hormones in a short span of time to achieve their desired body (Kulick 1999, 65). Even if women are prescribed hormones by their endocrinologists, they still look for advice from each other and online, as many trans women believe that doctors lack knowledge on transgender issues (Hill 1997, 179). They constantly ask each other hormone-related questions such as whether ejaculating while taking hormones would decrease their effect and, for instance, make their breasts (*tita*) smaller (Kulick 1999, 86). Likewise, they inquire whether their fellow hormone user friends gain weight, get smaller in height, or their shoe size decreases and whatnot.

Other discussion topics include men (to a visibly lesser degree women) as partners, relationships, dating applications and sites, having "the talk" with the family and friends, coming out at work or university, finding jobs, housing, and roommates, sexually transmitted diseases, sartorial and cosmetic fashioning of oneself, where and when to buy certain items, cooking skills, animals and whatnot. Women in the groups share their

⁴⁸I have heard that women know others who are prescribed a contraceptive pill. Although I know trans women use contraceptives for estrogen and I was advised to use a contraceptive pill when I was looking for how to become a trans woman, prescription of contraceptives has not been a common practice during the time span of this study.

everyday joys, pleasing sexual experiences, photos with proud-to-show *laços* (boyfriends), along with problems with their families, and unfortunately their depressive and even suicidal thoughts.

In this chapter, I attempted to show how group-making functions within the larger identity construction process in trans women's everyday lives. For this, what is deemed to be a "subculture," group-making works as an indispensable tool with which trans women understand, make intelligible, modify, contribute to –hence, "construct"– an identity under which they have been placed, and with which they describe themselves. Trans women, especially the group of trans women I work with, do express their need for and liking of support and friendship groups online and off. The enormous amount of information produced and transmitted on everyday basis takes an important role in trans women's self-identification. Studies on group-making have a further potential on comprehending trans subjectivities.

CHAPTER 4: TRANS-INTIMACY: REDFINING THE INTIMATE

When I found myself in a situation where my penis was seen by one of my trans friends who also happened to be my informant, and it was at the hands of another trans woman I had just met, I realized that this was the crescendo of intimacy for me. This was the moment I decided to dedicate one of my thesis chapters to the intricate subject of intimacy by looking in retrospect at the web of what would normatively be called hyper-intimate relation(ing)s which almost become an everyday part of the trans women whose lives I have been able to observe –including my very self, and the larger group of trans friends and acquaintances. In this chapter, I will be discussing trans women's complex ways of navigating the sundry forms of intimate deeds in a *vérité* manner. I employ the term intimacy as a governing concept both to analyze it as a tool in trans sociability and an inherent part or requirement of the so-called “male-to-female” transition process. I will be looking at how trans-identified women orchestrate an inflated level of physical and verbal intimacy among themselves and with an outer non-trans community as a way of negotiating their presence and needs in the respective social spaces. I argue that intimacy essentially functions as the warp and woof of trans subjectivity, as it is one of the most crucial linchpins of transness –if not the foremost. I am employing the term intimacy, “an array of concerns too often neglected in past debates over citizenship, and which extend notions of rights and responsibilities concerned with all those matters linked to our most intimate desires, pleasures and ways of being in the world (Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* 2003, 151),” as the way Ken Plummer defines it:

“... Intimacy is often restricted to our romantic and sexual life; but I use the term to refer to an array of arenas in which we ‘do’ the personal life – doing body work, doing gender, doing relationships, doing eroticism, and doing identities (Plummer, kenplummer.com n.d.).”

Esra A. mentioned that she was going to buy a tucking⁴⁹ underwear (*soston*, *üçleme külotu*, *üçleyici*) for herself, and she wanted me to join her. She already had arranged an appointment with the woman who was sewing these underwears, and two days later, we wended our way to her home-atelier. Her name –at least one of her names– was Derya; she was a trans woman, a former sex worker, and semi social media celebrity who had attracted some Internet fanfare until she decided to retire into a more secluded life. She lived in Istanbul’s Kadıköy and was known as “The Bull of Kadıköy” (*Kadıköy Boğası*) for reasons related to her former profession. She got famous on Internet with her videos. The videos included short clips of Derya greeting and sending her best wishes to her followers in the mornings and on Fridays (Muslim holy days), driving car, and telling sexual jokes. She also recorded videos, which brought her the most attention, for the purpose of informing potential clients how to prepare themselves to be anally penetrated. When she lost her mother, she changed her lifestyle drastically; she quitted sex work, covered her hair, appeared on social media wearing chador (*kara çarşaf*), and started to work as a tailor/designer. Prior to the visit, I had my prejudices and was expecting her to be more of a petulant diva. She nevertheless welcomed us in an amiable way; in fact, she was so generously friendly that I left her home confident and empowered having received flattering compliments galore from a glamorous transvestite (more correctly, *travesti*) that I looked up to. Derya was a voluble woman; she told us the summary of her life story as Duygu, a younger trans woman Derya called 'daughter,' served us some herbal tea: her problematic relations with her family, bodily alterations she went through, her relation to sexuality, love, and religion, and her regrets about transition. After a bona fide conversation, she gave us the tucking underwears. She also asked me whether I knew how to tuck. This piece of underwear was also called *üçleme*; and somehow, I had always ridiculously assumed that it referred to wearing three underwears on top of each other so that they can hold back the penis and the testicles tighter. Derya explained to me that *üçlemek* referred to a particular layout of genital area in which testicles are pushed back to their natural pouches and the penis is pulled back. I had heard about the technique; I just did not know that it was called that way in the trans lexicon. When I responded that I never used this sort of underwear nor I did a proper tucking, she ordered her daughter to help me try the *soston*. She suggested Esra A. to try it as well; but Esra A. could not comply with this level of intimacy and kindly dodged the dialogue on the excuse that she

⁴⁹Tucking refers to the practice of hiding one's penis as to make the genital area appear flat resembling the look of having a vagina.

was hairy. We went to the corridor with Duygu, and I undressed lower part of my body in this febrile atmosphere. When I seemed to fail in tucking, the daughter, who was about the same age as me, knelt down and started to demonstrate the practice on my body, mind you, while Esra A. was standing there and watching us. Since it was difficult to demonstrate the practice on my body, she felt the need to show it on her own body; however, she was not comfortable with the presence of Esra A. and she asked her to go to the other room. Although Esra A. wanted to stay, Duygu emphasized that she did not want to be seen naked by Esra A., and she had to leave willy-nilly. Perhaps due to Esra A.'s appearance of what is socially considered as man, the age difference, or the extremely short duration of their acquaintanceship made her feel uneasy about the situation, whereas the degree of hesitancy was lesser, albeit still present, when she engaged in this intimate relation with me. After a while, Derya came in to show me how to wear the *soston* once and for all. She was wearing gloves and looking more of a professional, making sexual jokes about the situation saying, "Give it to my hands!" and laughing, as opposed to Duygu.

Intimacy figures in arguably as one of the most distinctive features of trans *moyen de vivre* and working with trans women –even more of a fulcrum with my own circle of trans friends. It allows one –not just me as a researcher– to broker friendship relations (and even ephemeral encounters) in a cushier manner, as well as it allows one to be perceived as a helpful and gregarious friend, a confident individual, and less of a frosty person. Therefore, in many occasions, the quality, reliability, and the duration of the relations hinge upon one's ability to orchestrate intimacy. Relations among trans identified individuals tend to be protean, and the management of intimacy is one of the prominent reasons of it. Eschewing intimacy, or showing hesitancy about it, portrays one as socially awkward, hence it enfeebles the relation/encounter, and hobbles further ties. Depending on the way and the degree of the rejection of the demanded intimacy by one of the parties, and (depending on) the background of the relation among the parties, the one who is being tepid about receiving and/or extending intimacy can face reactions ranging from sartorial smiles and snide comments to prompt and glaring, or gradual and oblique execration. On the other hand, signaling that one is comfortable with being intimate will often bring immediate bantering with each other, an exchange of compliments, and physical interaction (kissing, touching). For those who do not know each other, it will ease the way for engaging into conversations about ubiquitous topics

of common interests, while for those who already hold acquaintance, it will pave the way for stronger bonds.

