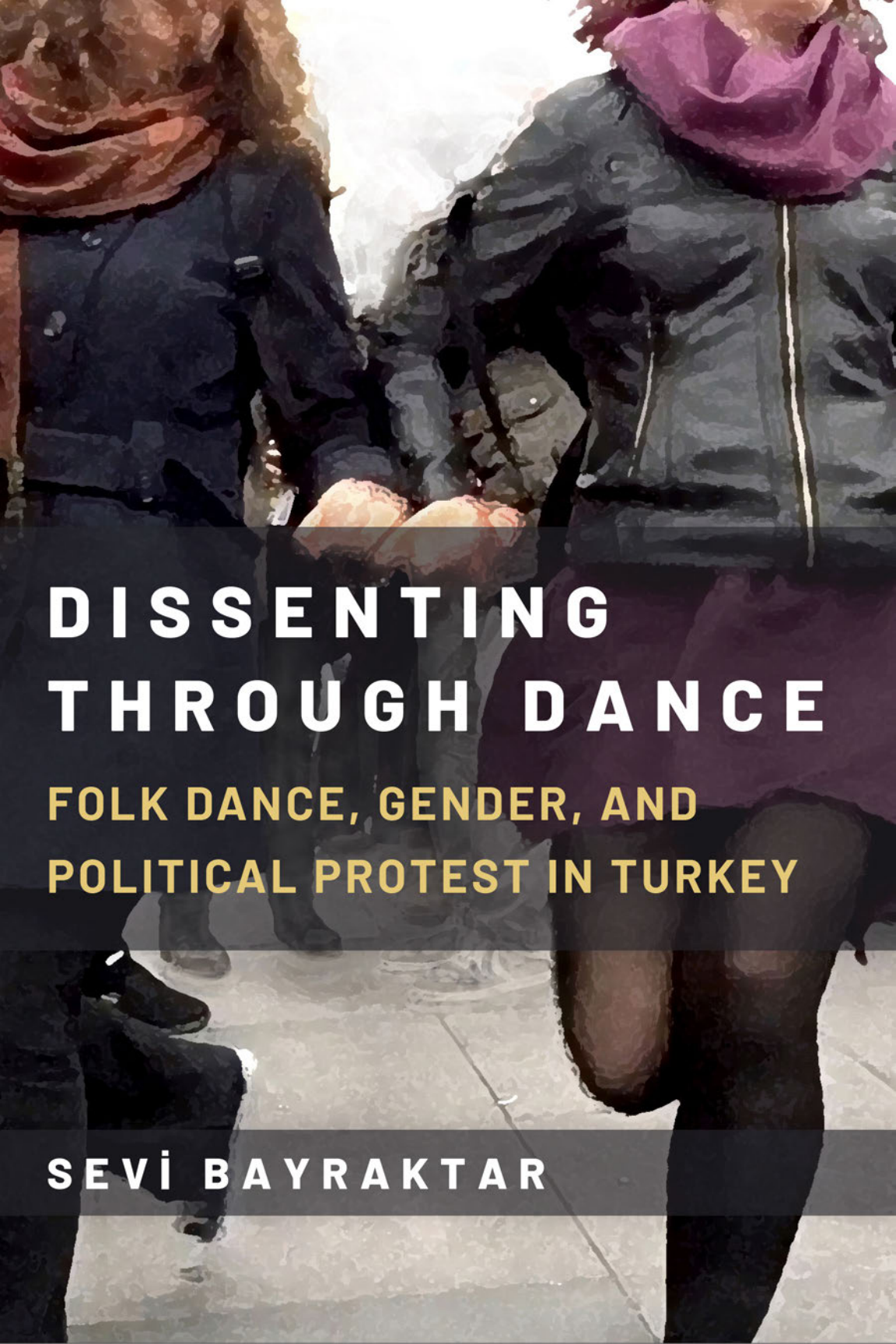




# **DISSENTING THROUGH DANCE**

**FOLK DANCE, GENDER, AND  
POLITICAL PROTEST IN TURKEY**

**SEVİ BAYRAKTAR**

# DISSENTING THROUGH DANCE

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# Dissenting Through Dance

Folk Dance, Gender,  
and Political Protest in Turkey

*Sevi Bayraktar*

University of Michigan Press  
*Ann Arbor*

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*For Rahmet Uysal, whose spirit danced beside me through this work,  
forever side by side in laughter and resistance.*



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# Abbreviations

|           |                                                                                               |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ADAKOP    | Arhavi Nature Protection Platform (Arhavi Doğa Koruma Platformu)                              |
| AKP       | Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)                                    |
| CANVAS    | Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies                                           |
| CHP       | Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi)                                           |
| CKMP      | Republican Villagers' Nation Party (Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi)                        |
| DİSK      | Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Unions (Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu)     |
| GIDA-İŞ   | Food Industry Workers' Union (Türkiye Gıda Sanayi İşçileri Sendikası)                         |
| HDP       | Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi)                                      |
| HEPP      | hydroelectric power plant ( <i>hidroelektrik santral</i> )                                    |
| KHK       | state-of-emergency decree ( <i>kanun hükmünde kararname</i> )                                 |
| MHP       | Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi)                                         |
| Petrol-İş | Petroleum, Chemical, Rubber Workers' Union (Türkiye Petrol Kimya Lastik İşçileri Sendikası)   |
| PKK       | Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan)                                         |
| TMMOB     | Turkish Union of Engineers' and Architects' Chambers (Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği) |
| Türk-İş   | Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu)               |



## Author's Note

Most of the interviews were conducted in Turkish. All translations from Turkish sources are mine, and I am responsible for any misinterpretations or mistranslations. All research participants' names have been changed by the author to maintain the confidentiality, except those who wanted their names to appear in this publication.



# Preface

This book emerged from a time marked by intensifying state violence and repression in Turkey and around the world, yet it is ultimately about hope—a fragile, embodied hope that endures amid despair. It is not a linear account of progress but a record of perseverance through uncertainty and loss. It moves in layered rhythms, looping through time, slipping between moments, and circling back to what remains unresolved. It stretches theory toward the improvised and contingent actions of people and the fleeting vitality of dance.

The research behind it also unfolded in motion, shaped by continual oscillations between home and migration, life and scholarship, between Turkey and the United States, and later, Germany. It has been shaped by the impossible translations of world-making experiences lived in different languages. It has inhabited the tension between the urgency of political change and the slow maturation of scholarly reflection.

Politics, too, has not moved progressively during the research and writing of this book. Increasingly repressive right-wing authoritarianism, not only in Turkey but also in many other countries, from India to Poland, and from Argentina to the United States, has targeted women, queer and trans people, racial and ethnic minorities, precarious laborers, migrants, and those who defend ecologies, animals, and ancestral life against violent exploitation and dispossession.

However, the context in which this work was carried out in the 2010s offered moments of shared hope and spaces of collective political imagination. My observations and embodied awareness of dance in political spaces, which grounded this book, took significant shape at those moments, particularly during the 2013 Istanbul Gezi Park resistance, where hundreds danced in concentric circles, demonstrating both joy and dissent. The Gezi led to a wave of optimism that swept through Turkey's progressive circles and continued following the June 2015 electoral success of a democratic alliance of Kurdish and leftist movements. This period was followed by a tightening climate of deadly violence, fear, censorship, and state of emergency declared after a failed coup d'état in 2016. You will find a fuller account of this period

in the chapters ahead. Amid these developments, a brief and volatile opening nevertheless emerged between the debates around the 2017 constitutional referendum, which sought to expand presidential powers, and the 2018 presidential election, during which I conducted the core fieldwork for this book. In this brief opening, despite the charged atmosphere and the ongoing state-of-emergency measures, femme activists who mobilized against the constitutional change continued to dance—in protest, in grief, and in resistance—embodying a persistent public defiance. Hope moved through bodies, along city streets, within collectives—carried in gestures that refused silence and insisted on visibility.

Since then, the erosion of public life has deepened again. Academics, medical workers, artists, journalists, and people from many different segments of society departed from the country and joined earlier generations of dispersed activists in voluntary or forced exile. Hopelessness has settled into the horizon of a generation: according to the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's 2021 Turkey Youth Report, 73 percent of young people in Turkey wished to move abroad (Duvar English 2022). These years have also been marked by deep mourning: Rising femicides, systemic impunity for the perpetrators of violence, and the mishandling of the 2023 earthquakes left a trail of grief and dispossession; mourning rather than joy has become a uniting force of dissent.

This book bears witness to a memory shaped by those who remained, who danced, who dared to hope. Of course, professional dancers have also played visible roles in protests, but this book focuses on the bodily practices and danced politics of cis, queer, and trans women activists who were not affiliated with formal dance institutions or companies. It asks: What does it mean to move under repression? What truths can the body speak when language is no longer safe? And how might collective movement keep open possibilities to imagine the future differently? It conjures a moment—or perhaps many moments, layered and echoing across time—as a way to grasp other moments unfolding in history. The documentation in these pages, along with the accompanying website compilation, seeks to honor ongoing femme struggles for justice, dignity, and autonomy that extend beyond that moment.

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# Introduction

## Stepping into the Dance Circle

It is July 6, 2017. I am excited to join the March for Justice (Adalet Yürüyüşü) on its twenty-first day in Yalova, a city located thirty-five miles from its final destination. The march began in Ankara, Turkey's capital city, and will end in Istanbul, Turkey's most populous city and its financial and cultural center. The opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, hereafter CHP) organized the march against the recent detention and imprisonment of its MPs by the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, hereafter AKP).<sup>1</sup> In recent years, with its foregrounding of secularist<sup>2</sup> tenets, the CHP has emerged as the main opposition to the AKP's Islamist, conservative, and neoliberal authoritarianism, which has steadily encroached on individual rights and freedoms, often resorting to arbitrary detentions. Since the early 2000s, the governing party's prevailing model of uniting Islam and capitalism has transformed the country into an authoritarian regime that regulates everyday life by marginalizing large segments of the population, particularly women.

A coup d'état attempt against the AKP government in July 2016 was a pivotal moment in the intensification of political violence and in the expansion of social control. In its aftermath, Turkey was governed for two years by state-of-emergency decrees—*kanun hükmünde kararname* (KHK)—which served as extralegal executive orders, enabling the government to strip away property rights, freedom of expression, and political representation. In April 2017, the AKP's constitutional amendments, accepted via a referendum, replaced the existing parliamentary system with an executive presidency.<sup>3</sup>

The march became a massive protest against the consolidation of authoritarian rule and the new presidential system. The CHP typically shared the AKP's populist and nationalist rhetoric, whereas another political party that participated in the march, the pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, hereafter HDP), claimed to be the voice of the marginalized and historically oppressed, such as the Kurds, non-Muslims (*gayrimüslim*), refugees, LGBTI+,<sup>4</sup> feminists, and workers. In

addition to politicians from the CHP and the HDP, bar associations, nongovernmental organizations, environmental initiatives, and trade union representatives participated in the march, together with hundreds of thousands of people who joined on different days. Independent feminists and women's organizations were also present on July 6 to commemorate Pippa Bacca, an international performance artist known as the "peace bride" who was raped and murdered in Yalova by a driver who had offered her a ride.<sup>5</sup>

After changing three buses, I arrive in Dilovası, a small town on the way to Yalova, and meet some friends from the feminist group Women Strong Together (Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü), a coalition of activist women with diverse political views who are all opposed to the AKP's heteropatriarchal discourse and policies. A live band with two musicians and a singer performs folk tunes, and I dance with other activists (Figure I.1). The band plays *horon* music from the northeastern Black Sea region. A person familiar with the dance style leads our semicircle as we imitate her steps. Then the band plays *halay* tunes from southeastern Turkey, and we switch our movements to those of a halay dance. I am experienced in both horon and halay because they are common at protests in Istanbul. But when the musicians play a tune for the *ellik* folk dance from the eastern province of Sivas, I do not join in. Its steps seem complicated to me, and I have not seen it danced at other protests. As their finale, the band plays a *semah* tune for the ritual performance of the Alevi, an unorthodox Islamic sect that is highly marginalized in the majority Sunni Muslim society. This music often sparks heated debate: While some activists consider Alevi music and dance to be signifiers of Alevis' marginalized public presence and choose therefore to perform it as part of their political activism, others argue that *semah* is a form of prayer and therefore cannot be performed in public for political purposes. A similar discussion occurs at this event: Some activists begin dancing to the music and others get angry with the band, reminding its members of the *semah's* ritual value and urging them not to include it in their repertoire. Complex political debates are often carried out through music and dance at demonstrations like this one.

Once the lunch break is over, we head off. The highway is closed in the direction of Istanbul, but we interact from a distance with people coming from the metropolis in their cars. Some drivers indicate their support, while some object by honking their horns angrily, swearing, or threatening the marchers. The weather is hot, and it feels even warmer on the highway. On both sides of the road, police are standing in their beige-and-green uniforms. Fifteen thousand police officers from across Turkey converging to "protect" the participants of the march are a manifestation of the AKP's recent securi-

tization politics. Armored police vehicles are standing by, ready to be mobilized, with most stationed nearby AKP supporters who are waiting for the demonstrators to approach.

As we move forward, I see various groups at the side of the road, noting the different hand gestures they make. Supporters of the ultranationalist, right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, hereafter MHP) make their “Gray Wolves” sign, with thumb and middle and ring fingers pinched together to form the wolf’s nose and the index and little fingers raised for the wolf’s ears. AKP followers make their “Rabia” hand gesture, with four fingers raised.<sup>6</sup> There are also other raised hands, belonging to people who work in this industrial hinterland of Istanbul. Primarily supporters of the HDP, these workers show their support by standing along the march’s route and making the “V for victory” sign. I know where I need to be more cautious and where I can be more relaxed by assessing the hand gestures made behind the police corridor. We walk at a quick pace until we reach the area where the demonstrators plan to spend the night. When the crowd arrives, folk tunes are played once again, this time with the accompaniment of the *davul* (a double-headed drum) and the *zurna* (a shrill pipe), the most common instruments in folk music. Activists begin dancing in smaller groups, seeking rejuvenation before they return tomorrow to the burning highway.

The March for Justice was directed against the arbitrary detentions and authoritarian policies of the AKP government, but the women’s organizations and feminist groups who joined it did so in direct opposition to the masculinist violence and misogynist politics that are on the rise. While diverse dissenting groups—including Kurds, leftists, non-Muslims, environmentalists, peace activists, and human rights advocates—have long been accused of destroying Turkish society and national unity, feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTI+) people have recently been singled out and demonized as a threat to the Turkish family and thus Turkish society, and have even been called “terrorists” (Özbay 2022). The AKP’s increasing repression of diverse political groups, despite their differing agendas, has united them in shared dissent against the government.

Since coming to power in 2002, successive AKP governments have introduced far-reaching legal and institutional changes affecting the administration of law and the health, education, and welfare systems, entrenching conservative gender norms and regulating women’s bodies and reproductive rights. The AKP’s gender policy backlash arguably started with the replacement of the State Ministry of Women and Family Affairs (Kadın ve Aileden Sorumlu Devlet Bakanlığı) by the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs (Aile



Figure I.1. Activists dancing during the March for Justice, including the author, wearing a hat at the midpoint of the semicircle. Yalova, July 6, 2017. Still from video by author.

ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı) in 2011. This change shifted the focus of gender policy from women to the family, and added to its official mandate the “protection” of children, the elderly, and the disabled, reframing these issues as social welfare matters and relegating women to the status of objects requiring protection rather than treating them as full citizens (Kandiyoti 2016). Increasing attempts to dismantle institutions and policies that aim to improve women’s legal and political agency have emboldened actors opposed to gender equality and granted them growing resonance and legitimacy in society at large (Unal 2024). These anti-gender equality movements have echoed the AKP’s neoliberal and neoconservative discourse that claims to strengthen the family as a central site for the production and maintenance of its desired economic and moral order (Acar and Altunok 2012). This discourse defines women’s roles in society and politics through their assumed responsibilities as nurturers and caregivers within the family, reinforcing gender-based hierarchies (for example, between trans and cis women and among cis women) and normalizing (cis)heteronormative violence in everyday life (Korkman 2017; see Zengin 2024).

Over the past two decades, domestic violence and femicides have undergone a de facto “deregulation” by the state, resulting in their dramatic increase. In 2002, 66 women were registered as victims of femicide, while in 2021, over 400 women were killed (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Plat-

formu 2022). The legal adjustments excused perpetrators of violence, sexual assaults, and femicides, who are commonly male family members (husbands, fathers, brothers, or boyfriends) (B. Belge 2011). Turkey's withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as Istanbul Convention) via an overnight decree issued by President Erdoğan in 2021 was the culmination of this process. Turkey was the first country to sign and ratify the Convention in 2011, committing itself to combating violence against women. This development was built on years of organizing by women's groups that had been pushing the state to address gender-based violence systematically.

Feminist coalitions, NGOs, and platforms had long been raising public awareness by documenting femicides, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination and advocating for legal reforms and enforcement of protections in national law. In the 1980s, the radical and socialist cisgender feminists, many coming from leftist political groups of the 1970s, mobilized large-scale street protests and organized together with trans women activists campaigns against sexual harassment and sexual violence (see Togay 2020). Their radical action gave way in the 1990s to more institutionalized feminist organizations, such as Women's Shelters (Kadın Sığınma Evleri), women's studies research centers at universities, and NGOs to support women in politics. The public visibility of the Kurdish and Islamic women's movements in the 1990s created new questions about the possibility of and strategy for the coexistence of a multitude of feminisms, or all-inclusive femme struggles. In the 2000s, women and *lubunya*<sup>7</sup> feminists pressingly questioned the cis woman subjectivity at the center of mainstream feminist discourse and practice (Özdemir and Bayraktar 2011, 2012). In the next decade of web activism, online campaigns against femicides made it possible to include often ignored experiences of trans women and sex workers into the category of womanhood (R. E. Altınay 2014). Moreover, Kurdish feminists strongly critiqued the role of women as defined by patriarchal dynamics in Kurdish society and within the Kurdish political movement as well as Turkish feminists' conceptualization of Kurdish women as oppressed and in need of liberation (Aras 2012; Işık 2020). Such competing discourses and experiences strengthened Turkey's femme struggles throughout the first decade of this century. In 2009, Turkish and Kurdish feminists formed the Women's Initiative for Peace (Barış için Kadın Girişimi), foregrounding "peace" as a common political stance. Interviews with some of its former members have guided my inquiry on the relationship between peace advocacy and dance as a nonviolent political praxis.

The criminalization of feminist activism and the targeting of women's

organizations, especially Kurdish feminist associations, unfolded alongside these developments and bolstered the government's anti-gender equality mobilization, undermining women's hard-won rights and alliances into the next decade. These forms of repression were intensified after the 2016 coup attempt. Hatice Kapusuz of the Women's Freedom Committee (*Kadın Özgürlük Meclisi*), a pro-Kurdish women's coalition providing legal support to victims of state violence, expressed that under the post-coup attempt state of emergency, antidemocratic discourse and practices became "legitimate," which affected even the smallest of women's acts (Evrensel 2016). The unbridled oppression and arbitrary violence and denial of fundamental human rights based on ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality have reverberated in public spaces, where trans, queer, and cis women struggle for their bodily autonomy and democratic rights.

This development echoes similar trends in other countries where women's struggles have become the focal point of resistance to increasing authoritarianism. In Egypt, women played a central role in the success of the 2011 Tahrir movement (Eileraas 2016; Hafez 2012; Pahwa 2016). After the revolution, women were forced to retreat from the public sphere and faced arrests, harassments, sexual assault, and torture. During and after the social uprisings against state repression and authoritarianism in the first half of the 2010s, Aliaa Magda Elmahdy in Egypt, Amina Tyler in Tunisia, Iranian activist Maryam Namazie, and others used nudity in public spaces as a form of protest against governments' use of religion to oppress women. Meitei "mothers" protesting the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in India stripped naked in front of the sacred Kangla Fort under military occupation (Banerjee 2017). In 2018 and 2019, women across Iran followed Vida Movahed in her protest against compulsory hijab: Movahed removed her hijab, tied it to a stick, and waved it like a flag for everyone to see, which led to her arrest. Iranian women's fight for justice intensified after the brutal killing of Kurdish Iranian student Mahsa Jina Amini during her detention by the "morality police" in 2022. Alaa Salah and other Sudanese women occupied the streets to demand dignity and justice, braving sexual harassment, torture, and live bullets in the 2019 Sudanese revolution. Moreover, in Ukraine, women have been pivotal in amplifying dissenting political voices. In the 2013 anti-government protests, following then-President Viktor Yanukovich's refusal to sign a free trade agreement with the European Union, women made up almost half of the protesters when masses occupied Kyiv's central Maidan Square (Nikoayenko and DeCasper 2018). During Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine, where women and girls have been particularly targeted by the military occupation and suffer

from rape, murder, and other cruelties, Russian feminists organized themselves to protest their government and circulated stickers and flyers anonymously in publicly accessible locations, despite the imposition of heavy criminal charges for their acts (Rozovsky 2022).

*Dissenting Through Dance* stands together with these contemporary transnational feminist struggles. In many of these resistance movements, dance has been a mobilizing political force, and its work in Turkey's contemporary protests is the main subject of this book. It examines how women from diverse ethnic, economic, and political backgrounds recontextualize folk dance as a mode of resistance through which to achieve political momentum in Turkey. I suggest that activist women's deployment of folk dance in Turkey has become a vital political praxis that enables them to navigate extremely restrictive and violent conditions in public space.

This book focuses in particular on horon, a popular chain dance associated with Turkey's northeastern Black Sea region, and to some extent on the halay, a group dance characteristic of Turkey's inner, eastern, and southeastern regions, parts of which are home to large Kurdish populations. They are both typically danced in circles, semicircles, and lines. Although participants may align their bodies in various ways, practitioners call the organization of the dance a "circle" (*halka* or *daire*) regardless of the actual shape (though usually it is a circle). I follow this verbiage by using the term *circle* (e.g., *horon circle*) to denote any group of dancers. The circle motif, representing equality and solidarity among group members, also works with notions of hierarchy, rendering it a complex space of assembly. When dancers join an ongoing performance by taking the hands of two other dancers and adjusting their step pattern and pace to the group as the dance continues, practitioners refer to their arrival as *halkaya girmek* (stepping into the circle) or *ele girmek* (holding hands). Should a dancer leave before the dance ends by stepping slightly backward and uniting the hands of the dancers on either side, practitioners refer to this departure as *halkadan çıkmak* (stepping out of the circle). A series of decisions—such as how and when to step in and out of the dance, between whom to dance and hold hands with, and how to care for one another—determine the pace and duration of the dance and thus become important in the composition of these circles. Dancers are expected to be focused and attentive to keep the circle moving, particularly at moments of demonstration.

Halay has been deployed in popular protests since the 1960s and has since the 1990s been strongly associated with the resistance of Kurds against cultural assimilation and nationalist violence (see Figure I.3). Stylings of horon

began to be deployed in public political gatherings in the 1990s and have since been increasingly articulated with nonhegemonic political movements by human, animal, and environmental rights activists. This book snapshots different moments of political assembly and protest as a testament to women's deployment of folk dance as a tool for grassroots solidarity and allyship that counters the individualizing and repressive effects of state power. It argues that by reconfiguring Turkey's folk dance traditions for their contemporary political aims, activist women rechoreograph national space in opposition to the hegemonic discourses and practices around Turkish nationalism, neoliberal economic development, and conventions of the female body.

The research participants mentioned here are progressives from various political, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds who self-identify as women and are citizens of Turkey. The majority are secular cis women and *lubunya* activists. Importantly, not all participants identify themselves as feminists and some actively avoid this term. To respect this political nuance and address multiple femininities, I use the term "femme," which has been theorized as multiplying feminine identity and comprises lesbians, bisexual women, transgender and non-binary folks, queer men, and heterosexual women (Schwartz 2018). Femme suggests a critical rethinking of femininity beyond heterosexual gender assumptions and refuses blanket categories of feminine and masculine that have been constructed in opposition to each other (Dahl 2012). Femme, like the category of women, underlines that the feminine is heterogenous, relational, and contingent. Many femme participants of this research are from leftist labor movements and minoritized ethnic and religious groups—Kurds, Roma, Hemşin, Laz, Pontians, Georgians, and Alevis—all of whom oppose the Turkish state's neoconservative gender politics and neoliberal authoritarianism. I use the terms "activists," "activist women," and "dissenting women" throughout as a shorthand for these differently positioned women and *lubunya* activists who use dance for protest purposes. By bringing together these intersectional dissenters, this book centralizes their reclaiming of the public sphere for a pluralist agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2000, 2005).

## FOLK DANCE AS A TOOL OF HEGEMONY AND DISSENT

Folk dance is often linked to a supposedly authentic common practice of a homogenous rural culture that persists in what Raymond Williams (1977) has critically theorized as "residual" cultural forms within the dominant culture



Figure I.2. The 1979 parliamentary election campaign at Kadıköy Yoğurtçu Parkı. Women from the Progressive Women's Organization of Turkey (İlerici Kadınlar Derneği) dance in support of their leader, Bakiye Beria Onger, an independent candidate from Istanbul (Kadınların Sesi 1979, 16). Courtesy of TÜSTAV Süreli Yayınlar Arşivi.

of modern urban society. Scholars have long critiqued such approaches to “folk” as essentialist, nostalgic, and ahistorical (Buckland 1983), and noted how they are used in the construction of different “imagined communities,” most importantly modern nationalism (Anderson 1983). Several works have examined the dynamic relationships between folk dance and the modern state by analyzing dance’s constitutive role in nation-state formation (Öztürkmen 1998, 2002; Shay 2002, 2006), performances of citizenship and national identity (Giersdorf 2013; Wilcox 2019), and cultural policy and institutions (Cherian 2009; Cuellar 2022). Scholars have also examined how dancers can cultivate new gendered political subjectivities (Cohen 2021; Gilman 2009) and challenge regulatory nation-state efforts in which the reorganization of gender and dance are mutually constitutive (Banerji 2019; Cowan 1990). This book draws on this scholarship and considers the historical, choreographic, and ethnographic analysis of folk dance as a way into the ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities in contemporary Turkey.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, women and men holding

hands in folk dance performances and coupling in popular Western dance were aligned with the modern and secular public space ideal of the emergent Turkish nation-state, in assumed contrast to the homosocial entertainment culture and social life of the Ottoman Empire. These secular dancing bodies were praised for their ability “to keep up with complex rhythms and turn their work into an enjoyable activity” (Eyüboğlu 1967, 90) and portrayed the new citizen ideal of the republic. From the 1920s to the 1970s, researchers in state institutions collected, codified, and categorized the folk dances of non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities and the Sunni Muslim and Turkish majority as a corpus of traditions echoing a glorified national culture and history. As regional dances were being nationalized, many existing or perceived “foreign” elements in their repertoires, including non-Turkish names, narratives, costumes, and props, were gradually replaced with their “authentically” Turkish counterparts. In the 1970s and 1980s, a national folk-dance repertoire was institutionalized with the establishment of state ensembles, the proliferation of dance competitions, and the creation of university folk-dance departments. The precise, disciplined, and unitary movement chorus was then developed and integrated into stage performances as a representation of the national body (see Chapter 1).

Folk dances were not only instrumentalized by the state but also used by grassroots movements to mobilize the public and demonstrate solidarity among dissenters (see Figure 1.2). In the 1960s, folk dances were deployed during workers’ strikes and factory occupations to protest capitalist workplace conditions. In the 1970s, these dances’ heightened popularity among organized workers as a method of collective action led leftist organizations to form professional folk dance troupes. These troupes performed to some degree a disciplined and unitary leftist revolutionary body and also functioned as a way of communicating directly with urban migrant workers—who had left the countryside in search of job opportunities—and winning them over to these organizations’ political cause (see Chapter 4).

Since the 1990s, grassroots movements have repurposed folk dance to constitute intersecting political, ethnic, sexual, and gender subjectivities in public political action. The relatively liberal cultural climate of the late 1990s, driven by Turkey’s European Union accession efforts, fostered not only linguistic plurality and collaboration between Kurdish, Armenian, and Laz musicians (O. E. Aksoy 2014) but also forms of allyship among diverse political movements. Folk dance has been deployed by dissenting groups advocating for social justice and human rights for ethnic and religious minorities, laborers and low-income populations, women, and LGBTI+ individuals. It has

become a tool to learn about and circulate cultural practices of a repressed ethnic group; block police action; stimulate anger, mourning, hope, and joy; and spread the courage necessary for resisting an authoritarian regime. In their demands for a pluralistic society, these dissenters have improvised, in a multitude of folk dance styles, the unitary dancing body produced by both the nationalist and leftist political projects of earlier decades. These dances include but are not limited to *Delilo halay*, *Hemşin horonu*, *bablekan*, *Keçê Kurdan* (aka *yanlama halay*), and *düz* (plain) *horon* (aka *sallama* in Trabzon and *Vazriya* in Artvin). As protesters perform in the immediacy of a protest, they gradually develop competence in these styles and others and patiently develop their capacity to improvise both in protest and in dance. By contextualizing and theorizing improvisation in relation to folk dance and political protest and analyzing women's agency asserted through improvised choreographies in public space, this study analytically opens folk dance up to being a choreographic praxis rather than a stable, imagined "elsewhere."

## CHOREOGRAPHY

In this study, choreography reflects the cultural and political structures of the social systems it occurs in and responds to, reproducing and interrogating those structures (Foster 2009; O'Shea 2007). I address choreography as both an object of analysis in the field of dance and a heuristic that enables the theorization of non-dance bodily acts as "choreographic" (Foster 1995, 1998). This quality offers dance as a unique lens through which to examine how bodies reflect and shape social and political phenomena, particularly when they are the most vulnerable in times of heightened political violence (Fortuna 2019; Goldman 2010; Rosa 2015; Satkunaratnam 2020). *Dissenting Through Dance* takes up this significance, demonstrating the potential of choreography as an aesthetic activity and a social and political praxis that unites a collective of activists, artists, and spectators as subjects who share a common public space and promote a bodily politics of nonviolence. While grounding its analyses in Turkey's specific political, social, and cultural history, the book thus gestures to broader discussions beyond this immediate context.

Pioneering dance studies scholar Randy Martin (1985, 1998) reminds us that dance creates mobilization and agency by inviting participation. He insists on the dynamic of reciprocity between performers and audience, described as "turn-taking and exchangeability" (2012, 73), indexing this reciprocity in the ciphers of breakdancers and in skateboarders' demonstration

of tricks to each other. Martin's approach to choreography, located in public spaces where movement and interaction between performer and audience are rife, foregrounds his conceptualization of the "audience" being constitutive of the performer's act. The performance "initiates and sets the terms for kinetic circulation with the audience in order to generate the momentum for their involvement" (Martin 1990, 171). Drawing on Martin's notion of the audience as "a co-player—a participant in the dance work" (Franko 2016, 34), I contend that danced protests pursue such involvement to politicize the public and encourage participation in social action. Folk dance in a public political protest complicates boundaries between a participant in a demonstration and an onlooker, as it invites onlookers and passersby to join in the dance and become participants in the protest. Throughout the book, I use the term "audience" to capture this potential, where onlookers' performative involvement in dance can transform them into protesters.

This treatment of choreography further enables me to examine the strategic maneuvering of the state and improvised corporeal decisions of activist women through which they resist and mobilize the audience to their action. The book foregrounds the improvisation activists employ in both protests and the horon and halay dances as a central choreographic "tactic" that combines political and artistic practices against state power. Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes tactics from the strategies he associates with the totalizing discourses and metanarratives that constitute ways of governing. Strategies may occupy and administer space, but tactics work through momentary interventions. Without the ability to claim territory, tactics make any gain provisional rather than permanent, as "their success lies in evasion and repetition, not in permanent conquest" (Certeau 1984, 37). Tactics necessitate continuous mobility in space.

The four counterhegemonic choreographic tactics I conceptualize in this book—*dispersal*, *imprecision*, *embellishment*, and *reassembly*—enable activists to improvise new forms of public political assembly while at the same time disorienting the police and internally negotiating the terms of their coalition. I theorize these tactics as improvised choreographic tools that are used in both dance and protest and that can be learned and applied individually and collectively when needed in action. These choreographic tactics are drawn from artistic expression and everyday life to counter the biopolitical and necropolitical state power that generates strategies of surveillance, discrimination, exclusion, and elimination.

## DANCE, POLITICAL UNREST, AND GENDER PRECARITY

Choreography as an aesthetic endeavor and social practice has been used to reframe the embodied nature of political actions and social movements (Martin 1998), thereby connecting dance and dissent. Studies linking choreography and dissenting politics can be categorized into two different approaches. One approach focuses on the choreographic in political protests, examining the ephemeral organization of bodies, the work of planning, arranging, and coordinating, and bodily acts that protesters rehearse, stage, and disseminate. These “choreographies of protests,” such as the corporeal improvisation techniques of the 1960s civil rights movements (Goldman 2010; Kowal 2004), the performative die-ins against HIV+ discrimination of the 1980s, and the seemingly leaderless protests against neoliberal world order of the 1990s and 2000s (Foster 2003; Gerecke and Levin 2018), as well as recent online and offline protests under the restrictive conditions of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic (Foellmer 2023), necessitated new bodily techniques that protesters learned and employed at each of these historical moments. These studies have shown how protesters train their bodies to respond to violent maneuvers of power and insist on nonviolent communication as the basis for their collective political actions. Another group of scholars has looked at performances on the professional stage and elaborated how, by using certain choreographic strategies, artists can challenge broader social and political theories (e.g., Lepecki 2006). They also showed how professional dancers can engage with cultural diplomacy and international political debates as representatives (Croft 2015) or dissidents (Franko 1995) of their states, since their aesthetic and choreographic choices can offer a critique of state politics by evoking often painful memories and emotions (Kowal 2010). By analyzing these staged choreographies of professional artists, scholars have theorized means and ways of political participation beyond the stage. *Dissenting Through Dance* contributes to these discussions in dance studies in a unique way, as it shifts attention to the choreographies that unfold within protest environments themselves and underlines how activism resides in the performance of dance within the protest.

