

# The Uneasy Vernacular: Choreographing Multiculturalism and Dancing Difference Away in Globalised Turkey

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## Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the changing valence of urban vernacular movement in contemporary Turkey as it lingers at the edge of Europe without formal membership. Drawing equally on dance theatre productions and politicised quotidian performances, I examine the frictive relationship between Islamic and secular culture entrepreneurs as well as the precarious, embodied articulations of difference in globalised Istanbul: the current European Capital of Culture. I investigate the overlapping aesthetic and socio-political ramifications of intimate globalisation to expose the limits of Turkish multiculturalism on stage and on the street. My first larger objective is to trace ethnographically the use of mutual ethnic, sexual, and classed bodily distinctions in choreographing pluralism and producing new hierarchies under transnational sanctions and neoliberal investments. Second, I use this materialist dance ethnography to generate fresh interdisciplinary dialogue on entangled questions of social justice and artistic innovation.

**KEYWORDS:** embodied vernacular culture, dance ethnography, multiculturalism, Islamism, secularism, political-economic analysis, ethnicity, NGOs, EU, Istanbul/Turkey

## Introduction

In this article, I reflect on the changing valence of urban vernacular movement in contemporary Turkey, as it lingers at the edge of Europe without formal membership. Drawing equally on dance theatre productions and politicised quotidian performances, I examine the frictive relationship between Islamic and secular cultural entrepreneurs as well as the precarious, embodied articulations of difference in globalised Istanbul: the current European Capital of Culture.<sup>1</sup>

*ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS* 16 (3): 93–105.

ISSN 1408-032X

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<sup>1</sup> Turkey's EU accession is still pending after its 1987 application for full membership and ongoing negotiations since 2005. Open to non-EU members since 1999, the European Capital of Culture designation is very significant for the Turkish government as it deploys the 'democraticised' lucrative local culture industry to realise its larger EU aspirations.

In doing so, I draw on multiple literatures across critical dance studies, political/cultural anthropology, and performance studies. First, I follow scholars of globalisation in charting the overlaps among ethnic inclusion/exclusion, economic stratification, and gender difference against diversity narratives under late capitalism (Singerman & Hoodfar 1996; Freeman 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff 2001; Smith 2002; Wilson 2004; Perez 2004; Collins, di Leonardo & Williams 2008). I also employ performance as an analytic tool to underline both the institutional and cultural limits, or rather the unevenness, of multiculturalism with tangible references to partial citizenship (Zemni & Parker 2002; Singer & Amar 2006; Jamal 2007) particularly of the Turkish Roma ('gypsies') (Marsh and Strand 2005).<sup>2</sup> Second, I borrow from the vast dance studies and ethnographic literature that has long investigated the complex linkage between discourse and experience (Cowan 1990) to chart the transformative and transformed role of embodied aesthetic labour in particular political-economic contexts within national and across transnational borders (Savigliano 1995; 2009; Browning 1998; Thomas 2002; Dox 2006; O'Shea 2007).

My analysis of the performative multicultural Istanbul aligns particularly well with Deborah Thomas' ethnography of Jamaican dance. Thomas renders embodiment pivotal to the material analysis of intersecting institutional, intimate, and discursive change at multiple scales (2002: 512). In what follows, I lay bare not only the tangible substance of choreographing pluralism, but also suggest fresh interdisciplinary lines of inquiry around 'the physicality of the body' (Thomas, *ibid*). The vignettes illustrate how the politicisation of Turkish vernacular steps involves as much artistic labour as fierce ideological struggle over shifting religious, gendered, ethnic, and class divides. Marginal steps, as in the Roma case, can simultaneously nurture unequal official discourses and underwrite civic transgression (with international support), but they also falter at their own expense. The question remains: is it too late when they catch up?