What is intimacy and which acts are considered intimate? Given that the definition of those can vary from individual to individual, what I call intimacy/intimate depends on my own interpellation of it as well as trans women's reaction to certain deeds. What is traditionally qualified as intimate can be perceived as inappropriate, brazen, or, quite the contrary, something beneficial, or a granted favor depending on the context, thus bringing the contextuality of intimacy to the forefront. It is also crucial to mention that making sense and management of what is intimate is not merely and exclusively orchestrated by trans women independent of the cultural environment; it is also socially charged. However, there is a significant level of negotiation around what is normatively perceived as intimate. In *Gecenin Kızları*, finding and sharing photos of vaginas constructed by certain surgeons, and/or sharing images of one's own vagina is a quotidian activity. However, it is not universally received as something acceptable by the whole group. In fact, at one instance, that some of the members clearly stated that they were leaving the group because of the nudity, and the ensuing highlight in the group's welcoming message claiming that sharing nudity for the purpose of understanding (trans women's) bodily development is a part of group's functions proves that the terms and conditions of intimacy is challenged and negotiated within the group. On the other hand, for some of the members the fact that another member, who is generally Esra A., finds and shares these intimate images is considered a pro bono work receiving positive responses. Esra A. shares before and after photos of trans women with her own captions. In addition to the information such as the length of the transition process in hormone replacement therapy, the person's age, and whether they have had any surgeries, she evaluates their passing. One can often see comments like "Thanks God she transitioned!" or "One of those thanks-God-she-transitioned!" ("*İyi ki dönmüş!*" "*iyi ki dönmüşgillerden*"), "From a young handsome lad to a woman" (*Laçodan kadına*), "From a macho to a woman" (*Maçodan kadına*), "From a good-for-nothing to a cutie" (*Serseriden cicişe*), "Beautiful men make beautiful women" (*Güzel adamdan güzel kadın oluyor*), "Flamboyantly feminine in 6 months" (*6 ayda zırl zırl*). Sometimes her comments get a bit more disturbing such as "From animal to human" (*Hayvandan insana*), "from a caveman to a woman" (*Mağara adamından kadına*) implying that it is better to perform a social role of which normative standards one can fit more easily.

Talks of sex work, and sex related to sex work is a contentious site as well. The group's founder Esra A. describes its style (*tarzi*) as "ladylike" (*hanım hanımcık*), therefore, in her words, conversations such as "How many clients did you get that day?" (*O gün kaç koli aldın?*), or "Whose penis is big?" (*Kimin similyası but?*) which she deems to be of sex workers are not congruent with the group's imagined characteristics and moral fabric. Similarly, another group member was extremely irritated by the talk of (or rather, by the imagined threat of) sex work because of the possibility that her boyfriend might see obscene messages when he checks her messages. To say the truth, however, since I have been a member of the group, there has been just one instance in which a member implied tongue in cheek that she might engage in sex work if she cannot sustain paying the rent of an apartment she had recently hired.⁵⁰ All the negative discourses around sex work, and the internalized social stigma of it brings the subject of sex work to a thoroughly intimate position –against which one must put a bulwark. Despite the fact that yet another a hot debate around sex work has led seven members to leave the group as to assert their political/personal stance in favor of sex work demonstrates a seesawing negotiation around the topic, the first Whatsapp group is now even more dominated by those who are averse to sex work. Thus, commercial sex remains an intimate and moot topic one shall not navigate, contrary to other intimate areas/acts one is expected and encouraged to delve into. As I have stated before, making sense of what is intimate is socially charged, and the subject of sex work holds even a more significant position amongst other venues of intimacy.

Then again, even in another and nascent trans women's Whatsapp group called *Lut Kavmi* (People of Lot) which is recently founded by Dünya after the aforementioned schism, the talk of sexuality has an intimate place. Dünya was incandescent at the way some members of *Gecenin Kızları* talked about sex work; she had a fight with them and left the group right after. A few days later, I had been added to the new group along with other women who were critical of the former group's "prostitute-exclusionary" ("*orospu dışlayıcı*") make-up, as one member dubbed. The new group founder pointed out that this

⁵⁰After the split of the groups, this situation got more clear. The split-up group is distinctively more comfortable with the sex work talk and includes sex workers. On the other hand, in the original group arguments over sex work frequently occurs. At first, I tried to remain neutral in the face of such quarrels. But when I realized that for my study dynamics, silence did not work very well and that I could not endure anti-sex work utterances which almost became hate speech and heavy derogation, I became a part and side of these fight, clearly showing my pro-sex work position. Together with another member, I became a stickler of opposing a language which uses pejorative words for sex work and sex workers. In a recent fight, I was "accused of" defending sex work because I was not going to be able to find jobs in Turkey with my current (male) identity. Sex work is criticized on the grounds of ever-similar pat remarks such as it contributes the stereotype that all trans women are "prostitutes" or they transition to monetize their bodies.

group would be open to sex workers and group members could talk about sex workers' problems. She stated that while being trans is already difficult, being a (trans) sex worker is much more onerous, making (trans) sex workers "the weakest link of the society" ("*toplumun en zayıf halkası*"). Therefore, a sex worker could possibly air her grievances when her client caused problems ("*kolisi sorun çıkardığında*"); however, sex work topics ("*koli muhabbeti*") are limited to solidarity and cooperation purposes. For instance, when a member wrote about her anal fissure caused by a sexual intercourse with a client, and how to heal the area, other members tried to help her solve the problem, and some of them even shared their own experiences with this sort of a health issue. Dünya, however, pointed out that people's roll in the hay is none of the group's business. The talk of sexuality, if it is merely about intercourse, is deemed an intimate subject –one does not necessarily have to expose or be exposed to in the new group *Lut Kavmi* either.

Intimacy is not merely sought or navigated online –a venue in which one might argue that the opprobrium is generated to a lesser degree because of the absence of face-to-face interaction. Trans women, both my group of friends and the ones I happened to meet, do engage in sets of physically intimate activities such as displaying and touching their own newly-developed hormone breasts (*hormon memesi*) or silicone breasts (both can be called "*tita(lar)*" in *Lubunca* which basically mean "tit(s)"), allowing others to see and touch them, or even demanding and initiating that others see, feel, and comment on them.

When I have first put myself into contact with a trans woman, through a man I had dated before, she invited me to her house. On my incredibly polite solicitation to "introduce me to several young and beautiful trans women who can show me the way," he was able to name some trans women and show their photos to me on Facebook as he was a man interested (also) in trans women. Tuba was one of them. The man had already told her that I was a trans woman at the beginning of her transition, and a one who is needed to be shown the ropes. Although she received me quite amicably, she did mention that she accepted to help me only because Kerem –the guy, apparently, we both had relation to– requested it. She told me in a nonchalant manner that she would not normally do this because "there are lots of girls who I don't know are asking for that." She was a 25 years-old "post-op" trans woman who was about to finalize her legal changes. She worked as a dancer in a famous night club in the European Side; however due to her plummeting income and swollen expenses, she had started to moonlight as an escort

woman albeit trying to hide it from her work environment lest she be fired. Rather than being a side hustle, sex work has become her main revenue, and her life started to be organized around it as she had to stay home and wait for clients and manage whom to reveal this intimate secret.

I stayed in her house for long hours. As she knew my purpose of visit, she made me talk about myself, what I felt, what I had done, and what I wanted to become. By the same token, she talked about her own past and transition process. She came from İzmir as a teenager, and from the age 18 she was in the community ("*18 yaşından beri ortamın içindeyim.*"). She recently went under breast enhancement and vaginal construction surgeries in Turkey. Since she assumed that these surgeries are what I wanted to have anyway, without my demand, she invited me to touch her silicone breasts. She even squeezed them to show me a white liquid coming through which she called milk. Previously on a phone talk before we met, she had also asked me if I wanted to have a vagina along with a barrage of other questions which had made me feel I was being interviewed. I can speculate that she needed to ask these laundry list of questions (including my height, weight, hairiness, hormone intake, means and mode of living, and then some) as to gauge our compatibility. She might have wanted to estimate if I would make a good-looking girl, hence, whether I am worth her time which might have subsequently allowed us to develop a trans kinship of mother and daughter. As Dilara Çalışkan discusses in her MA thesis on what she calls queer kinship, physical characteristics play a significant role when senior trans sex worker women are admitting junior ones into their house and under their tutelage (Çalışkan 2014, 66). Those who would –normatively speaking– make less of a beautiful woman, or those investing in whom would be costly are admitted as sort of a personal assistant (*domez*), whereas promising ones are admitted as daughters. To dispel her of such worries, I had first sent her my photo, both to introduce myself and to assure her that I would be worth her time. Up until this day, sending my photos directly to someone and reveal personal information without a modicum of warming up exchange makes me uncomfortable; however, in the framework of this relationship I somehow sensed that I needed to exceed my comfort zone in terms of my acclimated boundaries of intimacy.