This book emerged in the aftermath of the protests that began with the Tunisian Revolution of Dignity (2011) and continued with Egypt’s Tahrir movement (2011), the Occupy movements of the United States (2011), and Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park protests (2013). In all these popular resistance movements and many other global manifestations of dissent against forms of heteropatriarchal authoritarianism and neoliberal economic exploitation,

protesters employed performance for political resistance through mobilizing folk poetry (Rice and Hamdy 2016), music (Manabe 2016; Morcom 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Sugarman 1999; Swedenburg 2012), artistic humor (Makar 2011; Yanik 2015), visual arts (Dastarlı and Cin 2023; Toukan 2021), and dance. In North Africa and the Middle East, dance and music genres including Algerian *rai* (Noor Al-Deen 2005), Tunisian hip-hop (Gabsi 2020; Maira 2008; McDonald 2013), *dabke* in Syria (Silverstein 2024) and among displaced Palestinians (Rowe 2011; Van Aken 2006), Kurdish halay (O. E. Aksoy 2014; H. Şentürk 2021), and the Turkish *arabesk* (Stokes 2010) reflect the resistance of culturally and economically marginalized communities and their artistic productions, which have been systematically ignored or appropriated into hegemonic national repertoires.

Dance in the Middle East and Turkey often reveals complexities of gendered body politics and critically highlights the economic and political precarity of gender and sexual minorities. Feminist scholars in the Middle East have looked at how women performatively use traditional gender roles to negotiate patriarchal violence (Holt and Jawad 2013) or challenge those roles to resist heterosexist social and political structures (Hasso and Salime 2016). They showed in a broader context of resistance movements, how female activists' bodily interventions in public spaces of conflict "challenged gendered norms of conventional politics that construct women either as passive victims or caring, nurturing mothers of the nation" (Richter-Devroe 2018, 63; also see Abubaker 2014; El Said et al. 2015; Khalil 2015).

Feminist anthropologists and dance scholars have also demonstrated the outsized effects that shifting economic and political conditions can have on professional urban women dancers. Presenting the complex constellation of forces that work to regulate female dancing bodies in distinct cultural contexts, these important studies have furthered our knowledge of how women mobilize political agency through their choreographic decisions and emotional labor—as female *raqs-sharqi* dancers did under changing cultural and spatial conditions in Egypt in the late twentieth century (van Nieuwkerk 1995) and as the belly dance community in Istanbul, struggling with recent urban and "cultural" gentrification (Girgin 2023; Potuoğlu-Cook 2006), is doing. Belly dancers have worked to open up new performative spaces while navigating their positioning as subjects of both desire and stigmatization in various Middle Eastern contexts (Şahin 2024). For example, Istanbul's belly dance community invested in combining international popular dance movements with more "local" forms such as Roma dances, responding to both local audience expectations and to the globalized entertainment economy

(Kurt 2023; Öztürkmen 2016). Decades of urban renewal projects in Istanbul have particularly affected Roma dancers and musicians in the city. When Roma neighborhoods were opened to tourism via these projects in the 1990s and demolished entirely in the next decade, the female dancers who had thrived and worked there faced displacement and poverty (Girgin 2023). Tourism and globalization also positively influenced Istanbul's contemporary dance culture, turning it into one of the hotspots of the global tango scene. The performed eroticism of Istanbul's tango enthusiasts, particularly women *tanguera*, has challenged the conservative body politics propagated by the AKP government (Levent Yuna 2022). Similar to the Turkish case, studies on female dancers in Iran consider how women's bodies have provided evidence for competing representations of modernity, urbanity, and Islam. They interrogate how gender was constructed for the Iranian theatrical stage and popular cinema in the twentieth century (Meftahi 2013), as well as how female dancers are currently reshaping these constructions through their contemporary dance works in exile (Hatami 2022).

*Dissenting Through Dance* adds to these important works in novel ways, as it centralizes the voices and actions of activists and focuses specifically on the practices of dance enthusiasts who have no regular dance practice and in some cases dance only during protests. It works to demonstrate that in improvising folk dances, dancer-activist femmes transform already coded practices into new and oppositional political instruments.

## TURKEY'S NECROPOLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS

Democracy has always been a controversial term in Turkey's political history and has been interrupted by authoritarian reforms and military interventions, which regularly brought Turkey's "necropolitical undercurrent" to the surface of the political regime (Bargu 2019a, 1). Starting in the 1920s, the newly established Turkish Republic sought to enforce a homogeneous nation-state, highlighting the nation as religiously Sunni Muslim and ethnically Turkish. This political project was building on earlier Ottoman state policies including deportations, mass killings, and forced migration of Armenians as part of genocidal processes of elimination and exclusion (see Suny 2015). Nationalist and assimilationist policies targeted survivors of late nineteenth-century atrocities against Armenians, Greeks, and other non-Muslim communities.

Consolidating its vision of a unified national identity, the one-party regime of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk institutionalized Turkish as the sole offi-



Figure I.3. Women halay dancing in a demonstration in Istanbul, 2015 (erzingan 2015). Still from video.

cial language through the 1928 Law on the Adoption and Implementation of the Turkish Alphabet (Law No. 1353). This linguistic reform was accompanied by broader Turkification policies aimed at the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic transformation of diverse ethnoreligious groups into “Turks” (Zeydanlioglu 2014). These measures included the forced adoption of Turkish surnames via the 1934 Surname Law (Soyadı Kanunu, No. 2525) and the “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” campaign of the 1930s enforcing the use of Turkish in public life. The 1942 wealth tax, which disproportionately targeted Christian and Jewish citizens, compelled many to sell all their belongings to pay off their debts and aimed at transferring wealth to create a Turkish national bourgeoisie (Aktar 2021; Bali 1999).

Systematic erasure and renaming practices continued in the mid-twentieth century: Non-Turkish names were deliberately ignored or changed, including the names of villages, valleys, and rivers; lyrics of folk songs (Balkılıç 2015) and, importantly for this research, dance titles were replaced with Turkish equivalents, though the etymological roots of many continued to be contested as evidence of competing cultural claims. These combined policies of forced displacement, economic dispossession, and cultural erasure contributed to the sharp decline of non-Muslim populations in Turkey—from 19.1

percent at the start of the twentieth century to just 0.2 percent by its end (Özyürek 2007, 11–12).

The single-party rule of CHP persisted until the transition to multiparty politics in 1946 and the first democratic elections in 1950. Over the next three decades, Turkey experienced three breakdowns of its parliamentary regime in the form of coups d'état (1960, 1971, 1980), critically wounding its fledgling multiparty democracy. In addition to these junta rules, military memoranda (in 1997 and 2007, to “warn” elected leaders against religious extremism) and years-long states of emergency, particularly in Kurdish towns, marked repetitive and contingent periods of authoritarianism that took the form of social control, surveillance, restrictions, penalization, and exclusion from civic and human rights protections. The 1980 coup d'état in particular profoundly suppressed all leftist political organizations and persecuted their cadres, shutting down tens of thousands of associations and detaining over six hundred thousand individuals. Over two hundred thousand people were tried, with seven thousand facing the death penalty—fifty were executed (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi 2012, xiv–xv). Such oppression enabled a social, political, and economic shift from a welfare-based statist developmentalism to an export-oriented free market capitalism, resulting in the privatization of state property and infrastructure.

Public space and everyday life in contemporary Turkey have been undergoing once again deep authoritarian transformations under AKP dominance. Since the 2010s, the state policies have extended biopolitical control over new spheres of life through the introduction of digital identities, compulsory identity numbers, and e-government accounts that enable citizens to access and manage their judiciary, financial, and health-related files (Bozbeyoğlu 2011; Özşeker and Mercan 2022). The new prison system introduced in the 2000s targeted a significantly increased number of political prisoners, prioritizing maximum security in newly built large prison campuses and changing the previous ward system to a room or cell system designed to be “healthy,” “electronically equipped,” and “modern” (Kavur 2020, 340). While these modern biopolitical technologies (Foucault 2007, 2008) expand and legitimize state control in everyday life and over vulnerable populations such as political prisoners, they are also intertwined with the AKP's exercise of sovereign power.

The AKP's power is aligned with surveillance and securitization and also grounded in a politics of death through siege, detention, extrajudicial torture, targeted political murders, and killings of Kurdish and Alevi dissenters (Akıncı 2017; Mercan and Denizhan 2020; Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016; Yonucu 2022). Turkey's recent prolonged “state of exception” (Agamben 1998, 2005),

declared after the failed coup d'état in July 2016 and continued until July 2018, suspended regular juridical norms and violated the freedoms of political opposition with impunity in the name of protecting the state (see Chapter 2). State sovereignty is constituted via control over mortality. This necropolitical control operates through the governance of death and conditions of violence and oppression (Mbembe 2003). Some populations are rendered easy targets, constituted as disposable due to their race, ethnicity, and gender that is construed as an essential biological or cultural difference. These include Kurds, Roma, trans and cis women, workers, refugees, leftists, and non-Muslims. In each iteration, this violence becomes the normative condition of marginalized bodies, whose lives do not register as mournable and grievable, as having value (Butler 2009).

Whereas operations of power invest in, control, observe, and also produce the categories of the disposable and disappearable (Foucault 2003), protesting bodies use kinesthetic and spatial configurations to construct alternative political spaces (see Dabashi 2012; Lee 2014; Schneider 2011; Taylor 1997). André Lepecki's (2013) conceptualization of dance and political protest is essential to analyzing how dissenters and police maneuver in relation to one another in such contested spaces. His work theorizes what he calls *choreopolitics*, the transformative quality of movement as it activates, invents, seeks, and experiments in opposition to the repressive power of *choreopolicing*, which controls, regulates, and imposes its will on bodies and their movements. Against this disciplining and normalizing power, the dancer converts restrictive areas into spaces for mobility and action (Lepecki 2013, 20). Building on and forwarding Lepecki's analyses, *Dissenting Through Dance* focuses on the practices of activists who learn and cultivate dance techniques as a form of protest, examining how they practice solidarity but also compete with one another and shedding light on how dance and improvisation are used to negotiate citizenship.

In Turkey and many other countries, where the people's right to public assembly is curtailed by authoritarian state policies coupled with extreme police violence, dissenters' counterhegemonic movements manifest in innovative ways. If dance has been one way to show dissent in public space at times of extreme vulnerability, another way has been the performative use of minimal quotidian movements. One outstanding example of this is the "standing people" performances during the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park protests, a major uprising sparked by plans to convert the historical park next to the central Taksim Square into a hotel and shopping mall. On June 17, some three weeks after protests began, the authorities suspended the right to public

assembly. Performance artist Erdem Gündüz spent eight hours in Taksim Square standing still without speaking, facing a monumental image of the Turkish Republic's founder on the facade of the Atatürk Cultural Center (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi). Because standing and waiting were not explicitly banned, his protest confused the police, who had no legal reason to detain him. Noting the power of his action, others eventually gathered around him. The media called him Standing Man (Duran Adam), and his still pose inspired a wave of standing protests across the country and abroad.

As a trained contemporary dancer, Gündüz used artistic techniques—such as deceleration to extend the duration of standing and site-specificity to convert the public space into a performance site—to transform his ordinary gesture into an act of legal political resistance (Foellmer 2016). In Turkey, standing still is also a strong reference to military discipline and national unity, commonly expressed through collective stillness during the national anthem in various contexts and the nationwide moment of silence on November 10, commemorating the death of Mustafa Kemal. While dancers' technique is grounded in the "quotidian physicality of the public" (Martin 1990, 175), dancers' movements not only visibilize a contested social and political landscape but also analyze and make legible how diverse bodies move together. Activists in protest can appear and endure in stillness through standing, sit-ins, and other forms of action. They also dance using minimal gestures and movements or execute energetic jumps and kicks and show intense emotions such as anger, joy, and enthusiasm. Cis, queer, and trans women's dancing not only challenges the disciplining of their bodies through their alleged immobility but also confronts the marginalization and regulation of their mobility in public spaces.

These kinds of aesthetic interventions, which feminist political philosopher Chantal Mouffe calls "artistic activism" (2007), serve as counterhegemonic acts because they foment agonistic struggle against state domination across a multiplicity of social spaces. Unlike antagonistic actors, who compete as enemies to establish a hegemonic position over and against the position of others, agonistic actors view one another as worthy adversaries with competing yet equally worthy views. Thus, they avoid imposing a singular hegemonic view by recognizing the institutions that enable them to competitively persuade others (Mouffe 2000). By recontextualizing specific folk dance traditions that build on historically legible techniques to generate new choreographic tactics, femme activists in Turkey's urban spaces reveal nonviolent and agonistic alternatives to the politics of antagonism, war, and violence.

## CHOREOGRAPHIC TACTICS

*Dissenting Through Dance* proposes five hegemonic and counterhegemonic techniques, devoting one chapter to each: precision, dispersal, imprecision, embellishment, and reassembly. Two of the five techniques (precision and dispersal) are used as hegemonic strategies mainly by the state and its satellite institutions. Four techniques (dispersal, imprecision, embellishment, and reassembly) are used as counterhegemonic tactics during protests to improve the ability to improvise in rapidly changing circumstances and complications. If the disciplining of dissent is the aim of the police, improvisation in service of dissent is the aim of activists. Together, these choreographic tools work to close off or open up political possibilities in public space.

The book begins by exploring how the hegemonic strategy of *precision* is deployed at national institutional folk dance education in Turkey to produce standardized, virtuosic, and “modest” female dancing bodies. Based on field and archival work in folk dance institutions, state conservatories, cultural associations, private studios, and grassroots organizations in Istanbul and the Black Sea region, I demonstrate how horon choreography is divided into discrete units and taught through an emphasis on precise attitudes designed to make the dance and dancers look “authentic.” Such precise choreography reifies discrete ethnic communities and genders through minuscule differences in dance movement, which take on great significance in the formation of the national dance canon. Precision has also been idealized in the conception and collective performances of the revolutionary body central to the 1970s leftist aesthetics.

As precision choreographies support the national unity discourse, another choreographic device, *dispersal*, aims to irregulate and interrupt unity in the public sphere. Dispersal implies both the violent maneuvers of state forces acting in urban spaces and protester acts of survival. The Turkish state uses dispersal as a hegemonic strategy to disband protesters from the central squares to peripheral urban sites. Dispersal is also used by dissenting dancers protesting in public spaces as a tactic that enables them to oscillate quickly between scattering and meeting, depending on the hegemonic dispersal strategies used by the police. When the police work to disperse activist events occurring in central areas such as Taksim Square, dissenters disperse outward in an effort to continue their political activities outside authorities’ direct scrutiny.

If precision reifies ethnonational and gender differences as a hegemonic strategy, it is also transformed by contemporary activists via the counterhegemonic tactic of *imprecision*. Wielded in the folk-dancing circle, imprecision subverts claims of authenticity by recalibrating conventional choreographies from the institutionalized folk dance canon. Dissenting women bend the gender qualities of folk dance movements by introducing powerful kick-steps, pelvic gestures, and forceful upper-body undulations; shuffling folk dance genres and their various stylings and sequences; and combining gestures signifying diverse political positions to create a competitive kinesthetic space for political participation. I suggest that the deployment of imprecision enables protesters to establish political alliances and negotiate their power both within and across dissenting movements in public spaces.

Whereas imprecision centers gender- and ethnicity-bending to defy the reification of the difference and to work toward a pluralistic politics, the tactic of *embellishment* utilizes gender essentialism to counter hegemonic precision. Because activists must also grapple with precision strategies deployed by institutions on the left, embellishment enables women+ to perform “femmehood” through an aesthetic labor of excess and adornment as a critique of these institutions’ heteropatriarchal structures that separate “proper” femmes from “improper” ones (see Hernandez 2020). Embellishing their movements and clothing as well as chants, songs, and slogans, they build on the choreographic tactic of imprecision to further express their intersecting ethnic, gender, and political positionings.

Activists not only adorn and embellish their bodies, movements, and chants to flexibly engage with their difference and enhance visibility or employ imprecision to blend and bend ethnic and gender binaries; they also masterfully bring together disparate materials from a variety of traditional sources—including improvised poetry lyrics, crafted clothes and props, and musical styles and instruments—with methods of civil disobedience and social mobilization, such as petitions, call-for-action flyers, and political signs. The counterhegemonic choreographic tactic of *reassembly* used in horon performances at rural, regional, and urban environmental protests creates new regional diasporic and transregional tools for activists, and it also can be applied in other dance forms in protest contexts.

Protesters use several of these choreographic tactics separately and simultaneously to transform the hegemonic spatial organization in the public sphere and create femme spaces for political action.

## DANCING FROM THE MARGINS: HORON AND HALAY

Folk dance is frequently referred to as an authentic cultural tradition rather than a political expression. Authenticity, as a discursive formation, however, is always contextually redefined. As Regina Bendix (1997) argues, authenticity is frequently associated with “truth,” rendering certain cultural expressions genuine, trustworthy, and legitimate while producing its “other” as “fake, spurious, and even illegitimate” (9). These categories also operate by distinguishing a “true” halay or horon from their inauthentic imitations, and a “true” ethnicity or nation of a dancing community from supposedly “fake” ones. Claims to authenticity through language, culture, dance, and music render some groups more “native” and “national” (*yerli ve milli*) than others, providing them with a level of privilege to claim “full” citizenship. In response, Kurdish, Laz, Hemşin, and other minoritized publics have continued to use artistic expression to prove their historical nativity and to negotiate their belonging to the nation-state. *Dissenting Through Dance* shows that dance is at the center of such political struggles around who can claim to be “native” and “national” in Turkey and looks at the criteria for authenticity that link these categories. It also demonstrates how individuals negotiate changing social and political meanings of folk dances.

The book zooms in on horon and partly on halay, but because dances are not hermetically sealed off but exist as part of the social, it discusses as well other dance forms and their relationship to dissenting practices. For example, dances associated with isolated shoulder, hip, and belly movements, such as variations of *çiftetelli*, are also used in contemporary political protests by women and *lubunya* activists. These dances, often grouped under the catchall category of belly dance, were identified with the erotic dance traditions of the Ottoman Empire, such as *çengi* and *köçek* (dancing young girls and boys), and later *kanto*, which were banned, censored, or stigmatized based on class and ethnicity and faded away in Turkish urban entertainment culture by the mid-twentieth century (Avcı 2017; Blackthorne-O’Barr 2018). Another dance that was used in the 1970s labor struggles but is not visible in contemporary protests is *hora*. Commonly associated with Turkish communities in the country’s northwest Thrace region, *hora* is part of a shared and contested dance culture across the region, often linked to Greek dance vocabulary. It is danced by holding hands or linking arms in a chain-like alignment that is similar to halay and horon.

The Turkish folk dance canon is based on a model in which each of Turkey’s large geographical regions is associated with one folk dance genre,

framed as expressing regional cultural specificity while reinforcing the idea of a unitary Turkish nation (see Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion). The eastern and southeastern regions, where the majority of Turkey's Kurdish population is concentrated, are commonly identified with dances that often form lines and circles and are generically called *halay* in Turkish and *govend* (dance) in Kurdish. The horon represents the eastern part of the Black Sea region in the canon, yet is popularly associated with the entire Black Sea coast from the east of Istanbul to the border with Georgia. This regionalization marginalized the dances of religious and ethnic minorities, such as Greeks, Armenians, and Kurds as well as Islamicized communities such as the Hemşin and Laz. Movements, aesthetics, and symbolic messages delivered in these dances as well as the linguistic diversity and discourse of their accompanying poetry and songs were eliminated or regulated to reflect national unity. This study complicates such regional categorization and invisibilization of conflicted histories of cultural erasure and appropriation by delineating dances in various protest contexts: *halay* performed in urban labor activism, students' movements, and women's movements as well as Kurdish political struggle (Chapters 2 and 4) and horon deployed transregionally by environmental and cultural and political rights activists (Chapters 3 and 5).

In a horon circle, dancers typically hold hands and extend their arms forward in straight lines, often at the shoulder level. When they bring their arms down, their shoulders sway back and forth as they twist their torsos. They slightly bend their knees and let the backs of the knees snap the motion backward in staccato slides. In a bouncing movement, they alternate steps with the right and left foot, tapping the ground to make a percussive sound. The apex moment of the dance is the synchronized motion of a strong, stomping step following a brief suspension. The horon choreography has many variations on this basis.

Musical instruments accompanying the dance also vary. The *kemençe*, a bowed viol, is the most widespread instrument in Trabzon province and the main instrument of standardized and staged horon performances. However, at protests, the most common instrument is the *tulum*, a type of bagpipe popular in the eastern Black Sea region (as in Figure I.4). The *tulum* entered into the national folk music repertoire and was played on state radio and television in the 1950s. On television, the instrument was covered in red fabric with a Turkish flag, a characteristic cover for the instrument until the 1980s. Over the last two decades, environmental activists and popular musicians and bands from the area have introduced a variety of *tulum* music and horon styles to a larger public. Its high-pitched sound has served to mark activist



Figure I.4. A horon circle in the eastern Black Sea region. Oce/Yeniyl Village, Ardeşen, Rize, August 4, 2017. Still from video by author.

presence in public space. The accordion has been also used frequently in anti-mining protests in Artvin province bordering Georgia. Different instruments accompanying horon dances, such as the *kemençe*, the *tulum*, the *davul*, the *zurna*, and the accordion, mark not only different horon styles but also regional cultural and political geographies.

Existing research on horon focuses on tempo and movement (Gül 2010; Özarslan 1995; Yahyaoğlu 2009) and geographic locations (for example, in the high mountains or on the coast) (Kemhacıoğlu 2010). Only a handful of studies refer to the non-Turkish cultural context and language used in horon performances (Gül 2010). In fact, the Turks, Greek Pontians, Laz, Hemşin, Poşa (a Romani group), and Georgians in the Black Sea region have shaped horon dance and music, reflecting the rich cultural history of the region and histories of assimilation, erasure, and violence. The singing segments of horon and the leader's commands to change the movement sequence draw on this multiethnic linguistic diversity. Throughout the book, I register and use local Turkish and non-Turkish terminology to build an analysis based on practitioners' conceptualizations of the dance.

The assumed links between national history and dance terms reflect the political stakes of these dances' origins. For example, some Turkish folklorists say that the term *horon* is a word for "haystack" in Turkish dialects and claim that the dance is originally a tradition of Turkish-speaking nomadic people from central Asia (Cihanoğlu 2004, 22). Other researchers suggest that the

word *horon* comes from Greek, because *horo* (χορός in Greek, *chorós*) refers to both “dance” and a group of dancers who sing and dance in a chorus (Öztürk 2005, 529–31), which is today frequently manifested as call-and-response while dancing. Under the historical influence of Greek colonization up to the fifteenth century, communities of the Black Sea region adopted the term in their mother tongues with small variations, such as *horon* (Turkish), *horan* (Hemşin), and *horomi* (Georgian) (Öztürk 2005, 2017).

Dances like *horon* and *halay* occupy both celebratory and subversive spaces. They are typically performed in weddings and social gatherings. It is common to encounter impromptu performances of *halay* and *horon* in urban areas such as Istanbul as passersby join musicians in the streets. The dynamic meanings of these dances emerge from their various uses as cultural resilience, popular entertainment, pastime activity, and a collective political statement. Yet their presence in public space also reveals the fraught relationship between cultural expression and appropriation. In this context, *horon* and *halay* are subjected to different degrees of marginalization.

The 1990s witnessed an intensification of the armed conflict between the Turkish armed forces and Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, hereafter PKK), an insurgency that had begun in the 1980s in pursuit of political recognition and autonomy to some degree. The forced evacuation of over three thousand Kurdish villages (Sarigil and Fazlioglu 2014, 448) and the displacement of Kurds in this process was followed by migration to big cities in the west such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. The migration transformed urban cultural landscapes and created new platforms for Kurdish cultural and artistic expressions, including *halay* dance and music. However, the state’s ongoing efforts to marginalize and assimilate Kurds as “pseudo-citizens” of the Turkish state (Yeğen 2009, 610) and its portrayal of Kurdish cultural practices as “threats” to national unity (Erdem 2014, 51) have made dances like *halay* highly contested, performances considered to be acts of “separatism” and “terrorism.”

Despite these pressures, *halay* has been a powerful tool expressing an embodied politics of Kurdish resistance and cultural resilience. Yet the significance of *halay* extends beyond the Kurdish culture. As a group dance, it facilitates physical and emotional bonding among participants. The dancers hold hands, align their bodies, and respond to each other’s movements. In political contexts, *halay* fosters a collectivity of Turkish and Kurdish participants around a shared politics and signals solidarity among them. Its lyrics, particularly when sung in Kurdish (a language banned until 1991), further challenge the long-standing suppression of the Kurdish language and appropriation of Kurdish culture and artistic products (O. E. Aksoy 2014). This sub-

versive potential and the criminalization, in certain contexts, of halay have resulted in the performers facing detention and judicial scrutiny even when dancing outside protest spaces.

While halay has been subject to state suppression, horon has followed a different trajectory. It gained prominence in urban demonstrations in the early 2000s as part of environmental struggles and Laz and Hemşin cultural rights activism. Horon has also been widely used as a form of public entertainment in populist right-wing campaigns. During AKP- and MHP-sponsored constitutional referendum campaigning events in 2017, professional horon troupes performing to *kemençe* tunes were commonly featured to attract voters' attention and provide potential AKP supporters from the Black Sea region with a sense of belonging. Not only the AKP electoral base but also popular politicians from its opposing secular CHP, like Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, occasionally danced the horon in public, thereby contributing to its inclusion in the liberal national discourse. These uses of the horon have enabled activists to escape marginalization and mobilize a wider political spectrum of participants. Since the broad public continues to perceive Kurdish dances as a threat to the Turkish state and society, horon styles have become more popular during protests in big cities and have been deployed by both Kurdish and Turkish activists.

Young Kurdish activists sometimes dance the horon and not the halay to avoid becoming easy targets for arbitrary arrest and detention. An activist of the Kurdish youth movement and university student, Esma, told me that whenever they stage a protest at their university, the police come to campus. The police presence stops non-Kurdish students from joining in their Kurdish comrades' folk dances. In response, Esma explains how she and her friends studied and practiced the horon to involve others in their action and avoid police violence:

It's very painful. You can't dance your own dances because no one joins in, and the police come straightaway to arrest you. But this is what we can do now. We've learned the horon and performed it during Newroz. People participated in our celebration, and the police did not come for quite some time. (Istanbul, April 13, 2017)

The Kurdish term Newroz, also known as Nevruz in Turkish and Nowruz in Persian, refers to a festival marking the arrival of spring and is celebrated by various ethnic and religious groups from the Balkans to central Asia. For Kurds, it additionally symbolizes revival and liberation, associated with the

myth of a popular revolt against oppression (D. Aydın 2014, 68, 73). The performance of horon, instead of halay, a vital component of these annual celebrations, points to the extent of halay's marginalization. In contrast, the horon, associated with a performance of Turkishness in the public discourse, offers a tactical space for Kurdish activists like Esma to negotiate their cultural and political positioning without immediate repression. Moreover, various horon styles deployed by minoritized ethnic cultures of the Black Sea region, such as Hemşin and Laz, do not allow for a complete equation of the dance with Turkishness but rather echo histories of exclusion and appropriation. Esma and other activists maneuver within these complex relations and at times use the horon to celebrate Kurdish political revival and resistance.

Claims of authenticity and ownership of dance create hierarchies regarding dancers' ethnic or national belonging, but the immediate social and political context in which the dance is performed gives the danced action its ultimate meaning. Activists from the Kurdish movement have adopted new folk dances, including horon, despite the traditional centrality of halay, to keep themselves visible in public space. Many activists from the Black Sea region that I spoke to, however, refrained from performing Kurdish dances for fear of being seen as overly political. Some activists even refrained labeling horon as a dissenting dance to avoid the implicit resonance with halay. The political stakes of dance lie both in its form and in the contested claims of authenticity and belonging that surround it. Such strategic adoptions and refusals underscore that political legibility and cultural belonging are contingent, shifting, and never inherently fixed to specific dance movements, gestures, or regions.

#### DOCUMENTING DANCE IN PROTEST

I am a Turkish woman born in the northwest Black Sea region. My hometown is a former coal-mining area and, from the 1970s to the 1990s, was marked by progressive labor movements, miners' legendary resistance, and waves of labor migration abroad. Contrary to the prevalent idea in Turkey that all Black Sea residents know and practice the horon, those from the northwest of this region, where I was born, typically have no familiarity with this dance. My bodily engagement with these dance forms required careful observation and on-site practice during protests.

Protests taught me how to observe my surroundings carefully and move with the crowd. I was eleven years old when I traveled to Ankara to join my first political demonstration, marching alongside tens of thousands during

the funeral of assassinated journalist Uğur Mumcu, of the secular and Kemalist newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, in 1993. When a car crash in the small town of Susurluk unveiled “deep state” relationships between the parliament, police, and mafia, I was fourteen, switching the lights at home on and off every night at 9:00 p.m. as part of an unprecedented nationwide protest. My entry into left-leaning politics and feminism dates to the early 2000s, when I became part of a grassroots feminist organization as a university student in Istanbul. There, at nineteen, I learned to voice political demands in avenues and resist urban gentrification in these spaces. During protests in 2001–2002, I marched with feminists in Abide-i Hürriyet Square in the secular and historically multicultural Şişli district, because Taksim Square—the traditional location of public protests—had been closed to demonstrations. A couple of years later, Abide-i Hürriyet underwent an urban development project, changing the main protest route to the streets of Kadıköy, a central area in the Asian part of Istanbul across the Bosphorus. At twenty-four, with deep frustration, I marched toward the Kadıköy pier to protest the 2006 amendment to the already undemocratic 1991 anti-terror law (no. 3713), which broadened the definition of terrorism, criminalized minors, and authorized further limitations on gatherings in public spaces. In the years that followed, the historical neighborhood of Beyoğlu hosted many grassroots organizations and public political movements and also underwent gentrification projects that dispossessed its low-income residents, including Kurds, Roma, trans people, leftists, feminists, and LGBTI+ activists.

In the first decade of this century, the Saturday Mothers (Cumartesi Anneleri), whose children, husbands, and relatives had disappeared during the 1980 coup d'état, and Peace Mothers (Barış Anneleri), whose children, husbands, and relatives had disappeared during the conflicts between the Turkish army and the Kurdish guerrillas in the 1990s, performed their vigil every Saturday at noon at the small Galatasaray Square in Beyoğlu, next to the monumental gates of Galatasaray High School on the iconic İstiklal Avenue. Since first gathering in 1995, the Saturday Mothers have been systematically targeted, detained, and dragged off the street, and their vigil has been banned several times. Drawing on Law No. 2911 on Meetings and Demonstrations, the Istanbul governor banned protests in Galatasaray Square in 2018. Both groups of women, wounded by decades of state violence, succeeded in activating a language of peace by reframing motherhood as a form of political agency (Karaman 2016). In my thirties, resistance movements against femicides and anti-gender equality mobilizations thrived, as well as protests condemning political violence against the Kurdish opposition. A symbol of

the latter was the killing of thirty-four Kurdish villagers in the Turkish Air Force's Uludere airstrike near the Iraqi-Turkish border in 2011; and the former was prompted by the 2012 AKP-initiated anti-abortion law introduced after then-Prime Minister Erdoğan described abortion as "murder," comparing it to the Uludere atrocities that killed Kurdish villagers. The oppression did not cease, and neither did the resistance movements. Before continuing my studies abroad, I danced the halay and horon during the massive-scale urban uprising known as 2013 Istanbul Taksim Gezi Park resistance. I returned to the dance circle in the March for Justice in the summer of 2017 with a sense of gratitude and respect for those who never gave up pursuing democratic struggles.

My dissertation fieldwork in Turkey coincided with a historical turning point, as I returned to Istanbul years after the Gezi resistance to research activist mobilizations under an ongoing and repressive state of emergency that had been in place since the failed coup d'état of July 2016. An authoritarian regime was about to be consolidated—a referendum to vote on Turkey's transition to a centralized presidential system was scheduled for April 2017, followed by the election of the president in June 2018. Along with many fellow progressive activists who continued the struggle, I was saddened and angered, but I was also privileged to be away during the most traumatic times of Turkey's recent political dissent, with the bomb attacks, the coup attempt, atrocities against the Kurds as well as the escalating hate language against marginalized groups, particularly Armenians, refugees, and trans people, all of which polarized society to the extreme. While I was writing my dissertation in the United States and following daily news from Turkey, the hope and resilience that activists conveyed through their words and laughter in the recorded interviews gave me enormous courage to dare to write about and hold onto a radical reimagination of the present.