## **Physical theatre: destination Europe**

Dimmed lights: a place stuck between night and day. Two men are reading newspapers on the wooden benches of an old boat. During their ferry ride from Asia to Europe, they exchange secret glances, stories, and cigarettes with and without words. Now they trust each other, now they do not. This turbulent narrative of male friendship unfolds in front of video projections, fleeting images of glorious Istanbul, the 'Global City' of water dotted with skyscrapers and minarets. The actors use the set design and each other's bodies to craft a physical theatre of momentum and risk punctuated with pedestrian, folk, and contemporary contact improvisation vocabulary. They move swiftly across and between props to establish a kinetic language intentionally stranded between the vernacular and the formal, reminiscent of the group DV8's *Enter Achilles*.<sup>3</sup> Like DV8's clever use of the beer glass at a British pub, the condom becomes alternately a balloon and a circus act as it generates frictive movement and male companionship across multiple sites. This versatile

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<sup>2</sup> My use of 'multiculturalism' parallels that of Zemni and Parker: 'the right(s) and protection of cultural differences in a particularly heightened era of globalization' (2002: 233).

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.dv8.co.uk/home/review\\_the\\_observer\\_straight\\_and\\_narrow\\_minded](http://www.dv8.co.uk/home/review_the_observer_straight_and_narrow_minded).

prop redefines both performance and urban space that oscillates between an obstacle course and a city with open arms.

Touch binds these dancers to each other. It also evokes the intimate collision of gendered bodies in public space: at soccer matches, military camps, bathrooms, and ball-room classes. The dancers literally roll in and out of each other's lives and dreamy images of Istanbul. Their embodied fantasy transforms Istanbul into both a confused and confusing third character. The use of space, set, and movement is essential to constructing this urban space as backdrop and performative template for homosocial camaraderie. Coupled with vigorous torso twists, the gentle circular release tells a story of tense fluidity, hinting at how the dancers experience Istanbul as gendered individuals. Bouncy lifts, and intentional crashes, still with bravado, drive this story of competition and trust to its message: let the troubles of embodiment find their own physical language. If it were not for the Istanbul images, this story could be set anywhere. But *Monday in the Sun*, an elusive title, was commissioned by the 2010 European Capital of Culture Agency (ECOC) and has been touring in England, Holland, and Ukraine as the future, or rather, the representative of Turkish performing arts. How is it so?

Let me provide some background on Istanbul's 2010 ECOC venture. This project was initiated by a corporate secular NGO and later joined by the pro-EU Islamic government (AKP). Needless to say, this project and its capitalist 'culture for sale' motive (Göktürk, Soysal, and Türeli 2010) have intensified controversies over urban public memory, multiculturalism, and broader Turkish trials with democracy. With over two million euros of aid from the EU, this initiative, like other European Capital of Culture projects, was designed to boost historic preservation, gentrification, and cultural tourism.<sup>4</sup> Istanbul 2010's civil initiative and neoliberal agenda – reckless heritage commodification – both exemplify Turkey's political-economic compatibility with the EU. However, it is rather the performative staging of multiculturalism – ethnic and religious diversity across Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires and the inclusion of the urban poor – that makes a case for *why* Turkey belongs in Europe, despite the common charges that it is a poor, overpopulated, and undemocratic Muslim country (Benhabib & Işıksel 2006; Jung & Raudvere 2008).

The visual and kinetic cues of *Monday in the Sun* intend to prove Turkey's inherent European-ness. Water (as a metaphor) and the port (as a physical site) both play on the overused, yet seductive representation of Istanbul as the historic bridge for cultural exchange and trade between Asia and Europe.<sup>5</sup> Crossing continents is perhaps as easy as a ferry ride. This physical theatre piece also warms the 'cold' high-tech image of a Global City with a local remnant of old times: the low-tech ferry boat allows personal, face-to-face sociality drenched in cigarette smoke (and tea in tulip glasses). It is wood against

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<sup>4</sup> Zaman journalist Abdullah Kılıç notes that the Istanbul 2010 project will receive not only this large amount of aid from the EU, but 'is also expected to attract seven to ten million tourists in 2010' (<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=31955>; Internet).