Although in a pre-meeting phone conversation, I told Tuba that I was currently not dysphoric about my genitalia, she insolently told me that my voice gives it away that I would want to have a vagina eventually ("*Sesinden belli, kestirirsin sen.*"). Thus, when

I visited her, without further ado, she proceeded to show me her constructed vagina and asked me if I liked it. The same day I visited her, she took me to her best friend's, Özlem's house just a few streets away in the same district called Tatabla/Kurtuluş. Tuba introduced me to Özlem as a "new girl" ("*yeni kız*") and "Kerem's friend." Upon these information, which meant that I needed help, and they were supposed to help me because a man three of us valued requested it, Özlem followed the same steps of exhibiting her breasts and vagina, as well as asking me the litany of questions Tuba did. After a while, the two friends started to converse about the current condition of their vagina comparing their depth. They went to another room and called me to come with them, allowing me to witness yet another didactic activity of dilation –a practice of obtaining and sustaining the depth and width of a constructed vagina by inserting different sizes of dildo-like tools in it which are called dilators. They laid down on a bed and dilated their orifices moaning in unison as I was watching them perform the activity along with two other men I had met some minutes before.

Perhaps due to the factor that Tuba and Özlem were escort women, everything happened in their apartments oozed intimacy and privacy, as the nature of the profession required. Tuba's work phone would constantly ring, and her tone of speaking with the client would instantaneously change. She would alter her voice into a more high-pitched one and address the men about whom she knew nothing as "my love (*aşkı*)," "my life (*hayatım*)," and "my only one (*bir tanem*)." It is not only her tone and mode of speaking that changes; her identity changes as well. She does not work as a trans woman, she works as a "woman" ("*Kadınım diyorum.*"). When clients come, she would instruct me to stay silent in the saloon, volume up the music, and pretend that there was nobody else at home as to make her clients feel more comfortable⁵¹. Since these are considered to be the essence of sex work, the importance of forced-intimacy and the emotional labor sex worker women go through is often overlooked.

When I met Ela, she was a 26 years-old woman, graduated from the sociology department of a respected state university, living with her older sister, and working in an LGBTI association. At that point I came to know her, she was seeking to find the right doctor to go under the knife for the vaginal construction surgery. Apparently, she had

⁵¹This is a practice among sex worker trans women and it is a double bind situation. On one hand, they have to make the client feel secure and relaxed for an engrossing sex experience which would ensure that client becomes a frequenter; on the other hand, they need to secure themselves by having somebody in the house as trans women are often attacked by their clients.

been reading about the operation, certain doctors in Turkey and abroad, and various methods of making use of penile or intestinal tissue to construct a vagina. She had been also talking to "post-op(erative)" trans women as to discover more about their pain and pleasure, complications and healing process, emotional and financial cost of the procedure, and their overall experiences. However, due to the fact that this is a serious operation with some high risks (recently a trans woman died right after having the operation in a Turkish hospital by one of the known SRS doctors) and especially given that Turkey is not the Mecca of vaginoplasty, she needed to resort every possible way to convince herself to undergo this surgery. At one instance, while I was at SPoD's⁵² monthly group therapies with some of my informants including Ela, there appeared a whispering about a newcomer of the therapy. That person came to the therapy just to accompany her friend who was a first-timer. As everyone in the group is supposed to introduce themselves briefly to the other members, two women among my informants, Ela and Esra B., who were interested in having SRS, found out that the woman had already gone through vaginoplasty in Thailand. They left their seats while others were talking, and they managed to conjure up persuading the new guest to show them her vagina. After the whole therapy was over, they happily talked about how they succeeded to see her vagina, and they seemed quite content about the look of it, as well as its capabilities of receiving sexual pleasure and having orgasm based on the woman's comments.

Similar to this setting, there was another scene where Ela and Esra B. attempted to see a trans woman's vagina. When I met Ela and Esra A. some afternoon, they were excited to talk about a Turkish doctor they recently found about who would allegedly prefer to lie low. They came upon this doctor via one of his patients and arranged a consultation for Ela. Ela reported that the doctor wanted to work with only a niche trans clientele, particularly refraining from operating on sex workers as they do not pay attention to post-op care instructions and get non-satisfactory results. The idea behind this was that paying no heed to the healing process by starting to have sex precociously would result in complaints, and this would eventually damage the doctor's reputation. A trans woman called Kiraz had her vaginal construction surgery done by this doctor. When Ela found about who Kiraz's doctor was, she went to a consultation in the doctor's office in Nişantaşı with the reference of Kiraz –this is how the doctor worked, according to Ela.

⁵²The association Ela worked at.

After trusting him and securing a significant discount, she wanted to see the doctor's work with her eyes. She immediately sought to see Kiraz's new vagina; to Ela's dismay, Kiraz was hesitant about this level of intimacy and rejected her several times. Kiraz told Ela that the vagina is like that of any other women, and she can go and demand to see any cisgender women's vagina to quench her curiosity. As opposed to Kiraz, Ela had no scruples about the situation, and even if she did, her desire outweighed other feelings. Ela and Esra B. paid a *fait accompli* visit to the place where Kiraz was playing music as DJ, and Ela finally convinced her to show the constructed vagina, albeit quickly and not allowing an extensive examination. Kiraz had denied access to Esra B., because it was only Ela who was at the verge of making the decision for the surgery. Ela told me that she left the place content and she was determined to have the surgery operated by that doctor.

Women who "complete" their transition and receive the pink ID card officially stating that they are "women," are seen in the group as to be ahead of others. Even in the monthly group therapies, moderator psychiatrists ask women where they are in the transition process (*Sürecin neresindediniz?*) In return, they are expected to reveal intimate information with others. Nisan was the only woman with SRS long before Ela had her surgery. Although she lived in Balıkesir, she was an active member of the online group. She came to İstanbul two times during my fieldwork both to pay a visit to her friends and her doctor and stayed in Esra A.'s home. In both occasions, Esra A. hosted an event in her home where a handful of trans women in the group got together. In these gatherings Nisan was asked to show her vagina. She was not completely healed; her orifice kept closing, therefore she had to carry a glass tube inside her vagina to prevent this problem. She was hesitant to perform this intimate activity at first, as she was self-conscious about the vaginal smell; however, other group members relieved her saying that nothing smelled funky and she could continue.

As I attempted to shed a light in this chapter, sets of activities, deeds, discourses that are societally considered as intimate and/or private constitute a huge volume of trans lives –often times, perforce. Trans identified women sometimes reproduce or reinforce the intimate meanings on certain relation(ing)s and representations; however, they also do challenge, manipulate, caricaturize, and dare to defy the intimate meanings attributed to them. These undertakings come in a conscious and deliberate forms such as fearlessly

and proudly displaying trans bodies in mass demonstrations⁵³ or solo political protests⁵⁴ as a part of LGBTI+ activism. Subverting and transcending these meanings may figure even more in everyday lives of trans women in a more subtle and unwitting, yet not any less negligible ways at all. Although trans women transcend the normative expectations/meanings of intimacy in strategic or unpremeditated ways, orchestrating intimacy plays an undeniable role in negotiating a personal and collective trans identity. Kenneth Plummer, in *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* explicitly claims that “...the new politics has one major axis in gender/sexual/erotic politics, and that the workings of such politics is heavily dependent upon the kinds of stories invented about the roles of intimacy within it (Plummer 2003, 149).” He contends that the power of gay and lesbian movements and the movement against rape partly depends on the way the subjects of these movement successfully relayed their intimate stories (Plummer 2003, 149). He also follows and explains that this type of story telling is important in terms of citizenship rights:

“Rights and responsibilities are not ‘natural’ or ‘inalienable’ but have to be invented through human activities, and built into the notions of communities, citizenship and identities. Right and responsibilities depend upon a community of stories which make those same rights plausible and possible (Plummer 2003, 150).”