In this process, my methodology was guided by feminist ethnographers' insight that knowledge is typically incomplete, partial, and particular (Abu-Lughod 1991; Visweswaran 1994). The historical and contemporary documentation of dance in Turkey is already extremely fragmentary. Institutional archives as well as TV news clips and social media normally cover only a few seconds of danced actions—often edited format. Given that Turkish mainstream media have been significantly and visibly censored or converted into a propaganda tool, contemporary activist videographers and video-making collectives—such as Aktivist Kamera, Bülent Şık, Camera Street (Kamera Sokak), İlkey Şahin, and Kazım Kızıl—have worked to document resistance movements and democratic struggles as well as police violence and legal

corruption. Many video activists and journalists have been detained, put on trial, tortured, and imprisoned for their documentary work, their archives destroyed and confiscated. This book, and its audiovisual online component, is a fractured documentation of femme space-making that hopes to humbly contribute to these works documenting the arts in and as political action, thereby serving to critical knowledge production and history-writing. This living archive testifies to activists' unyielding contestation of authoritarianism and their demand for democratic rights and justice. It is also a testimony to the fact that dance matters in politics and life.

The book snapshots a specific moment in Turkey's contemporary history, with examples limited to what I could access at the time. It does not encompass the invaluable site interventions by professional dancers and movement artists. I must rely on the contributions of other scholars, artists, and activists to illuminate the additional dimensions of dance in public political protests in Turkey that I could not include in this research. I carried out ethnographic research in Istanbul's protest sites, activist gatherings, and dance institutions between 2014 and 2017 and conducted additional interviews, particularly in the eastern Black Sea region, in 2018 and 2019. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews with activists, folk dance teachers, folklore researchers, dance and ethnomusicology scholars, and musicians informed the book. I attended folk dance classes at six different institutions in Istanbul and practiced in a variety of locations in the eastern Black Sea region. The complexities of the choreographic process in studio settings—such as learning, disseminating, and staging folk dance—carried over into the streets in new ways. Walking alone or with an interlocutor through a protest site helped me interpret the spatial context of the dancing and the physical culture of the city, both of which influence the form, sequence, and configuration of dance and protest movements (Hammergren 1996; Certeau 1984).

The embodied memories composed of gestures, movements, songs, and other corporeal forms of transmitting knowledge, or *repertoire* (Taylor 2003), complemented archival texts and artifacts stored in institutional repositories. Collections of journals, newspapers, photographs, flyers, and posters in Istanbul's archives, such as the Istanbul Research Institute (İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü), SALT Research (SALT Araştırma), and the Istanbul Municipality Atatürk Library (İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Atatürk Kütüphanesi) showed historical continuities in dance practices, particularly those performed in public spaces. This book is also informed by the scrutiny of visual, digital, and audio archival documentation. The Filmmor Women's Cooperative (Filmmor Kadın Kooperatifi), an organization of feminist filmmakers

in Istanbul, and Women from the People's House (Halkevinden Kadınlar), a women's group from the left-leaning grassroots organization People's House in Ankara, as well as independent Women Who Film (Çekim Yapan Kadınlar) were very generous in sharing their insightful thoughts or archival footage with me.

The volatile political environment in Turkey has created fragmented and discontinuous narratives of political resistance. If the constant oscillation between the feasibility and unfeasibility of protesting in central public spaces caused by the excessive use of police violence against AKP detractors has made improvisation an essential tool for activists, it has also made improvisation central to my work as a researcher. During fieldwork carried out between November 2016 and October 2017, I participated in twenty-six political protests in Istanbul. Throughout these events, I observed and filmed folk dances and moved alongside women's groups. I marched with activists, signed petitions, joined in press statements, and participated in folk dances at protests. The uncertainties of the protest space defined my research methods. I usually met research interlocutors at protest sites and often requested to meet them at another time to talk in more depth about their dancing at protests. Some activists consented to this, while others wanted to converse on the spot. In such cases, we would move to a nearby teahouse, where we could keep an eye on the protest space and return when needed. Still others invited me to join them at a political meeting as a condition for giving an interview, thus involving me in their activist practice. In each conversation, I pointed to activist struggle as a shared common concern in my own political positionality and that of the interlocutor (Visweswaran 1994), prompting us to brainstorm and think together about the possibilities and potentials of dance in political action.

Although both men and women deploy folk dances in protests, I limited my inquiry to women+ from different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds who adhered to a range of dissident political perspectives. I conversed with members of long-standing radical left-revolutionary groups (and their contemporary continuations), progressive professional organizations, Kurdish political groups, environmental grassroots organizations, and the established political opposition parties CHP and HDP. I conferred with independent feminist, queer, and transgender activists organized in associations and collectives.

The various chapters of *Dissenting Through Dance* work to understand how dissenting women find ways to resist Turkey's authoritarian regime by carving out and creating alternative spaces in which to mobilize the public.

They do this by forming fluid and responsive peripheral assemblies in various sizes, expanding the limits of the social movement repertoire, and creatively using multiscalar spatial dynamics to establish a politically connected grassroots community. The book's chapters demonstrate how activists create flexible yet particular forms of assembly that are always in motion and ever subject to change. Each chapter is a new framing of a choreographic tactic as a tool of improvisation that provides different entry points for accessing this complex and always in-the-making history of dissent.

#### NAVIGATING THE BOOK

Chapter 1, "Precision: Choreographing the Authentic Female Folk-Dancing Body," examines horon by historicizing the relationship between the Turkish state regulation of folk dance, authenticity, and gender to demonstrate that throughout the twentieth century, folk dance has been formative to the constitution of ethnonational aesthetics and the "authentic" female body in Turkey. As a prelude to the remaining chapters' focus on contemporary women's agency in Turkey's public space and the deployment of their dancing as progressive political action, this chapter zooms in on the "hegemonic choreographic strategy of precision." To explore the precision criteria for contemporary staging and dance education, I investigated horon choreographies at different dance classes in Istanbul and offer an analysis of the technique, its regional and gendered variations, and ways of teaching.

Chapter 2, "Dispersal: Dancing Public Political Assembly at the Peripheries," focuses on how activists in Istanbul have responded to the Turkish state's oppressive strategy of dispersal, which limits, blocks, and damages central spaces of protest to prevent assembly. Drawing on Hanah Arendt's notions of "isolation" and "politics" ([1958]1966), dispersal is conceptualized as both a hegemonic strategy of the state that aims to isolate individuals and destroy their ways of coming together and also a pluralistic tactic for unsettling power and acting in concert. I call these efforts of protesters to create intersubjective action in public space "counterhegemonic tactic of dispersal." I argue that activists recast the exigent circumstances of dispersal produced by the executive, judiciary, and police to creatively reorganize themselves by forming tiny assemblies in peripheral urban spaces that might temporarily escape state surveillance. Through performances like horon and halay, they reconfigure public space, rehearsing how to relate to both one another within these spontaneous dance circles and to a larger body of protesters.

Chapter 3, “Imprecision: Choreographing Agonism into the Body Politic,” focuses on the inside of the folk-dancing circle and examines how women and LGBTI+ grassroots activists deployed horon and halay during the 2017 constitutional referendum and in other important events, like the International Women’s Day demonstration and the LGBTI+ Pride parade. In contrast to the hegemonic emphasis on precision and virtuosity in dance, these activists deliberately employed “counterhegemonic tactic of imprecision”—altering gendered movements, mixing styles, and incorporating everyday gestures—to challenge restrictive norms of precision and foster pluralistic, participatory assemblies. This choreographic tactic aligns with Mouffe’s (2000) concept of agonistic politics, promoting contestation and negotiation over unity or enmity.

Chapter 4, “Embellishment: Reclaiming the Revolutionary Body,” zooms in on the tactics of gender expression and explores how activists used another tool for improvisation that I call “embellishment” to express their intersecting subjectivities and challenge both state and mainstream leftist gender norms. By drawing on the history of folk dance in 1960s workers’ struggles and 1970s left-revolutionary movements, contemporary feminist and queer activists reclaimed dance to critique and subvert heteropatriarchal structures within leftist circles, their potential allies. Through embellishment, they reimagined public assembly, bringing femme aesthetics and body politics into dissenting spaces, and co-opted prevailing ideologies of gender and sex within and outside of these dissenting groups.

In the final chapter, “Reassembly: Reconfiguring Horon Across the Rural, Regional, and Urban Diaspora,” I examine skillful deployment of horon in protests against neoliberal developmentalist projects causing extensive ecological damage in northeast Turkey between the 1990s and the 2010s. Focusing on resistance to the Green Road highway, the Cerattepe mine, and the Kavak hydroelectric projects, the chapter analyzes how horon brought activists together across regions, from Black Sea villages to major cities like Istanbul. I argue that “reassembly,” the counterhegemonic choreographic tactic analyzed in this chapter, enabled protesters to repurpose songs, props, and movements to challenge state-corporate alliances and generate new political meanings. A detailed analysis of song lyrics shows how protesters converted traditional folk songs into political chants, while a visual analysis of call-for-action posters reveals the transregional circulation of symbols of resistance. This chapter demonstrates that tradition requires reciprocal exchanges between rural, regional, and urban contexts to effectively register as communal protest.

The coda, “Stepping Out of the Dance Circle,” extends the scope of this research and looks at the widespread 2025 demonstrations following the arrest of Istanbul’s mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu. Protesters, especially students, responded to escalating authoritarianism with acts of bodily resistance and dancing to express dissent and solidarity. Despite deep political divisions, diverse groups temporarily united in shared struggle, while femme activists challenged both state oppression and exclusionary dynamics within the protests themselves. The coda calls for further academic and artistic research into folk dance and political participation.

Taken together, the chapters of the book reveal how activist women reshaped folk dance heritage as a political tool with which to claim urban space and subvert hegemonic discourses on Turkish ethnonationalism, neoliberalism, and conventions of the female body. At the current juncture in global history, in which populations are differentially segregated, maimed, killed, and disappeared under rising waves of ultranationalism and authoritarianism and popular uprisings are increasingly mobilized and led by women activists, *Dissenting Through Dance* suggests that dance generates political efficacy by facilitating the reorganization of minoritized bodies, enabling democratic alliances to flourish in contested public spaces in Turkey and beyond.

## Precision

### Choreographing the Authentic Female Folk-Dancing Body

I am looking at a black-and-white postcard picture from the early twentieth century depicting a horon dance scene in a town square (Figure 1.1). In the photo, dozens of men form a horon circle by holding hands as they stop and pose to highlight a moment in the dance. They stand upright, close together. Their arms are stretched skyward in straight lines above their shoulders, each man's right hand placed on top of the hand next to them, supported by straight arms and a stiff torso. The dancers' clothing seems specific to this event: They wear mostly dark pants with layered clothing on top. Their light shirts and the cloths wrapped around their waists are variously patterned. Another piece of cloth, similarly varied, is wrapped around their heads, the tail end dangling over their shoulders. The performers pose in a closed circle with two musicians at the center: one plays the *davul*, hanging from his neck by a strap, and the other plays a wind instrument, a kind of flute. Different instruments correspond to the cultural and geographical context where particular horon types are performed. For example, Greek Pontian dancers are typically accompanied by the *zurna*, whereas Hemşin-style horon involves a *kaval*, a double reed pipe. Another instrument predominantly used in horon, the *kemençe*, is popular in the Greek Pontian, Turkish, and Laz communities of the Black Sea coastline.

The photograph was taken in Trabzon province in northeastern Turkey. It shows the male dancers and musicians surrounded by hundreds of audience members, also all male, who frame them on three sides. The scene was likely staged; the musicians and dancers paused to facilitate the photographer's task and the audience might have taken advantage of this moment to look at the camera, reflecting the gaze of the photographer, who is standing on an elevation to capture the scene. The postcard seems to have been taken by Turkish photographer Osman Nuri, who was active in the area in the late nineteenth century. These kinds of photographs were popular among



Figure 1.1. Postcard showing horon dancers standing upright with their arms raised. Trabzon, circa 1890–1910. Photograph by Osman Nuri (Nuri 2021).

European travelers and Orientalists and reproduced as postcards by famous publishers of the time, including Austrian publisher Max Fruchtermann and Greek publishers Theodore Stylianides and the Kakoulis Brothers. The postcard captions varied, depending on editorial choice. This postcard, with its inscription “Salut de Trébizonde Costume National,” both conveys greetings from the Ottoman city of Trabzon and informs the recipient about the customs and people of Ottoman society.

I look at the crowd from above with the photographer and just barely recognize two women sitting in a window on the second floor of a building. Their bodies frame the window as they look down toward the camera or the men dancing. Because they are located outside the center of the frame and are wearing light-colored outdoor garbs in the same shade as the window frame, I do not recognize them at first.<sup>1</sup> Their bodies are located at the border between being visible and being invisible. Depicted through their positioning in the window, they are located at the margins of public space, on the threshold between the public and the private. They seem to be the horon’s fugitive audience. With no door visible within the frame, they appear not to have access to the street. Ottoman society’s urban milieu is portrayed as a male-dominated space in which Muslim women are mere observers rather than active participants. This scene, with women at the border of visibility, contrasts sharply with the current feminist recasting of horon and other dances as a means for women to reconfigure public space and lay claims to pluralist participation in national politics.

This postcard picture has appeared on the websites and social media timelines of various cultural minority associations from the Black Sea region. Armenians, Greeks, and Laz all claim that the image represents the traditions of their respective communities. But do the dancers in the photo speak for a particular ethnicity? How and why do different ethnic communities from the Black Sea region—marginalized politically and socially in Turkey and largely neglected in the mainstream Turkish folk dance literature—claim ownership of the dance depicted in this image? What kinds of knowledge about past and present unfold through these bodies captured in a black-and-white postcard picture from the previous century?

The postcard evokes a range of questions that delve into claims of ownership and cultural authenticity but also extend to broader themes of gender, modernism, and nationalism. How does the women's marginal visibility at the windowsill in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire speak to their public roles in the early decades of the modern and secular Turkish Republic? How did the shifting social and political dynamics of this transformative period reshape urban dance cultures and the performances of femme and queer agency? How did dance practices become entangled with both the continuities and the disruptions of modernization processes in the Ottoman and Turkish states? And what kinds of gender body politics have been propagated through folk dance staging, and how does institutional dance education both reproduce and challenge these body politics today?

The Turkish Republic, established in the wake of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, attributed a central role to women in the national project. It called on women to act as patriotic subjects and positioned them as symbols of the new republic's westernized, modern, and secular society. The modern Turkish woman was imagined as an amalgamation of contradictory discourses and practices: As mothers and housewives, women were expected to raise healthy children, apply modern scientific methods of household management, and develop a companionate relationship with their husbands, all part of their task to forge modern families, seen as fundamental for societal transformation (Akşit 2005; Y. Arat 1997; Z. F. Arat 1994, 2000; Durakbaşa 1998; Göle 1997; Kandiyoti 1991, 1997; Sancar 2020; Sirman 2005; Yumul 2000). Modern women were those who actively participated in public life, "as students, citizens, professionals in the city, walking hand-in-hand with their husbands, shaking hands, dining, dancing, and playing sports with men" (Göle 1997, 51).

Popular publications of the 1920s and 1930s depicted national women's desirable qualities as laborious, modern, skillful, fit, and healthy, aligned with the changing beauty norms of this period (Durakbaşa 1998). The "new

woman” ideal of the republic highlighted the physically strong, agile, and lively woman as “beautiful” (Baltacıoğlu 1937, 32, cited in Durakbaşa 1998, 43). This corporeal ideal paved the way for the expansion of physical education and gymnastics, a field that had been part of the multiethnic and multilingual middle- and upper-class male social life in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century (M. C. Yıldız 2015), to include women. In the early twentieth century, the daughters of Turkey’s modern physical education pioneer Selim Sırrı Bey (Tarcan 1926), Selma Hanım (later Mimaroglu) and Azade Hanım (later Kent), made their careers in modern dance and therapeutic gymnastics, respectively. Selma Hanım was inspired by Isadora Duncan, who developed a groundbreaking dance style that defied the structures of classical ballet and Victorian gender norms and emphasized expressive movements that celebrated the liberation of the female body. Duncan’s barefoot dancing was drew on the drapery of ancient Greece, evoking an idealized connection to what she saw as the origins of European aesthetic values. This new dance approach influenced many, including Selma Hanım, who choreographed two modern dance pieces and performed them with her sister Azade Hanım in the late 1920s (Öztürkmen 2003). Whereas physical education became part of mixed-gender public education in Turkey, the new dance technique did not receive state support. This situation changed only in the 1960s, when graduates of the state conservatory’s ballet department personally invested in developing and disseminating modern dance (Günsür Yüceil 2007, 187–88).<sup>2</sup>

Within the framework of the modernization project, the regulation of gender and sexuality became particularly visible in public presentations of couple dancing—a domain where male and female bodies and subjectivities were prominently displayed and carefully controlled. Ballroom culture, representing Western and modern social life and its heteronormative gender norms, was practiced in the Ottoman palace and continued in the 1920s and 1930s through the republic’s official ballroom receptions (Van Dobben 2008). Women and men, dressed in gowns and tuxedos, danced Western couple dance styles such as polka, waltz, tango, and foxtrot at official receptions, whereas in social dance venues called *dansing*, more sensual and energetic Western popular dance styles such as the Charleston and swing were common (Z. Toprak 2017). These urban dance cultures reinforced modern patriarchal gender norms and cisgender roles, yet also encouraged women’s visibility in public life, serving as both a means of constraint and a space for new opportunities.

This chapter argues that despite the central role of the woman dancer and women’s prominence at the forefront of the republic’s modernization project,

women's knowledge remained at the margins of visibility in the making of the national dance (and music) repertoire. It explores this contradiction by looking at two related but distinct political processes: The first is Turkish ethnicity-centered nationalism, characterized by continuing Turkification that framed the popular entertainment genres of the multiethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual Ottoman Empire as the cultural heritage of the Turkish nation-state (Cankara 2018; B. Yıldız 2016). The second is the Ottoman and Turkish states' modernization processes, in which the bodily and emotional experiences of the female dancer were defined and propagated, enforcing a politics of heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the staged representations of national subjecthood. Dances associated with the corpus of belly dancing and resembling sexual labor and same-sex relationships, such as *köçek* and *çengi* (dancing young boys and girls) of the Ottoman society, came to be seen as immoral, unchaste, and improper because of their non-heteronormative representation of the gendered and sexualized body (Avcı 2017; Blackthorne-O'Barr 2018). While these dances were denigrated, neglected, and even banned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, signs of sexualized femininity, including movements and emotions associated with bodily "excess" and "hypervisibility," were excluded from public performances of the modern Turkish female body. I will argue that the female folk dancer was constructed as the "authentic" Turkish woman, both modern and secular and also moral, moderate, and national, in contrast to the "belly dancer"—associated with the erotic dance traditions of the Ottoman Empire and therefore seen as "immoral" and belonging to the past—and the "variety artist," whose "excessive" sensuality and flamboyant aesthetics were perceived as "low art," "unchaste," and Western imitation.

In the first decades of the republic, Turkish music researchers, linguists, bureaucrats, and state representatives compiled folk music material through field excursions. They assumed that folk songs could serve as the "purest" (*temiz*) and most authentic examples of the Turkish language (Balkılıç 2015). Thus, folk songs in different languages and dialects were either changed or deliberately ignored; and their obscene lyrics were removed (124–25). In dance, too, local dances were appropriated, categorized, and later stylized to reflect a unified national corpus. In the single-party period (1923–1946), Mustafa Kemal's CHP (known as *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası* until 1935) approached the cultural field as constitutive for nation-making. It established the People's Houses (*Halkevleri*, 1932–1950), a nationwide network of community centers that promoted the modern and secular values of the new nation-state

and contributed to the development of national arts and culture through research, performance, and production. In addition, the Village Institutes (Köy Enstitüleri, 1940–1954), government-led teacher training centers, promoted the inclusion of folk music and dance classes in primary schools. When the ruling CHP was replaced by the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti, 1946–1961) and its right-wing populist and conservative Islamist discourse in 1950, the People's Houses, and later the Village Institutes, were closed to prevent CHP-centered discourses from being advocated in the countryside. Nevertheless, folk dance continued to enjoy a nationwide popular interest through university students' organizations in the 1950s and later, in the 1960s and 1970s, through national and international folk dance competitions and festivals. By the 1980s, the national folk dance canon had been largely consolidated. Following the 1980 coup d'état, the military leadership (1980–1983) briefly closed folk dance associations and imposed nationalist policies, which resulted in further targeting of non-Turkish signs and symbols used in the dances, such as dance titles, costumes, and colors emblematic of minoritized cultures (see Cömert Ötken and Kızmaz 2014). In the 1990s and early 2000s, folk dance teaching was developed in spaces outside state folk music and dance institutions, carrying the 1970s independent folk dance groups into a new market comprised of private dance companies, cultural associations, and movement studios (see Dehmen 2003; Öztürkmen 2002). Both the commercialization of dance and the nationalist perspective on cultural and artistic heritage remain in place today.

While the first three sections of this chapter focus on the first half of the twentieth century to provide a sense of the landscape of dance choreographies in the context of the combined state projects of ethnonationalization and heteronormativization, the last section zooms in on one folk dance style and discusses how a nationalized and gendered body politics is reconstructed in contemporary folk dance classes. It visits a conservatory, folk dance association, and private studio to examine continuities and ruptures in the collection, categorization, dissemination, and staging of folk dance. In these dance education settings, I often struggled to execute movements with the precision expected from a female body. In trying to understand how precision works in folk dance teaching, I became increasingly attentive to the historical discourses and embodied practices that shape how the female folk dancing body is approached today. This led me to question precision not simply as a technical requirement, but as a choreographic and bodily construct tied to assumptions of authenticity. From this perspective, I under-

stand *precision* as a hegemonic strategy, a mode of governing both individual bodies and collective movement. It produces the image of a unified, synchronized body, often aligned with the idea of the nation, and in doing so, it can obscure or erase embodied diversity. State-sponsored cultural performances, for instance, frequently mobilize such precision to present national heritage through controlled, orderly, and harmonized movement. Here my focus is on horon, a dance whose genealogy is difficult to pin down due to the diversity of historical accounts, violent histories of ethnic and religious marginalization, regular migration and radical demographic change, and the state's constant efforts to institutionalize, canonize, and regulate folk dancing. Further complicating this are the confluence of fairly recent trends to commercialize horon as a spectacle by the tourism industry and its simultaneous repurposing by ethnic and gender minorities, leftists, and environmentalists to show resilience against assimilation, assert claims to landownership, and resist neoliberal policies.

Assumptions of cultural and historical continuity through authenticity continue to validate the various practices of folk dance education in Turkey. The discourse of authenticity on the one hand enforces separations and hierarchies between so-called "true" and "fake" cultural expressions and, on the other hand, is used to protect minoritized cultures from erasure and assimilation by proving ownership of dance, culture, and place. The precision strategy can therefore be also taken up by minority communities as a means of articulating difference. Such articulations, however, often remain tied to claims of authenticity, and thus continue to operate through processes of demarcation and separation. Because this chapter examines the relationships between actors, institutions, procedures, and choreographies, it goes beyond a focus on horon to offer a broader view of other folk dances in the making of a national folk dance canon and "authentic" female embodiments in Turkey. These analyses together show how dance has been a crucial site for both the construction of a modern Turkish female subjectivity and the cultural and corporeal production of the nation.

## EARLY FOLK MUSIC EXPEDITIONS

Research into folk dances in Turkey developed from studies and collections of folk music that were largely compiled in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Around the turn of the twentieth century, in the

context of the brutal Ottoman repression of the empire's Armenian population, Armenian immigrants to the United States recorded the songs of their homelands, contributing to the earliest field-recording compilations (B. Yıldız 2024). However, the institutionalized and extensive folk music collection efforts by state-sponsored initiatives in Turkey took place only between the 1920s and 1950s. In the 1920s, teachers at Istanbul's first modern, state music conservatory, Darûlêlhan, led folk music expeditions, during which they occasionally also collected folk dances.<sup>3</sup>

Music researchers, such as Mahmut Ragıp Gazimihâl, and professors of the Istanbul Conservatory, such as Yusuf Ziya Demircioğlu and Ferruh Arsunar, collected musical material by recording songs and notating music on the spot. These fieldwork recordings were published as books.<sup>4</sup> Other actors sometimes joined music researchers on these expeditions: The Turkish Folklore Society (Türk Halk Bilgisi Derneği, 1928–1932),<sup>5</sup> the first scholarly organization to center folklore for scientific research and analysis, was particularly interested in compiling Turkish folktales and epic stories. In cities like Trabzon, Erzurum, and Rize, the researchers collected their materials through visiting teachers' schools and talking to young teachers. They also met state bureaucrats and local volunteers from state-sponsored civil society organizations, such as Turkish Hearths (Türk Ocakları, 1912–1931),<sup>6</sup> who played a key role in helping researchers contact skilled musicians and singers. In contrast to the urban researchers, these local volunteers possessed an intimate knowledge of the cultural landscape of their respective areas and were central to the collecting of folk music and dance in the field. Researchers also visited prisons (Gazimihâl 1929, 22; Saygun 1937, 297–98), a popular ethnographic method in Europe and the United States during World War I (Scheer 2010) that they were influenced by.<sup>7</sup> In rare cases, they even watched the prison inmates perform folk dances such as horon as depicted in the research field notes (Gazimihâl 1929, 22). The cameraman Remzi Bey was invited to accompany the researchers of the 1929 Black Sea expedition to record dance for the first time (Gazimihâl 1929, 3–4).

At the end of the 1920s, the researchers used a gramophone (C. Ünlü 2016, 214–19), which provided a clearer sound and enabled longer sound recordings than the older wax cylinders of the phonograph, which were limited to two minutes of recording. The gramophone equipment was, however, both sensitive and fragile, and several disks broke on the way due to the harsh conditions of the research trip (Gazimihâl 1929; C. Ünlü 2016); films were also

damaged or disappeared over time. The precarious nature of the research was formative to the research process: Technologies of the time—passenger boats, automobiles, and recording equipment like gramophones and cameras—facilitated collection and archiving, while time limitations, accidents of fortune, and the fragility of the material defined the scope of the data collected. At the same time that they were collecting and compiling material, the researchers were defining what a Turkish nation meant and how such a nation could be scientifically and artistically researched and delineated.

Academic and cultural associations played a crucial role in “unearthing” the rich culture and traditions of the Turkish people in Anatolia and reshaping Turkey’s national cultural presentation. The Turkish nationalist ideologue Ziyaettin Fahri Fındıkoğlu suggested that the scientific documentation of “folk knowledge” would contribute to making Turkey a powerful modern nation. In a 1928 essay in folklore magazine *Halk Bilgisi Mecmuası* (Fahri 1928), he defines the need for a unified national body that shares a language, thought, and sentiment as one of the most pressing issues for the country. He advises folk scholars to use scientific methods to meticulously document Turkey’s cultural landscape in pursuit of this goal and suggests that the Turkish Folklore Society can “serve as a powerful ally to the government in the significant task of cultural representation” (143) by taking on the role of “cultural general staff” (*hars erkan-ı harbiyesi*) who prepares “ethnological and folkloric maps” (144) in which religious practices, dialects, folktales, epics, economic traditions, and customs related to law and morality are registered alongside racial, ethnic, tribal, and linguistic characteristics. The state could use these comprehensive social maps to achieve national unity by designating which village, community, or tribe was in need of an increased dosage of Turkish cultural representation (143). Different parts of Anatolia require different kinds of work, he argues, drawing attention particularly to the north and east of the country, stating that, for example, the north needs more cultural representation than the west (145, 143). In locations “where traditions contradict national education, where superstitions prevail, or where literary and artistic expressions diverge from the national language,” he sees potential places for state educational intervention and action (143).

Fahri emphasizes an institutionalized scientific investigation of culture (*hars*) to foster young Turkey’s national identification. This approach echoes Mehmet Ziya Gökalp’s conceptualization of Turkish nationalism, inspired by ethnicity-centered nationalist ideologies, positivism, and the Westerniza-

tion movement. Articulated in mainstream politics during the early republican period (Kandiyoti 1991, 33), Gökâlp's ideology aimed to reconcile Western modernity with Turkish national culture. As a Durkheimian sociologist, Gökâlp viewed society as an organic whole whose cohesion depended on shared values and collective consciousness. His central concepts of culture (*hars*) and civilization (*medeniyet*) are closely related and help us understand his nationalism. Civilization refers to the rational and institutional structures, including laws and scientific knowledge, shared across societies, such as those associated with Western or Islamic civilizations, whereas culture denotes the particularistic and emotional elements, including traditions, language, customs, and moral values. For Gökâlp, culture was the soul of the nation, and civilization its outer shell. This enabled him to advocate for a synthesis in which the Turkish nation would adopt elements of Western civilization while preserving and revitalizing its unique Turkish culture. Gökâlp formulated Turkishness as an assumed unifying bond central to the Turkish nation and the nation-state (B. Yıldız 2016, 41). His formulation of Turkish nationalism fused Western civilization with a revitalized Turkish ethnic culture, forming a distinct amalgamation of national modernity (see Gökâlp 1959). In the fields of artistic and cultural production, such as music, dance, and fashion, we see complex efforts to respond to and negotiate with this model.<sup>8</sup>

Gökâlp refers to pre-Islamic Turkish life and traditions, deemed to have originated from central Asia, to locate the authentic Turkish culture. According to his theory, equality between men and women and secular social values were rooted in this pre-Islamic Turkish culture, and residues could be found in everyday life in Anatolian rural culture. Composer Adnan Saygun's fieldwork notes and observations in the eastern Black Sea region arguably provided proof for Gökâlp's assumptions. In this expedition, Saygun mainly collected music, but he also paid special attention to those folk dances that men and women performed together. Saygun learned from his interlocutors that men and women used to dance the horon together in Rize about half a century prior, a custom that he saw was lost in the city but partially alive in its villages (Saygun 1937, 12–13). For Saygun, these dances were proof that secular relations had existed among Anatolian folk previously, but that they had been forgotten under the religious pressures of Ottoman Empire laws, which enforced gender-based segregation in urban social life.

This theory of men-women equality and secular life as the residue of the pre-Islamic Turkish culture and its social and political traditions did not necessarily



Figure 1.2. Mahmut Ragıp Gazimihâl recording folk songs among women in the field. Erzurum, 1929. Source: Gazimihâl 1929, 33.

mean that women were at the forefront in these research processes. Women, in fact, continued to be at the margins of visibility in national knowledge-making, although they were seen as vital in the cultural and corporeal production of the nation. Women were largely absent from the Istanbul Conservatory's expeditions and the research results that derived from them: None of the researchers and only a handful of the research subjects were female. The 1929 expedition's song catalog includes only one woman's name, registered at the very bottom of the list: broken-toothed (*dışı kırık*) Naciye hanım, a woman named for her lack of teeth rather than by her family cognomen, place of birth, or occupation, as male informants were (Gazimihâl 1929, 47). While male informants' identifying information connected them to a larger network of social relations, this woman exists alone and with a "lack" in her physicality in this field registry. Naciye hanım provided the researchers with two songs from Erzincan. The names of other women, including those in Erzurum whose songs were apparently recorded in the field, fail to appear on the list. Nor were other identifiers recorded that might have indicated their gender. We know of these women's contributions to the song collection only thanks to Gazimihâl's field notes and one of Remzi Bey's photographs (Figure 1.2).

Difficulties in accessing women's knowledge also led to skewed research results for European scholars. German archaeologist Felix von Luschan searched for songs in Anatolia as early as 1901 and settled ultimately for the songs of two young boys, one Christian Armenian from Gaziantep and one Muslim from Maraş (Abraham and von Hornbostel [1904] 1975, 93), whose voices are to be the closest approximation of women's voices. Hungarian musician and researcher Béla Bartók (1976), who visited Turkey in 1936, also had trouble collecting songs from women singers. Following an invitation by László Rásonyi, a leading professor at the Ankara State Conservatory, Bartók gave lectures on his research methodology and led a fieldwork expedition to southern Turkey to record musical material of the nomadic Yörük of the Taurus Mountains. Turkish musician and composer Saygun and two composition teachers from the conservatory, Necil Kazım and Ulvi Cemal, accompanied Bartók on ten days of fieldwork to learn about his methodology. Bartók was unable to gain access to Yörük women to record their songs on his phonograph. He concluded that Muslim women were too shy to speak to a foreign man, which he found a "serious handicap in collecting Turkish folk songs," adding: "If this situation does not change, then half the Turkish population will be artificially excluded from making any contribution to folk music collections!" (Bartók, 1976, 51). Women's knowledge was often visible in gender-segregated sites such as *hammams*, henna nights, and private spaces such as those where women sang lullabies to a newborn or laments after a loss. Just like the faint, barely visible glimpses of women sitting in the windowsill in the postcard (Figure 1.1), women's performance skills remained inaccessible to these male researchers.