<sup>5</sup> See also Deniz Göktürk's 'Projecting Polyphony: Moving Images, Traveling Sounds' (2010: 178–198) for a thorough analysis of the bridge metaphor in musical and cinematic articulations of Turkish plurality, covering Roma artists and their new media engagements.

metal – the new, material face of how globalisation becomes localised (Tsing 2000; see also Goodman 2005). Similarly, the movement vocabulary fuses contemporary modern technique with vernacular folk dance, usually associated in Turkey with secularism. This form helps represent Turkey as cosmopolitan, in synch with Europe, but also true to its heritage. ‘Which heritage?’ is a complicated question.

In *Monday in the Sun*, the performers compete with push-ups and other exhausting routines from their army training.<sup>6</sup> Their effusive sweat reads to a Turkish audience as an ever-demanding, highly militarised secular Turkish state, a NATO member and a long-time US and Israel ally until summer 2010, the masculinity of which is as fragile as Turkey’s European future. By fragility, I am referring to over 50 years of volatile EU negotiations with no membership in sight (Salmoni 2003; Casanova 2006). However, what these artists have elided is *the object* of Turkish military consolidation, a devastating history of civil war with the Kurds in the south east of the country that has cost over 40,000 lives, massive unemployment, and displacement (Houston 2008). *Monday in the Sun* thus aptly avoids the taboo subject of ethnicity, also remaining silent on one of the performer’s Kurdish upbringing and vernacular dance training. The subtle use of folk steps brings forth multiple associations between the secular nationalism and modernity projects that have been ideologically linked, but contentiously lived throughout Turkish Republican history (since 1923).

Following the Ottoman Empire’s disintegration, the makers of the Republic deployed various vernacular forms such as folk music, dance, and costumes to simultaneously craft and discipline nationalist subjects (Öztürkmen 2001; Shay 2002; Çefkin 1993).<sup>7</sup> Initiated by Turkey’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Kemalist modernisation project sought to implement ethnic and linguistic homogeneity (against Kurdish Roma, and non-Muslim heterogeneity), cautious Westernisation, and secularisation with privatised religious expression (Özyürek 2006; Yavuz 2003).<sup>8</sup>

Either dismissing or sanitising ethnic – Kurdish, Armenian, Roma, and other – antagonisms as regional cultural diversity, state-sponsored folk dance companies bolstered the official narrative of Turkish homogeneity (Shay 2002: 209). In an effort to repudiate Islamic gender segregation, most folk dance choreographies devised a co-gendered performance space where unrelated men and women perform together in public (Shay 2002: 209). Concurrent with the Kemalists’ abolition of the Caliphate, mandatory unveiling, and other clothing reforms, this secularisation of embodied practices further distinguished the new Republic from its Ottoman past. Similarly, folk dance initiatives glorified rural peasants as the bearers of a modest, industrious, and ‘authentic’ Anatolian heritage, a heritage uncontaminated by urban Ottoman degeneracy (Shay 2002: 209) and its distillation in belly dance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Military duty is compulsory for young Turkish men.

<sup>7</sup> Öztürkmen’s (2001: 140–2) reading of Turkish folk dance is particularly useful as it highlights the origins and aesthetic means of secular ‘invented traditions’. For the recent popularization of folk steps and performance, also see Öztürkmen 2002.

<sup>8</sup> For a critical analysis of Turkish modernization, and particularly, of how concepts of modernity have changed since the early Republic, see Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (2005, 3–9).

<sup>9</sup> See Stokes 1992 and 2010 for a parallel construction of Turkish folk music during this era.