In this chapter, I have deliberately put the Turkish state's and society's forced intimacy upon trans women out of the scope of chapter, and rather focused on trans women's intimate relations among themselves. Then again, I would still like to touch upon a few points to show the difference between the intimacy practiced among trans women and the intimacy forced upon trans women. Among many countries including Turkey, trans women are still forced to legally live under the assigned sex/gender "male/man" unless they accept to go through a sterilization/genital reconstruction as a condition for them to be officially recognized as "female/woman" by the state and capitalize upon what is there in the name of women's rights and privileges. Those whose transness is even more errant, cannot currently be officially recognized as woman. Among various forms of being a transgender, the most “culturally intelligible (Feinberg 2006, 212)” is the medically transformed body. According to Jason Cromwell, “Identities framed within a medicalized border effectively negated individual identity and erased those whose

⁵³"MÜBAREK AYDA LGBT TAKSİMDE SOYUNDU" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXIKKrhBtA8>

⁵⁴"Trans Efe Bal sokak ortasında soyundu" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzIL2pzYZ5M>

histories, identities, bodies, and sexualities did not fit within the criterial boundaries of “true transsexual (Cromwell 2006, 512).” Therefore, by states and societies, trans women’s lives, especially their physical presence is under constant scrutiny, which, for the most part, culminates in rendering their bodies undesirable, abnormal, and subject to medical and social correction. As Plummer states, as the anatomy is no longer a destiny, the discourse of natural body gets challenged and the new stories about bodies become everyday part of our lives (Plummer 2003, 156). However this does not happen all too easily; although transgender bodies challenge the norm, they are also challenged by the cemented status quo, as there is a constant “war” between the new and the old stories according to Plummer (Plummer 2003, 161).

After having swallowed the red pill of trans/womanhood, I can testify how my own body became an object of scrutiny from very own experience. When my family still thought that I was a boy, my “womanly” look were frowned upon and I was expected to be “normal” –which I never have been– like everyone else’s son. When I had “the talk” with my family, and they professedly accepted me as a woman after some crying and cathartic release of pent-up emotions, my increasingly feminized look⁵⁵ were still frowned upon. All my achievements, for example those in educational area, with which a “normal” family with a “normal” child is supposed to be proud of were put aside, and my form of being was reduced to the miniskirts and shorts I should not be seen wearing around in my neighborhood. My very own father accused me of being “disrespectful” towards “other people.” “Other people” supposedly accepted me, which this very conversation proved no one did, and I should be “empathetic” towards them. This specter called “other people (*elalem*) /neighbors (*komşular*)” works as a measure with which I keep my behavior and look under control. In that sense, the society’s self-entitled, prurient right to ask about, speculate on, and correct my body (from how it works to how it looks) shows similarities to how they treat cisgender women and people with disabilities. Cis women’s bodies are seen as a sacred, yet, fragile property of their family (*namus*), especially the male members of the family, until this property is transferred to its new owner or supervisor –their husbands. In a traditional Turkish family like mine, a cisgender woman cannot exist with her sexuality, even practiced within the norms of cis-heterosexuality. Hence, it is considered as a right for her family to decide on the limits of

⁵⁵I should perhaps mention that my changing look were confined to what hormones do to my body (most visibly, only small-sized breasts), makeup, and clothing choices. I did not go through any surgical operations and did not demand any.

what she wears and how she can act and speak within the proximity of other men. Likewise, a disabled person's body, a fat person's body, and a body of a person with dwarfism, is under constant check as well. A fat woman is body-shamed when she dares to wear skinny tights and/or revealing clothes. A person with a dwarfism can be ridiculed when they enjoy wearing clothes usually seen to be worn by tall people, instead of opting for customized clothes or children's clothes. A trans woman is criticized –Exhibit A– when they want to wear too revealing clothes in a certain neighborhood that “even normal girls do not.” These people are pitied by the society that their bodies are not going to be desired by anyone, and if they are desired by somebody, that person is not “normal” either. These people with non-normative bodies are expected to internalize this fact and proceed their lives with “propriety/morals/respect,” which means that they should give up on being sexually desired/sexually desiring someone and focus on being a “good person” instead –which perpetually means giving up on sex(uality). If they can manage to be that good person, then they can be trans-but-good, fat-but-good, dwarf-but-good, ugly-but-good and so on.

I, as a trans woman and a somehow “family girl,” a combination hard to come by, increasingly feel this unbearable situation of people's meddling with my intimacy. With other trans women, I do engage in intimate acts voluntarily –albeit sometimes with a tad bit of uneasiness– and for the purpose of advancing my knowledge on certain topic. On the other hand intimacy takes the form of a forceful act with many cisgender people who thinks of it as a right or non-problematic action to intervene in one's privacy and intimate life. Trans women's intimate workings are different from the intimate workings of state or society on trans women, as Asli Zengin uses the phrasing. In her PhD dissertation, Asli Zengin exclusively works on medicolegal intimacy penetrating and permeating trans women's lives in Turkey. She squarely calls this type of intimacy a “siege,” and “structural violence.” In her expansive study, Zengin claims that sex and gender are important tools for the Turkish state upon which it exerts its power on its citizens. Trans people, whose gender and sex are supposed to be very problematic, take the most damage out of these intimate workings of state power. While trans women employ intimacy, sometimes comfortably and sometimes not, to create a space for their subjectivity, to generate their own new gendered selves, state's and society's intimate workings function a way to render trans women/their bodies as harmless and tamed as possible. Jamison Green says that “...in order to be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all (Green 2006, 501).” My informant Deste, too, seconds this

point: “If you don’t tell that you are trans or if you don’t show it off, if you act like a cis woman or a cis man, there isn’t a problem.”⁵⁶ In the context of intimacy, in order to be a good or successful –a living one, first of all– transgender person, especially one who has to live in a non-LGBTI+/friendly environment, one has to denounce intimate life, an aspect so crucial to transgender life as I attempted to show in this chapter.

Although in this chapter I zeroed in on the intimacy among trans subjects, trans women’s forced intimate encounters with non-trans subjects, both in formal and informal settings, are everyday occurrences. Among my study participants, women who follow the state instructed transition path share their experiences where an unnecessary degree of intimate demands discomfit them. As I will discuss in the “Passing” chapter, in the encounters with the military institution, a trans woman has to present themselves as constantly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for sex with men (poised to wreak havoc in an all-male environment) in order to be exempt from the conscription. This is not necessarily a negative quality at all; but trans women –or nobody for that matter– should be in need of a constant disclosure of their libido and whom it is directed to, especially for the sake of being labeled as “sick.” Likewise, some of my informants reported an arbitrary request of checking of their genitalia or an unnecessary photographing of their faces during the so called “sexual reassignment surgery” in the state hospitals. Plummer weighs in about the importance of intimacy in citizenship discussions as follows:

“Postmodern intimate citizenship debates look at the recognition of emerging ‘intimacy groups and identities’, their rights, responsibilities, and recognition in emerging zones of conflict, and suggests new kinds of ‘citizens’ in the making. Amongst these may be the cybercitizen, the new reproductive citizens (surrogate mothers, ‘lost fathers’, ‘test tube citizens’ and the like), new family citizens (including post-divorce citizens, children and stepfamily citizen, grandparent citizens, single parent citizens, the elderly citizens), as well as the transgendered citizen, the fetishistic citizen, even the S & M citizen, and aware of the controversy this must bring, the pedophile citizen (Plummer, kenplummer.com n.d.).”

Although my focus with regard to intimacy was that of among trans women, and not between trans women and medico-legal institutions, I believe that this is still important in terms of citizenship issues and trans identified people’s recognition within and outside the citizenship context. Understanding the dynamics of lives outside the scope of cis-hetero normativity will help us forge a new frame of citizenship which is more trans

⁵⁶“Transım demezen ya da onu göstermezsen, herhangi bir şekilde cis kadın veya cis erkek rolü yaparsan, sıkıntı yok.”

inclusive. A lot of aspects of trans life remain outside the legal sphere and the concept of citizenship. The institutional imposing of invisibility and invalidation force these particular intimate aspects, such as trans people in schools, in public bathrooms, jails, or in sex work, to the peripheries of legality.

CHAPTER 5: PASSING

"I am called Agrado, because my whole life I have always tried to please others. Apart from being agreeable, I am very authentic. Look at my body. Made to perfection. Almond eyes: 80 thousand. Nose: 200 thousand. Such a waste, because in after a fight I ended up like this [she shows the bend in her nose]. I know that it gives me a character, but if I'd known, I wouldn't have bothered. To continue. Breasts: two, because I am no monster. Seventy thousand each, but I've had my money's worth. Silicone... –Where? (Shouts a man from the stalls). Lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and buttocks. A liter costs 100 thousand. You calculate, because I've lost count. Jaw reduction, 75 thousand. Total laser depilation, because woman also originated from the monkey, the same or more than man. Sixty thousand per session. Depends on the hair of each person. Usually two or four sessions. But if you're a flamenco diva, you'll need more. As I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic, my dear. And, one shouldn't skimp in these matters, because the more you resemble your dreams, the more authentic you are (Maluf 2015, 3)."