Although folk music expeditions in the 1920s and 1930s were predominantly led by male music researchers, enthusiastic women researchers and artists also accessed and compiled folk materials, particularly those transmitted and performed by women. Kurt and Ursula Reinhard conducted music research in Anatolia in the 1950s and 1960s, confirming that religious norms and patriarchal structures remained major barriers to the public visibility of women singers in Turkey (Bartók's 1976, 264). Acknowledging Bartók's inability to access to women's voices, linguist and musicologist Ursula Reinhard undertook joint fieldwork with her husband to address this gap. Thanks to her ability to enter homes and build trust with women, the couple succeeded in recording women's musical expressions (Reinhard and Reinhard [1969] 2016). Around the same time, Romanian dancer and choreographer Euge-

nia Popescu-Judetzu conducted extensive ethnographic work across the Balkans and Anatolia. Accompanied by her husband, choreographer Gheorghe Popescu-Judetzu, she collected music, dance, and oral literature, publishing her findings in both academic and autobiographical formats (Popescu-Judetzu 2006). Unlike their male counterparts, these women researchers often relied on informal methods and personal resourcefulness to gain access to private and gender-segregated spaces and broadened the ethnographic record in creative and often unacknowledged ways.

In addition, beginning in the late Ottoman period and continuing into the early years of the republic, women in the popular music industry demonstrated enthusiasm and capacity for artistic research and created a rich, multilingual, and multicultural repertoire with vibrant performances. As I will discuss later, the early twentieth-century pioneers of *kanto*, a musical theater genre, were Armenian and Greek female performers who mostly sang in Turkish but combined different artistic genres that were popular in Istanbul's heterogeneous urban entertainment culture. Popular singers of the time, such as Roza Eskenazi, Marika Papagika, Eliz Surhantakyan, and Cemile Cevher, adopted from time to time this innovative and cross-genre quality of *kanto* and researched, compiled, and performed Anatolian folk music for urban audiences.

The life story of Eliz Surhantakyan,<sup>9</sup> who rose to national fame as Zehra Bilir and came to be known as the "Mother of the Folk Song" (*Türkü Ana*), particularly offers a revealing lens into how women of minoritarian backgrounds contributed to the construction of a Turkish folk music and dance canon in the shadow of nationalist violence and often at the cost of their assimilation into the broader project of Turkification. Surhantakyan was born in 1913 in Arapgir, a town in today's Malatya province that housed a vibrant Armenian community until the early twentieth century. She never knew her father, who was conscripted into the Ottoman army during World War I and never returned. In an effort to avoid the mass deportations and atrocities culminating in the 1915 Armenian genocide, her mother married a Turkish man and raised Eliz in this new household until she was ten, when her stepfather died (Er 2016; Sekmeç 2009).

In the early 1930s, as a young woman, she applied to the Istanbul Theater Conservatory under the leadership of Muhsin Ertuğrul and was accepted into the ballet department. She received formal dance training and performed in operettas at the city theater, collaborating with established artists. Follow-

ing her marriage, she adopted the Turkish name Zehra and her husband's surname Bilir (Şenocaklı 2002). Due to her husband's work as a road contractor, she traveled extensively across Anatolia. These journeys, particularly through the eastern provinces, provided her with the opportunity to collect folk songs, learn regional accents, and, in many cases, incorporate the corresponding dance movements. Upon returning to Istanbul, she took music lessons from prominent musician Arteki (Terziyan) Candan, learning how to transcribe the songs she had gathered. Her stage performances in the 1940s were groundbreaking in assembling, for the first time, a wide repertoire of folk songs from various regions, all rendered in Turkish—with occasional Kurdish words and exclamations. She wore handwoven vests adorned with traditional motifs and villager-style baggy pants (*şalvar*) and ornamented slippers. Her signature silk handkerchief, gracefully fluttering with the rhythm of her movements, became an emblem of her performance style (TRT Arşiv 2019). She accompanied singing with some dance movements and gestures in accordance with the lyrics of these songs, resembling *kanto* performers of those years (Er 2016, 74).

Eliz Surhantakyan was also the first folk song soloist appearing on Turkish national radio (as Zehra Bilir). While Turkish classical music instruments accompanied her during the first years of the radio program, her later broadcast featured *bağlama*, the stringed instrument most closely associated with Anatolian folk music. Her radio broadcasts and live performances strongly contributed to folk music's elevation into a celebrated national art form and led to her fame as the “mother” of Turkish folk songs. Zehra Bilir's story is waiting for further research to examine not only the substantive role of peripheralized subjects in the making of the Turkish music canon but also how women artists used their own resources and creativity to gather and present fieldwork data that confirmed and shaped the official narrative.

#### TURKISH NATIONALISM AND FOLK DANCES

The development of Turkey's national folk dance canon reflects a dynamic interplay between state-driven efforts to create a unified cultural geography and the underlying tensions of ethnic, regional, and historical complexities. National homogenization and regional securitization had been managed through the segmentation of cultural geographies and demographic control since the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ottoman periods. Ethno-demographic policies in this period imposed Turkish ethnic dominance

## BÖLGELERİ HARİTASI

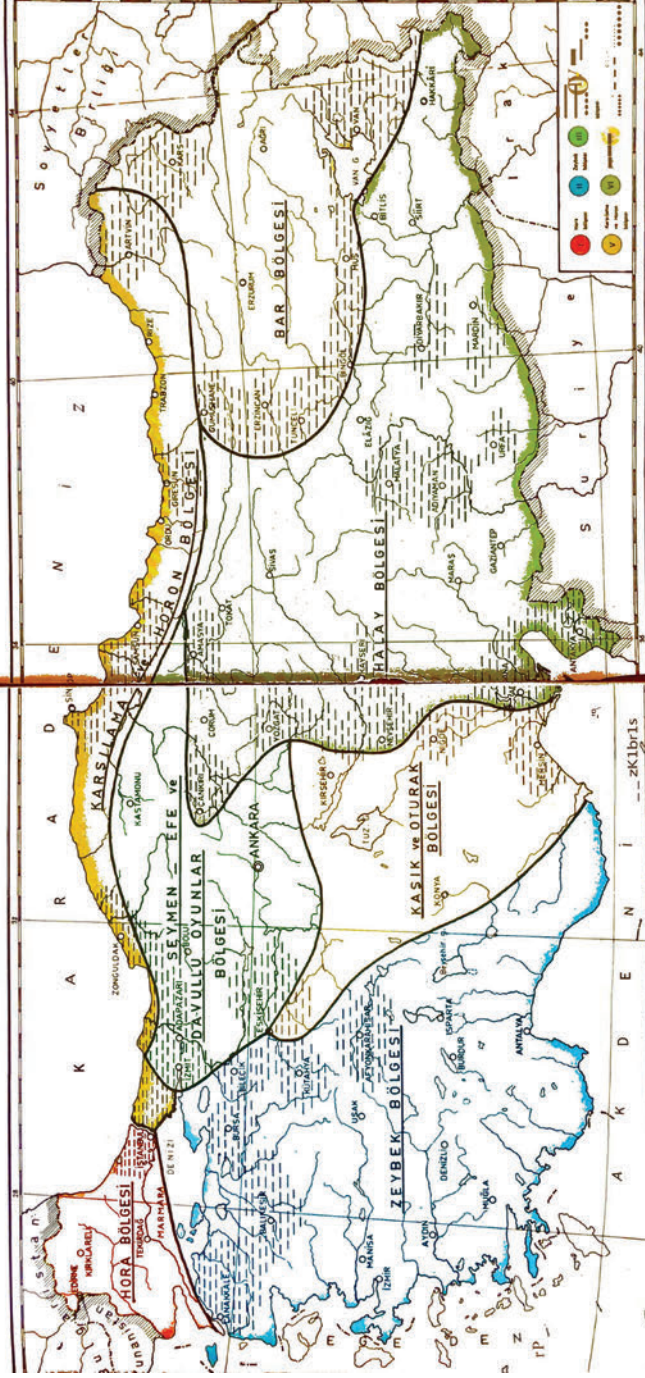


Figure 1.3. A map of Turkey based on folk dance regions. Source: Ataman 1975.

through assimilation and elimination of certain populations as well as confiscation and redistribution of wealth (B. Yıldız 2016, 43–44). The deployment of patrols in areas with a significant non-Turkish ethnic presence was part of the state's population management efforts. A historical examination of Turkey's internal demographic politics, regulated during this period through settlement laws in 1926 and 1934 and inspectorates general (Umumi Müfettişlikler, 1927–1952), reveals continual state efforts to institutionalize regional divisions to achieve compulsory assimilation (Yeğen 2009, 600). Designed to maintain state authority through authoritarian rule, inspectorates general were regional governorships appointed by the executive that held sway over all civilian, military, and judicial institutions. They were initially established in the nineteenth century and continued in the transition to the single-party period of the Turkish Republic (Koçak 2010, 27). In this later period, they enforced the process of Turkification, particularly in eastern, northeastern, and northwestern regions, which Ankara considered strategic or turbulent. Demographic division laws aimed to depopulate these strategic areas and increase the Turkish population density through settling mostly Muslim immigrants from the Balkans (Yeğen 2009, 601).

These formative decades of the republic saw a reorganization of the knowledge about Turkey's geography and regional divisions. In 1941, a group of academics, bureaucrats, state ministry representatives, and the Office of the Turkish Army's commander in chief gathered in Ankara for the First Turkish Geography Congress. For two weeks, the participants met in various commissions and subcommittees to discuss the standardization of geographical terms, the renaming of places, and the inclusion of geography education in school curricula (Ertek 2012, 12–13). Turkey's seven major regions (*mintika*) were defined as Marmara, Black Sea (Karadeniz), Aegean (Ege), Mediterranean (Akdeniz), Inner Anatolia (İç Anadolu), Eastern Anatolia (Doğu Anadolu), and Southeastern Anatolia (Güneydoğu Anadolu). Each region was further divided into subsections and in subsequent decades came to be associated with mainly one specific folk dance genre (Figure 1.3). At the same time, subsections could cross regions, and one dance could correspond to two different regions whose geographical subsections intersect. The easternmost Eastern Anatolia region, particularly its northern subsection Erzurum-Kars, came to be represented by a group dance called *bar* that is historically linked to Armenian cultural heritage. The *hora*, associated with Turkish emigrants from the Balkans (And 1976, 22), came to represent the northwestern part of

the Marmara region surrounding the Marmara Sea and reaching to Turkey's borders with Greece and Bulgaria. The *zeybek*, a solo dance, came to represent the Aegean region to the west and extended to the southwestern part of the Mediterranean region. The *kaşık havası* (spoon dance) — a peer dance performed with a pair of spoons the dancer bangs together rhythmically— came to represent a portion of Inner Anatolia, with the inclusion of a smaller area in the south. A group of chain dances generically called *halay* in Turkish and *govend* in Kurdish came to represent both the eastern and the southeastern regions located along Turkey's borders with Syria, Iran, and Iraq as well as parts of the Mediterranean and Inner Anatolia regions. And the *horon* came to represent the eastern part of the Black Sea region in the north.

These large regions are often assumed to share the same values (although in reality they are characterized by great internal diversity), with the dances representing their spatial and cultural characteristics. For instance, certain movements in the *horon*—bodily undulations and suspensions, quick jumps and quivering motions—are associated with the movements of nature found in this region's landscape—the movement of the sea and the region's native fauna as well as its rapidly shifting climate. For example, when dancers shake their shoulders and vibrate their entire body by pulling their knees back, they are often considered to be mimicking the movements of an anchovy (*hamsi*) after being caught. This mimicking is seen as a residue of ancient rituals (And 1964, 78), which is often perceived as evidence of a unifying regional history.

In her extensive research on the relationship between folk dance and nationalization in Turkey, Arzu Öztürkmen shows that during annual celebrations of the People's Houses in the capital city of Ankara in the 1940s, local dances came to be performed one after the other, creating the first versions of a folk dance repertoire (Öztürkmen 2002, 131). In some cases, dances of neighboring villages were gathered together to represent a particular town, thereby aligning with the new nation-state's "definition of locality based on geographical administrative units rather than on ethnic ones (132). After the closure of the People's Houses, a private bank, Yapı ve Kredi Bankası, pursued the tradition of annual folk dance festivals through the 1960s (Öztürkmen 1998, 204). In 1955, the bank established the Foundation for Disseminating and Reviving Folk Dances (Halk Oyunlarını Yayma ve Yaşatma Tesisi) to continue dance research, documentation, and dissemination. This institution's first Folk Dance Festival (Halk Oyunları Bayramı) took place in Istanbul's Open-Air Theater in 1955, and these festivals continued until 1969. During this

time, roughly six hundred dances were presented on stage (Baykurt 1976, 116), with hundreds more performed in regional competitions organized to select those for the national festival stage. After the fifth festival in 1961, the foundation organized the first scientific seminar on folk dance research and staging techniques (Baykurt 1996). Dancer and scholar Bedirhan Dehmen (2003) likens this process to a kind of “colonization” through folk dance, in which experts from the nations’ center traveled to the peripheries to “discover” and “collect” dances that had not yet been performed at national events (26), effectively orchestrating the construction of regional and national dance canons in a coordinated fashion.

The inclusion and exclusion of dances in the national canon has been a dynamic and ongoing process, evolving alongside shifts in the relationship between dance and nationalism, which have continually redefined which dances are deemed national (Öztürkmen 2016, 48–49). The folk dance repertoire reflects evolving definitions of national identity and changing priorities of cultural and economic discourses and policies.<sup>10</sup> The shifting incidence of and regions attributed to *bar* and *halay* dances illustrates these processes of nationalization and their ethnic, regional, and historical entanglements. In the 1920s, ethnomusicologist Mahmut Ragıp Gazimihâl observed *bar* dances in Erzurum and identified *bar* as the quintessential eastern Anatolian dance genre, capable of representing the aesthetics and customs of the nation (Gazimihâl 1930, 4). However, some of the specific styles he noted, such as *Das-ıncıors barı* (Gazimihâl 1929, 34–36, 89), are conspicuously absent from later studies, including Kasım Ülgen’s 1940 research on Erzurum *bars* (Ülgen 1944). The term *bar* itself, which means “dance” in Armenian, became increasingly contested among Turkish scholars, as it invoked a cultural heritage that had been violently erased, assimilated, or marginalized.

The systematic and institutional denial of religious minorities in Turkey has long silenced the presence of Armenian artists across literature, architecture, music, and dance. In the late nineteenth century, Armenian theater artists such as Takvor Nalyan and Hagop Güllüyan (Vartovyan), also known as Güllü Agop, were formative in shaping Turkish national theater by writing and staging operettas and plays in Turkish (Çalgıcıoğlu 2020). As discussed earlier, renowned folk singer and performer Eliz Surhantakyan’s artistic contribution and national fame as Zehra Bilir came at the cost of public disavowal of her Armenian identity. Other Armenian musicians of the twentieth century, such as Onno Tunç, Cem Karaca, Arto Tunçboyacıyan, and Udi Hrant

Kenkülyan, made foundational contributions to Turkish popular music, often while enduring discrimination and cultural erasure (B. Yıldız 2016, 2025). In some cases, they were compelled to translate Armenian songs into Turkish and present them as original compositions to avoid persecution (B. Yıldız 2018). The silence surrounding Armenian cultural heritage and its disappearance in Anatolia continues to shape our contemporary understanding of Turkish national arts.

This silence extends to the historical record and present-day performance of *bar* dance. The dance's reconfiguration in the national canon gained symbolic momentum when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself participated in a *bar* dance. During the Second Balkan Folk Dance Festival in Istanbul in 1936, Mustafa Kemal, who was born in Thessaloniki, joined the Artvin folk dance group, which won first place in the folk dance competition, and celebrated their victory by dancing the *bar*. The style of *bar* they performed was also known as *someh*, meaning "Armenian" in Georgian (Kurt Kemaloğlu 2014). After Atatürk danced it, this particular form was renamed *Ata-barı*: the *bar* of Atatürk. But the term *ata* also carries another meaning, namely "ancestor," central to Turkish cultural symbolism and the cult of ancestors (Ökten 2007, 95). Revered as both the savior of the nation and the ancestor or spiritual forefather of the Turks, Atatürk was embraced as a leader who combined sacred and profane powers (100). His participation in the *bar* lent the dance a symbolic legitimacy, imbuing it with a mythologized historical continuity and ethnonational authenticity as Turkish cultural heritage.

Although these stories of origin canonized the *bar* as authentically Turkish, it came to occupy less and less space on the official maps of dance heritage, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Halay, on the other hand, emerged as the representative genre of eastern, southeastern, and central Turkey, covering almost two-thirds of all Turkish folk dances. At the abovementioned 1961 folk dance seminar, writer Şerif Baykurt claimed that halay styles made up only 10 percent of Turkish folk dances, while the *bar* genre accounted for 20 percent (1996, 63). A decade later, however, folklorist Sadi Yaver Ataman (1975, 4) claimed that *bar* dances made up 10 percent of all Turkish folk dances and halay 30 percent.

While the sizes of dances' shares in the national whole were changing, dance names were also subject to change. Non-Turkish names were usually replaced with Turkish ones, but proper nouns were not as easy to translate. Horon is a good example: In the Greek Pontian Romeika language, horon

names are often based on three different criteria. Some take the name of the town where the style is practiced: *Tamzara*, *Seranitsa*, *Machuka*, *Kousera*, and *Togialidikon* horon styles refer to the former Pontian names of towns located in today's Trabzon province. Some are named for their pace and tempo: *omal* (plain, calm), *di-pat* (two-foot), *letsi* (slow), and *letsina* (fast) horon. Some take both the name of the town and the pace or tempo: *tik Machuka* and *omal Kars* horon. Others are named after their accompanying song lyrics or genre: *Etere* and *Patoula* horon (Öztürk 2005, 529–31). Despite the predominance of town-related proper nouns, horon styles over time were categorized according to their movement vocabulary, pace, and changing national politics. As a result, these dances were often decontextualized and recontextualized through their given names in Turkish, such as “plain horon” (*düz horon*), “comfortable horon” (*rahat horon*), “jumping tremor” (*atlama titremesi*), “half horon” (*yarım horon*), and “the nation's horon” (*millet horonu*) (Ataman 1975, 71).

The construction of Turkey's folk dance repertoire—amid rising nationalism and ethnicity-centered Turkification processes, which intensified from time to time, such as in the 1940s and 1980s—reveals how cultural performance became a stage for negotiating the boundaries of national belonging, often at the expense of minoritized subjects and their histories. If thousands of village names were changed to Turkish until the mid-1980s,<sup>11</sup> the changing dance names, alongside their symbolic associations with specific regions, complemented this effort and served to reinforce a sense of a common past. At the same time, they masked a diverse and often contested cultural heritage. The inclusion, exclusion, and transformation of dances in the national repertoire mirrored broader shifts in cultural and political priorities, with dances like *bar* and *halay* representing evolving narratives of national subjecthood, assimilation, and heritage.

*Zeybek* dance is another example of these complex dynamics between the making of a folk dance canon and national belonging. Abdurrahim Karademir (2015) explains that in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, *zeybek* groups were often regarded as local protectors or rebels who upheld justice outside formal state structures. The *zeybek* dance reflects this legacy, portraying a proud, vigilant, and self-reliant male figure—arms expanding from the armpits, knees lifting in slow, deliberate steps, and the body engaging in dramatic squats and twists. Performed solo, the dance evokes ideals of masculine autonomy and individual strength.

The dance also testifies to layered histories of race and masculinity due to the presence of African *zeybek*. Enslaved Africans brought to the Ottoman

Empire for agricultural and domestic labor remained in the Aegean region following the abolition of slavery. These individuals, often referred to as *Afro-Türkler* (Dinçer 2017), took part in male *zeybek* groups, and some *zeybek* dance styles are even claimed to have originated from them (Karademir 2015, 43). Karademir refers to these dancers as *Afro-Zeybekler*. At the same time, *zeybek* was imagined as a national dance derived from peasant cultures and performed in urban settings. Selim Sırrı Tarcan, with the support of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, made significant efforts in the 1920s to stylize and “modernize” the dance as a group performance. He also reconstructed *zeybek* as a ballroom-style couple dance, intended to represent a secular and Westernized society. His choreography was praised in an urban milieu but could not receive sustained support from the larger public (see Öztürkmen 2002).

#### THE GENDER POLITICS OF OTTOMAN AND TURKISH MODERNIZATION PROCESSES

Turkey’s national folk dance repertoire has continued to change against the backdrop of the country’s twentieth-century political, social, and cultural conditions. In this process, dances were not only nationalized through ethnic homogenization strategies such as regionalization, standardization, and canonization but also gendered and sexualized according to the hegemonic politics of hetero- and cisnormativity of the time. Dances that included isolated movements of the belly, hip rotations, torso undulations, expressive leg extensions, and shimmies were seen as resembling the erotic dance traditions of the Ottoman Empire or as expressions of female sexuality and femme desire and were pushed to the margins of the national dance canon. Some of these dances, such as belly dance, regained their place in the national canon in the 1980s, but others eventually disappeared.

What some writers in the 1960s called “spoon dances” (*kaşık oyunları*) were considered related to Ottoman belly dance and therefore not appropriate for representing the national culture. Composer Bülent Tarcan (1996) argues that spoon dances were performed chiefly by cross-dressing men who seductively move their bellies and necks and must have arrived in Anatolia from “the south,” because, he claims, this genre does not have the nobility of other genres danced in Turkey (69). Tarcan could be referring to *köçekler*, cross-dressed male belly dancers who enjoyed popularity across Ottoman society from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. In miniature paintings

of Ottoman palace festivals, men can be seen dancing in groups of three or four and are often depicted as holding short wooden spoon-like instruments called *çarpara* (And 1976, 139). Appearing in both elite and everyday settings, they performed at courtly events, public celebrations, and weddings. However, in 1856/1857, the Ottoman government banned *köçek* dancers due to their association with social disorder and religious impropriety (Avcı 2017, 762). Ethnomusicologist Mustafa Avcı (2017) demonstrates how this suppression of *köçekler* aligned with broader Ottoman modernization efforts and the growing emphasis on a heteronormative ethos that viewed *köçek* performances with shame. This shift, influenced by Western gender norms, marginalized a previously hegemonic “culture of beloveds,” a literary and aesthetic tradition in which the beloved is an idealized emotional, erotic, and spiritual figure that is commonly identified as male, and relegated *köçekler*, once celebrated across social strata, to the status of a source of embarrassment (Avcı 2017, 763).

In the Ottoman Empire, dance forms like *köçek* and *çengi* were central expressions in the gender-segregated, homosocial spaces of society. *Çengiler* refined their dance into a sophisticated courtly art form, entertaining the Ottoman palace as early as the fifteenth century and could be both male and female (Avcı 2015, 34, cited in Blackthorne-O’Barr 2018, 79; also see Gazimihâl 1991, 119). In the sixteenth and over the seventeenth century, *çengi* performances gradually moved from courtly spaces to urban coffeehouses, where dance intersected with other forms of theater, such as shadow theater (*karagöz*) and the improvisational storytelling art of *meddahlık*. Although European visitors interpreted *çengi* and *köçek* dancers’ movements as feminine, in the early modern Ottoman context these performers invoked desire in line with the social norms of the time rather than by adhering to European gendered perceptions (Van Dobben 2008, 50; Blackthorne-O’Barr 2018, 52). These dance forms, often associated with homoerotic desire, thrived until the nineteenth century but were then banned or lost popularity.

The nineteenth century was marked by Tanzimat (reorganization) (1839–1876), a turning point in Ottoman social and institutional modernization and Westernization caused by increasing interaction with Europe (with more trade, travelers, embassies, and missionaries coming to the empire, and Ottoman students being sent to Europe). Ottoman elites adopted Western military and modern police forces as well as scientific and cultural theories and encouraged women’s integration into the workforce by establishing girls’

vocational schools in 1865. In this period, “the ‘woman question’ appeared on the Ottoman political agenda, never to leave it again” (Kandiyoti 1991, 23).

For the elites of the early Turkish Republic, men and women interacting and dancing in public was an important symbol of the new gender roles and the secular lifestyles and modernist ideals of the new nation-state. Couple dance forms also resonated with broader political and social transformation of the family, as the extended family structure gave way to the idealized dominance of the conjugal family in this period (Sirman 2005). Held up in stark contrast to their presumed invisibility in Ottoman society, women’s visibility in public space and on stage was appreciated as a mark of the Kemalist revolution’s success.

But in the following decades, mostly male scholars and critics continued to fiercely debate women’s increasing participation in folk dance staging, the kind of dances they performed, and the nature of their dancing corporeality—their ways of demonstrating gracefulness, their bodily and emotional expressions, and their use of the legs, hips, and belly.<sup>12</sup> In his essay assessing the 1961 national folk dance festival organized by the Yapı ve Kredi Bankası in Istanbul, Gazimihâl (1961) seems proud to observe that 30 percent of the dancers on stage were women—the highest ratio of women dancers so far in comparison to the previous four festivals (Öztür 2009, 43). He adds with enthusiasm,

Women used to dance behind closed doors, so men could rarely watch them. They were allowed to dance among their relatives. But now they are right in front of us. Such honor and felicity. Many thanks to our girls [*sağ olsun kızlarımız*]. (1961, 2474)

Gazimihâl’s statement supported the idea that the republic and its revolutions rescued women from the closed, dark rooms of the past, enabling them to defy Islamist norms so publicly. By referring to these women as “our girls”—that is to say, the girls of the nation—he invokes a specific discourse of female subjectivity that was foundational to the republic: the new modern woman of the nation who participates in and reproduces the nationalist transformation at home and in social life. Nationalist sentiments and patriotism, on the rise in school curricula since the last decades of the Ottoman Empire (Z. F. Arat 2000), eventually culminated in the ideal of the “girl of the republic” (*cumhuriyet kızı*) (Akşit 2005, 19).

Ottoman women struggled for their suffrage, demanding equal rights and rebelling against male dominance. Muslim, Armenian, Greek, Assyrian,

Arab, and Jewish feminists of the nineteenth century fought for women's rights in their religious and ethnic communities and organized women, published journals and newspapers, and wrote numerous novels, poetry collections, and theater plays (Çakır 1994; Ekmekçioğlu and Bilal 2006). In the early 1930s, women were granted the right to vote in the Turkish Republic, first in local elections and then, in 1934, at the national level (Kandiyoti 1991). Yet the state representatives saw women's struggle for liberation as unnecessary after they obtained suffrage. Plans to establish the Women's People's Party were dismissed, and the Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadınlar Birliği), active from 1924 to 1935, was shut down, effectively sidelining women's activism and trivializing their struggles. The state appropriation of feminism through granted rights silenced and infantilized women's political endeavors (Adak 2007).

An important site for the regulation and transformation of women's bodies and subjectivities were the Girls' Institutes (Kız Enstitüleri), started in the 1928–1929 academic year to provide public education for young women with the goal of shaping modern and national female citizens of the republic (Akşit 2005, 17). These institutions emerged from the reorganization of girls' vocational schools (Kız Sanayi Mektepleri) as part of nineteenth-century Ottoman modernization efforts to develop skilled labor, particularly in textiles and tailoring (Z. F. Arat 2000). At the Girls' Institutes, young women were instead taught practical home-management skills based on modern science and Taylorist production methods and were encouraged to apply their knowledge in home economics, sewing, fashion, and cooking to transform the household (Akşit 2005; Navaro-Yaşın 2000). Graduates could become professionals, though many returned to the home to apply their training as modern housewives, competent mothers, and comrades of men; their main contribution to the development and transformation of the country was seen as being in the domestic sphere (Z. F. Arat 2000, 175). Thus, while women's participation in social and economic life was deemed essential for societal development and transformation, their primary role continued to be framed within the home, with motherhood emphasized as their most significant function (Z. F. Arat 2000; see also Bayraktar 2014). The Muslim middle class, including bureaucrats and soldiers, particularly favored the Girls' Institutes for educating their daughters (R. E. Altınay 2013, 116). These institutes became key sites for the cultivation and dissemination of nationalist politics (Akşit 2005, 19) and were also deployed to assimilate minorities into the Turkish nation. For example, in southeastern Turkey they aimed at transforming Kurdish society as part of the nation-building project. Kurdish women were specifically targeted, their

bodies stripped of cultural markers of Kurdishness in an effort to reconstitute them as Turkish citizens (R. E. Altınay 2012, 90–91).

The new moral discourse in the early twentieth century normalized “women’s and men’s ability to control their sexuality” (Durakbaşa 1998, 46). Nevertheless, since the “repression of sexuality, faith in professionalism (or education) and respect for the community over the individual demarcate women’s space in the republican project of modernity” (Y. Arat 1997, 105), sexualized femininity was particularly targeted. An example of it was girls’ and young women’s school uniforms and strict clothing regulations, which were to hide perceived signs of femininity—school outfits sometimes even included hats that resembled those of military officers (Z. F. Arat 2000, 169).<sup>13</sup>

Sexual control was also related to the infantilization of women as “girls of the nation.” Hülya Adak examines Turkish female writers’ autobiographical works in the 1920s and 1930s and concludes that they used certain techniques of self-infantilization as “girls,” which she describes as an “act of internalizing childhood as a perpetual state of womanhood” (2007, 32). These women writers centralize men in national history and state-making and silence themselves by casting their roles as witnesses rather than agents. Their self-presentations are “infantilized, belittled, passivized” and “subjected them to paternal authority of the state leader” (46). The symbolic father of the nation, Atatürk (Durakbaşa 1998, 47; Ökten 2007), had in fact personally adopted several girls and championed their education, even encouraging their participation in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as military aviation (Z. F. Arat 2000, 177).

When in 1961, Gazimihâl commended the “girls” for appearing on stage in such large numbers, he was referring to these processes of modernization and nationalization, which presented folk-dancing women as symbols of the secular republic and proof of the nation’s break with its Ottoman past. However, here the criteria were not only about the physical visibility of women, but also about *how* they were seen in public space, which was as significant. These latter forms of visibility validated or negotiated with the patriarchal notions of “girlhood.” In this context, I argue, the female folk dancer was constituted through certain corporeal strategies demonstrating morality and chastity of the modern and national female citizen, the girl of the republic. This hegemonic definition of the female folk dancer was constructed through its supposed opposite: the flamboyant aesthetics and elaborate gestures found in the Ottoman-era belly dance traditions and associated with feminine excessiveness.

Excess, embellishment, and diligent movements of the hips, torso, and

belly continued to create heated debates among state institutions, bureaucrats, and critics after the mid-twentieth century. In 1971, the official state journal *Halkevleri Dergisi* (People's Houses) announced that it was advisable that dances that put the center of gravity in the belly ("siklet merkezini göbeğe veren danslar") and those with sexually suggestive movements, like *köçek*, should not be disseminated through the Houses (Halkevleri 1971, 12). A decade after the journal's advice, however, the State Folk Dance Ensemble (Devlet Halk Dansları Topluluğu), established in 1975 to elevate the professionalism of folk dance performances, became the first state institution to include belly dancing in its popular repertoire. It presented regional dances in suite compositions (Shay 2002) and utilized Igor Moiseyev's staging techniques, combining ballet training with folk dance vocabulary and modeling the next generation of folk dance staging in the post-1980s. It was also at the center of a maelstrom of criticism, some concerning the ensemble's highly stylized choreographic approach and others regarding the content and representation. One prominent critique of the ensemble's execution of belly dance adaptations came from Baykurt (1995), who accused the group of reviving Ottoman palace culture to appeal to Western Orientalists (146). The targeted piece was Turkish ballet dancer and choreographer Duygu Aykal's 1983 *çiftetelli* choreography. While Baykurt praised the ensemble's innovative use of technology and staging techniques, which he saw as introducing Western innovations to the local Turkish stage, he strongly objected to the choreography and harshly criticized the ensemble's representation of Turkish women:

Instead of our women's dances, which are aesthetic, humorous, and fragrantly redolent of Anadolu and Rumeli, the *çiftetelli* movements, about which little can be said as to what they are or where they come from, are performed and staged like a *kanto* on a shabby theater stage, making us think and feel strange . . . [It is] unthinkable that Anadolu women and girls should dance the *çiftetelli*, so full of hip-rotating movements. (Baykurt 1995, 145)

*Çiftetelli* is a belly dance form seen as derived from the Ottoman *çengi-köçek* erotic dance (Girgin 2023, 101) that inspired *kanto* in the late nineteenth century. In the early modern Ottoman era, *çiftetelli* was associated with Romani and Jewish dancers and also popular among Greeks (*tsiftetelli*) (Blackthorne-O'Barr 2018, 25). In the second half of the twentieth century, many considered the movements of the waist, horizontal hip swaying, shoulder shimmying, and torso undulations that characterized belly dancing and *çiftetelli* to be obscene, unchaste, and improper representations of the

national female body (Kurtiřođlu 2014, 112–14). Gonca Girgin argues that until the 1980s, *çiftetelli* and belly dance constructed a “femme fatal” representation of the dancing female body in opposition to the national one (2023, 109). This binary corporeal construction, which served to regulate and discipline women’s movements, has remained influential.

In the years following the ensemble’s 1983 performance, *çiftetelli* was refashioned as a folk dance style, shedding its improvisational structure and feminine-associated movement qualities and decentralizing the hip and belly until they were integrated into the full body moving in unison. These interventions eventually reduced the dance to simple upper-body movements, with the arms raised upward by bending the elbows downward, and erased the lower body undulations altogether (Kurtiřođlu 2014, 113). The dance is now performed with a set choreography for couples in lieu of an improvised solo.