Alternately, the use of modern and postmodern movement in *Monday in the Sun* speaks to Turkey's cosmopolitan aspirations. Istanbul 2010's larger dance program hosts not only ballet competitions, but also prominent western choreographers, including Sylvie Guillem/Akram Khan, Meg Stuart, and Lloyd Newson.<sup>10</sup> Formal vocabularies and performance sites – on multi-media downtown stages, not on the street – both claim, from a secular nationalist view, civilisational equality with the West. They illustrate how making this Global City involves efficient, mutual cultural and economic restructuring.<sup>11</sup>

Further, the performers of *Monday in the Sun* tread the homoerotic subtext ever so lightly, where tender hugs between two men could easily be read as unthreatening Turkish homosociality or even as a reference to cultural Islam (gender segregation in the absence of women). There are exceptions, though, such as the tense bathroom confrontation and same-sex tango. Both provide a glimpse of a different sexual narrative. The tango scene, in particular, evokes not only globally-commodified spectacles of flesh (Savigliano 1995), but also gently challenges the disciplining of heterosexual nationalist subjects through Republican ballroom classes. As a whole, *Monday in the Sun*'s elusive ethnic/sexual vision successfully appeals to both Islamic and secular nationalist entrepreneurs of the 2010 project.

Beyond the stage, the water gets rough on the way to Europe. Last summer, I spoke to executives, artistic committee directors (theatre, dance, and visual arts), urban planners, and PR agents at the 2010 Agency about the meaning and pragmatics of 'staging' Istanbul as European. All seemed to agree on employing 'culture' as a justification and means to power. I witnessed fierce ideological battles between secular and Islamic entrepreneurs over what that culture is.

The secularists privileged investment in arts infrastructure (new high tech cultural centres and the renovation of the Kemalist theatre buildings) international biennales and theatre festivals to promote Istanbul as an always-already European city with Byzantine and Roman roots while accenting the pre-Islamic sites (archaeological projects) over the city's Ottoman legacy.<sup>12</sup> Islamic municipal actors and culture entrepreneurs, in contrast, chose to invest in renovating Muslim sites, ranging from small-scale upgrading of mosques and *medreses* to the rehabilitation of the Ottoman Topkapı Palace and Hagia Sophia's calligraphic heritage. The main objective was to reclaim Istanbul as the former Ottoman capital of Islamic glory.

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<sup>10</sup> See the official performing arts program at <http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/SAHNEGOSTERISANATLARI/index.htm>. Also visit the page of Dance Platform hosting renowned western choreographers on stage and in workshops: [http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/HABER/GP\\_676653](http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/HABER/GP_676653).

<sup>11</sup> In a delightful interview, one of the choreographers, Şafak Uysal, spoke of their unfulfilled intention to perform this piece on a ferry boat rather than on stage. Subsequently, 2010 performing arts assistants, Verda and Ümit, confirmed bureaucratic hassles with staging on a boat. My critical reading of *Monday in the Sun* does not match the intentions of its exceptional choreographer/dancers, Şafak and Bedirhan. Although I admire their sophisticated artistry (via video), here I raise questions about the possible limits of vernacular transgression, regarding common gender/sexual narratives and ethnic boundaries.

<sup>12</sup> See Cem Erciyes' column, 'Bu Neyin Didişmesi' in *Radikal Newspaper*, 10 March 2009.

Recorded interviews with former Urban Planning Director, Korhan Gümüş (4 August 2009), Foreign Relations PR, Nilgün Mirze (16 July 2009), and Chairman Şekib Avdağç, the former director of Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (10 August 2009).

The conflict between the two groups became fiercer with the performing arts. The Islamists vouched for shadow puppetry and improvisational family entertainment rather than European or Turkish secular playwrights. In contrast, the secularists have funded international ballet competitions, classic and experimental Western and local theatre without any reference to Islam: ‘absolutely no veiled women on stage’, as one executive told me. This, too, was stretched to its limit, as I illustrate in the upcoming section.

The ongoing conflict over the embodied substance of modern Turkish heritage is due, in part to, Atatürk’s legacy. The Republican reforms relegated Islamic expression to the private sphere, making it a matter of cultural choice rather than a state affair while suppressing public signs of piety. (Hence, there are continued debates on secular state’s zealous ban on Islamic headscarves in public institutions, from universities to courts and the senate.) As well, the increasing visibility of Islamic expression (Göle 1997; Gülalp 1997) and governance in Turkey (White 2002; Tuğal 2009) continues to challenge such disciplining of bodily expression at the official and everyday level.