Agrado's monologue is arguably the most famous scene of the acclaimed movie *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* (All About My Mother) directed by Pedro Almodóvar. In a facetious fashion, Agrado talks about a panoply of extortionate and taxing procedures she went through in order to authenticate herself as a female in a world with obstinate gender binary. For many trans women who aim to transition "male" to "female," such procedures and then some, feature as almost everyday exigencies that require elaborate and well-thought devising, practicing, and negotiation to ensconce oneself in the most Barbie pink side of the gender spectrum. Almost every trans-identified person, regardless of their own desire to transition, has to and/or expected to pass one way or another: when they simply want to be called woman, when they want to receive hormones or female ID, when they want to have vaginoplasty, when they have to convince their partners that they are women and so on. In this chapter I will present one of the most contentious, yet, primal aspects of life à la transgender. Even though every transitioning process do not result in, what I would call, "passability" or it is not the end goal for many trans people, two concepts are ineluctably tied to each other. For my study participants, it is something pursued after in the broader transition process which is translated into Turkish as "*geçiş süreci*." *Geçiş*, which literally means passing or transition(ing), is therefore used in the same meaning with its English counterpart. In this chapter, I take the topic of passing in a broader sense in addition to its meaning as an everyday act of performing gender. Passing is sometimes

not just a momentary act; it might require planning of a past narrative in congruent with the identified gender. I attempt to limn how passing is a power dynamic within the society and how trans women navigate this challenge.

5.1. Passing Language

Originally, the term passing was used in the context of race, referring to black people whose physical features (mainly, lighter complexion) allowed them to blend into the society as a white person not to be subject to the atrocities and escape the everyday exclusion in race-ridden USA.⁵⁷ The term passing has also been used for cisgender women presenting themselves as cisgender men to have more credibility and independence, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual people presenting themselves as straight people to eschew the barriers and violence they would potentially face (Gianoulis n.d., 1). Passing, here, refers to a transgender person's ability/capacity to be instantaneously recognized (or, read) by strangers as the gender they are identifying with and concomitantly treated accordingly based on whether their physical appearance, manners, voice pitch, self-fashioning and so on conform with the normative presentation (and these expected presentations may vary within a culture and among cultures) of the gender one is transitioning or has transitioned to. This phenomenon is also called a trans person's "blending" into the society as what is problematically called the "natal/natural/biological/genetic" member of the gender they identify with. Harold Garfinkel describes the phenomenon as a combination of

“vigilance, resourcefulness, stamina, sustained motivation, preplanning that was accompanied continually by improvisation, and, continually, sharpness, wit, knowledge, and very importantly [her] willingness to deal in “good reasons”—i.e., to either furnish or be ready to furnish reasonable justifications (explanations) or to avoid situations where explanations would be required (Garfinkel 2006, 70).”

Germane to one's –trans women's, in the scope of my thesis– capital of and investment in the culturally defined femininity, in other words, one's passing or blending, two other important terms follow: Stealth⁵⁸ and visible. Stealth (as in "being stealth," "going stealth"), mostly used pejoratively, is reserved only for those trans women with what is called "passing privilege" who do not (have to) disclose their trans identity and continue their lives as non-trans women (Gianoulis n.d., 1). While it means that stealth

⁵⁷ https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/9k5gq7/the-beauty-and-terror-of-passing-as-a-woman

⁵⁸The term stealth is also used in gay lexicon. The word refers to the insertive partner's removing the condom without the knowledge/consent of the receptive partner and ejaculating inside during the sexual intercourse.

trans women are passable, not all passable women are living stealth lives either out of political choice or unwanted outing of their sexual past. Those with lesser passability (for instance, with masculine-considered features), on the other hand, are more visible as "trans women" mostly without a choice; whereas being visible as "trans" is often a choice for a passable trans woman.

Passing does subsume being a beautiful woman, and for many transgender women the end of transition is to pass as a normatively desirable woman. However, there are also a great many trans women who –by using the popular discursive expression– just want to live their "true selves" regardless of being perceived beautiful. Those who opt for a queer identity aside, among the ones who embrace an identity at the traditionally-defined feminine side of the spectrum, one can still pass without complying with the idealized beauty standards; that is to say, without being a beautiful woman.⁵⁹ Then again, the marginalization of trans bodies and the concomitant anxieties about one's femaleness take its toll on trans women forcing them to fray into a never-ending quest for beauty. Among *Gecenin Kızları*, there are women who believe that they will not ever be able to pass because of age, because they were previously an "alpha male," or that "testosterone has already damaged" them (Esra A.). Also, there are the ones who express that they would prefer a more androgynous and masculine look. Esra A., for instance, describes how transitioning after 40s was difficult to her and she states many times that testosterone has already damaged her in this process: "My dysphoria increased after my 40s. Because after 40s, men's body start to deteriorate, it become much different, it becomes... That hit me very very very much."⁶⁰

The term "passing" is mostly used exactly as "passing," or "*pass etmek*" meaning "to pass" in the word stock of my group of trans-identified friends which relatively has a closer acquaintance with the English language that holds almost an unchallenged position as a lingua franca in producing discourse in identity politics, especially that of sex/gender. By the same token, people I work with also use the expression "*cis sanmak*" (from "cisgender," pronounced as "cis" in Turkish) meaning "think of as / take as (a) cis(gender)." The opposite of this situation in English language trans lexicon is called "to

⁵⁹<http://www.tsroadmap.com/early/passing.html>

⁶⁰"Benim disforiyalarım çok artmaya başladı kırkımdan sonra. Yani çünkü kırkımdan sonra daha daha bir şey olmaya başladı, erkeklerin fiziği daha bir düşüyor, daha bir farklılaşıyor ve daha bir böyle şey olmaya başlıyor. O beni çok çok vurmaya başladı."

be clocked" which means for a trans person to "fail" to pass or blend in as the gender they identify with at the first glance.

"Passing" and "being clocked" is chiefly described via the Turkish words "*anlaşılmak*" and "*anlaşılmamak*" which mean "to be or not to be understood/realized" (by strangers that one is trans). In a more niche trans patois in Turkey, called *Lubunca*, there is another word, "*alıktırmak*," covering the same meaning with no exact equivalent in Turkish. While almost everyone in my group of trans friends are familiar with *Lubunca* to some extent, their acquaintance with the language remains relatively superficial, therefore it is not as widely used in my study group. Perhaps another most common definition of passing used both by trans women and a larger non-trans community would be "*kadın sanmak*" which means "think of as / take as woman." Trans women, especially sex workers tend to employ the same expression with an alteration; they use the *Lubunca* words of "*gacı*" (trans woman) and "*has gacı*" (real woman) instead of "*kadın/woman*" to indicate the distinction. Additionally, young and beautiful trans women are called "*cıvrı gibi*," which is an informal expression used to describe young and good-looking cisgender women.

Misgendering is another important term in relation to passing. People who do not conventionally pass from one gender to the other are more subject to misgendering. In a world people assume each other's gender based on secondary sex characteristics and sartorial fashioning, individuals who fail or opt out presenting normatively as women are susceptible to misgendering. Although there is not a counterpart word for "misgendering" in Turkish language –there is not a word for "gender" for that matter– to my knowledge, what the word entails has a ubiquitous and unbearable presence in many trans women's lives, my group of trans friends being no exception.

Being "clocked" is an informal, non-neutral term in the trans parlance, and it refers to when a transgender person is read as a transgender person, instead of a cisgender one. (I am employing the term for intelligibility purposes; however, many trans people believe the term is problematic just like the term passing. The reason behind this is that the term implies as if the trans person is caught red-handed trying to appear as a cis woman.) Being clocked is slightly different than being misgendered in that one might be "clocked" and still be referred as their chosen name and pronouns. Misgendering can also be intentional and used as a tool of violence after one is being "clocked" and/or known to be trans and kept being referred as their assigned gender/sexuality. Misgendering can also stem from

the toll the gender/sex binary system take on people's mind; that is to say, an ineptitude of comprehending or an intellectual distance to the discourse of self-identification may cause people to misaddress a trans person who does not comply with the normative expectations. For instance, a person who identifies as woman but normatively looks like a man can be subject to misgendering. In that sense, people with non-conforming appearance, a queer/non-binary/fluid physical outlook can be subject to misgendering the most. Misgendering, by and large, figures in trans women's familial relations. Even one succeeds to pass (for those passing is a goal) in social environments, their families might refuse to call them by their chosen name.