The Othering and subsequent disciplining of *çiftetelli* as the opposite of the national ideal of folk dance is indicative of recurrent procedures in the making of the national folk dance repertoire. Emphasizing women’s legs, hips, and belly and dancing sensuously were considered “improper” and “immoral” behaviors in folk dance execution even before the State Folk Dance Ensemble’s *çiftetelli* choreography. İhsan Cořkun’s (1963) article “Halk Oyun-larımıza Kıymalım” (Let’s not sacrifice our folk dances) complains about women folk dancers at an event organized on April 21, 1963, by the Federation of Turkish Folk Dances and Folk Songs (Türk Halk Oyunları ve Halk Türküleri Federasyonu) in Ankara’s Grand Theater (Büyük Sinema). He claims that women folk dancers played with and let their skirts flutter; shouted too much and too loudly during *Erzurum bar* dances and performed them improperly; lifted their legs too forcefully and too high, like in ballet; and hurled their skirts like “variety artists.” He adds that he, like other audience members, felt ashamed. They all came to watch the performance to find a night of rest and emotion amid the harmony of different music, dances, and colors, which unfortunately did not happen (1963, 3238). Cořkun sought to transfer his own shame to the dancers on stage, it seems, and indeed, shame was often mobilized to regulate gender through the dancing body. But the repeated attempts by critics and officials to control performing women’s movements signal that women were actively negotiating the heteropatriarchal body politics that aimed to shape their public visibility.

Cořkun’s “variety artists” could refer to Western dancers in European traveling performance troops popular in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Istanbul, or, as we saw in Baykurt’s critique of the State Folk Dance Ensemble, *kanto* dancers from the same period. Using some staging tech-

niques of French variety theater, *kanto*, a Turkish-language musical theater and dance genre, appeared in Istanbul in the early 1880s (Blackthorne-O'Barr 2018, iv). The term *kanto* derives from the Italian *canto* (song) or *cantare* (to sing), reflecting its connection to Italian comedy troupes and operetta performers who frequented Istanbul's *café chantants* (20). Musical instruments used in *kanto* performance, such as the trumpet, trombone, clarinet, violin, and contrabass, were European. However, *kanto* was not a mere adaptation of European cabaret or popular music; it represented an urban youth subculture shaped by the city's multilingual and multiethnic fabric and was rooted in earlier performance traditions (iv). *Kanto* dancers' extravagant outfits—colorful and low-cut, heavily fringed dresses, shimmering belts, accessories, and distinctive makeup styles (Özinal Öztekin 2020, 10–11, 13)—complemented their performance of an “overly theatrical and flamboyant eroticism” (Blackthorne-O'Barr 2018, 17). While *kanto* dancers' hip accentuations, shoulder shakes, belly undulations, and neck and head swings referenced Ottoman erotic dance traditions, their quick footwork, twists, and skip steps resembled Western popular dances of the time, such as swing (16–17). From the 1880s to 1935, *kanto* flourished in the coffeehouses of Direklerarası, a lively multicultural entertainment district in Istanbul that hosted several small “shabby” theaters, as Baykurt defines them in his abovementioned critique (1995, 145), and later in the European-style music halls of the Galata district (Beşiroğlu 2007; Tunç Yaşar 2023). Similar to *çengi* dancers, who acted between scenes of *orta oyunu* comic theater in the eighteenth-century coffeehouses, *kantocu* women performed in *tuluat* theater, an improvisational genre rooted in Ottoman satirical urban theater, to introduce the play or in between acts. Acclaimed *kanto* artists were Armenian and Greek in the early period, with performers like Peruz Terzakyan, Şamram Kelliciyan, Küçük Virjin, Aramık Hanım, Amelya Özcan, and Mari Ferha becoming celebrities in Istanbul's popular culture.

Scholars argue that the emergence of *kanto* reflected broader shifts in Ottoman sexuality and performance culture as well as the changing role of women in popular culture (Beşiroğlu 2007; Blackthorne-O'Barr 2018). Homoerotic performances associated with *köçek* dancers were increasingly censored or replaced by performances of female dancers—whereas women dressed in male military costumes and performing in the palace harem were uncontroversial (Beşiroğlu 2007, 10). Although female *kanto* performers could play male roles (Blackthorne-O'Barr 2018, 101), they were mostly seen in extravagant costumes, interacting flirtatiously with majority-male audiences

and performing a theatrical eroticism that appealed to both upper- and lower-class spectators. Eric Blackthorne-O'Barr (2018, 105) sees these developments in *kanto* as an indication of a shift toward performances of acceptable heterosexual desire. Even though *kanto* dancers marked a continuum of Ottoman erotic dance, they also represented a significant shift toward the heteronormalization of the Turkish state and society (106).

This shift toward heteronormativity as a governmental discourse progressed together with a process of nationalization. The decline of *kanto* in the mid-1930s was aligned with the intensification of nationalist policies between the 1940s and 1960s and their impacts on the arts. While state elites dismissed *kanto* as an “alafranga entertainment” (7) lacking artistic merit, it was ultimately brought down by the escalating violence and increasing discrimination against Turkey’s remaining non-Muslim citizens and the resulting large-scale migration. In the 1960s, Turkish artists such as Nurhan Damcıoğlu, Seyfi Dursunoğlu, and Ayben Erman revived *kanto*, but it never recovered its lost popularity.

Femme and queer embodiments expressed through dances associated with belly dance traditions, such as *çengi*, *köçek*, *kanto*, and *çiftetelli*, stood in contrast to the gendered body politics of the staged folk dance. I argue, the body of the “authentic” female folk dancer became the national Other to both the belly dancer, associated with the Ottoman past and its forms of sociality, and the “variety artist” or a *kanto* performer, characterized by the Western low art entertainment culture. The revelation of “excessive” emotions, such as “unconfined” passion and enthusiasm (Eyüboğlu 1967, 88–93), was disparaged as representing the childlike, improper, and immoral attitudes generally attributed to women. Physical training and bodily control, on the other hand, were seen as signs of health, modernity, and civilized maturity (see Tarcan 1932; Tevfik 1998; M. C. Yıldız 2015). The variety artist, *kanto* dancer, or belly dancer, performing an aesthetics of excess, was neither moral nor mature. As solo performers already in the twentieth century who danced in an improvisational style, they symbolized an undesirable female independence and sexual liberation. In contrast, the folk-dancing woman, often seen in groups, mastered delivering the correct emotions at the right time and in the right place. Her public visibility, which implies women’s freedom in the secular and modern republic, remained constrained to a limited form of liberation. Full control over her body and emotions, combined with the repression of “inappropriate” displays of passion and sensuality, was required to cultivate publicly acceptable emotions such as *neşe* (cheerfulness) (Halkev-

leri 1971, 12). Unlike the deliberate sensuousness of the solo performer, a folk dancer's moderate cheerfulness was grounded in collective movement.

By demanding that women regulate their desires, enthusiasm, and joy, the body of the female folk dancer was disciplined to reflect the ideals of modern national womanhood. Women's visibility (their lively and artistic visibility as well as public political roles) was regulated through heteropatriarchal codes of chastity, morality, respectability, and honor and practiced through the skillful cultivation of the body. As opposed to the performances of excess, eroticism, and desire, which were not only stigmatized as shameful and immoral, but also ethnicized, the female folk dancer was imagined as moral, modest, and national. Women's bodies in dance and in public space have continued to be of central importance in the post-1980 period, and this praxis is even transmitted to today's folk dance education.

#### THE "PRECISION STRATEGY" IN THE CONTEMPORARY STAGING OF AUTHENTICITY

What are the contemporary reflections of these discussions on the nationalized and gendered body of the female folk dancer? How are these dance histories and discourses confirmed and challenged in folk dance education today? In the following pages, I will zoom in on one folk dance, horon, to discuss gender body politics as they are in dialogue with notions of authenticity and forms of dissemination. In 2017, I frequented the horon classes of three male teachers who worked at a conservatory-type dance school, a private studio, and a cultural association in Istanbul. Among those teachers, Şenol Şentürk claims to continue the criteria set by his father, Cavit Şentürk, a retired university instructor of the Istanbul Technical University State Conservatory and pioneer dancer who developed horon as a stage choreography representing Turkey's Black Sea region in the 1960s and the 1970s. Şenol Şentürk applies his father's horon technique and compositions in his private classes at school gymnasiums and sports clubs in the suburbs of Istanbul. He prepares his students for stage and folk dance competitions. In these large gymnasiums, the participants spread out to form several smaller groups divided according to experience: some made up exclusively of men, some exclusively of women, and mixed groups of male and female dancers are usually composed of newcomers. As the groups shift, unite, and separate continuously, Şentürk walks around with his live *kemençe* musicians and dances with the group members to point out problems and demonstrate ways to develop.

In these classes, women's chests are typically bent slightly forward, whereas men keep an upright position facing forward and out. Women's arms are raised only up to the chest level. The precise execution of certain movements is fundamental for the correct styling. On a couple of occasions, I am urged to keep my hips straight, since hip swaying during the footwork is found to be unserious and insouciant. Women are expected to keep their hips in line with the body. Moreover, the assumed limitations of the female body in performing high jumps, torso swaying, and deep squats legitimize the gendered and sexualized performance of the horon as part of an "authentic" execution of the dance technique.

In contrast, whenever I participate in the horon classes of another teacher, Aclan Sezer Genç—who runs a private studio, House of Horon (Horonevi), in the central and secular Kadıköy area of Istanbul—I revel in the chance to learn and perform all gestures and movements forbidden to women in Şentürk's classes, such as beginning the dance with a slowly swaying torso, where all dancers' arms are slowly and monumentally raised above the chest (*horon kurma*, or forming horon). Even so, I am not allowed to perform with advanced dancers for a long time. I first have to prove that I can dance so well that I can express the dance's assumed authentic feeling. Only after countless reiterations of the movement sequence do I learn how to sway my upper body at the same time as stepping forward, so that it looks "natural," by which is meant that I look like a male dancer from a Black Sea village.

Genç approaches horon more as a form of collective therapy and a community healing practice than as a staged product. In his teaching, a large mirror hangs in the studio, enabling people to see and correct themselves while lined up. The studio has become home to many dance enthusiasts over the years, who socialize through various activities, excursions, and stage performances outside the classroom, creating a community around a specific horon technique that Genç himself has standardized for teaching and staging purposes.<sup>14</sup>

My third teacher, Şaban Altay, teaches at Hemşin cultural association HADİG, at the time located in a small apartment in Kadıköy. While learning and developing their horon skills in weekly classes, the community members gather and socialize at the association. Altay approaches horon as a symbol of the resilience of an oppressed culture against the repression of a hegemonic one; as such, he teaches at the association voluntarily, outside his day job. The apartment has several small rooms, and the gathering area is not very spacious. Even so, numerous activities typically occur simultaneously: Some people discuss the publication of the association's twice-yearly

journal, *Gor*, meaning “collective work” in Hemşin. Others read literature or knit as they watch those learning horon. Music is usually not played during the class. Instead, Altay sings the dance cues. He gives commands to execute short movement sets, such as “Right, left, together!” indicating the right and left hand coming together to clap to the rhythm of the music. While these commands become decipherable only in time, each teacher creates his own set of standards and vocabulary based on his experience, teaching methods, and horon tradition. A rigid discipline is not applied in Altay’s dance class, where the students are most often friends or relatives of varying ages, flexibility, practice level, and patience. While men and women usually perform the same movements, those who come to learn the dance prioritize enjoyment over competition. At any given moment, dancers chat over, have fun with, or refuse what Altay is teaching.

In these settings, horon teachers typically perform a count, in which a number refers to a specific movement. In Şentürk’s class, we learn the ten-count horon: the right foot bounces as the upper leg is pulled back from the knee for two counts and the left foot bounces in the same way for another two counts; then the right foot taps the ground and the left foot lifts and moves forward for counts five and six until it too steps forward at count seven; the right foot steps next to the left at count eight; the right foot goes forward at count nine; and the left foot moves next to it at count ten. This movement cycle repeats, and the sequence is enriched with individual variations. During the footwork, the arms move together by going up and down in straight lines and by making forward and backward rowing movements. In this class, one of teacher’s assistants approaches me during the break to ask how I learned the dance.

TEACHER’S ASSISTANT: Have you ever worked with this person as your horon teacher?

ME: Hmm . . . yeah. How did you know that?

TEACHER’S ASSISTANT: I knew it!

ME: Did I take a wrong step?

TEACHER’S ASSISTANT: At count number nine, you stepped like a Laz!

Lazness is expressed not only as a historical, linguistic, and cultural identification but also as a discursive category. The term “Laz” has been colloquially used in Turkish as a form of denigration (Meeker 1971), to ridicule, or within a framework that represents the Laz people as agents of “national entertainment” (Taşkın 2016, 192). In the national discourse, the name of the

ethnic group has come to signify all people from the Black Sea region. Those targeted by this discourse have rather used the term *Karadenizli* (Black Sea Turk) (Meeker 1971, 322) as a regional classification name in lieu of an ethnic category marked by denigration and an alleged “lack” of Turkishness, with the regional identity emphasizing “indistinction” as proof of belonging to the nation. Although all teachers hail from the eastern Black Sea region, they might use the term “Laz” to create distinctions among themselves and emphasize hierarchies according to their proximity to the ethnonational category of Turkishness.

The assistant’s comments draw my attention to how I executed the steps: According to him, to correctly dance like a Turk, I should have stepped forward at count nine and executed a bigger instead of a smaller step, as he implies a Laz would do. “Count nine” of this horon is apparently an important corporeal sign, displaying both one’s ethnic identity and one’s political engagement with Turkish citizenship. Yet when I perform this forward step in Genç’s studio class, he criticizes me for not dancing like a woman: according to him, women are usually expected to perform smaller steps and take a backward step at count nine. I try to adjust my steps and styling but am unable to satisfy both these male teachers, given their opposed interpretations of what constitutes “proper” technique for a Turkish female body dancing the horon.

In Altay’s horon class, I perform my forward step at count nine, and he becomes frustrated with me, (half-jokingly) complaining that even though I have attended several dance classes in town, I have obviously not been able to learn the “real” horon. His discomfort stems from the fact that I do not take a parallel step at count nine. He claims that the horon should be danced using small, modest steps, which “naturally” motivate the dancer to take a parallel step at count nine and move only slightly back at count ten. Whereas the other two teachers execute a forward rowing gesture with their arms at count nine, he specifies that my arms should have gone back to prepare the body for the next move forward at count ten.

In addition to specifying precise steps and arm movements, all three teachers teach specific gestures and attitudes for the horon, claiming that theirs is the most authentic form. The authentic dance is identical to the horon elders perform in “the village.”<sup>15</sup> To validate his claims, each gives examples of how the villagers dance. Yet each teacher creates his own particular set of validity norms for choreographic structure and movement execution, based on his own particular vision of “the past” and experience of “the rural.” To demonstrate respect for and proper representation of this cultural tradition, I am told to execute my steps just like my teachers. Yet which horon

should I dance to display my “authenticity”? Which steps, stylings, and arm movements make the dance an authentic representation of Black Sea culture, particularly when no homogeneous regional culture or tradition can be agreed on, as when the teacher’s assistant differentiates between Turk and Laz steps? Although I rehearse before attending each class, I cannot escape critique: The great diversity within horon itself makes attaining uniformity impossible.

The presentation of authenticity in folk dance staging became a central question in the 1970s, a period of widespread social upheavals, coups d’état, and increasing dissent and repression, and continued to be so in the 1980s, under conditions of globalization and Turkey’s economic liberalization. One main concern of dance institutions in this period was how to keep the authentic value of the dances while diversifying their staging in a growing global cultural market. Since the 1960s, Turkish folk dance troupes had contributed to foreign diplomacy through their representation of the Turkish state at international events. For example, folk dancers performed in 1965 and 1966 in European countries of Turkish labor migration like Belgium and Germany (Yalçın 1972, 29). At a 1967 UNICEF gala performance in Paris, Turkish folk dancers appeared alongside world celebrities such as Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor, and Ravi Shankar (*Folklor* 1969–70, 41). In 1969, the Turkish Folklore Association (Türk Folklor Kurumu, est. 1964) won first place at the International Carthage Folk Dance Festival (*Folklor* 1969, 32). These international events increased attention to the complex relationship between folk dance staging and authenticity claims.

The popular folk dance competitions also contributed to the discussion about proper ways of staging. A decade after the 1954 folk dance competition organized by the Yapı ve Kredi Bankası, the state-owned Türkiye Ticaret Bankası (Turkish Trade Bank) organized national folk dance competitions among elementary schools, and in the 1970s, *Milliyet* daily newspaper initiated folk-dancing contests among high schools (Öztürkmen 1998, 247). In this period, several state ministries, including the Ministry of Tourism and Promotion, the Ministry of National Education, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, also organized folk dance competitions (Kurt 2017, 41). These competitions are seen as constitutive of today’s folk dance education and stage practice (Özbilgin 2012). Baykurt claims that the intensive period of festivals and competitions required the large-scale movement of stage arrangements and the interpretation of existing choreographies, which created chaos, leading folk dances to “lose” their meanings (1995, 142). In the 1980s, a period marked by the coup d’état and military rule, this presumably fragile existence

of authenticity led to a series of discussions on preventing dances from losing their “essence,” while dancers and dance educators survived precariously in the coup’s shadow. In 2001, the Turkish Folk Dance Federation was established to organize, centralize, and regulate dance competitions. Through its competition categories, it encouraged choreographers to either keep existing values of “authenticity” or fully innovate.

As mentioned, the establishment of the State Folk Dance Ensemble in 1975 introduced new dances and stage aesthetics. The staging techniques and innovative movement styles of Soviet Union artists, such as Olga Skavron’s choreographies and Moiseyev’s aesthetic principles, based on highly stylized folk dance choreographies deployed by a movement chorus in precise synchronization (Kurt 2013, 19), were found particularly useful for elevating the artistic value of folk dances (Ataman 1984, 27–28). Following its performances broadcast on the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, the State Folk Dance Ensemble inspired other folk dance groups in the 1980s and 1990s. Their use of precision as the governing strategy of choral movement has been extensively applied in choreographies of private dance companies such as Anadolu Ateşi (Fire of Anatolia), founded in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the presentation of the State Folk Dance Ensemble choreographies, “virtuosity, uniformity, reinforced movements, mises-en-scène open to the audience, linear compositions” (Kurt 2013, 19) were achieved through highly stylized and synchronized movement compositions, highlighting precision at bodily and choreographic levels. Anthony Shay argues that standardized choreographies and staging techniques of state folk dance companies often create alternative realities on stage: Their presentations of danced cultures can starkly contrast with the historical or ongoing violence against these cultures (and gendered bodies, I would add) (1999, 36). Turkey’s State Folk Dance Ensemble’s close attention to local dance manners, movements, and steps while making its choreographies arguably created a sense of “truthfulness” for the audience (Shay 2002).

I conceptualize this choreographic strategy of authenticity as *precision*, which I see as being on the opposite side of improvisational choreographic work and aligned with other governing strategies of the national corpus, such as standardization, canonization, and monumentalization. Precision sometimes allows bodies to act as one corpus of the nation, erasing differences between ethnic, religious, and gender minorities, and sometimes enables the choreography to meticulously amplify those differences. This double work of precision creates a paradoxical dynamic in the representation of national identity. On one hand, it fosters unity and coherence by emphasizing the

collective body, aligning with nationalist ideologies that seek to present a singular, harmonious image of the nation. On the other, it allows for highlighting regional and cultural particularities, celebrating diversity within the framework of a shared national narrative. This tension between homogenization and differentiation reflects the intricate balancing act inherent in state-sponsored cultural performances, where the goal is to both unify and showcase the multifaceted nature of the nation's cultural heritage.

Acts of precision demonstrate how authenticity is constituted at both bodily and choreographic levels. As Regina Bendix (1997) points out, authenticity is never an objective criterion but changes according to social, political, and historical conditions. She underlines that continuity and cultural ownership, or need for authentic heritage, provides people with bargaining power (201). An attempt to akin authenticity to objectivity and truth also defines the "inauthentic" other as "fake," legitimizing its exclusion from the field of cultural belonging. A dancer's working towards the assumed authentic expression can be also perceived as honoring the culture that generated the "real" version of the tradition. An independent Kurdish folk dance teacher articulated this very point about Kurdish dances to me, underlining that dancing correctly indicates one's respect for the culture that shaped the dance and its meaning. During our meeting, he emphasized that one must flawlessly perform traditional dances to show respect and avoid damaging the culture in which these dances flourished. Bodily discipline and regular practice are necessary for finding perfection by learning how much weight one should put on the knees, how one can sense the right elevation and angle of a lifted knee, or how one positions one's hands to link them together "just so." In this specific case, reiteration for a perfect "authentic" look is seen as key to displaying respect for Kurdish culture. Teachers' visions, their education, and their experiences foreground these bodily discourses. This teacher received his formal dance training at a state conservatory and gained experience at the stage during his professional work at the Anadolu Ateşi dance company, known for its spectacular folk dance staging. This might have impacted his decisions about the precise reiterations of movements to highlight the distinct features of Kurdish dance. Nevertheless, if virtuosic precision is seen as the condition for cultural authenticity, it is safe to say that Shay's observations from the 1990s seem to be valid today. In deploying the national dance technique, precision can serve to mark marginalized communities from the national unmarked fold as Others, but it can also empower these communities, which have been resisting ethnonational assimilation for many decades.

A similar relationship between cultural authenticity and virtuosic preci-



Figure 1.4. Women dancers of the Turkish Folklore Association rehearsing horon choreography. Istanbul, June 1, 2017. Still from video by author.

sion applies to gendered movement structures and execution. In Figure 1.4, we see women dancers of the Turkish Folklore Association (since 1973 called Folklore Association Society, or *Folklor Kurumu Derneği*) rehearsing their horon choreography with an accompanying *kemençe* musician. The association, founded in 1964 by university students, is one of Turkey's oldest folk dance organizations, sustained by the dedication of its volunteer members. They gather every Sunday in a state school in the Tarlabası neighborhood of Beyoğlu, a residential area for low-income and marginalized people, especially Kurds, Roma, and migrants from African countries, and a considerable transgender population. Tarlabası is also an urban development area undergoing significant gentrification, with many projects converting it into luxury residences and businesses. Despite this socioeconomic change and financial limitations, the association fosters a deep sense of community and intergenerational participation. Many families have been involved for generations, with some couples meeting through the association and their children continuing the tradition. Its archives are run entirely by its members, reflecting their commitment and devotion to sustaining the association and its Kemalist values (Folklor Kurumu, n.d.).

The female dancers are together and stand upright, lined up directly in front of the audience. The horon choreography in Figure 1.4, with its synchronized movements, precise leg and arm elevations, and sharp knee angles,

reflects a choreographic strategy that evokes the image of the nation as one body, a technique deeply influenced by the Moiseyev Dance Company, as discussed. In Moiseyev's choreographies, synchronization and spatial formations, such as linear alignments and shifting directions, symbolize collective strength and unity, transforming individual dancers into components of a cohesive whole. Similarly, the dancers' precise bodily control and meticulous alignment not only highlight cultural specificity but also deliberately embody a unified representation of the nation.

It also evokes discipline and controlled physicality, avoiding any semblance of suggestive motions and resembling Moiseyev's female dancers, who displayed extraordinary technical and athletic skills devoid of sensuality (Shay 1999). In a standardized horon choreography for the stage, women perform shoulder shakes, twists, and small jumps but avoid deep squats or high jump kicks characteristic of men's horon. Their upper body remains upright and restrained, with arms held at chest level and hips kept still. These choreographic choices reflect the disciplined and desexualized ideal of femininity, the "girls of the republic," portraying women as agile, controlled, modest, and orderly, aligning with the aesthetics of precision.

These gendered movements assume continuity. For instance, in a 1946 article, Halil Bedii Yönetken describes some of the bodily qualities of women dancing horon and notes that they raise their arms only to chest level and avoid crouches (1966, 71). In the 1970s, other authors confirm these descriptions and underline that movements such as deep squats, jump steps, and shimmying shoulders and chests, and qualities such as aggression, expansion, firmness, and meticulousness are attributed to male-only horon styles and assumed to correspond to masculinized qualities of courage, heroism, and bravery (C. Genç 1970, 65–66). While "men's horon" has been associated with the extensive use of the body, resolute expressiveness, and inexorable energy, female corporeality has continued to be defined by the limited use of the arms and legs, inflexible semi-squats, and small steps. Assumed to be part of women's "authentic" corporeality, these gendered bodily standards largely continue to be the norm in the staging and teaching of horon today. Yet they are also contested—by women dancers, dance teachers, choreographers, and dancing activists—in dance studios, stages, and the streets.<sup>16</sup>

While horon teachers in state institutions are predominantly male, an exception is a teacher at the Ege University State Conservatory, Dr. Füsün Aşkar, who choreographs women's horon sequences using a new interpretation. Aşkar argues that until the 2000s, women were seen as passive accompaniments in horon, which was seen as a mainly male dance form (Aşkar

2022). Indeed, in the classes I participated in, many participants and teachers indicated that whereas men's horon is a stand-alone spectacle, women's dancing complements and enriches men's horon alignments. This perspective led Aşkar to create a women's horon to compete at an international competition in the category of innovation and stylized dances. In this choreography, she changed existing movement sequences standardized by male teachers and associated with the authentic horon danced by women. To deconstruct gender bias in the execution of the dance and turn women from an accompaniment into lead figures, she made a number of changes: The arms were lifted above the chest level, a larger hemline was added that fluttered during jump steps, and percussive stomping was juxtaposed with the sound from the dancers' golden-coined necklaces. The necklace was an aesthetic choice emphasizing the movement dynamics and not an assumed Black Sea tradition. Her choreography, part of a larger choreographic set of Turkish folk dances, gained first place in the Dijon International Folk Dance Competition in 2001, the same competition that had brought Cavit Şentürk nationwide fame when his horon choreography of five male dancers, including himself, won first place in 1964 (S. Şentürk 2009). This was not quite the case for Aşkar: She was harshly criticized by male dance teachers and musicians for her innovations, which allegedly "ruined" the authentic women's horon. Yet she is confident that her choices were aesthetic, meant to create an artistic understanding with the audience and emphasize a "gender-neutral" movement composition (personal conversation with Aşkar, January 6, 2025).

The teaching of horon emphasizes various styles and techniques, with particular attention to the stage-oriented choreographies popularly associated with the authentic horon. In these choreographies, a specific portrayal of female corporeality has been normalized—one that is restrained, modest, inward focused, and acutely aware of how the body is perceived. This prevalent approach reflects broader social expectations and constructions of gender. On stage, horon is presented with virtuosic precision, where the exactness of movement becomes a marker of both ethnic and gender authenticity. These choreographies emphasize strategies of precision, in which minute details in movement are highlighted as significant indicators of cultural, national, and gender identifications. Teachers, peers, and the dancers evaluate these performances, reinforcing ethnonational and heteropatriarchal constructs of selfhood through continuous assessments and self-reflection. However, in many social settings, horon takes on a different character, fostering communal relationships and offering more space for the improvisation of ethnic belonging, political positioning, and gender.

## PRECISION BODIES AND THE TACTICS OF IMPROVISATION

The 1980s were shaped by economic liberalization and the growth of international tourism. In this period, the distinction between folk dance and other forms of popular dance, such as belly dance, became more pronounced, reflecting broader cultural and political tensions. While the idealized female folk dancer, modeled after the “girl of the republic,” embodied chastity and national tradition through a desexualized and disciplined body, belly dance was increasingly promoted, catering to the entertainment industry and the growing influx of Western tourists (Öztürkmen 2016). However, into the 2000s, professional belly dancers remained marginalized in urban social and economic life (Girgin 2023; Potuoglu-Cook 2006) and even criminalized through random police raids and forced sexually transmitted disease examination (Guler 2015). At the same time, movements historically associated with female sexuality, such as the hip and belly-focused vocabulary of the *çiftetelli*, were significantly subdued, as the dance was incorporated into the folk dance canon. Criticism of the State Folk Dance Ensemble’s performance of *çiftetelli* in 1983 as pandering to “Western Orientalists” makes analogies with nineteenth-century European travelers to the Ottoman Empire and highlights anxieties about the portrayal of Turkish culture in the globalizing cultural economy. Yet movements like shoulder shimmies and hip accents persisted in public celebrations and reemerged in contemporary feminist and queer protests, demonstrating how these practices have continued to challenge and subvert hegemonic norms.

During my participation in various horon classes, rehearsals, and stage performances, I observed that the horon vocabulary, syntax, units of analysis, counting, sequencing, lead dancer commands, musician participation, and dance-music relationship were differentially conceptualized and taught in each class. Some teachers divided dancers into groups based on gender and level of expertise and encouraged a high level of gendered body consciousness to perform the virtuosic authentic dancer. Others taught all levels in the same dance circle, bringing different levels of expertise together. Still others began with pedestrian movements to enable newcomers to get used to the tempo of the dance and focus on finding ways to synchronize their body with their fellow dancers. These different approaches were legitimized via deliberate references to an “authentic” culture that the teacher transmits to his students. The teacher’s references to particular horon genealogies, culturally situated personal experiences, and metaphoric imagery were made in support of their

claim to authenticity and authority. Despite their different approaches, many male teachers shared a common reference to the movements assigned to the female dancing body, such as slightly inward torso angles, minimal hip and belly articulations, less intricate step combinations, group work instead of solo dancing, and confined jumps and squats. Folk dance choreography and its body politics were assumed to represent a continuity that prevents the nation or community from losing its identity.

Strict binaries of correct and incorrect dance forms and right and wrong movements that govern the transmission of tradition by dance teachers are thereby mapped onto ethnic and gender validity measures, strengthening allegiance to a specific dance school. Each school has specific criteria for the precise execution of dance movements through which it reconstructs national culture, history, and subjecthood. These criteria both emerge from historical discourses, debates, and contestations and are also shaped by ongoing struggles of minority communities, as well as by the demands of the market. I argued that as a hegemonic choreographic strategy, precision continues to be central for reiterating the authentic folk-dancing female body, both on conventional stage and in dance classes.

In contrast to the strategy of precision, improvisational choreographic practices in dissenting contexts seek to connect, negotiate, and cultivate ways of working together agonistically. But how does the folk dancer manifest politics beyond the inscribed body politics of the authentic dancer? How does improvisation help her carve out an alternative public space for dissenting politics? The next chapter will demonstrate how dissenting women deploy the counterhegemonic tactic of dispersal in contemporary protest settings as a means to maneuver in the cramped public spaces available to them in today's authoritarian Turkey, where dispersal is also wielded as a hegemonic strategy of the state. Dispersed to the outer peripheries of the city, activist women work to find ways to assemble by disrupting the spatialized techniques of governance that produce isolation, separation, and political invisibility.

## Dispersal

### Dancing Public Political Assembly at the Peripheries

Over the past two decades, the consolidation of an authoritarian political system and the entrenchment of neoliberal sociocultural and economic programs in Turkey have set the stage for political unrest. Since 2006, public gatherings opposing these government policies have been systematically repressed via legal, constitutional, and coercive brute-force measures. The 2006 changes in Anti-Terrorism Law No. 5532 increased the scope of the already vague term “terrorism.” Since 2008, demonstrators have received long prison sentences as “terrorists” for acts such as shouting slogans, making the victory sign, carrying banners, and throwing stones. In the late 2000s, Kurdish children and teenagers who joined protests were prosecuted under these anti-terror laws, and many faced harsh sentences of up to eight years in prison, sparking criticism from domestic and international human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch 2010). In 2010, the Turkish parliament passed reforms to reduce penalties for these children and authorized juvenile courts to handle their cases, yet these changes did not end their mistreatment and prosecution (Head 2010; Krajeski 2011). Further, the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park protests, the last nationwide anti-government uprising prior to the Istanbul Saraçhane protests in 2025, was violently suppressed, and the targeting of its participants continues today through ongoing trials (Project on Middle East Democracy et al. 2022). The peace process (2013–2015) between the Turkish state and the PKK was terminated, and Kurdish politicians and MPs were imprisoned in 2016, resulting in deep social polarization heightened by nationalist policies. In the same year, rising authoritarianism, particularly coupled with a failed coup and subsequent mass purges, made protests and large public gatherings more difficult. While the antagonism between secularists and Islamists grew irrevocably, the charge of “terrorism” has since expanded to include anyone who opposes the AKP government, and recently in particular feminists and LGBTI+ people (Özbay 2022).