But why is this heritage battle fiercer with regards to performing arts, in particular to dance? In other words, what is specific about the epistemology and genre of live performance, with and through bodies, as opposed to built environment? Dance ethnographer Jane C. Desmond’s (1999) concept of ‘physical foundationalism’ provides a useful frame. Despite all the debates on the ephemerality of performance, most performance studies scholars contend that live acts have staying power. They are performative in the sense that bodies zealously build and replenish cultural truths through repetition. The temporal physicality of ‘liveness’ also has the capacity to disrupt or destabilise the fabric of cultural repertoires (Taylor 2003: 5, 20; see also Madison 2010). To put it another way, it is one thing to build a mosque or a convention centre, and quite another to put a belly dancer on stage, which does happen in Turkey or Egypt, for economic leverage, but with significant moral dilemma (Potuoğlu-Cook 2006; see also Nieuwkerk 1995; Shay & Sellers-Young 2005).

All of this is not to deny pragmatic compromise between the secularists and Islamists vis-à-vis performance. The opening vignette is a good example of such collaboration. Despite ongoing battles over cultural authenticity, both Islamists and secularists of the 2010 project agreed on ‘bringing visual and performing arts to disenfranchised neighbourhoods to fulfil the EU requirements of ‘inclusive, participatory urban regeneration’. Some secular theatre executives at the agency spoke gleefully of the high attendance at university theatre festivals in Istanbul’s forgotten ghettos where, in their words, ‘shoeless kids could not get enough of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*.’ Islamists have agreed, albeit reluctantly, to such a secular civilising mission, keeping in mind their mutual destination: Europe.

## **Embodied fractures**

Commissioned by the 2010 Agency, *Barbarossa* updates the glorious story of naval conquests and self-searching during the height of Ottoman rule in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. To do so, choreographer Beyhan Murphy, who is also the current 2010 Performing Arts Director, layers gendered balletic vocabulary with video images of Istanbul’s dazzling chaos and spiritual significance: crazy traffic merges with sublime Sufi music by world-famous *ney*

player Mercan Dede. Zooming in on busy streets, traditional boats, and idle everyday camaraderie helps personalise Istanbul, playing on at once *the city as stage* (for Islamic imperial expansion and present-day globalisation) and *city on stage* (the backdrop for individual and communal cultivation). This is a story of two brothers, formidable sea captains, whose identities are defined by the urge to seize in the name of Islam. As they ride the Mediterranean waves, they realise there is ‘water under water,’ a plethora of identifications while crafting themselves as individuals, officials, and representatives of the empire (Barbarossa, Dance Theatre Programme 2010: 19).

Like *Monday in the Sun*, water (imagery and fluid) and the circular motions of crossing continents are central in claiming European entitlement. Unlike the former, however, *Barbarossa* plays on Islamic nostalgia to place Ottoman/Turkish bodies at the centre of Europe. The claim is simple: Turkey’s always already European belonging is made possible by civilising, benevolent dictates of past (and present) Islamic rule; fighting off pirates until they fall. Set in front of a huge, exposed ship, these men, as power-holders, indulge in lengthy, aestheticised combat scenes with swords and logs. Deep *pliés* and grand *jetés* simultaneously express and reflect the constant collision between a deserving east and unruly, corrupt west. The balletic vocabulary is often counterpointed by everyday *gestus*, from rough, uneasy embrace, and fist fighting, to hearty back pats among men. This combination of vernacular and formal movement not only localises global aesthetic borrowings, in this case ballet, but also softens the conquest theme with intercultural dialogue.