5.2. Contextuality in Passing

Passing is not an unfettered condition; it can be highly contextual as well as it can be partial. A trans woman may not always pass as a cisgender woman independent of any factor. As it happens with my group of friends, someone who feels quite confident about their womanhood one day, may feel less of a woman in another day. I often read messages in the WhatsApp group such as "I am so dysphoric today." (*Bugün çok disforiğim.*) or "My dysphoria has increased a lot today." (*Bugün disforiyam çok arttı.*) from women at all stages of transition. Various platforms or forms of encounters with strangers, outing of their official IDs, hearing their dead names being pronounced, health related issues may cause a trans person to feel less confident about their womanhood depending on the context. While one might feel confident about their look on an online dating platform where they are able to present the best version of themselves and get a barrage of compliments about how drop-dead they look, face to face interactions may be more intimidating. By the same token, an otherwise "feminine woman" may feel quite self-conscious when they have to use their voice especially if they have a low-pitched one or when their voice is cracked due to an illness –something that is associated with being a male. Age is also thought to be one of the most important factors when it comes to passability. Ebru A., a 46-year-old, often says "Do whatever you can while you are young." and thinks of her age as one of the reasons why she will not be as passable. Just like our photos turn out quite differently under certain lighting, trans women's womanhood may turn out to be less-than-satisfying to overly saturated based on various context.

However, there is another aspect where context plays important role. Transgender journalist Allison Washington asserts that "Passing is in the eye of the beholder—we

have no control over how others choose to see us—yet we are all required by society to own passing privilege or suffer the (sometimes dire, always debilitating) consequences.”⁶¹ I also highlighted this in my description of passing, underlining the fact that passing is related to the “requirements” of being a man or woman in the culture one lives in. Putting an emphasis on this is crucial not to mistakenly claim that trans women who want to pass can learn immutable, universal characteristics of femininity (which do not exist); therefore, it is their responsibility to put these into practice and steer away from whatever discomfort they may face in the society. This “over-agency” is a perilous task given to transgender people. In fact, cisgender people, too, might not be instantly recognized as their self-identified gender. We all are men, women, queer, beautiful, successful, promiscuous, intelligent within the very particular culture we dwell in. Referring to my rant against homonormativity in the second chapter, I can assert that this happens within gay communities as well: That is to say, some gay men are simply not able to pass as men. Just like how society has codes for being a man and woman, the smaller gay subculture has these codes and anyone who fails to comply with these codes are deemed less or none of a man. One can often see on gay dating applications how certain profiles openly express that men who are under certain weight and height, men who opt for certain clothes, men who are feminine do not count as men, and these people should not ever send a message to that profile’s owner who are seeking *men* –not even manly ones.⁶² These too short, too skinny, feminine, flamboyant men are “sisters” (*bacımdır*) to that profile’s user; and after all, that profile’s user can go and have sex with women if he wants to have sex with women –not with the women disguised as men in a male dating site! Similarly, especially in the context of Turkey, one can often observe how gay men would only refer to those who they perceive as the “active” partner as men. This helps to solidify understanding how our expressed gender is not solely dependent on our own effort to present it. While one can still strive to comply with the norms for their own comfort and be able to succeed within a particular context/culture, they may still fail in the other. A gay man, for instance, who fits the masculinity (hence, desirability) standards of homonormativity might still be perceived as less of a man, or just as “gay” (“man” dropped) in heteronormativity simply because of his sexual predilection.

⁶¹<https://medium.com/@allisawash/pass-fail-the-hell-of-not-being-seen-as-your-gender-97d4e35c7e3f>

⁶²A common statement on major gay dating applications: “*Erkeksi değil, erkek arıyorum.*”

Contextuality in passing is an important topic within the trans community. In *Girls of the Night*, everyone passes. Everyone's womanhood is approved, validated, affirmed. The group members are not simply pampering and flattering each other about how beautiful and womanly they look. Not that there is anything wrong about that –one can do such a self-affirmation in front of a mirror occasionally: daintily posing or going for a Beyoncé-esque sassy hair-flip. What I want to emphasize is that otherwise a –normatively-speaking– “male-looking” person is accepted and treated as trans woman regardless of where they are at transition process. As a person who almost never commented on people's photos, I came to understand that hearing nice thing from other people are so important and I grew to learn to say a few nice things or two when a fellow trans woman shares her photo enthusiastically. This does not mean that group members encourage each other to make passing as a goal; it does mean that for people who like to have “normal” lives blended into society, receiving positive affirmations figures in as a quotidian need, especially when the society constantly state they are less women.

5.3. Passing in Past

Many trans women who is transitioning from one gender to another do not just try to pass at the present; trans women, for most of the time, need to pass retrospectively as well. They must rearrange their personal history in accordance with the gender they are transitioning to in order to get legal and social validation they personally want and/or need for their survival in society. Lots of trans individuals report that they had to give authorities what they want; this means that when they face Turkish bureaucracy in legal, military, and medical institutions, they need to furnish the authorities with the stories they want to hear from trans men and women. My own experience with Turkish Armed Forces is an illustrative case of that situation. As a trans woman with a male identification card, I had to interact with Turkish military in order to be exempt from the mandatory conscription. While my personal history flock to a category of stereotypical trans woman, I did have my own peculiarities regarding my womanhood, which might not have necessarily fit squarely into what they wanted to hear from me. Prior to my first visit to the military institution, I was already aware of that fact, and I had already marshalled my thoughts as to what exactly to say. I made up my mind to give the psychiatrists, psychologists, and military staff I was going to see what they want from me in order to drag myself out of that situation as quickly as possible.

Turkish military requires every able "male" citizen of age to serve in the military – trans men, feminine presenting men, and pre-operative trans women excluded. In other words, people who are officially given male sex status by the state but do not have penis and/or fail to perform masculinity are excluded from the mandatory service. However, they need to prove their unfitting situation by seeing military personnel, psychologists, and psychiatrists and taking a laundry list of written, visual, and oral tests from them. Although based on my conversations with trans women who took these tests, the tests are not the same in every institution. However, they have one thing in common: They are designed to show "psycho-sexual" sickness in gender non-conforming "males." The procedures I followed included having to talk to psychiatrists and psychologists and proving them that I was "actually" a woman, therefore not only I would be inept for the service, but I would also be a sexual threat for an all-men environment. I had to provide them with an account of myself peppered with a self-description as a trans woman with a constant and insatiable desire to have sex with men. In their world of categorizations, women like men, and "men who claim to be women" would definitely do. After all, this must be the only reason they wanted to become a woman! I remember this moment in an utter disgust where the psychologist accompanied by a psychology student intern asked me why I did not want to do the service and I had to say that I would not be able suppress my sexual desire in such an environment. The tests are designed to make sure that trans women conform to these expectations. Although I cannot quote everything verbatim, written test I took consisted of almost a hundred questions of such variety: "What do you feel when you see a man and a woman together?" "Would you play with dolls or cars in your childhood?" Some of these questions appeared throughout the test several times with different wording just to make sure that the person taking the tests passes as a woman consistently. To put it differently, military wants to make sure that the individual, as a male, has been performing this psychosexual sickness persistently –from their childhood to this day.

Ela shared similar experiences of trying to receive what is unofficially called "pink (exemption) certificate" or "*pembe tezkere*." Even though she describes her experience as relatively easy and mild, she describes these tests she called "silly, ridiculous, illogical."

"They gave me a bunch of tests. Was it 560 (questions) or 540... (There are) personality tests there. ... Same question interpreted differently, for example, reappearing as the 3rd question and then 60th. There were really silly questions. Then they wanted me to draw a picture. When I talked to my friends from the (LGBTI+) association, they wanted (suggested) me to draw

womanly, feminine things. Apparently, we could get the certificate more easily that way. And I drew a tree, I painted its branches and leaves. Then I drew a house with a chimney, and smoke is supposed come out of the chimney –apparently it symbolizes woman. ... There was a charcoal pencil but there were also colorful pencils. And there were even ... scrap papers, pink and white. Which one of those (you choose, they look at). Of course, I took the pink one. ... On whichever you draw... This is sort of a test, they try you. Because you know, unfortunately gender is (attributed) according to colors, pink is for women, blue is for men.”⁶³

Ela goes on accounting her experience with the psychiatrist. Like me, she told the doctor what she already planned to say and what they wanted to hear: "I do not have a boyfriend. I do not accept monogamy; I favor polygamy. If you send me to the military, I will mess up that barrack.”⁶⁴

Aslı Zengin, in her dissertation, discusses the "violent intimacy" between trans women and legal and medical institution. She demonstrates how trans women have to "pass" in order to obtain even the most basic things, such as the female ID, which recognizes and allows them to live as proper citizens. If one is a 26-year-old trans woman, for instance, the medical and psychiatric process the woman is required to undergo, supposedly prepares them as to present a 26-year-old trans woman, having had the experiences of a 26-year-old and having coped with the problems of presenting one's true gender. Since there is no legal citizenship status for "pre-operative" trans women, they have to pass to one of the two recognized gender categories if they do not have the means to deal with both societal and institutional oppression.