The 2016 LGBTI+ Pride Parade marked a turning point in the evolving spatial politics of dissent in urban Turkey. Exemplifying the conflict between

the state and protesters, the events surrounding the parade were a sign of the shifting terrain on which grassroots activism would subsequently play out. Although Pride had been celebrated in Istanbul each year since 2003, in 2015, the then-governor of Istanbul, Vasip Şahin, denied the twelfth annual parade a permit because it coincided with the holy month of Ramadan. Disregarding the prohibition, participants gathered on the chosen date in Taksim Square and were violently attacked and dispersed by the police. Citing concerns about security and public order, the governor declared the 2016 Pride Parade illegal as well, resulting once again in police violence, detention, and torture for the demonstrators. In response, the Istanbul LGBTI+ Pride Committee released a press statement<sup>1</sup> on June 24 inviting protesters to “obey the call of the police” and “disperse to every single corner of Istiklal Avenue”:

We are announcing, with sadness, that we will not be able to hold the fourteenth Pride March. But our confidence in ourselves, our horizon, and our dreams are much bigger than a march, Istiklal Avenue, this city, and this country. Our fight for existence goes beyond yesterday, today, and the future because we were here, we are here, and we will be here. . . . Police forces told those attempting to read a press statement during the Trans Pride March as a voicing of their legal and political demands, “Please disperse and allow life to go back to its normal course.” We are obeying this call: on Sunday, June 26, we will disperse to every single corner of Istiklal Avenue and reunite with each other on every street and avenue in Beyoğlu. Instead of living a life that is imposed, a life that normalizes violence, oppression, and denial, we are living the life we chose, the life in which we exist with pride and honor, and we are “letting life go back to its ‘normal’ course” by DISPERSING, DISPERSING, DISPERSING. (LGBTI News Turkey 2016)

As a tool for improvisation in public space, dispersal enables protesters to expand their space of political action. When Pride demonstrators met briefly at a street corner, they read the above statement, recorded it for dissemination on social media, and dispersed once again to the backstreets of Istiklal Avenue, adjoining Taksim Square.<sup>2</sup> Protesters moved from one place to another, seeking out opportunities for interaction, momentary encounters, and rapid escapes from police violence. By leaving the larger assembly, activists, composed of lesbians, heterosexual and bisexual women, queer men, and transgender and non-binary people, dispersed innovatively to form small-scale assemblies at the peripheries of the major squares in response to police maneuvers. The choreographic tool of *dispersal*, utilized by both state

forces and activists, serves as a hegemonic strategy to enforce control and a counterhegemonic improvisational tactic to resist it: On the one hand, as a hegemonic strategy, the police violently block, prevent, scatter, divide, clear, and even disappear (detain, torture, and kill) dissenting individuals; on the other, as a survival tactic, dissenters continue moving, circulating, interacting, conjoining, and performing through their fleeting and urgent encounters in urban space, and dispersal is an effect of their political and kinetic resilience. This chapter asserts that such flexibility and ambiguity of dispersal create the potential for collective political agency, and folk dance circles inform our knowledge about this performative potential of dispersal.

In the context of social movements, dispersal is associated with both the method and the size of political assemblies. The Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), a Serbia-based international organization that provides activists with nonviolent protest strategies in countries spanning the Balkans and the Middle East, conceives of “concentration” and “dispersion” as two distinct but interlinked nonviolent methods of resistance. According to CANVAS, concentration requires large numbers of participants that may concentrate people, time, or resources in one spot. The global protests of the 2010s from Turkey and Egypt to Hong Kong, Bahrain, Brazil, and the United States exemplified this method, with massive crowds marching through or occupying major avenues, squares, and central parks for weeks and even months, ultimately serving as reference points for future demonstrations. This concentrated power often results in confrontation with the police, which may at times be the participants’ objective. As soon as confrontation is no longer advantageous for protesters who can be easily dispersed by the police, activists have maintained the impact of their dissent through smaller-scale, decentralized actions, such as banging pots and pans from their apartments or flashing lights on and off to show solidarity with street protests (Popovic 2015). While Turkey’s contemporary history of dissent includes such decentralized tactics, this chapter focuses on actions where activists deliberately dispersed to clear a space for public expression, thereby holding the very marches and gatherings that were officially banned or declared illegal.

In this context, dispersal refers to a mode of collective activity. It focuses on the moment of protest but also implies a fragmented continuity inherent in the act of dispersion. This continuity is central to my use of the term, which draws on the theorizations of diaspora as a continuous communication among and network of dispersed and dislocated bodies. Paul Gil-

roy (1994) argues that the concept of space in diaspora should be seen less through notions of fixity and place than in terms of what he calls “ex-centric communicative circuitry,” which enables dispersed populations to “converse, interact and even synchronize significant elements of their social and cultural lives” (211). In this way, it becomes possible to transform the historical, social, and political realities that space entails. Performance studies scholars have further rearticulated the term as not merely a negative condition of displacement but “a positive condition of multiple location, temporality, and identification” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994, 339) and a future-looking possibility for innovative networking, while they acknowledge the often violent conditions that produce diaspora (Gilroy 1994; George-Graves 2014). Building on this literature and borrowing the notion of dispersal from these discussions, I employ the term to imply not only a negative field of displacement but also a space of diasporic possibilities that activists reconfigure through their movement at urban protests and in dancing collectives. In this way, dispersal collapses two temporalities: activists’ ongoing struggles, which connect and mobilize new diasporic spaces in the city, and their immediate struggles that emerge in the face of violent police intervention and repression during moments of protest. While police coercion and hegemonic dispersal strategies aim for mass atomization and isolation, on which state authority thrives (Arendt [1958] 1966), activists aim to connect at those moments of separation, of departure from the larger collective, and create flexible forms of assembly at multiple scales.<sup>3</sup>

An analysis of the variable scales of public political assemblies demonstrates that the smallest gatherings—such as folk dance circles, which may form with as few as three participants—have significant performative power as a form of protest. Here I am inspired by the insight of Richard Schechner (1988) that performances can occur in varying magnitudes, from great spatial and temporal events (social dramas that last for years) to smaller ones (facial expressions) to the smallest (brain events that happen in a split second and leave no spatial trace). Hundreds of thousands of people can assemble in public squares to form large-scale assemblies, such as during the 2013 Gezi Park protests, a scale the political opposition typically aims to achieve. Direct action groups are often able to create medium-scale assemblies in the form of marches, sit-ins, and press statements, which bring together several hundred people. In the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests, when conventional forms of public political gathering were no longer an option due to the state’s use of extreme violence, dissenters dispersed toward the peripheries

of the urban center and created smaller-scale assemblies. The third scale of assembly involves even smaller groupings of protesters, often spontaneously forming into folk dance circles, whose numbers may range from a few to over a hundred individuals coming together to perform an immediate act of dissent. Unlike the 1970s students' protests, which filled large avenues in cities across Turkey and many other places in the world, these protests take place in peripheral sites, such as street intersections, pedestrian crossroads, or neighborhood parks, and aim to keep people moving and interacting to open up a space for politics. These tiny assemblies often already exist within larger ones, but they also move independently. When public political gatherings are banned, such tiny formations are still able to mobilize an audience.

Folk dancing is one effective way of creating a peripheral, tiny assembly. Halay, in particular, has long been a central part of dissenting protests in Turkey (see Chapter 4). Similar to horon choreographies, the halay is danced through forming lines, semicircles, and circles. Dancers hold hands and synchronize their movements while the lead dancer determines the duration, energy, and tempo. Halay dances are often accompanied by a drum (a double-headed *davul*, a handheld *def*, or a large-framed *erbane*). The most used props, such as handkerchiefs, are typically replaced by political signs and banners during protests. If singing is involved, it usually takes a call-and-response pattern, in which one person sings and others echo. With these qualities of collective action, halay and horon choreographies enable activists to create assemblies at the margins of central squares. Dispersed activists rehearse acts of departure from and toward the collective each time they gather in small groups. They step out of one circle to step into another until they are dispersed once again, either by police coercion or of their own volition for tactical purposes.

To discuss multiple modes and manifestations of dispersal in the city, I first explore the reconfigurations of public space under authoritarianism, showing how dissenting citizens were exiled from the main public space of activism in Istanbul, Taksim Square, by hegemonic applications of dispersal that separated and isolated protesters. I then investigate how dispersal became a potentially transformative mode of political engagement through the countermaneuvering of dissenters, who scattered throughout the city center. Finally, I turn to radical dance gatherings to reveal what dancing meant to protesters, particularly women, under conditions of social and political crisis and gender backlash, and how folk dance was repurposed to claim and reconfigure femme spaces at moments of deep grief and lamentation.

## HEGEMONIC CHOREOGRAPHIES OF DISPERSAL: NECROPOWER IN URBAN SQUARES

Until activists' exile and dispersal throughout the city due to permit denials, Taksim Square had long been a symbolic site of power negotiations between the state, nationalist groups, and dissenting social movements. Taksim and the larger Beyoğlu area gained importance during the late nineteenth century as a space from which secular and modern social values could circulate across the Ottoman Empire. Formerly named Péra, Beyoğlu became the center of an overtly European lifestyle, replete with public parks, streetlights, and tramways as well as theaters, clubs, and other entertainment venues. After the inauguration of the Republic in 1923, Beyoğlu continued to serve as the nation's most significant cultural and social center, although the initial locus of the Republican utopia was not so much Istanbul but Ankara (Şenol Cantelek 2012). In the 1930s, the central avenue connecting Taksim Square to Péra quarter, Grande Rue de Péra, was renamed İstiklal (Independence) Avenue.

As part of the nationalization process, the Turkification of street names occurred alongside modern, European-style urban planning efforts. In 1936, French colonial architect Henri Prost was invited to transform Taksim into Istanbul's new urban cultural hub. In 1939, the nineteenth-century complex housing the Ottoman Artillery Barracks (Topçu Kışlası) was razed, along with, importantly, the Armenian Surp Agop Cemetery and Surp Krikor Lusavoriç Church. In their place, the Turkish Radio and Television building was constructed for the country's first-ever national public broadcasting corporation, situated next to luxurious international and Turkish hotels, including the Hyatt Regency, the Hilton, and the Divan. In 1943, a recreational park was completed in the same area named İnönü Gezisi (İnönü Esplanade), after Turkey's second president, İsmet İnönü. This later became Taksim Gezi Park. The tombstones of the Armenian cemetery were used in the construction of the park's stairs, and many graves that had not been transferred to other cemeteries remained under the park, the hotels, and the state radio building (Nalcı and Dağlıoğlu 2013).

Adjacent to the park, Taksim Square was rearranged as a large, open area to accommodate the Republic's public celebrations (Bilsel and Pinon 2010). The monument, the park, and other public and private facilities in the surrounding area made the square an ideal center for national ceremonies. Italian artist Pietro Canonica crafted the Republic Monument in 1928 to give the square a "national identity." The thirty-six-foot-high monument depicts Mus-

tafa Kemal Atatürk as a soldier on one side and as a teacher in modern clothes on the other, signaling military determination and modern education as core values of the Republic. In the first half of the twentieth century, laying wreaths at the monument became a popular nation-state ceremony (Batuman 2015). In the 1940s and 1950s, civil demonstrators with nationalist sentiments also chose Taksim to stage their protests against non-Muslim minorities living in the area, particularly Jewish, Orthodox Greek, and Catholic Armenian citizens of Turkey. Beginning in the 1960s, labor unions and student organizations held protest rallies in Taksim Square. Students often gathered in the large square in front of Istanbul University in the Beyazıt neighborhood of the historical Istanbul peninsula, marched toward Pera, and ended the meeting in Taksim (Batuman 2015). In the 1960s, leftist students established several powerful organizations in support of workers' struggles across the country. They joined a miners' strike in the northern province of Zonguldak in 1965 and marched from the northwestern town of Çorum to Istanbul in 1966 in defense of Çorum municipality workers' rights. These groups often ended their march with a rally at the foot of the Republic Monument in Taksim Square. In 1967, student movement spokespeople campaigning against government attempts to lift the parliamentary immunity of Workers' Party MP Çetin Altan organized a large-scale gathering, the Awakening Rally (Uyanış Mitingi), which also began in Beyazıt and ended in Taksim Square (Koçak 2018). In the late 1960s and the 1970s, Taksim Square hosted large assemblies of students, workers, unions, and others who identified themselves as part of Turkey's leftist dissent.

A fatal incident in 1977 cemented Taksim Square's reputation as a place of dissent. On May Day 1977, large groups of protesters—members of students' organizations, workers' unions, and political parties—converged on Taksim. Soon after, gunfire from an unknown source suddenly dispersed the crowd, killing thirty-three people and wounding hundreds. May Day celebrations were soon banned from Taksim, a ban that remained in place for the next three decades—until a brief opening in 2010. Throughout these decades, protesters continued to defy the ban, despite mounting police violence, and Taksim Square has remained the focal point of leftist and dissenting protests and the symbolic center for activism in Turkey.

The first large-scale anti-government assembly that Istanbul witnessed after the 1970s took place in Taksim Square in May 2013 (Alessandrini et al. 2013). First, a small group of demonstrators occupied Taksim Gezi Park to stop bulldozers from razing the green area as part of an AKP government redevelopment program to rebuild the Ottoman Artillery Barracks as a shop-

ping mall and luxury apartments. Protesters decried the lack of transparency about these plans. In a dramatic show of the state's hegemonic dispersal of dissenters, riot police forcefully disbanded those peacefully gathered in the park, attracting more people in defense of the protesters and converting what began as environmental resistance into a nationwide political mobilization for social and economic justice in Turkey.

The 1930s demolition of the barracks aimed to redesign this area once associated with the Armenian community and later the Ottoman military, transforming it into a center of modern entertainment with European-style venues and parks. In contrast, the 2013 demolitions targeted buildings representing the modernist urbanism of the Kemalist republic and were driven by a neo-Ottoman nostalgia (Whitehead and Bozoğlu 2017). Among those buildings, the Atatürk Cultural Center, Istanbul's first modern opera building constructed in the 1960s, had remained in a dilapidated state since its closure for "restoration" in 2008.<sup>4</sup> During the Taksim Gezi Park resistance, its facade was transformed into a canvas adorned with emblems and slogans from diverse political groups and affiliations. Countless people from many different backgrounds took to the streets and camped in the area. But the Gezi encampment was not the only protest camp in those years. The 2010 TEKEL workers' encampment in Ankara, protesting the neoliberal privatization of state industries, lasted two and a half months in a cold winter. Its reconfiguration of public space to facilitate a protest camp and its performative practices spearheaded the spatial and bodily tactics used in the Gezi resistance (Batuman 2013).

Gezi protesters further crafted this space as a field of contention among dissident visions but also signaled a new form of opposition, uniting disparate and often incompatible political positions in their shared resistance against the Islamist conservative and neoliberal authoritarianism of the Erdoğan government (Göle 2013; Tugal 2013; Yeğenoğlu 2013), which strategically provoked antagonism between the protesters and the conservative masses (Özen 2015). Particularly feminist movements composed of individuals and groups with differing standpoints, politics of sexuality, and understandings of feminism constituted shared spaces for political activism to shed light on the interlinking operations of "patriarchal, racist biopolitics, heteronormative family values and increasing austerity measures" of the AKP government and its economic and political allies (Potuoğlu-Cook 2015, 96). The park, a cruising place for men and trans people since the 1970s, brought another layer of historical importance in which feminist and queer claims to a public commons merged (Özbay and Savcı 2018). Trans, queer, and cis women's bod-

ies were at the front lines of the Gezi protests, covering heterosexist graffiti with purple paint, substituting masculine song lyrics, standing still, forming human chains, rallying, running, dancing, and performing practices of collective mourning.

Scholars conceived of the 2010s' large-scale social movements as "choreographic arrangements" that "shape and reshape the social, the aesthetic, and the political" (Gerecke and Levin 2018, 5). These popular mobilizations introduced new aesthetics and repertoires of performative protest. As one of those movements, in the Gezi Park protests, resisting bodies, their exertion, risk-taking, and interdependence as well as their nuanced expressions of vitality and spontaneity, became central to the definition of the political (Ertem 2018; Gambetti 2013). Humor foregrounded the language of dissent and created alternative spaces of sociability and friendliness, where participants with different standpoints could connect and communicate to adopt a collective political position (Baylar 2024). Professional musicians, movement practitioners, and dancers of various styles, from tango, flamenco, and lindy hop to contact improvisation and *sema* whirling, used their artistic creativity to mobilize the public (Bayraktar 2016; Gökarısel 2016; Öztürkmen 2014). Like other Occupy movements, Gezi also incorporated intimate forms of occupying public space, such as collective eating, sleeping, meditating, or praying (Haksöz 2015). Creativity, endurance, visibility, and the collective power of bodies sustained the protests. However, excessive police violence, using tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons, and arrests, caused the death of five young people and thousands of injuries, with over ten people losing an eye (hakki 2013). The encampment in Gezi Park was dispersed when police stormed the park and cleared it of protesters, but the resistance continued for some time in the form of park forums across Istanbul and other major cities.

Following the forced dispersal of the Gezi encampment, the square was closed off to activist gatherings and the Republic Monument physically isolated by police barricades (Figure 2.1). Any attempt at anti-government protest at the square or Istiklal Avenue is banned and met with a violent police response. Designated locations for political protests have been far from Taksim Square. For example, in 2015, the Istanbul Governor's Office permitted May Day celebrations only at an outdoor parking lot located two hours from Taksim Square by public transportation, in Beylikdüzü (*Diken* 2015a). Some of these designated locations were in newly built areas of urban gentrification and land reclamation that had caused the dislocation and impoverishment of previous residents. Designating these remote areas as sites for political protests was tantamount to inviting anti-government protesters to act as



Figure 2.1. With the Republic Monument and Istiklal Street enclosed by police barricades, activists are spatially exiled from Taksim Square. Istanbul, May 2, 2017. Photo by author.

accomplices in the state's dispossession plans. In the meantime, regulations against the proliferation of cultural centers, entertainment venues, restaurants, and bars were enforced. Ongoing urban renewal projects dramatically increased property prices around Taksim and forcefully displaced marginalized inhabitants of these areas, such as queer and trans individuals, sex workers, precarious migrant communities, Roma, and Kurds, changing once again the social and demographic structure of Beyoğlu (see Zengin 2014). Many dissenting groups and activists, who had already suffered disproportionately from the government's political, cultural, and economic exclusionary practices, were driven out of their social circles and in some cases sources of income, forced to spread out or find alternative locations in which to continue their activities. The upshot was that pro-government groups gradually became more visible in Taksim Square through the granting of permits for religious Ramadan activities, anti-coup celebrations, and pro-AKP meetings such as the so-called Democracy Vigils. The latter were held following the 2016 failed coup attempt, with attendees being predominantly (84 percent)

AKP supporters (Konda 2016). The LGBTI+ Pride Parade-turned-protest of 2016 occurred under these conditions of spatial enclosure and against the backdrop of these vital demographic, social, and political changes in the urban landscape.

The closure of Taksim Square was followed by a period of bomb attacks and explosions in central urban areas, with the necropolitical power of the state becoming more visible. The attacks intensified after the parliamentary elections in June 2015 and continued through 2016, leading to the extreme vulnerability of dissenting bodies and spreading a fear of large public gatherings. During this time, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh) was accused of organizing suicide bombings and mass killings that targeted anti-government rallies. The July 2015 attack in Suruç on the Turkish side of the border with Syria killed thirty-two young socialists who had been on their way to the neighboring Kurdish city of Kobanî in Syria to help rebuild it after ISIS had left it in ruins. A few months later, the October 2015 Ankara massacre, the deadliest terror attack in modern Turkish history, targeted demonstrators who had joined a Labor, Peace, and Democracy Rally (Emek, Barış, ve Demokrasi Mitingi) in the run-up to the November general elections. The bomb attack killed over a hundred people and wounded hundreds more. The terror attacks continued through to the end of 2016 and targeted central locations in Istanbul, such as the historical Sultan Ahmet Hippodrome Square, Istiklal Avenue, the surroundings of the İnönü Stadium near Taksim Square, and, on New Year's Eve, the Reina nightclub in Beşiktaş. The attacks instilled a pervasive sense of fear in the public, resulting in a reluctance to frequent popular locations, entertainment venues, or political gatherings. The police used the pretext of security concerns to "clear" public spaces of anti-government protests.

In 2017, on the day of a planned political meeting at Taksim Square, I went to meet Ayla, an environmental and urban justice activist and member of the Chamber of Environmental Engineers (Çevre Mühendisleri Odası). Tension was already running high on Istiklal Avenue, with many armed police vehicles parked with their engines on, ready for action. Police barricades had been erected to close off each adjacent street lining the two-mile-long pedestrian thoroughfare. During the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park resistance, the backstreets of Istiklal Avenue had become a second home to activists, who had carefully studied its blind corners, narrow openings, nineteenth-century European passages, and tricky cul-de-sacs and sussed out its friendly and hostile merchants. But this time, the full closure of the avenue with armed vehicles and collapsible barriers did not leave any room for demonstrators to access backstreets. When I met Ayla, she was angry:

It feels meaningless to demonstrate or march down Istiklal Avenue because we are trapped here. They've trapped us here, leaving no room to escape. You're all surrounded, and they're here to kill you. So why do you go out and walk this street that is like a cage? Unless you want to be killed, I don't think there's any point. I no longer look forward to marching down Istiklal. (Istanbul, April 26, 2017)

The square and the main street were completely closed off, leaving no room for any attempt at gathering in the area. The increased militarization of everyday life and the heightened visibility of the police and armed police vehicles patrolling the city created an atmosphere of fear. Soldiers wearing balaclava snow masks and carrying rifles made their rounds along Istiklal Avenue. Checkpoints were erected in random locations so that the police could subject passersby to an identity and background check. These hegemonic choreographies of dispersal aimed to control and separate. Even when a political protest at a central square was permitted, it was deliberately isolated from the rest of the city's inhabitants by police barricades, intended to signify potential danger and emergency. In one interview, Zerrin, an independent activist specialized in social and political justice issues, mentioned a rally recently organized by the HDP in protest of an AKP-sponsored constitutional proposal. Called Hand in Hand (El Ele), the rally was planned at the large Barbaros Square, located next to a busy pier in the Beşiktaş district, where ferryboats sail to Kadıköy and Üsküdar on the Asian side of the city. The area was cordoned off by police barricades. Zerrin went to the meeting, but instead of entering the square, she watched it from outside the cordoned-off area.

I walked all around [the barricaded square]. There was one gate and ten police officers [at the gate]. I didn't go in. It was like a cage. I was not afraid, but I felt truly sad. It was painful. I didn't want to be there. . . . Can we say there is no oppression? People were afraid of participating [in the rally]. There were only fifteen to twenty people inside the square, and half of them were dancing halay together. Tell me, if this is not resistance, what is it? (Istanbul, April 19, 2017)

For both Ayla and Zerrin, enclosed, segregated, and controlled space resembled a "cage." In such a cage, protesters feel acutely how their bodily existence is subjected to hegemonic technologies of violence through physical destruction, injury, and death. Their remarks underline the spatial segregation and isolating police coercion as a basis of the state's necropower

(Mbembe 2003). To prevent street protests, the police elevated oppression by forcefully dividing, segregating, enclosing, and inhibiting movement. Once individuals are forcibly disconnected, they lose the potential for political engagement and efficacy (Arendt [1958] 1966). The hegemonic choreography of dispersal manifested itself in how the state commanded its centralizing authority by having the police occupy public space or the military drive out its opponents, showing them as being on the run, afraid, and cowering, and rendering them as potential detainees and targets for killing.

These necropolitical strategies of the state were neither new nor confined to Istanbul. The violent dispersal of dissent and military operations have been ongoing in the Kurdish provinces of southeastern Turkey, particularly between the summer of 2015 and early 2016. Hundreds of people died and thousands were displaced; residential areas were burned and neighborhoods destroyed (Darıcı and Hakyemez 2019). Political violence has been a recurring feature since the establishment of the modern Turkish state and its single-party period, manifesting in varying modes and intensities and targeting selected populations, putting them at higher risk of death, destroying infrastructural necessities, and strategically neglecting them. Political theorist Banu Bargu calls this omnipresent and from time to time intensifying deadly violence the “necropolitical undercurrent” that continuously flows below the surface of Turkey’s political regime (2019a, 1–2). Bargu argues that necropolitics is constitutive to Turkey’s democratic sovereignty and became most acute in the post-1980 coup d’état period, during which the neoliberal government’s investment in democratic values was in absolute tension with the ongoing violence inflicted in the name of security, social order, and national unity. To understand and analyze this tension, she suggests taking a closer look at plural modes of political violence. Among those, indirect, slow, and symbolic violence appear as crucial as physically destructive violence.

Stripping individuals of basic rights such as access to primary health care and social security, alongside defamation, imprisonment, travel and work bans, and the confiscation of passports and identity documents have been among the results of emergency decree measures and used to regulate lives while creating necropolitical conditions, as I discuss below. Similarly, strategic neglect and taking away attention makes some populations more vulnerable to physical harm, such as women. Turkey’s recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 epitomized the state’s disinterest and neglect in stopping femicides, as cis and trans women have been increasingly killed by cis men. Male perpetrators of these murders often receive reduced sentences, justified by claims that they were provoked by the women, that the women’s

morality was in question, that the perpetrators acted in a “fit of rage,” or that they behaved well during the trial. Their acts of gendered violence are frequently overlooked and left unpunished; they are also released early through amnesty after serving only brief sentences. Gendered necropolitics operates through patriarchal norms of morality and female subjugation, intersecting with other hegemonic power structures to enforce the medical, political, and ethnic/racial objectification of the female body. A striking example is the postmortem denuding and violent display of the bodies of Kurdish guerrilla women on social media, accompanied by Turkish ultranationalist commentary, as seen in the summer of 2015 (Bargu 2019b). Numerous examples illustrate the relationship between gendered political violence and the targeting of dead bodies as a medium to discipline the living. State forces often suspend, repress, and disperse funeral processions for those deemed “disposable” (Butler 2009), such as Kurdish and Alevi youth, guerrillas, leftists, peace activists, and trans individuals, among other marginalized citizens. Yet these funerals are not only sites of mourning; they are transformed into acts of political protest (Akıncı 2017; Bargu 2019b; Zengin 2016).

Turkey’s necropolitical climate intensified once again following the June 2015 general elections and persisted over the next three years, during which political protests and dissent endured despite hegemonic violence. Just a month after the banned LGBTI+ Pride Parade turned into a protest, the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, allowed the government to declare a state of emergency, resulting in the beginning of mass state purges. The state of emergency was extended seven times until harsh, sweeping anti-terror laws replaced it in July 2018. Regulations and emergency decrees instituted under the state of emergency, including the ban on public assembly, were legalized and constitutionalized, rendering any and all anti-AKP government political gatherings and activist meetings more hazardous than ever (Human Rights Watch 2018a; International Federation for Human Rights 2020). State-of-emergency decrees targeted not only the purported perpetrators of the coup but also over two hundred thousand teachers, academics, and public service employees, who were dismissed from their jobs or suffered false accusations (Human Rights Watch 2018b; US State Department 2019). These individuals were prohibited from future employment with the government, leading to destitution in numerous instances (Bişkin 2022). The decrees essentially legalized arbitrary dismissals and arrests of associates of the entire spectrum of Turkish oppositional groups, including scholars, students, journalists, human rights defenders, and MPs, notably those belonging to the pro-Kurdish HDP party. By mobilizing nationalist and pro-state movements within a polarized

society, imprisoning members of civil society, and creating the conditions for the exile and deportation of dissenters, the authorities fomented an atmosphere of permanent danger and instability. In this atmosphere, the precarity of life intensified through the state-of-emergency laws, which provided the police with legal grounds to perform hegemonic maneuvers of dispersal to prevent dissenting bodies and voices from gathering.

Forced to explore their political agency in dispersed public spaces, where bodies were unable to gather to freely manifest their democratic rights through political protest, dissenters had to find other means. In response, two intertwined tactical acts of dispersal became important: dispersing in the city to politicize peripheral areas located off the main square and dispersing at a given location through the ephemerality of folk dance. In both these tactical choreographies of dispersal, activists sought to preserve the possibility of political assembly.

#### TACTICAL DISPERSAL: ASSEMBLIES IN EXILIC SPACES

Activist Betül Celep was among those affected, launching a vigil to protest her unjust dismissal under a presidential emergency decree. Emphasizing the unique precarity women face in cases of job loss and job bans, politico-legal persecution, criminal indictment, and prison sentences, Betül turned a corner in Kadıköy into her symbolic space of resistance to structural political violence. I went to visit her on March 29, 2017.

In the busy streets of Kadıköy, I walk toward the narrow, slightly hilly, and overwhelmingly crowded market lanes. As cultural events, social gatherings, activist organizing, and protests have moved from Beyoğlu to Kadıköy, they turned this middle-class district into a popular new hub for social and political activities. As I walk up the hill, I am repeatedly stopped by party activists from across the political spectrum who are working on the upcoming constitutional referendum campaign. On April 16, 2017, less than a fortnight away and in a Turkey still under a state of emergency, voters are to decide on a major constitutional amendment that will determine the fate of the country whether to shift the political system from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential system, thereby consolidating executive power and authoritarian rule in Turkey. To promote their campaign, political parties have set up stands along the crowded thoroughfare, often with a tent, one or more tables to display brochures and party emblems, and a sound system to play songs that convey their party's political views. From the stands, volunteers hand

out flyers, explaining the pros and cons of the presidential system and trying to convince passersby to vote yes or no on the amendment.

I eventually find Betül sitting at a busy pedestrian intersection surrounded by shops and cafés, protesting her dismissal on January 6, 2017, from her job as a civil servant alongside hundreds of thousands of others. Her action was inspired by Nuriye Gülmen, a purged academic who, despite continuous police harassment, staged a sit-in in front of the Human Rights Monument on Yüksel Street in Ankara.<sup>5</sup> Both women's vigils take place in central areas of their respective cities, but I wonder why, instead of picking the world-famous square of Taksim, Betül chose such a small pedestrian convergence, Kalkhedon Square, which was unknown to me until her protest.

Betül wants to make her and others' unjust dismissal visible to the public and thereby cast doubt on its legitimacy. Her manifesto, "Kanun Hükmünde Kadınname (KHKadınname)," or Woman's Emergency Decree, urges others to join her protest:

My dear KHK friend, I know your story is not much different from mine. I feel responsible for your silence, loneliness, and despair, too. To be the voice of those dismissed via emergency decree, on Monday January 23, I will be in Kadıköy, in front of the church, as though I were going to work. If only you would come, too. If only you would lend a hand. If only you would tell your story! That's the way we can stop this! If not, we'll give up hope. We'll accept our own destruction. They have stolen our jobs. Let's show them that we won't let them kill our souls! (Celep 2017)

During our conversation, several people stop to read her signs, express their feelings of solidarity, or ask if she needs anything. Betül explains to me that the dismissal of a man is different from that of a woman, because a woman experiences its consequences much more deeply. Like many other women, her dismissal forced Betül to move back into her parents' house. Others become dependent on their partners' salaries. Women are often offered limited job opportunities, and living alone as a woman is socially and economically more challenging. To her, it is this alliance between the actors of political and patriarchal violence that women protest and create new possibilities of life, often in unexpected ways and places:

Women resist and convert spaces of struggle into spaces of life. I created a life here in this square which has served as my home for the last several months. I come here every day and stay until late at night. Sometimes, I come just to

visit, and if I see police or other people, I get pissed off because I feel like they are trespassing on my home. We are creating a public memory of resistance in this square, but it also feels so intimate. (Istanbul, March 29, 2017)

Soon her friend arrives with an *erbane*, a large-frame drum that often accompanies Kurdish music and dances and is symbolic for Kurdish women's political struggles. Betül and the other women gathered in the square to support her are energized. They join hands and start moving to initiate a halay sequence. The musician improvises on the lyrics of a Kurdish song, inserting Betül's name as he praises her resistance. I join the dance, grasping the hand of the last woman in the line. We align our bodies in a semicircle, leaving both ends open to further participation from passersby and those who pause momentarily to form part of the audience. We take three steps forward and pause on the fourth, and then go back three steps. Our upper bodies are straight, and our arms bounce at double tempo, demonstrating an effortful alignment. While repeating this three-step pattern, we move slowly counterclockwise, led by the dancer on the right. The dance uses the most recognized Kurdish three-step halay sequence, known as *Delilo* (Karakeçili 2008), which is frequently used at public gatherings, implying a link between this protest against arbitrary dismissal and the Kurdish political and cultural rights struggle.

To some Kurdish activists, the three-step pattern is merely a warm-up to dancing, because Kurdish folk dances involve complex step patterns, tempos, and bodily coordination. Some activists I spoke to agree that the three-step walking pattern is understood as an invitation to dance and aims to constitute harmony among the participants. But its pedestrian quality is also appreciated by activists, as it enables larger public assemblies. Eylem, an activist in the United Revolutionary Party (Birleşik Devrimci Parti), explains to me that the three-step dance is her favorite because it does not seem to belong to any one culture and anyone can do it, even those with no prior dance knowledge (Istanbul, April 4, 2017). Some support the idea that, unlike complex dances that only competent dancers can join in on, the uncomplicated step pattern invites more people into the dance circle, opening up space for diverse encounters. Like humor, dance enables communication among people with contesting political views and different standpoints. When dance is accessible, its political outreach can be extended beyond its cultural context—which may or may not be preferred.

Folk dancing in Kalkhedon Square generates discussions around folk dance proficiency, accessibility, and a politics of alliance and solidarity. It also



Figure 2.2. Betül Celep (second from the right) dancing with her supporters against the arbitrary dismissals. Her apron reads “I want my job back.” Kadıköy, March 29, 2017. Still from video by author.

reveals the many histories hidden in these new protest areas located in what Silvija Jestrovic (2013) calls “exilic spaces.” In her exploration of performance in the exiled spaces of former Yugoslavian cities in the Balkans, Jestrovic found that living in a state of war and unrest fostered by an oppressive and violent nationalist regime in the 1990s resulted in hegemonic spatial isolation and marginalization. Dissenters responded by establishing urban countersites, “inner exilic spaces—their city-within-the-city—to preserve and protect a form of urban life that had been threatened” (Jestrovic 2013, 191). For its dissenting inhabitants, Istanbul, too, has become an “exilic city” since the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park resistance. Under the AKP’s hegemonic strategies of dispersal, urban dissenters have been forced to find and occupy “inner exilic spaces.” They moved from the central square of Taksim to other municipalities, such as Kadıköy, Beşiktaş, and Bakırköy, governed by Turkey’s main opposition party, the liberal, secularist, and Kemalist CHP. In this way, they set up peripheral diasporic spaces of activism, politicizing them by continuing with the performance of sit-ins, vigils, press statements, marching protests, and folk dancing. Kalkhedon Square, emerging from the church square of the Greek Orthodox Hagia Euphemia, exemplifies activists’ repurposing of forgotten locations to create sites of resistance and memory. Betül’s choice to designate this space in her manifesto is a deliberate act of reclaiming and

reimagining peripheral spaces to create political assemblies. These actions disrupt traditional urban narratives, bringing marginalized or neglected areas into the public's consciousness as politically and culturally significant. By moving their political protest from major squares to smaller transportation hubs, including ferry terminals and bus stations, and to pedestrian intersections and market streets, activists are in spaces that cannot be closed off as easily. This is why Betül was sitting in a busy street in Kadıköy; like many other activists, she had found a corner of the city to call her own.