Captains do falter, however, especially when seduced by beautiful, shiny-haired sirens, dressed in flowing, satin costumes. *Barbarossa*’s physical narrative is highly gendered wherein the female dancers’ lyrical *arabesques* and horizontal postures differ from the vertical, feisty jumps by men. Women use limited space whereas men expand on stage. The *pas-de-deux* between men accompany forceful percussion while cross-gender partnering is mostly underlaid by soft wind (*ney*) instrumentation, except during seduction scenes. Women alternate between the role of seductress and nurturer, a dichotomy distilled through kinetic and aural cues. Either way, they distract men from the lofty discovery of land and self. Costumes play a crucial role in moralising seduction, or in making these scenes family-friendly. Rather than leg-baring tutus, female dancers are strategically covered with nets and long red hair.

*Barbarossa*’s dancers are from the State City Ballet. Its choreographer, Beyhan Murphy, is also a seasoned administrator, the former director of the State Opera and Ballet Company in Ankara, Turkey’s capital. Although Murphy has steadily promoted avant-garde dance within these institutions (also now at the agency with the international Dance Platform), her artistic vision in *Barbarossa* is strategically attuned to the Islamic ideology in and beyond the 2010 agency. Murphy aptly avoids censorship by merging conservative gender embodiment (through movement and costume) as much with vernacular embodied vocabulary as the soft and moderate aural face of Islam (*tasavvuf* music). Conversely, the very language of ballet, with its Republican associations with west-oriented civilising, appeals to the secular nationalist executives at the agency. However, *Barbarossa* differs from early Republican ballet experiments, particularly their nativisation of ‘high culture’ with

‘stylised folk motifs, national costumes, and traditional shadow theatre’ (Öztürkmen 2001: 142). Interspersed with non-ethnic (read: safe) daily *gestus*, this new Turkish vernacular is Islamic, at once global – engaged in the ECOC initiative – and local in its deployment of traditional gender hierarchies.

Despite *Barbarossa*’s depiction of moderate, benevolent Islam, there were tangible rifts in Istanbul’s EU-style participatory urban citizenship. Consider, for instance, the recent evacuation and demolition of Sulukule, an artistic ghetto mostly comprised of Roma [‘gypsy’] musicians and dancers. Located by the 5<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine walls under UNESCO protection, this neighbourhood is, or rather had long been, a formidable, but allegedly ‘dangerous’ entertainment centre under constant state surveillance and criminalisation in Istanbul.<sup>13</sup> Populated by 5,000 residents, 3,500 of which were Roma, Sulukule was the epitome of disenfranchisement. Hosting nightlife workers, street vendors and fortune tellers, this self-enclosed community faced both unstable informal sector employment – without work permits and with less than 150 euros monthly income—and wide infrastructural neglect, from unsanitary, substandard housing to deficient education facilities.

As elsewhere, the official economic rationale behind the historic peninsula’s neoliberal gentrification was inseparable from the moral. Although Sulukule residents have replenished Istanbul’s nightlife for decades with their entertainment labour, they were still considered to be the morally-toxic (see also Shay 2008; Hanna 2008) urban poor. A conservative Islamist governor defended the Roma’s evictions by naming Sulukule ‘a hotbed of prostitution’ with implicit reference to in-family training of belly dancers.<sup>14</sup> This rhetoric of saving the Roma from their performance-centred sexual degeneracy and dispossession, however, neglected the role of institutional and social discrimination in shaping Roma’s current poverty and limited career choices (Marsh & Strand 2005).

During my fieldwork at the height of the demolitions, I came across grassroots mobilisations in and through dance. During the day, the bulldozer rumbled incessantly over Sulukule’s streets and washed over unstable rubble hills amidst the pungent smell of garbage and dead animals. At night, streets, the lifeline of the Roma, hosted weddings with loud double drums and buoyant dancing to 9/8 beats as well as popular *arabesque* tunes, and even techno music. In these gender-segregated weddings, women and children moved in an informal circular stage, marked by our placement of plastic chairs in front of graffiti-laden broken walls. Participants used complex footwork (from stamping to gliding) and associative folk hand gestures, ranging from wiping off the sweat to breaking bread and/or screwing (the power holders). Interestingly, women crossed over gender boundaries, reaching beyond the feminine gestures of domestic labour (laundry hanging) to