5.4. Passing as a Threat

Passing figures in as a kernel point in non-trans people perception's and negotiation of trans identity as well. During re-occurring discussions about a strange legal barrier prohibiting trans women changing their "dead names"⁶⁵ in school diplomas, Esra B. puts

⁶³“Bana bir sürü test verdiler böyle. 560 tane miydi 540... Orda kişilik testleri ve kişilik testi işte... Aynı sorular mesela, farklı biçimde yorumlanıp işte 3. sorudaysa atıyorum 60. soruda farklı bir şekilde... Böyle çok saçma sorular vardı. Sonra benden o testi bitirdikten sonra resim çizmemi istediler. Genelde şöyle, yine dermekten konuştuğum arkadaşlarla, genelde böyle kadınsal, feminen resimler çizmemi istediler. Raporu daha iyi bir şekilde alabilirmişiz öyle. Ve ben bir tane ağaç çizdim, ağacın dallarını bayağı boyadım böyle, yapraklarını boyadım. Sonra ev çizdim, bacaya daha mutlaka dumanın tütmesi gerekiyormuş çünkü o kadını simgeliyormuş. ... Karakalem tabii ki vardı ama renkli kalemler de vardı. Hatta şey de vardı, renkli, pembe miydi... Hangi rengi almana... Tabii tabii pembe gibi bir şeydi, yani müsvedde kağıt, pembe beyaz. Onlardan hangisi... Ben tabii pembeyi almıştım. ... Hangisine resim çizersen... Artık orda şey işte, deniyorlar, test bir nevi. Çünkü renklere göre maalesef cinsiyet hani öyledir ya pembe kadınlaradır mavi erkekleredir.”

⁶⁴“Asla sevgilim yok, tek eşlilik kabul etmiyorum, çok eşlilikten yanayım, eğer beni askere gönderirseniz o koğuşu darmaduman ederim.”

⁶⁵A trans person's birth/official name that they no longer identify with.

forward an argument I had never thought of before. She claimed that, by preventing trans women re-arranging their legal documentation retrospectively as female, the state wants to make sure to publicize the person's trans status if the person "passes" as a cisgender woman in their social life.⁶⁶

This is ridiculously similar to the frustration of some males when they find out that women they liked turn out to be trans women. This cissexist entitlement which expects trans women to always inform others about their sexual status gives way to laws such as trans panic defense, and consequently the legitimatization of hate murders. In her piece, transgender activist Kira Wertz touches upon the issue by saying that "Passing, might just be more dangerous than failing (to pass) (Wertz 2017)." Her experience is men complimenting her without knowing that she is a trans woman. If men later on find out that the women they like is "actually dude," this might create problems. Trans-hating men might feel regret, anguish, an anger because they like somebody that they are not supposed to like, and they were not able to clock that "it" was a "dude." The situation even gets worse if other men find out about this situation and ridicule the man who was "tricked into" liking a trans person. She goes on and makes an important statement:

"There is absolutely no denying that when a Trans person is murdered the level of violence that's perpetrated in that act far exceeds levels of violence that would be analogous to an assault on a cisgender individual. In many instances the assault targets the individual's face or genitals; bodies get burned, brutally stabbed, and horribly mutilated. It cannot be mere coincidence that this occurs most often to Transwomen at the hands of Cisgender men whom identify as heterosexuals. The act of destroying their lover's beauty is seemingly an attempt to remove themselves from some shame they bear for having had an encounter (presumably sexual) with a Transgender woman (Wertz 2017)."

In Turkey, people who assault and murder trans women, especially sex workers, try to get away (and they almost always do) by using the argument they were tricked into sex

⁶⁶The topic of passing is discussed in the feminist movement as well, especially by trans exclusivist radical feminists (TERFs), often to criticize trans women and to prove how they should be left outside the women's movement. Janice Raymond, in her controversial book named *Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* touches upon the issue of passing as well. In general, the book serves as the purveyor of the author's pet theory, which is one of the most hackneyed trans exclusive radical feminist ideas. Raymond argues that trans women are not women (she does not make a bone about crassly misgendering trans women by calling them "he" and "man"); they are men trying to infiltrate into women's movement as the agents of patriarchy. She maintains that, this new "breed" of women is created by patriarchal medical science to keep "real/genetic" women in check, and even replace them—hence the name, transsexual empire! However, trans women are far from being the Stepford Wives of medical practitioners; they deploy sundry forms of methods as to broker their identity within a larger social system.

by the victims. They claim that since the victimized person who is "actually a man" passes so well as woman, it is only understandable that they fell for it; hence their violence is justified. The acceptance of this argument by the courts is one of the biggest grievances of trans women, leading the slogan "Trans murders are political!" ("*Trans cinayetleri politiktir!*"). Therefore, many trans women stressfully has to manage situations where they pass as cisgender women especially there are men in the context who are prone to get violent. On one hand, passing appears to be an ultimate goal for many trans women, on the other hand it is a fragile and dangerous "prize" one needs to make use of meticulously.

In the same vein, a popular reality show used the case of a trans woman who apparently chose not to disclose her identity to her family, raising a furor. TV show scandalized the case of the passed away trans woman who continued her life as a cisgender woman but her sexual identity was ignominiously made public by this particular show and other media outlets. The programme quitted the case du jour because of the broadcasting ban on the issue. However, by this way society wants to make sure that one shall not pass: If one passes alive, it is only for their benefit to reveal that to keep being alive; or else, detractors will rush to meddle in their dead body even the corpse is buried/burned.

The prefix "trans" in transgender/sexual is perceived and promulgated differently by everyone. Although the prefix gives the meaning of being beyond, across, or above, many people take it as the abbreviation of the word "transition," or "transforming." Trans people are often accused of trying to transition, i.e., striving to fit in and reproduce patriarchy. My group of friends in no way do not try to "transgress" or "transcend" male normativity, nor that of female; their "transness" is all about bodily and sartorial alterations. However, this does not strictly mean reproducing gender roles and gender binary. The very act of transition itself is subverting the cemented gender normativity. When I had an interview with Deste about transition, she gave me some important insights about transition. She talks about how transition has deconstructive effect even in the medical institutions:

"From psychiatrist to the endocrinology (department), to the plastic (surgeon) and whatnot you are a man who wants to be a woman. That's it. That's also the attitude of the psychiatrist. Do you have trans friends? Are you ready for this process? Will you start the laser (hair removal)? Do you like men or women? Well because you are going to be a woman, do you know what I mean? If you are going to be a woman, like men. Because women like

men. What is the possibility of you becoming a woman? (The psychiatrist) will measure that and make you a woman. This is up to the psychiatrist, they will give you that report.”⁶⁷

All in all, trans people’s passing as cisgender people is part of the power dynamics of the cisgender society which does depict similar characteristics to black people’s passing as white people in a society dominated by white people. In this hierarchy, trans women are deemed less successful when they do not or cannot comply with the normative gender expectations. When they do “seamlessly” blend, it is perceived as a threat that needs to be prevented. Society is now more concerned with the “epidemic” of passable trans women tricking unsuspecting men into sex and getting themselves –well– killed, than the actual “epidemic” of cisgender men murdering trans women. This panic is similar how slave owners were frustrated over their black slaves escaping and being able to blend into the society as white people, sometimes creating new biographies for themselves (Bates 2014). Likewise, white supremacists were panicked about how they might mistakenly have sex with a black person who can pass as white and cause miscegenation (Kennedy 2001, 5). One can see how people that needed to be kept at bay are suffering from the same mechanism of power in different paradigms of race and gender. I think having a broader perspective on passing will eventually contribute discussion around the topic, destigmatizing people who do not or cannot pass, and leaving alone those who choose not to reveal their trans identity for safety and convenience.