As activists familiarize themselves with these new sites of protest outside Taksim, they map out and rehearse new routes, navigating backstreets to strategize escape and dispersal in case of police intervention. In the run-up to the April 2017 referendum, dissenting women from several political organizations organized a campaign called Women Who Say No (Hayır Diyen Kadınlar, or HAYDIKA). The acronym HAYDIKA cleverly combines "Haydi"—meaning "come on" or "go ahead," often used to motivate or encourage action—with "Ka," an abbreviation for women (*kadınlar*). Together, the two words create a call to action specifically aimed at women. In February, at a protest in Kadıköy, women gathered at the Süreyya Opera House, the first European-style opera venue on the Asian side from 1927, and marched through pedestrian streets lined with shops and cafés toward the Kadıköy Pier. Instead of taking the direct route, they chose backstreets and paused at Kalkhedon Square to deliver a press statement. A small group of women also performed the three-step halay. Singing Kurdish songs and dancing in front of the police, this group adapted its movements to remain mobile and prepared to disperse quickly. Their hand clapping and ululations stopped before the police intervened. Melek, a HAYDIKA organizer and labor movement activist, later explained how the marching route was rehearsed with evasion strategies in mind, demonstrating tactical awareness:

With the state of emergency, our right to protest has been suspended, and dissenting political activities have been banned. This is especially the case whenever the women's movement goes out to protest: another ban is announced. We talked a lot about where to begin the march. We talked about whether Süreyya Opera gives us a way to run down backstreets to escape the police should violent intervention occur. We went to the area and rehearsed it several times. We discussed everything street by street. We went to the spot and explored which street ends up where. And only then did we decide on our route for the protest. And so the protests continue. . . . The police offer

us other places to try to trick us. But whenever they try to fool you, you find alternatives. (Istanbul, March 22, 2017)

Volunteers from grassroots women's groups in Istanbul agreed on a route for the march, and their proposed path birthed a new protest choreography model for use at future protests. Moreover, by temporarily stopping at Kalkhedon Square, HAYDIKA activists recognized it as a public site of resistance and also demonstrated solidarity with Betül Celep's vigil.

Improvisation during protest that does not involve dance shares similarities with and differs from improvisation in dance. In both situations, activists carefully examine their surroundings and assess corporeal signs to anticipate what might happen next. At moments of unpredictability and uncertainty, flexibility and purposefulness guide both dancers (Albright and Gere 2003; Nagrin 1994) and activists in their decision-making. Improvisation helps dancers cultivate "an ability to move as the situation demands" (DeFrantz 2014, 332) and offers a range of possibilities to act. An activist may delineate possible routes for hiding and escaping in case of police attack by examining the street and its intersecting alleyways and dead ends (narrow or large? even or uneven? empty or populated? dark or well lit?); buildings in the street (maintained or decrepit? high or low? gated or publicly accessible?); and the spatial restrictions of the protest site (park borders, monuments, bus stops).

A tactical approach also requires the study of the actors in this space of action: the police, military, and other authorities (and areas blocked by police barriers) and the range of protesters (their agendas and motivations). Some groups may want to physically resist the police, increasing the potential for clashes, random violence, and arrests. If the security forces are armed and wear gas masks, this indicates the potential use of bullets and tear gas. If there are plainclothes police with cameras, this indicates that people identified in police videos may later be arrested, detained, and prosecuted. Activists also often know which merchants in the area are friendly to their cause and which are hostile. Finally, they assess recent political conditions to help them anticipate how various actors might behave in a given space by scanning recent news on social media to understand the legality or illegality of certain actions (for example, the recording of police officers at protests was banned in 2022 while police retained the authority to record protesters), checking recent statements by officials and politicians, and reviewing how the event is covered in the mainstream media. Dissenters also benefit from brief research into how long one can be legally remanded into custody and

one's legal rights in custody. Protesters assess all these variables prior, during, and after the protest to develop improvisational techniques that will increase the possibility of moving under restrictions and diminish any possibility of physical harm or detention.

As activists find and create opportunities for political struggle amid the shifting political and spatial landscape and narrowing public space for protest, the police also study protesters' movements and find new routes, intersections, and streets to block, enclose, and evacuate. This ongoing spatial negotiation reflects a broader dynamic: while the state seeks to fix bodies in space for control and targeting, protesters tactically "unfix" themselves through circulation, escaping surveillance and disrupting state hegemony. As a choreographic move and an aesthetic political intervention that has the capacity to make hegemonic social and political relations visible while promoting dissent (Mouffe 2007), tactical dispersal requires the constant occupation of space that has been evacuated by the state forces. At the moment of activists' departure from the collective body, at the moment they step out of the dance circle, the possibility for ad hoc and hit-and-run types of assembly emerges. In evading police barricades, dissenting bodies relate to each other in new ways as they join hands and step into the circle again.

The video is available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14524804.cmp.11>

Folk dancing in and as a protest regenerates forms of bodies' interdependency, as one cannot dance alone and needs to connect with another person to form a dance circle (see Video 2\_2.mov). While repressive environments are maintained primarily through the reproduction of persistent fear and despair (Arendt [1958] 1966), human interaction that is contingent and unpredictable (Arendt 1998) shields against the devastating impacts of hegemonic division, isolation, and encapsulation. Protesters' precariousness paves the way for mutual dependency as an act of reciprocity that establishes a sense of "we" for sustained and sustainable political relations (Butler 2009). Precarious bodies acting interdependently delineate a constellation of individuals who are profoundly responsive to each other, creating a "social network of hands that seeks to minimize the unlivability of lives" (Butler 2015, 67). As the quintessence of bodily interaction and collective movement, dance in political protest is always relearned, mentored, practiced, and rehearsed through interpersonal exchange and experience. In this way, dancing enhances the possibility of political interactions in public space.

Betül points to this resistive quality of interdependency against isolation. Although she dances each time for a different purpose—at times to generate public visibility for her cause, at other times to express her anger, and at

times to warm up her cold body during the long hours of her sit-in protest—she does it to spark a connection with passersby in the square through the shared work of dance:

As you dance you hold the hand of a person you do not know. You work with this person on something you both feel enthusiastic about. This is very powerful. You connect with a passerby for maybe five minutes, and in those five minutes that you share with another person, you resist the isolating efforts of the system. (Istanbul, March 29, 2017)

When people peel off from collective choreographies of protest, a few people can still get together and hold hands for a few minutes to dance and perform the possibility of moving and interacting to communicate a shared cause. In this way, folk dance gatherings nuance and extend our ideas of what public assembly is, what it can be, and how it works choreographically when bodies persist to relate despite their forceful separation. These danced assemblies spotlight that a choreography of departure from the group inventively keeps bodies connected in the public sphere.

#### ON THE STAKES OF DANCING AT PROTESTS

Dancing enables cis, queer, and trans women activists to arrange their bodies in tiny assemblies at peripheral protest areas in ever-changing combinations and thereby transform deadly public squares into femme spaces where new movements and emotions can proliferate. How is dancing negotiated to express mourning, pain, anger, and lamentation as much as hope, care, and joy? How does folk dancing convert perilous moments of hegemonic dispersal into empowering acts of interdependency? How does a folk dancing assembly connect multiple histories and the embodied memory of Turkey's dissent? How do the limitations of the individual body impact the collective act of dancing? I propose some answers to these questions by focusing on the 2015 Labor, Peace, and Democracy Rally, where dance served as a metaphor and practice that revealed the fragility of living bodies in the omnipresence of necropolitics.

The Labor, Peace, and Democracy Rally was organized by the HDP in collaboration with professional chambers, civil society, and labor organizations such as the Turkish Union of Engineers' and Architects' Chambers (Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği, hereafter TMMOB), the Confederation of

Revolutionary Workers' Unions (Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu), and the Confederation of Public Employees' Unions (Kamu Emekçileri Sendikaları Konfederasyonu). It was scheduled to take place on October 10, 2015, just one month before the November general elections, at Ankara's main Sıhhiye Square, located near the central train station, which served as a meeting point for many political organizations before they marched to the square. People traveled from all parts of country to the capital to take part in this massive rally.

A widely circulated video of the rally shows a group of activists gathered in front of the train station executing the three-step halay pattern, the same dance Betül performed with supporters in Kalkhedon Square. Holding hands, the dancers sing a song emblematic of the leftist struggle of the 1970s, *Placards in Their Hands* ("Ellerinde Pankartlar"), also known as "Bloody Sunday" (Kanlı Pazar), when a dreadful explosion rings out in the background. The song references a student protest on February 16, 1969, when thousands of university students collaborated with workers' unions and labor parties to meet in Beyazıt and march together to Taksim Square to protest the arrival of the American Sixth Fleet in Istanbul (Bianet 2009). The far-right media targeted the meeting with vitriol, emboldening armed and aggravated right-wing youth to show up in Taksim Square and attack the leftists in full view of the police. Two people were killed, and many were wounded, prompting the spatial and institutional polarization of right- and left-wing groups into the 1970s. After the 1969 incident, political rallies targeted Taksim (Batuman 2015).

Written to commemorate this event and released in 1977, the song is also associated with the May Day rally massacre that took place that year, also on Taksim Square on a Sunday. On both "Bloody Sundays," the protesters killed had been holding signs and banners, a commonality reflected in the first stanza of the song:

|                      |                               |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Ellerinde pankartlar | Placards in their hands       |
| Gidiyor bu çocuklar  | These kids are going          |
| Kalkın ayağa, kalkın | Get up on your feet, stand up |
| Gidiyor bu çocuklar  | These kids are going          |

The song, which entreats its audience to get up on their feet to support the protesting youth, was sung by the Friends Choir (Dostlar Korosu), a choir of highly skilled leftist musicians under the leadership of Ruhi Su, the song's composer. Su received his first music education in an orphanage for Armenian kids in Adana and continued his artistic development in modern

music institutions of the Republic, such as the Ankara Music Teachers School (Musiki Muallim Mektebi) which became the State Conservatory.<sup>6</sup> His fame as an opera singer at the State Opera during the 1940s and early 1950s was boosted by his regular radio programs, where he performed folk songs based on his research on Anatolian folk music. Su was imprisoned for his political affiliation with the Turkish Communist Party, which ended his career in opera and led to his subsequent dedication to folk music. His unique artistic skills enabled him to reinterpret traditional monophonic songs with polyvocality. In “Ellerinde Pankartlar,” Su combined European-style polyvocal singing with the musical patterning and quality of Anatolian folk music, particularly the accompaniment of his *bağlama*, a long-necked plucked lute predominantly used in folk music (Ruhi Su Dostlar Korosu 2013).

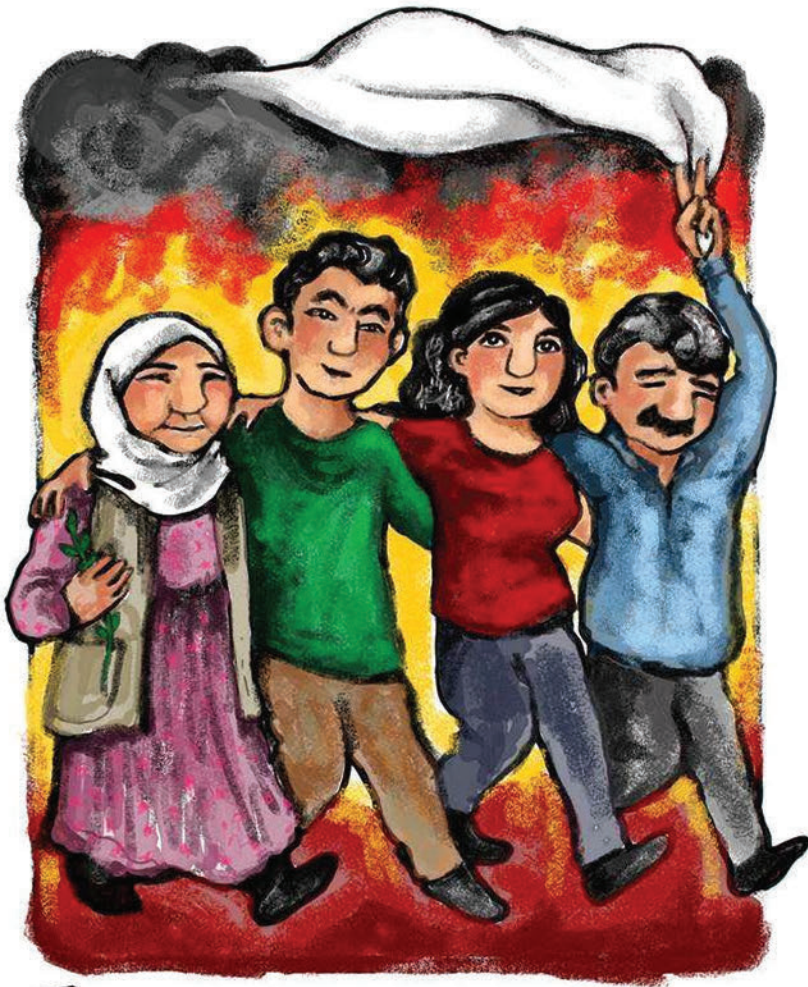
In subsequent decades, “Ellerinde Pankartlar” was sung regularly during protests by diverse leftist groups. The young protesters in attendance at the Ankara Labor, Peace and Democracy Rally of 2015 were singing this same song and dancing the three-step halay sequence when two bombs exploded behind them, killing 109 and wounding more than five hundred. Many in the video showing the moment of the explosion were carrying the banners and placards of the Socialist Refoundation Party (Sosyalist Yeniden Kuruluş Partisi), a Marxist-Leninist and socialist feminist political party. The party was founded on June 24, 2013, as a merger between several far-left factions. Given its guiding socialist and feminist principles, the party primarily supports the struggle against capitalism and ecological destruction, but it also incorporates political struggles of Kurdish and LGBTI+ movements in its party platform (Sosyalist Yeniden Kuruluş Partisi 2015). Since 2011, the party has participated in the Peoples’ Democratic Congress (Halkların Demokratik Kongresi), a union of numerous left-wing political movements, organizations, and parties that work to transform national politics by ensuring the rights of marginalized individuals who face economic, ethnic, religious, and gender discrimination. The Congress resulted in the establishment of the HDP in 2012 as an umbrella party for the united Kurdish and left-wing groups that participated in the June 2015 general election and achieved significant success.<sup>7</sup>

The choral song and the three-step halay, as well as accompanying chants, cries, and props in Ankara in 2015, linked the dancing activists’ endeavor to both the leftist movement of the 1970s and the ongoing struggle of the Kurdish political movement. As the video of the singing, dancing, and bombing went viral, a flyer depicting the bloody events of that day was also widely circulated on social media. It is a vivid portrayal of a group of four people joined in the halay as a nonviolent form of protest against a burning and smoke-

filled background, symbolizing the deadly violence of the attack. The man on the right end of the line leading the dance holds a flowing piece of white cloth above his head, symbolizing peace, and raises his left fingers to form the “V” for victory sign. The white cloth, the green and red T-shirts of the two young people in the middle, and the yellow background of the explosion symbolize the colors of the Kurdish flag. When viewed together with the calm, peaceful, and hopeful demeanor of the dancers, the yellow and red colors of the explosion evoke an exuberant and festive Newroz fire. The halay dancers resurrect the Kurds’ liberation after resisting to oppression as narrated in the Newroz myth. In the illustration, resistance, celebration, and destruction fold into one another.

The older woman on the left holds an olive branch, again symbolizing peace. Her white headscarf resembles those worn by the aforementioned Peace Mothers, Kurdish women grieving the loss of their children and demanding peace between the Turkish state and the PKK. The governments often prevented these women from gathering, persecuting and arresting them and even questioning the validation of their recognition as mothers, “since they raised ‘terrorist’ children,” and disguised opposition to Turkey’s self-defense against such “terrorists” as peace activism (Üstündağ 2023, 65). In the illustration, the older woman wears a pink, long dress, contrasting with the young woman wearing pants that symbolize her identification with urban culture. Below the illustration, the flyer’s message reads, “They were dncing [*sic*] / Ankara 10. Oct. 2015,” indicating the incompleteness of an action, the rupture of a celebratory moment, the disruption of dance, and the alliance including generations of Kurds that was tragically destroyed as “they were dancing.”

Kurdish insurgencies and the intensification of state violence against Kurds in the 1980s resulted in decades of emergency governance (Olağanüstü Hal, OHAL) in Turkey’s Kurdish provinces until 2002. The ban on the use and dissemination of the Kurdish language continued until 1991. While the law forbidding the use of local languages other than Turkish in everyday life and in cultural productions such as music and dance (Law No. 2932 on Publications and Broadcasts in Languages Other Than Turkish) was repealed, the 1991 Anti-Terror Law No. 3713 defined “terror” in such a broad way as to include almost all activities connected with the promotion of Kurdish culture. In the 1990s, the outbreak of war between the PKK and the Turkish army led to the forced evacuation of thirty-two hundred Kurdish villages (Sarigil and Fazlioglu 2014, 448), resulting in the displacement of an estimated two to three million Kurds (Gunes 2013). Even after the ceasefire and reduced con-



# THEY WERE DNCING

ANKARA 10.oct.2015

Figure 2.3. The “They Were Dancing” flyer was circulated widely on social media after the Ankara massacre on October 10, 2015.

flict in the new century, most displaced families could not or did not return (Jongerden 2007).

The 1990s rural-to-urban migration visibilized Kurdish cultural expressions such as halay music and dance in Turkey's western cities. Nevertheless, in the Turkish mainstream discourse, Kurdish language and music (and dancing to Kurdish songs) continued to be associated with "separatism" and "terrorism," resulting in halay being arbitrarily restricted and halay dancers questioned, detained, or forced to defend themselves before the judiciary, even if they did not dance in protests (*Mezapotamya Ajansı* 2024). Meanwhile, Kurdish halay music and dance were also mobilized as a performance of Kurdish national identity, cultural resilience, and political struggle (Kuruoğlu and Hamelink 2017; H. Şentürk 2021). Because many songs in Kurdish were appropriated by being translated or rewritten into Turkish (O. E. Aksoy 2014), reclaiming them showed already a stance against cultural appropriation and erasure. Moreover, the participatory choreography and bodily aesthetics of the halay have played a symbolic role to emphasize solidarity and togetherness. Finally, the deployment of halay in Kurdish weddings and private parties, which for a while remained outside state surveillance, provided a unique space where people could voice their enthusiasm and support for the Kurdish struggle.

During the 1980 coup era and throughout the 1990s, amid mourning profound losses—homes uprooted by forced displacement, comrades subjected to imprisonment and unimaginable torture, loved ones dismembered, disappeared, or murdered, and shattered dreams and opportunities—dance remained a vital act of commemoration, resistance, celebration, and the renewal of solidarity and interdependence. The halay was also embraced by other dissenting groups as a powerful collective expression against the politics of war, destruction, colonialism, minoritization, assimilation, and erasure. It was particularly connected to the Kurdish women's struggle, since "The aesthetic imagination that halay brings to the world also informs the radical political tradition of Kurdish women, the being and becoming that they constitute and the joy they generate, which the state tries to interdict with no avail" (Üstündağ 2023, 179). This aesthetic and bodily imagination also spotlights a specific kind of exertion, which some scholars associate with the Kurdish concept of *dilan*—a collective ethos where struggle is not only a serious pursuit but also one imbued with joy, vitality, connection, and possibility (Gunes 2013). Holding hands in a halay circle after tragedies, during mournful events, and despite the deepest pain one could ever feel, therefore

lies at the very heart of resistance, demonstrating the insistence of interdependency to make life prosper as bodies are present and together, moving once again in their repeating sequence.

After the Ankara rally bombing, mourning and lamenting dominated Turkey's public space of activism. Many activists in Istanbul had already been debating and negotiating the preconditions for dance deployment at protests. They discussed whether one could dance to show outrage, anger, and force against the government in times of grief. A member of the percussion group Rhythms of Resistance (*Direnişin Ritimleri*), which only performs during protests, explained that the band members have long debated performing at a women's protest against a rape incident in one of the backstreet alleys of İstiklal Avenue. She played her drum vigorously to express her rage, and many drums were broken that evening as the group members played them with extraordinary force (Istanbul, May 22, 2017).

Every year on November 25, women from assorted grassroots groups meet in Taksim Square and march down İstiklal Avenue to protest femicide and violence against women. They carry the names and photos of women who were killed by cis men. Some feminists find dancing inappropriate for such mourning practices, arguing that on a day of lamentation, protesters should march in silence and restrain from performances that might imply pleasure or entertainment. Others, however, disagree with this perspective, suggesting that dancing resists the state's politics of death, as it shows individuals alive and in solidarity with one another.

For similar reasons as the first group of feminists, the members of TMMOB had stopped dancing after the 2015 Ankara massacre, as Ayla explained. As one of the institutions who had called for the fateful rally, they were traumatized by a sense of responsibility. They had invited members from all over Turkey to join the protest in Ankara. Out of grief, they decided not to dance at protest events commemorating those who had lost their lives on the square:

When the explosion occurred, we were caught in the middle. Should we manifest hope and dance? Or, being sensitive to all the pain and sorrow, should we refrain from performing something associated with joy? We chose the second option, but we regret it because without those dances, people cannot heal. Without coming together and holding hands, people cannot heal. We tried it out, and then said, "We will not do this again. . . . Even if it explodes here today, we will come here and dance!" We eventually realized that it's not about joy. It's full of so much anger. (Istanbul, April 26, 2017)

In this context, folk dancing can be important for overcoming collective trauma and performing resilience after urban tragedies or for showing anger and rage toward the violence's perpetrators and their sponsors. Eylem, who lost close female comrades in state-sponsored armed attacks, explained to me why such tragic events targeting dissenters should not preclude activists from dancing at protests. While she commemorates her lost friends' comradeship with private sorrow and pain, she prefers dancing at public protests because she thinks that her comrades would want to see her doing that—remaining alive and resistant to duress:

Folk dance is our happy-days practice [*neşeli günler pratiğimiz*]. We have many reasons to be depressed, but we should not dive into depression. We should keep up our happy-days practice. Our friends who died at political protests lost their lives so that we may smile, and I inherit what they intended to do. If everyone else who is in extreme danger can still smile, why should I not keep my spirits flying high? (Istanbul, April 4, 2017)

Eylem suggests that dancing is a means of keeping her comrades' memory alive, the memory of those who lost their lives struggling for social and political justice. She perceives dance as an important counterhegemonic act with which to demonstrate the life's resilience against the state's necropower.

Because folk dancing references past victories and catastrophes that are formative for today's dissenting choreographies, multiple temporalities come together in the dance. The circle then requires various kinds of memory work: commemorating comrades, invoking leftist movements' genealogies to position oneself in the lineage, rehearsing recent histories of violence, and circulating narratives about the experience of loss. This connection between past and present forms the dance that contains within its layers a palimpsest of violence, fear, and trauma that manifest in individual and collective movements of the body. Dancing as a "happy-days practice" surely does not mean that dancers are happy or in celebration. They dance despite their deep pain, sadness, and anger and are aware that bodies, whether dancing or resisting, face varying degrees of risk, including injury, detention, and even death.

According to sociologist Nilüfer Taşkın (2016), dance and music can be associated with resistance only when these art forms are under threat from infringements of political or cultural rights. She argues that in horon music and dance in public spaces and popular culture, Lazness is assumed to be "safely" performed when the cultural identity is expressed in contrast to Kurdish identity, which circulates as a politicized and stigmatized signifier (193).

She suggests that unless Laz activists use horon dance and music to assert their cultural, linguistic and political rights—thereby drawing parallels rather than distinctions with the Kurdish struggle—they cannot offer a radical alternative to national politics. Environmental activist Ayşe, who is a queer woman and a secular Kemalist, disagreed with the notion that horon represents a safe space. She noted that in an atmosphere where anything can be perceived as a political threat to the state, dance and music, often contextualized as “apolitical” activities, may not be so apolitical after all. At a 2016 protest against a highway project destroying the environment in the eastern high plateaus of the Black Sea region (see Chapter 5), protesters marched down İstiklal Avenue, read their press statement, and ended with horon, with Ayşe leading the dance. Although they dispersed before the police intervened, she noticed that the police filmed her and the other dancing activists. She knew that she might later be prosecuted or even arrested based on these recordings, charged with, as is common, “violating the law on meetings and demonstrations,” “inciting hatred and enmity among the public,” or “making propaganda for a terrorist organization.” Ayşe associated horon in a protest context with a nonviolent political act “similar to a sit-in protest” or “a symbolic hunger strike” (Istanbul, July 21, 2017). Even after the protest was over, her action made her vulnerable to possible future police harassment or detention.

If it is used as evidence for an anti-government stance, folk dancing may result in persecution and criminal litigation. An LGBTI+ activist in Istanbul detailed in our conversation that she danced in a circle where she repeated the Kurdish lyrics of the accompanying song. Although she does not speak Kurdish and did not understand the meaning of the Kurdish words, she was accused of spreading terrorist propaganda because the lyrics called for Kurdish independence from the Turkish state. Beyond being persecuted for the content of song lyrics at protests, people have been detained, imprisoned, and subject to criminal fines because their folk dancing is considered to be a form of “illegal” assembly (Dalgıç 2016; *Yeni Yaşam Gazetesi* 2018).

A protester’s precariousness stems not only from persecutions, police interventions, or masculinist violence but also from personal bodily limitations, including aging, trauma, and heightened vulnerability in moments of fear—like the inability to run quickly to avoid injury or arrest. Some activists push themselves beyond their physical limits to keep up with the group’s energy and pace, while others adapt by finding ways to move in harmony with the group without overexerting themselves. Those who are more vulnerable to health-related issues, perform primary caregiving roles, work under demanding conditions, or grapple with post-traumatic stress or other psy-

chological effects—often stemming from previous encounters with extreme police violence during protests or in custody—highlight the diversity of protesting bodies’ movement capacities. Participants must navigate their own physical potential while adapting their movements to still support group harmony and bypass the normative constraints of the protest environment.

Group harmony is reflected in the timescale of dancing, which is immediate and often unpredictable. Dancers converge in a circle almost spontaneously, with the duration of the dance remaining uncertain. When and how the dance ends is unknown at the outset. Seda, a Turkish leftist activist who was also politically active in the 1970s, said that she first observes. When she feels comfortable about the footwork, she joins the dance and keeps going “until the end,” but she did not specify a time frame (Istanbul, April 4, 2017). The dance may end abruptly within a few minutes, and the group disperses, ideally before anyone is harmed. Police intervention can disrupt the flow. However, the tendency is usually to sustain the dance for as long as possible. As Ayla said:

I don’t leave the dance until the music is over and the group has dispersed. . . . Even if I feel short of breath, I don’t leave because I don’t want to give up the energy I share with other dancing people. (Istanbul, April 26, 2017)

Ayla wants to continue dancing even when she feels short of breath. If protesters dance to music, they either stop dancing when the music is over or continue while singing, extending the duration of dancing and protesting. During the 2017 May Day protests in a designated area in Bakırköy, when the music stopped, assorted political groups continued dancing by singing songs specific to the cultural history of their political organization: A leftist group sang “Ellerinde Pankartlar,” a Kurdish activist group sang a Kurdish song praising the Kurdish guerrilla, and a small group from a labor union danced the horon and sang “Bella Ciao,” an Italian folk song that became an anthem of anti-fascist resistance during World War II. In none of these instances was music the only defining variable that determined the end of the dance—and in some cases, it did not even define the genre of the dance.

Whether the music has stopped or not, Eylem is unwilling to step out of the circle before the dance is over because she does not wish to disrupt the group’s composition. She explained that she remains in the choreography out of respect for the other dancers, fearing that her abrupt departure could cause confusion among her comrades, thus “ruining” the dance. To avoid dis-

rupting the dance, she prefers circle dance to line dance, as she can more freely step in and out of a circle and is more easily replaced by others. She finds it more difficult to exit line formations because the broken alignment exposes her sudden absence. Thus, easy access and exit are essential, as they give participants the freedom to step out of the circle whenever their physical limits are reached. A circle can accommodate and incorporate different degrees of vulnerability. Eylem prefers not to join when people dance with high intensity because she does not want to get too sweaty and then catch a cold. While formal dance training is often governed by able-bodied norms of precision, Eylem makes her decisions carefully, she said, because in a collective movement, bodily capacity requires a profound consideration of how one's own actions impact others. With reciprocity as her base, she is able to attend both to her own health needs and to the other dancers' need to maintain the conditions of the dance.

The choreography, and its continuous repetition, enabled dissenters to not only defend themselves against the forces of immobility and control but also relate to one another in ever new and changing ways. This flexibility and openness in turn allowed them to create spaces of interaction, mobilize the public, and disorient the police. At each gathering, activists redistributed, reinvented, and realigned themselves in relation to others and against the potential repercussions of the police's choreography, reclaiming controlled spaces through their kinetic knowledge and praxis. Instead of obeying police commands and dispersing before the end of the dance, protesters exerted agency by staying in the choreography, either as a dancer or as a supporter of the dance, depending on their bodily limitations. Many activists do not conform to ableist assumptions about protesting bodies as tireless, youthful, and fit and negotiate their positioning. When deployed in opposition, dispersal for assembly is not a closed system; it is rather an open system that time and again enables activists to step out of and back into the collective to reconfigure public space in new ways.

#### STEPPING OUT OF AND INTO CIRCLES

In any given choreographic strategy of forced dispersal, a number of state actors—the police, the military, private security units, groups of watchmen, plainclothes police—work together to block and enclose public space and restrict citizens' movements. Streets, squares, neighborhoods, highways,

transportation hubs, and vehicles are randomly evacuated to limit the movements of the body. Activists trying to gain access to those spaces are dragged, detained, injured, maimed, tortured, and even killed. The two-year-long state of emergency and suspension of civil law following the 2016 coup attempt enabled the police to apply arbitrary measures and means of violence. To counter the use of forced dispersal as a hegemonic tool, activists improvised dispersal as a counterhegemonic tactic designed to reclaim public space. By rehearsing the dance over the course of the political action and over the years, many had already practiced to step out of the circle to reassemble at a smaller scale and for a brief duration, and join hands again to step back into the circle. When a large-scale public assembly was impossible, folk dances such as the halay and horon helped dissenters to step into tiny assemblies at the peripheries of former protest areas in order to continue to resist.

Equipped with this tactical knowledge, participants chose when and whom to follow, challenge, or hold hands with during a dance, decisions that might have affected other individual and collective choices made during political protest. Each time they dispersed the dance circle they were in to meet up with other dancers and form an alternate circle, dissenters reevaluated their capacities and improvised ways of collaborating and moving in sync with surrounding bodies. The police also examined activists' tactics, developing new ways to block, enclose, evacuate, and monitor streets. Dissenters responded by claiming new spaces and applying novel tactics to continue composing new kinds of assemblies.

Dancing, requiring immediate decision-making and negotiations at multiple levels, has many conflicting meanings and risks as well as opportunities. Whereas some activists claimed that one should not dance at funerals or events memorializing victims of violence, others suggested that dancing is necessary both for healing survivors' trauma following tragic events and for honoring their comrades, who sacrificed their lives to make a world in which others can continue dancing. They carefully and critically considered the appropriateness of folk dance at funerals, hunger strikes, sit-ins, and other types of political protest to express anger, frustration, and mourning as well as vitality and connection. Dance is a way to demonstrate the resilience of bodies and the endurance of dissenters and their capacity to assemble despite legal prohibitions and the police violence.

This chapter explored the creation of dissenting public assemblies in Istanbul's central urban areas under challenging and violent circumstances, focusing on the choreographic tactic of dispersal. The next chapter shifts its focus to the internal dynamics within dance circles, introducing the choreo-

graphic tactic of imprecision. It examines how dissenters engage in protest dance by positioning themselves fluidly among other participants, learning steps from one another, and initiating collective movements by blending different folk dance styles and their movement vocabulary. Through this tactic of imprecision, dissenting women cultivate joyful cross-group alliances that challenge the clear-cut boundaries put in place by state institutions' genealogies of authenticity and strategies of ethnonational and gender precision.

## Imprecision

### Choreographing Agonism into the Body Politic

In spring 2017, political parties and grassroots organizations are lobbying across Istanbul for the upcoming constitutional referendum on whether to shift the Republic from a parliamentary to an executive presidential system of government, vesting the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with vastly increased executive powers. The busy square outside the Kadıköy Pier ferry terminal has become this political season's host to three competing parties: the pro-Kurdish HDP, the main oppositional CHP, and the ruling AKP. These three parties do not share the square equally: While the HDP and CHP share the small area at the terminal's exit on a rotating basis, the AKP occupies a larger space adjacent to the exit in a show of hegemonic presence.