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<sup>13</sup> The persecution of and social discrimination against Roma is not unique to Turkey. Most recently, the French government implemented a controversial ‘crack down’ policy against its already marginal Rom populations. President Sarkozy legitimised ethnic forced evictions and mass deportations as ‘fight against crime.’ For details, see Spielberg coverage at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,717324-3,00.html>. On EU’s critical reaction, see: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,717496,00.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Foggo, Hacer. ‘The Sulukule Affair: Roma Against Expropriation.’ In *Roma Rights Quarterly*. Issue 4, 2007, p. 43. Also see the Guardian reportage: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/22/roma.turkey>.



those used by men. They used promiscuous expressions reserved for men. The gendered malleability of quotidian movement was, in part, due to a shared lower class status (the Roma as marginal informal workers) and alleged immodesty (associated with belly dancing and ‘contaminating’ ethnicity). In other words, as Barbara Browning argues in her critical analysis of canonical dance ethnographies (2006: 391), the fluid engendering of dance in Sulukule was intimately entangled with class and ethnic stratification. Moreover, borrowing movement across gender underwrote collective resistance, or political possibility, against a state that deemed Roma performers dispensable and/or displaceable. These Sulukule dances were, indeed, ‘intimate choreographies of sexual, aesthetic, and political (labour) freedom’ (Browning 2006: 393).

The Roma coupled this wide range of critical kinetic vocabulary with telling tales of state greed (referencing the Mass Housing Authority and the Islamic municipality). They shared prized rumours about daily resistance gatherings: the location and strategies for collaborating with the secular NGO, Sulukule Platform. As residents/dancers constructed their political critique through movement and words, they also set out agendas/plans for how to fight their forced displacement. Further, almost every Roma resident claimed their performance skill as ‘innate.’ Consider respondent statements such as ‘We were *born* to dance and sing,’ or ‘If she can sing like that, she was definitely moulded by the gypsy mud.’ This naturalisation of the Roma’s trade, however, further primitivised their bodies and aesthetic skills while hindering the 2010 project’s participatory urbanism at large.

Furthermore, there is the inevitable disjuncture between the multiculturalist rhetoric, or its ‘teleological fulfilment, its universal pretensions, and its moral veneer’ (Zemni and Parker 2002: 232), and its stratifying reality on the ground. In the Turkish case, multiculturalism has become ‘an empty signifier,’ (Zemni and Parker 2002: 240) obscuring how corporate elites and city governors both engage the urban poor in visual and performing arts community projects (an ECOC imperative) without granting basic rights such as equal housing and education, healthcare, and wage employment.

Roma spring rituals (*Hidrellez Kutlamaları*) and their newly-fashionable social dance and music (*40 Days, 40 Nights Sulukule Celebrations*) are both cited as the living proof of diversity for the 2010 project.<sup>15</sup> Against the unresolved Kurdish and Armenian issues, the Turkish Roma represent the pleasant, ‘safe face’ of cultural/political pluralism. In response, city administrators, real estate agents, and academics joined forces with the Sulukule’s Roma to generate participatory festivities to, ironically, justify gentrification as an ethnically – and economically – fair democratisation project.

Imagined and realised through street dance, was the Roma political action, torn by contradiction, effective in the end? At first glance, not very effective as Sulukule was razed to the ground despite consistent ultimatums from UNESCO, European Commission

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<sup>15</sup> On the repercussions of the new Rom chic in worldbeat markets and Turkish entertainment scene, see Seeman 2006. For visuals, see <http://www.hidrellez.org/> and for performances, see [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x977v0\\_ahyrkapyda-2010-hydrrellez-yenlikler\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x977v0_ahyrkapyda-2010-hydrrellez-yenlikler_news). For the detailed schedule and political agenda of Sulukule Celebrations, see project manager Aslı Kıyak İngin’s blog at <http://40gun40gece-sulukule.blogspot.com/>; Internet.