⁶⁷“Psikiyatrdan tut endokrine kadar, işte plastiğine (plastic cerrahi demek istiyor herhalde) bilmem nesine kadar sen kadın olmak isteyen bir erkeksin. Bu kadar. Psikiyatırın tavrı da bu. Trans arkadaşların var mı? Bu sürece hazır mısın? İşte lazere başlayacak mısın? Erkeklerden mi hoşlanıyorsun kadınlardan mı? ... Çünkü kadın olacaksın, anlatabiliyor muyum? Çünkü kadın olacaksın. Yani kadın olacaksın erkeklerden hoşlan. Çünkü kadınlar erkeklerden hoşlanır. Yani kadın olabileme ihtimalin ne kadar? Onu ölçüp ona göre kadın yapacak seni. Onun elinde o, sana o raporu verecek.”

CONCLUSION

This research holds a very special place for me both in terms of my academic career and personal life. This MA thesis gave me the opportunity to present my long-term observations and analyses and has prepared me for further trans-themed academic endeavor. Moreover, due to close relations with the participants through a prolonged period, this thesis allowed me to reflect on how my informants and I relate to various issues –how and on which conditions our opinions change or remain the same. With this master’s thesis, I argued that trans women go through a unique path to find and develop an identity that has come to be named as transgender today against the backdrop of a rigid cis-hetero normativity and an increasing authoritarian regime. In the introductory chapter, I presented a brief history of the presence of LGBTI+ people in Turkey and I tried to locate them within the current sociopolitical framework as to prime the reader why trans women as a distinct subculture requires a unique *moyen de vivre*. In the second chapter, I narrate my own story of finding my current gendered self to explain my positionality and situatedness with regard to this research, to reflect on how the author of this thesis is also a subject of the very same research, and how this self-reflection potentially contributes to the comprehensiveness of the research. In that section, I also strived to question the supposedly immutable boundaries between sexual identity and sexual orientation that are promoted to be completely different, in the contemporary gender and sexuality discourses. In the third chapter, I attempted to show the importance of group-making and solidarity-building for trans women’s everyday needs of sociability. I discussed, upon which issues trans women I work with split apart and which subjects figure in as common point throughout their lives as to make them need each other’s presence online or on-site. I argued that socialization and solidarity is a conscious attempt for building trans women’s sense of individual and communal identity and helping with their everyday survival. In chapter 4, I asserted that transness may, and often does, require a hyper intimacy that is beyond the normative standards for cisgender people. This level of intimacy I called “trans-intimate” also functions as to orchestrate societal relations within the trans community and gain knowledge about every nook and cranny of the transition process which is a grab bag of all sorts of onerous bureaucratic, medical, and performative procedures. In my last chapter, I examined the much controversial, nonetheless crucial

subject of passing. I argued that regardless of one's own desire to pass as a cisgender woman, passing occupies an important role in trans women's life as they are constantly treated and evaluated based on their compatibility with cisnormativity; it almost works as a defining factor for one's "successful" transgenerness.

This research had to exclude some other important aspects that for the construction of trans woman identity. First of all, this study excludes the "sex" part of sex work and sex workers' point of view. Although I talk about sex work as a point of distinction, including sex worker into this study could have made it more multifaceted. Similarly, as some of my informants pointed out, sex workers seem to have a more distinct ways of sociability, and my research lacks this facet. In the future, I would like to research on the memory and knowledge transmission among sex workers, and the rites of passage for trans women's initiation into sex work to understand how past and memory play a role in identity building. This would enable me to better comprehend this imagined community and whether sex worker women's identity construction process differs from non-sex worker trans women. I had the opportunity to observe during my fieldwork that women otherwise antagonistic to the idea of sex work started to engage in sporadic commercial sex (not as their main source of revenue at all) as their relations to men develop. These women did not want to talk to me about that trend for the purposes of research as commercial sex remains to be a highly stigmatized.

I also do not focus on the women's night life, sexual and romantic practices, which I can assert, are significant aspects when understanding and positioning oneself. Trans women, more specifically, my participants who are almost exclusively interested in men, invest an immense amount of time to talk about their relation to men. They do even have a particular term for trans-attracted men: *travesti* or *trans kocası* (husband of a transvestite or trans) or *TK* (sometimes pejoratively referred to as "trans chaser" by the English-speaking women) who can be spotted temporarily dating and/or having a fling with various people in the *camia* (community). There are discussions about their trustworthiness and sexual orientations and whatnot. *Trans kocası* or not, men figure in important measurements, if you will, for men-attracted trans women's identity formations.

I also have to say that bisexual and lesbian trans women are not in the confines of this study. There are a very few number of trans women that are attracted to trans and/or cisgender women and transgender men. Some of these women have always been

interested in other women regardless of their own gender identity, and some of these women started to develop an interest for other women as they themselves are en route to become women. So far, I have come to know only one person among my study participants who is a steadfast feminist, only and exclusively interested in women, and has a strong dislike for cisgender men out of her political alignment and because of cis men's "toxic masculinity." However, I have also observed a trend where trans women engage (or show a volition to do so) in practicing emotional and sexual activities with other trans and cisgender women as well as trans men as their relation to cisgender men in dating scene prove to be thorny. Another trend is that heterosexual-identified trans women looking for partners in gay dating applications/sites. Obviously, self-branded gay dating applications/sites, which are sometimes more inclusively called sites for men-loving-men, are used by bisexual, pansexual, and curious heteroflexible men for whom trans women might find attraction. However, there are also trans women, that happen to be in the earlier stages of transition and/or less passable, who go for self-titled top and versatile gay men. One of my informants had explained to me that men who are experienced with "man's body" can satisfy her better, whereas other informants are averse to the idea of having sex with men who show an interest for other men as this would make them feel less of a woman. This is a fragile area where one has to walk on eggshells not to make sweeping generalizations on sexual orientations and the conditions within which they are formed. Not to forget, these are the only one facet of the situation; while I am up to date with discussion among trans women, the perspective of men who engage in sexual practices with trans women cannot be easily found. Lots of men consider being with trans women as something that would make them no longer straight and it has become something for straight men to "come out" and articulate their interest for trans women. Sexual orientation of their partners is a hot topic among trans women. Still, the situation brings a rich area for further research. Are we indeed "born this way" in terms of our sexual identity and orientation? To which degree convenience play for one's choice of partner? How can we understand strict or "normed" preferences for sexual partners in a "queerized" group?

Lastly, as I have already stated in Trans-Intimacy chapter, this thesis puts trans women's relations to medico-legal institutions out of its scope. Particularly, trans women's relations with medical establishments play an essential role for them to convince themselves and their social circles about their condition and its medical recognizability. One of the informants, Esra A., believes that transness is an "illness and condition;" not

as a condition to be reversed, as to be treated with the proper measures. While my informants' relation to medical establishments include therapies by psychiatrists, visits to endocrinologists, and finally consultations with the surgeons, for the most part sex worker women do not follow that path and as a requirement for transition process. Their relations to the hospitals seem to be only confined to surgeons for vaginoplasty and cosmetic surgeries/procedures for the better part of it. Some sex worker women opt for medical procedures not necessarily operated by medical practitioners that are considered –they pose a certain risk– perilous by non-sex worker trans women. Illegal forms of hormones, use of contraception pills, and silicone injections are some of these types of bodily alterations non-sex worker women steer away from for the most part. Then again, they do not completely trust the medical path they are taking; they believe endocrinologists in Turkey are not experienced with trans women and are afraid of getting themselves in trouble by trying new hormone regimens for trans patients. As opposed to that, it is also speculated that certain state doctors operating SRS are trying new methods with every patient and one should be careful about that.

Trans women only get to be legal female citizens in Turkey, through the validations and operations by the medical establishments. By following the routes of medicine and psychiatry, they overcome the feeling of loneliness and guilt, and they put it as a feasible resolution that they can change their sex and gender –something once deemed unimaginable and wrong by many. The medicalization process of trans womanhood and how trans women view the medicalization of their own being, their hesitations about certain medical routes and doctors, their endeavor to seek certain medicine over another, and in general how state's and medical power operates with regard to trans bodies would definitely make an intriguing research topic. Moreover, trans women with male IDs have to encounter the military institution as every “men” are required to serve in the army. The experiences of trans women in the military establishments (recruiting offices, military hospitals, and barracks) is a pretty much an uncharted map. Although I have briefly discussed my own and one of my informant's encounter with the military to show how passing could be a life-long act that might require the person even regressively pass, this is an area I plan to delve into more in my future endeavors.

With all of its stronger and weaker aspects, hereby, I contribute to trans literature of Turkey and I aim to continue to do so in the future. I hope that this thesis and the future

works on trans women will help to stimulate inclusivity for all gender errants and anyone whose mode of life diverge from the normativity.

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