on Human Rights in tandem with local grassroots mobilisation and heightened national visibility.<sup>16</sup>

Sulukule's disappearance from the map does not, however, negate, in Jackson and Shapiro-Phim's words, the power of dance in 'revealing, resisting, and rectifying different forms of abuse and injustice, both through intentionally choreographed work and as part of broader social movements that engage in wider struggles for justice' (2008: xv; see also Chatterjee 2008). Equally crucial is the engagement of Roma artists with the language of UNESCO (claiming their intangible heritage) and the larger neoliberal discourse on ethnic commodification. In other words, 'empowerment through embodied ethnic commerce,' brought Roma collectivity into life despite persistent fractures along class (renters vs. owners) or gender lines (men vs. women) (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 9, 15).

## **Conclusion**

These vignettes posit movement vernacularisation as a compelling instance of battling out Turkey's past and present fortunes. Driven by Europe in the future tense, the Islamic/Ottoman legacy simultaneously meets and collides with its steadfast secular alternative. Across formal and street performances in Istanbul, gendered, ethnic and classed identifications emerge out of aggressive debates around both the meaning and political efficacy of public memory, bodily repertoires, and broader globally-situated neoliberal modernity projects. Here I have explored the inextricable connection between aesthetic and political strategies. Cultural producers, from city leaders to corporate executives, have put globalised Istanbul on stage for legitimacy and/or revenue with contentious Europe-oriented, Islam-inspired diversity. Istanbul's European Capital of Culture venture demonstrates how performers of all stripes redefine social and ideological entitlement by binding intricate footwork to ethnic protest or nationalist ballet to religious nostalgia. Vernacular embodied expression, whether in dance concerts (*Barbarossa*) or grassroots organising (Sulukule), alternates between solidifying social hierarchies and challenging them. In doing so, they churn neoliberal discourses with morality tales and/or transnational visions of social justice and heritage. In the face of state or government restrictions, Sulukule residents, for instance, alternately failed and succeeded at gaining ground, gaining momentum. Through its cracks, Turkish multicultural rhetoric exposes how the uneasy vernacular is made and lived. My analysis, thus, suggests the central role of dance ethnography/analysis in theorising the tensions between political and cultural pluralism in Turkey and elsewhere. Seizing the limelight from 'the state' with embodied research, our analysis can reach new interdisciplinary ground.

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<sup>16</sup> While UNESCO threatened to revoke Turkey's membership in the World Heritage List on the basis of 'failed historic preservation' in this neighborhood, Europe Human Rights Council framed Roma homelessness, discrimination, and substandard living as human rights violations that could impede Turkey's EU harmonization.

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## POVZETEK

V pričujočem članku se lotevam analize spreminjajočega se urbanega telesnega gibanja v sodobni Turčiji, ki ždi na robu Evrope brez formalnega članstva. Osredotočam se na plesne gledališke predstave in na spolitizirane vsakdanje predstave, da bi proučila trenja med islamskimi in posvetnimi predstavniki kulture, pa tudi negotove utelešene artikulacije razlik v globaliziranem Istanbulu: trenutni evropski prestolnici kulture. Proučujem prekrivanja estetskih in družbeno-političnih posledic tovrstne intimne globalizacije, da bi razkrila meje turške multikulturalnosti tako na odru kot tudi na ulici. Moj prvi cilj je, da bi z etnografsko analizo sledila uporabi vzajemnih etničnih, spolnih in razrednih telesnih razlik v koreografiranju pluralizma in proizvodnji novih hierarhij v okviru transnacionalnih sankcij in neoliberalnih naložb. Drugi cilj pa je, da bi s to materialistično usmerjeno plesno etnografijo ustvarila svež interdisciplinarni dialog o zapletenih vprašanih družbene pravičnosti in umetniških inovacij.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** utelešena telesna kultura, plesna etnografija, multikulturalnost, islamizem, sekularizem, politično-ekonomska analiza, etničnost, nevladne organizacije, EU, Istanbul/Turčija

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