As passengers from the densely populated Eminönü and Karaköy districts disembark from the boats to mingle with the usual Kadıköy crowd, a group of women representing a number of activist groups against the referendum are dancing the horon in front of the HDP pavilion on the pier, including two HDP volunteers wearing aprons emblazoned with the HDP logo, labor union members, feminist grassroots activists, and citizens with no political affiliation (see Figure 3.3). They form a semicircle that welcomes participation from the audience. Some dancers hold the next person's hand very tightly, and others hook their little fingers, creating a delicate link that contradicts the strength conveyed by their energetic moves and forceful kick-steps. The use of the little finger is unusual in the horon but common in Kurdish halay. Likewise, they rapidly sway their shoulders, which is common in both dances: Horon features a horizontal shoulder movement, whereas halay often spotlights a vertical one. These dancers perform a mix of horon and halay movements, merging the two genres' movement vocabularies and stylings.

The leader holds a purple banner that reads "Na," the purple signifying feminism, the "Na" meaning "no" in Kurdish—here, no to the presidential system. As the dance continues, another woman claims leadership by taking the current leader's hand. She commands attention as she executes energetic jumps, decisive stomps, and intricate footwork characteristic of the standard-

ized Trabzon horon style, and other dancers work to replicate her variation. But the music guiding their steps is a Hemşin song, normally accompanied by a different horon style, one that favors a grounded stance, with dancers bouncing up and down from the knees, their pelvises weighted, bodies undulating inward and outward in a 5/8 rhythm rather than the sharper 7/8 time signature. The amplified song “Ella Ella” is a folk song in the Homshetsi language, an Armenian dialect spoken by a minority Hemşin community.<sup>1</sup> It is sung by activist singer Kazım Koyuncu (2004), who innovatively employed Western rock tunes to reinterpret traditional melodies. While Hemşin horons are typically danced to the *tulum*, the Trabzon style is predominantly danced to the *kemençe*, emphasizing a bottom-up intermittent bouncing that seems to defy gravity. The activists utilize dynamic rock beats to bring kick-steps from the standardized Trabzon horon into the Hemşin horon. They therefore combine elements from different horon styles, along with their distinctive props, music, and step sequences, opening up the space to a multiplicity of ethnic interpretations.

They also mix and match the gender-coded elements of their clothing, hair, posture, and movements. Some women wear high heels and miniskirts, others jeans and T-shirts. Most wear their hair loose, even if it sometimes impairs their vision. They emphasize movements conventionally considered masculine: energetically moving shoulders, strong kick-steps, high jumps, forceful stomps. These incoherent performances of ethnic and gender conventions challenge ideals of the national genre categorizations and the professional folk dancer’s ideally virtuosic, disciplined, precise, and unified body. I take a hand to join the semicircle.

The passersby who stop to watch the dance are mostly men. Among them, undercover police officers film the scene to identify and register the participants in police records.<sup>2</sup> No one stops dancing because of the police presence. Those who feel uncomfortable or insecure can leave the circle and blend anonymously into the crowd. The women dance until the music is turned off because it’s the CHP’s turn to use the square. As the terminal is tiny and crowded, this small area can accommodate only one political party’s activity at a time. The CHP transforms the area not into a dance floor but into a miniature stadium, where people, again mostly women, passionately wave identical Turkish flags in synchronized movements. Although they are not as in sync as participants in state-sponsored public national ceremonies, the aesthetics of the unity and forward marching, together with the amplified song lyrics about national pride, military success, and progress, reaffirms the nation as a homogeneous entity.

Behind the shared square, the AKP has its own elevated stage, where two men are dancing. One carries a Turkish flag displaying the portrait of President Erdoğan, whose executive powers would be vastly increased should the constitutional amendment pass. In the other he holds a sign that reads “EVET” (yes). The music blaring through the large speakers combines the AKP’s campaign song with folk tunes as the two men lean forward and against each other. One man bounces in place, occasionally stepping to the right and to the left or continuing to step to the right until the edge of the platform, then coming back. The second man has difficulties following him. Although they are only two, they take turns leading. As they switch roles, the new leader shows the former his own version of the steps, but because there is no repeating pattern, the former leader gives up looking at the new leader’s feet and dances as he likes.

The lack of repetition in these two men’s dance contrasts starkly with the mode of those dancing in front of the HDP pavilion. While the AKP men’s movements appear erratic, the women at the opposite corner deliberately incorporate elements from Trabzon and Hemşin horon as well as Kurdish halay, blending footwork and movements such as stomping, shoulder shrugging, and linking little fingers. Female dancers perform gendered qualities of dance movements, such as combativeness, forcefulness, and defiance, often associated with heteronormative masculinity and deployed by male horon dancers on stage. Their movements do not follow canonical staging techniques, yet they remain intentional rather than arbitrary and imitative.

Post-1980 staging conventions (such as synchronized footwork, stylization, regional choreographic arrangements, athletic physicality, and precise postures) impose fixed movement patterns that correspond to rigid ethnonational subjectivities. These choreographies aesthetically map a diverse yet unified national geography where all regions are equally able to present themselves at their best and compete for the prize of authenticity. I argue that the mixing of dance styles, attitudes, and vocabularies—alongside the use of minoritized music and dance forms—blurs rigid identitarian and antagonistic divisions, moving toward an agonistic political imagination of public space. I call this choreographic effort a counterhegemonic tactic of *imprecision*. The success of the imprecision tactic is not about the true or false execution of the supposedly authentic movements. As an improvisational tool, its success resides in its ability to sprout new possibilities of action. Therefore, the possibility of failure is unavoidable and even constitutive for imprecision. Failure to perform dance movements as “precisely” as in the standardized and canonized way challenges existing conventions and

hierarchies of authenticity. Rather than representing a lack of skill, it enables dancers to imagine and realize new forms of alliance.

Performance studies theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009) places queer failure between art, life, and play because it “rejects normative ideas of value” (173) and eschews mainstream notions of competition and achievement. The heteronormative and conventional valuing of success equates achievement with relentless tryouts that proceed along a linear timeline of development that ignores systemic and structural inequalities. In response, queer artists use layered temporalities to redefine prevailing notions of achievement, preserving what is conventionally considered childish and unserious (Halberstam 2011). Muñoz calls this a “deliberate childishness” that interrupts “the protocols of straight time” (Muñoz 2009, 159), that is, a time always progressing toward a targeted success. By oscillating between art, life, and play, and between “deliberate childishness” and the seriousness of the dissenting act, protest dancing interrupts the disciplined and virtuosic repetition imposed by the hegemonic public order to open up a space for improvisation. Particular failings then become deep openings toward “more creative, more cooperative, and more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2011, 2–3).

Like queer failure, imprecise reconfigurations of the traditional body in folk dance reject the heteronormative values of mastery, virtuosity, and precision. While the failure of the performative act is not a flaw but a structural condition of its success, both failure and imprecision operate through the breakdown of normative codes. Drawing on J. L. Austin’s theory of the performativity of language, in which utterances do not merely describe but perform social action, Shoshana Felman (2003) theorizes failure as a structural feature of these kinds of performative speech acts, not always linked to the subject’s intention. Felman examines the case of Molière’s Don Juan to demonstrate how the promise—a speech act—fails even when sincerely made. But imprecision is constituted via personal intentionality; it is a willful deviation of the norms. Imprecision is an intervention in *who is not willing to do what*—who is not willing to replicate the national codes of dance but instead molds it for political dissenting purposes. The repurposing of folk dance, not to conserve the political order but to radically transform it, foregrounds intentionality as a constitutive force connecting bodies in the circle. However, it is still a performative act whose power emerges from structurally indeterminate deeds that succeed because they fail. Like failure, imprecision is not only oppositional but also constitutive of the dissenting political expression.

Here activist women reveal themselves to be “political citizens” whose connection to the discourses of Turkish nationalism and citizenship has

been primarily structured through their gendered absence (İşin 2002). While men's participation in public space as equal individuals is largely taken for granted, women have historically been excluded from the social contract, with their citizenship and political agency constrained by patriarchal structures that relegate them to the private sphere (Pateman 1988). Folk dance in contemporary protests visibilizes and repudiates heteropatriarchal hegemonic power by pointing to the exclusion of women from public space politics and setting them in constant motion. Dancing protesters choreograph male-dominated public spaces to amplify femme politics against the Sunni Islamist and patriarchal discourse of the political regime, so that their joy is serious.

This chapter argues that by repurposing folk dances in imprecise ways, particularly through the ethnicity- and gender-bending of standardized stage choreographies, dissenting women perform new modes of political participation based on multiplicity, contestation, and agonistic struggle. Feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2007) points out that the current model of liberal democracy inevitably reproduces hegemonic and hierarchical social structures through an insistence on consensus as the only way to resolve the problem of political antagonism and dissenting diversity in society. Instead, Mouffe asks how we can create more egalitarian and pluralistic systems in which competing notions about how to organize society may confront one another productively without imposing a hegemonic consensus. She (2000) demonstrates that the dominant model of democracy today, deliberative democracy, in fact offers only "hegemonic forms of stabilization" (5) of the political conflict between individual equality and liberty and the common good. In deliberative democracy, where the common good is emphasized over dissenting diversity, citizens voice and exchange ideas and compete for widespread acceptance of their views to arrive at consensus. For Mouffe, this model aims to overcome the antagonism that is unavoidable in modern democracies by hegemonically sublimating the diversity of dissenting ideas to a rational and impartial standpoint on what constitutes the common good (73).

As an alternative to this model of deliberative democracy, Mouffe proposes a project of radical democracy based on political contest, which, to her, can take two forms: *antagonism proper*, which takes place between enemies who share no common symbolic space and who wish to establish their position as hegemonic over and against the position of others, and *agonism*, which takes place between worthy adversaries or "friendly enemies" who share a common symbolic space but "want to organize this common sym-

bolic space in a different way” (2000, 13). In agonistic pluralism, multiplicity and conflict are seen as foundational (Mouffe 2005). Citizens recognize one another’s positions as valid and consider each other to be worthy adversaries rather than illegitimate enemies (Mouffe 2000). In the struggle for power, while they seek to civilly persuade others of the truthfulness of their point of view over that of their competitors, they also work to destabilize appeals to authoritative or fixed identities so common to ethnic, religious, and nationalist politics (114). Mouffe’s political theory envisions common symbolic spaces in which conflict can be productively performed in shared work for democratic participation: “In my view the aim of democratic politics should be to provide the framework through which conflicts can take the form of an agonistic confrontation among adversaries instead of manifesting themselves as an antagonistic struggle between enemies” (117).

While authoritarian antagonism has intensified in Turkish politics since 2015, the diversity-sublimating and hegemony-establishing model of deliberative democratic contests has been playing out in the particularities of Turkish democracy and nationalism in highly specific ways since the 1980s, through the metaphors of mosaic, marble, and ebru paper marbling, explained below. These metaphors have been reconstructed and performed in various stagings of folk dances as well. In the 1980s, Turkey’s political economy shifted from a welfare-based system to an export-oriented free market economy, and state property and infrastructure were privatized. The 1980 coup d’état eliminated all leftist political organizations and their cadres and enabled a social, political, and economic shift to liberalism throughout the 1980s. The discourse of liberalism also brought new political metaphors for talking about multiculturalism and diversity in citizens’ public life. At this time, Turkish society was idealized as a “mosaic,” implying that it was a coherent unity of diverse political, social, cultural, and ethnic differences. To create a picture, mosaic art requires assembling small pieces of stones of varying “natural” colors, giving new functional meaning to each stone as a piece in a larger national puzzle. In its sublimation of diversity toward hegemonic unity, the mosaic metaphor projects the democratic ideal of the liberal state.

However, this liberal democratic idea was challenged by monoethnic nationalist elements. Alparslan Türkeş, who founded the far-right and ultranationalist MHP party in 1969 and was one of the generals who masterminded the 1980 coup d’état, stated in a televised debate with Kurdish politician Orhan Doğan that Turkey was made of “marble” (Baysal 2014). Used to indicate an unbroken, white, solid, and homogeneous Turkish national identity, the political metaphor of marble has been part of MHP discourse ever

since, emphasizing its antagonistic politics based on identitarian enmity. In 2010, cultural and ethnic diversity came to the fore once more when the EU Commission announced that Istanbul under the AKP administration would be the cultural capital of Europe, leading to public discussions about globalization and Turkey's efforts to become part of the European Union. A popular description of this period defined Turkish society as *ebru*, or "marbled paper" (A. G. Altınay 2007). The art of paper marbling, considered traditional because of its use in the decoration of manuscripts and religious relics during the Ottoman Empire, reproduces the patterns of smooth marble. By applying the method of aqueous surface design, paper marbling creates patterns that blend with and flow into one another, forming ever new colors and shapes. As a metaphor, paper marbling was used to indicate the blended heritages and fluid identities that make up Turkish society. As a traditional Islamic art form, it also signifies nostalgia for the assumed multicultural diversity of the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic state and its hegemony based on religious and cultural tolerance and compassion, which the ruling party enthusiastically reenacted to enhance its deliberative political model.

This range of metaphors for the relationship between diversity and unity in Turkish political discourse demonstrates the various ways actors worked to legitimize the hegemonic sublimation of diversity in Turkey. When the AKP won its first victory in the national elections of 2002, it promised to serve the public with "love and compassion" (*aşk ve sevgi*). The party representatives continued promises of love and affection in their election campaigns (i.e., "love for service," *hizmet aşkı*, in 2015; "love for Istanbul," *İstanbul aşkı*, in 2019; and "Ours is a love story," *bizimkisi bir aşk hikayesi*, in 2023), whereas the authoritarianism was simultaneously aggravating antagonistic politics (Atila 2023). Furthermore, construction projects, land privatization, and the destruction of natural and environmental resources in the hands of the state's crony capitalists led some critics to reinterpret the AKP's promised love as a "love for concrete" (*beton aşkı*)—immutable, concrete, and capitalist as well as colorless and tedious (I. Akkaya 2017). As a construction material, *beton*, or concrete, has been used as arguably a new political metaphor for hegemonic discourse of national unity. Unlike mosaic, marble, and ebru paper marbling, concrete is a form of fluid cement hardened over time, constituting a homogeneously bounded substance. As a metaphor for government policy, it aggravates antagonism due to its work of erasing social differences or fixing them into a firm compound of the nation.

In 2017, voting no on the constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling AKP and the ultranationalist MHP was viewed as a last chance to pre-

vent the further narrowing of Turkey's democratic system toward hegemonic authoritarianism and the deepening polarization of society. The AKP's discourse, particularly during the 2013 Gezi Park protests, had already framed this division as antagonistic camps of "us" (pious Sunni Muslims) and "them" ("plunderers," encompassing various forms of AKP opposition) (Özbay and Savcı 2018). Activists lobbying in Kadıköy Pier under the ongoing ambiguity of the state of emergency were attempting to fend off the proposed amendments' further political consequences. The outcome of this hotly contested constitutional referendum was a yes, resulting in a shift to an executive presidential system and the institutionalization of hegemonic authoritarian antagonism in Turkish democracy, a system calcified in its treatment of dissenting citizens as enemies.

The AKP and MHP together formed the right-wing electoral People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) in February 2018. A few months later, the CHP and the nationalist İyi Party (founded in October 2017 by a group who had left MHP) claimed to represent Turkey's opposition movements and established the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı). The June 2018 general elections also included the election of Turkey's first president after the constitutional change, with the candidates being the AKP's Erdoğan, CHP's Muharrem İnce, HDP's Selahattin Demirtaş, who had been in prison for over a year by then, and the İyi Party's Meral Akşener, who competed and ranked in this order. Erdoğan was elected as the president of Turkey. Although the opposition was unsuccessful in the 2018 general and presidential elections, the alliance worked better in the next year's local elections and brought several important municipalities to the Nation Alliance, including Istanbul and Ankara.

Against the backdrop of this political climate, dissenters whose existence was threatened by populist, nationalist, conservative, and neoliberal intensification became political companions to some degree. Their folk dancing in protests indicates a work of solidarity against the prevailing political ideology, but it also manifests contestation and debate among opposing views within the dissenting group. Agonistic discussions reveal the heterogeneity of these dance circles: Questions around dance composition, bodily proximity and distancing, leadership and followership dynamics, dance competence and mentoring new dancers, and call and response as well as dissonance between dance and music are discussed among dancers, mostly during short moments of dance in protest. This chapter will zoom in on the complex structure of dance circles and how various political discussions, experiences, and pedagogies are produced and circulated within them, fostering a kind of leadership that is tactical and temporary. It will then discuss the circulation

of joy, hope, courage, and good feelings within and through dance circles and imprecise improvisational choreographies in protest. Finally, it will analyze the gender- and ethnicity-bending power of dancing bodies as they imprecisely amalgamate gendered and ethnicized movement vocabularies and qualities of the folk dance canon.

#### CIRCLE DANCE COMPOSITIONS

When two people hold hands to dance at a protest, they both affirm and contest forms of individuality. Melek suggested that dance is an individual expression, and one does not have to belong to any political group or ethnicity to folk dance in a protest (Istanbul, March 22, 2017). Others emphasized the dance circle's capacity to connect people, particularly enabling interactions among ethnically, racially, economically, and sexually marginalized individuals to create physical forms of solidarity. A dance circle supposedly composed of equal individuals who hold hands to demonstrate solidarity and support in a horizontal organization of bodies may also invoke social hierarchies based on experience, political affiliation, gender, and competence in dance improvisation. The possibility of negotiating folk dance movements establishes common ground among activists, both inside and outside the protest space.

Proximity to those one wishes to dance with is a constant challenge in a circle where no one stays in the same place, no matter where they start. Because bodies move relationally, one's movement is often challenged or supported by others as the dance continues. In this process, someone who prefers to lead the dance might find herself suddenly at the end of the line. Unlike institutionalized choreographies, where dancers remain in fixed places and roles, at protests some may prefer to lead while others may feel more comfortable dancing next to the leader, at the margins, or among other women. These decisions change from one situation to another. Some protesters prefer to hold hands only with women, to avoid touching the hand of strange men to eliminate any possibility of discomfort, while others look for a spot where they can insert their body in between people they find attractive. With each participation in the circle, these placements are likely to shift, and a protester may relocate by exiting and reentering the circle next to those she wants to connect and move with.

That said, protesters often prefer to join hands with people from their own political and social circles. Many expect to be asked before a newcomer simply steps into the circle by taking their hands. Dilek, a transgender rights

activist and human rights defender, told me that she was annoyed with people who just stepped into the circle and prevented her from dancing next to a close friend and fellow activist. Refusal is addressed when hands are clasped together more tightly, creating an unbreakable bond; the request to join hands could simply be ignored, or dancers could say that they just want to catch up as they dance together.

Another way to respond to constantly shifting bodies in the circle is to dance next to an experienced dancer, a decision that shapes the nature of participation in and contribution to the circle significantly. Those with a deeper understanding of the genre are distinguished as good dancers, and sometimes as dance leaders, who negotiate their expertise in the group. In this context, experienced dancers can support inexperienced dancers by facilitating their movements in the circle. Protesters may choose to perform next to an experienced dancer so they can learn the step patterns and later convey their political statements and emotions with more choreographic fluency. For example, Melek is often asked to lead the dance at protests because she is a competent dancer. She accepts leadership in the hope that by taking the lead, participants of varying abilities would be able to focus on and manifest a variety of emotions. Similarly, Leman, who identifies herself as an independent feminist and an ambitious dancer, said that she often begins by analyzing the circle from the sidelines so she can join the line next to skilled dancers, which makes dancing more pleasurable for her and enables her to better project her joy. Whereas Burcu, an environmental and animal rights activist, said she prefers to insert herself in the middle of the semicircle because she feels more comfortable being surrounded by other people. That way, if she gets confused and takes a wrong step, she can adjust her rhythm to those next to her, who are more experienced in the dance style (Istanbul, April 11, 2017).

The negotiation of placement, proximity, and distancing is ongoing throughout the protest and requires assiduous dancer attention. A constant awareness of the leader's changing cues and step patterns and the shifting conditions of the protest space helps dancers avoid injuries and remain vigilant about developments in their immediate vicinity. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 depict a protest on the square outside the Kadıköy Pier ferry terminal following the referendum. Hotly contested due to the state of emergency and an unusual and, according to outside observers (OSCE 2017), illegal decision by the Supreme Election Council (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu) to abruptly change the system of ballot counting while the votes were being tallied, many opposition parties and dissenters saw the yes outcome as fraudulent. The constitutional



Figure 3.1. Activists dancing at Kadıköy Pier to protest the presidential referendum results. Dancers learning steps from each other. Istanbul, April 24, 2017. Still from video by author.



Figure 3.2. Activists dancing at Kadıköy Pier to protest the presidential referendum results. Another moment in the dance where dancers practice synchronization. Istanbul, April 24, 2017. Still from video by author.

change it ushered in essentially institutionalized Turkey's authoritarian form of political antagonism. Refusing to recognize the results, protesters marched in the streets until stopping at Kadıköy Pier, where I was able to capture their dance on video.

In the first still from the video (Figure 3.1), protesters dance in a semicircle holding hands tightly, several looking down at their neighbors' feet to grasp the rhythm and learn the step patterns of the Hemşin horon, whose melodies ring out from a nearby speaker. Next to a woman in a black coat and black-and-white stripes at the midpoint of the semicircle, the still reveals two young men who hold hands as they move their right feet forward in a synchronized gesture with the two women on the left of the still. The group is surrounded by audience members, including protesters and passersby, mostly of men of different ages. Some document the event with their cameras, while others stand behind the dancers to learn the steps, carefully watching the lead dancer's feet on the left, visible in the second still (Figure 3.2), wearing a light brown leather jacket and black backpack.

While the first still (Figure 3.1) shows protesters adjusting their steps and learning from each other, the second (Figure 3.2) demonstrates the dancers' slightly improved synchronization and alignment. The dancer in the black coat and black-and-white stripes in the middle has exited the circle and a dancer in red has joined not far from her spot. This new dancer, whose backpack seems to be sliding down her coat sleeve toward the ground, has stepped into the circle between two dancers whose hands were joined in the first still. Having aligned their bodies and adjusted their bodily coordination, the protesters in Figure 3.2 lift their left feet in unison. Their upper bodies are bent slightly from the waist, and their elbows are lifted higher to execute the rowing gesture, one of the most distinctive movements of the horon. As the Hemşin song continues to ignite the group's enthusiasm, the dancers continue to search for their shared pace and cues in the horon with every new person entering and exciting the circle. In the first still, several dancers focus on the step patterns to grasp the sequence, and in the second, their lifted chests and heads signal more confidence. Some are shouting or yelling, mouths open. While new participation always changes the group dynamics, a development of communal and individual competence during the dance enables dancers to add more components to the choreography, making it more complicated and fluent in each repetition.

Not only the bodies and their movements but also the objects that demonstrators bring with them contribute to the making of the protest space in a public square. Backpacks, for example, are an important part of the creation

of this ephemeral space. Backpacks contain vitally important equipment that can guard the protesting body against the possibility of police attack—goggles to protect the eyes and a water bottle to dissipate bitterness in the throat, both a response to the excessive use of pepper spray by the police. Those with chronic breathing disorders such as asthma carry medical supplies to facilitate breathing. A backpack may also contain a helmet to prevent skull damage as a result of the police's use of batons or rubber bullets. It may contain extra clothing for use in case of police water cannons or detention. A notebook or piece of paper with phone numbers is also useful, should the protester's phone be broken or seized by the police. To prepare for a backpack carrying all these vitally important tools being lost or seized, the most important phone numbers (such as those belonging to lawyers) and their blood type are written on the protester's arm. Backpacks also contain everyday items. Given that the backpack, and all its contents, has its own bouncing pace during the dance's kick-steps, jumps, and squats, dancing with the counterweight of a pack on one's back is not easy. If an immediate police attack is not predicted, backpacks may be put at the center of the circle so that everyone can keep an eye on their pack and dance without the weight. These backpacks serve as a kind of center, the materialization of a safe space around which protesters dance to manifest their demands. When protesters carry backpacks during the dance, the weight and pace of the bags as well as the fragility of their contents contribute to protesters' decisions about energy and proximity. These decisions often require experience in protest and in dance.

A protest is an opportunity to learn from more experienced dancers in action. If asked, competent dancers are expected to show the dance style to others and lead newcomers at protests. Yıldız, a member of Trotskyist political party the Continuous Revolution Movement (*Sürekli Devrim Hareketi*), leads horon and halay circles. She emphasized the importance of mentoring and rehearsal as key to newcomers' learning experience. When approached by an inexperienced dancer for guidance, she may demonstrate the dance for them on the spot during the protest and rehearse it with them outside the protest so that they may more readily join the protest:

I say, "Come on comrade, you can learn this. No worries." I place those who don't know the dance in between experienced dancers so that they can learn it from experienced dancers during the protest. . . . If it's requested of me, I also teach the dance style at home before we join a protest. . . . One time, a friend of ours wanted to enter the horon [circle]. But he was very tall and couldn't stick to the rhythm. We went to Kadıköy Pier where people [regu-

larly] dance the horon. He joined, but could not continue. I said, “Look, you draw too much attention and can’t stick to the rhythm. Let’s teach this to you [at home], instead of you learning this on the protest field [*eylem alanı*].” But he was persistent and said, “No. I can learn this in the field.” He kept coming back to protests, and after four or five times, he learned it. (Istanbul, May 4, 2017)

Yıldız found these conversations and negotiations around dance important, as she could learn how novice activists handle difficulties. The young activist she talked about had insisted on studying dance in protest space rather than learning it at “home,” showing that he was committed to his decision and would pursue it until he succeeded in this challenging task. While public space provides a relevant context for dance to be performed as a political act, the protesters’ determination and perseverance in learning and deploying dance reveal key aspects of the group’s internal dynamics.

While experienced dancers may or may not prioritize teaching, their mentoring skills often help them establish new alliances with others. By teaching and mentoring, activists who are competent in the dance enable others to learn and execute these skills, fostering the confidence necessary to join the circle. One competent dancer and Kurdish youth activist, Esma, explained to me how she developed such confidence through the support of others since her childhood. While waiting long hours in front of a prison in Diyarbakır to see her relatives, all of whom were political prisoners, Esma would rehearse a set of Kurdish dance styles. But she not only learned the dance technique but also adopted a pedagogical perspective with an emphasis on relationality, morality, and the resilience of dancing bodies. Today, she includes this experience in her approach to dancing and mentoring:

I never say, “Get out! Don’t ruin the dance!” I never exclude, because I remember learning these dances myself outside the prison where I went with my family to see our relatives. I had no idea how to do it. But I eventually learned the dances because when I am dancing, I feel that I am not alone. The people I lean my hand, my arm, my shoulder on give me courage. (Istanbul, April 13, 2017)

Esma now leads both women-only and mixed-gender circle dances at political protests and makes a point not to discourage activists who would like to learn the dances. If she sees a person behind her who wants to dance but feels shy about joining or is afraid of failing in front of the others, she said,

she turns toward this person and smiles to encourage their participation. Esma approaches mentoring as an inherent part of dancing in protest. Yet the mix of competition and cooperation between experienced dancers and inexperienced newcomers at any given protest creates an ever-present tension.

Some activists are reluctant to teach at protests, because it may reduce their own political enthusiasm. Another competent dancer, Ayşe, an activist from an eastern Black Sea environmental solidarity platform, shared this attitude: “It’s very boring to teach the horon to those who have no idea how to do it. Yet they insist on dancing! I say, ‘OK, look at my feet’ and I hold her hand.” Burcu, another environmental activist who is involved in the Istanbul-based Northern Forests Defense (Kuzey Ormanları Savunması) and works at an international human rights organization in Istanbul, prefers not to ask for individual attention from other dancers. She said, “I don’t know the horon, but I can adjust my steps. From time to time, I remember [the patterns] while I’m dancing, but I can’t perform a horon from beginning to end.” She prefers to follow the lead dancer and avoid any placement that might offer her the lead. Yet she dances the halay with more confidence because of her earlier familiarity with this genre. While she empathizes with Ayşe’s comment on the boredom of dancing with a person who does not have enough experience, she also values the common objective that is so central to protest, a value that pushes dance beyond its aesthetic context. In a protest setting, she argued, dance can be well taught, and those who do not know the dance can be tolerated because of the shared political objective:

Someone who doesn’t know the halay disturbs your rhythm, and after a while you get irritated and can’t enjoy it. When I dance with our people, the halay is much more pleasurable. But why you dance the halay is also important. There’s a whole different pleasure you get from dancing together with many people for a purpose. Then what you dance becomes more important than how smoothly [*akıcı*] you dance. The dance you deploy while struggling for something together with people from different cultures is very precious. (Istanbul, April 11, 2017)

Just as Burcu prioritizes political objective over aesthetic perfection, Dilek values the shared objective of dancing in protest, but she also mentioned that this objective is best delivered through good dancing. Although she does not enjoy dancing next to people who cannot feel the rhythm, she respects their attempts to learn. Rather than teach them, she focuses on her own movements in an effort to keep her eye on the objective of dancing together in protest. She said:

The person next to you should get carried away with the rhythm. When a person who does not know how to dance holds my hand, I cannot focus on dance, and it destroys the objective of dancing. But if this person is persistent and remains next to me, I don't leave. I continue. I think that leaving would be disgraceful, and that maybe this person just wants to learn. Yet she distracts from my motivation. Even though I don't show it, I get uncomfortable. (Istanbul, April 3, 2017)

These complex debates and struggles manifest both dissonance and resonance in a dance circle. On the one hand, a tense negotiation can occur between an experienced dancer and a newcomer. A novice dancer may be stubbornly persistent and continue dancing next to an experienced dancer, even though the novice's rhythmic (dis)engagements may distract the latter from the common objective of dancing. On the other hand, having a political goal that is shared by all dancers, both new and experienced, also shapes their relations. Competent dancers therefore teach, mentor, ignore discomfort, or discuss dance positions in the circle with a newcomer. Through a back-and-forth movement between competencies, new hierarchies, political positionings, and forms of solidarity may develop.

These competencies can also be carried beyond the space of the dance to influence social and political relations. Burcu noted that when she dances with prominent political leaders and sees them being corrected, warned, or even left outside the circle because of the way they dance, she is less anxious about talking to or arguing with this person in the group:

For example, you attend a meeting, and someone is speaking authoritatively and expressing your thoughts precisely. You notice that he dominates the group. This is the kind of person who speaks more, pontificates more, and also does more. Consciously or not, you create a distance that glorifies this person. This is normal. After a few such meetings, if you dance across from this person at a protest, the distance disappears. You begin to establish a more relaxed and equal relationship. Dance helps form more equitable relations in a political organization. It's much easier to do things with a person you can dance with. Most importantly, you become much more comfortable expressing yourself in the group. I think that dance reveals something about the dissenting movement itself. The biggest problem is the internal authorities we create. The function of dance is to challenge these authorities. (Istanbul, April 11, 2017)

To Burcu, dancing subverts the male political actor's hegemony and makes the dissenting group more equal and accessible for its members. By dancing alongside the political leader, marginalized voices can be raised more comfortably and internal hierarchies of authority can be challenged more readily. The distance resulting from the members' hierarchical positioning can be transformed into a productive space in which distancing and proximity between bodies and their collective efforts to move together generate alternative kinds of relationships.

Competence in this context is about flexibility and the ability to improvise on the spot. In this sense, protest dance competence differs from the virtuosic precision of institutional folk dance, as the dancer's concern for maintaining the continuity of the circle and communicating the dance's political message takes precedence over aesthetic perfection. This contrasts with the conventional understanding of virtuosity, often conceived as the "display of exceptional technical accomplishment" performed on a proscenium stage (Burt 2017, 57). In such conventional, antagonistic notions of virtuosity, dancers are expected to accept a model of the correct way that comes from the authority of a master.

An alternative, agonistic notion of virtuosity values other kinds of dance knowledge and experience, approaching dance as a shared space of social and political encounter. This kind of agonistic virtuosity can also be formative for stage production. In this context, Thomas DeFrantz (2005) introduces Houston Baker's concept of "deformation of mastery" to examine how Black performers manipulate established representational structures to assert their subjectivities, even when working within the constraints of established movement idioms. Analyzing the repertory and technique of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, DeFrantz shows how dancers adopt and adapt conventional dance techniques such as ballet and modern dance through Africanist aesthetics and individualized corporeal understanding, creating a composite performance style that transcends the original form.

Folk dancing by dance enthusiasts in political protest extends this framework, where competence is not defined by formal training or institutional recognition. Most dancers have no formal instruction or sustained engagement with codified folk dance techniques. Many of the people I spoke with emphasized that they dance only at political protests. Their imprecise deployment of folk dance movements is not a sign of their lack of skill or a symbol of their arbitrary attitude toward the dance. It is rather a persistent intention to have a corporeal discussion about their politics as they negotiate the symbolic gestures, dance movements, and props. These imprecise articulations

of political subjectivity and the development of competence in improvising during protests reveal a possibility of cooperation among activists.

As a work of improvisation, the choreographic tactic of imprecision shares common ground with radical creativity rather than disciplined repetition and virtuosic precision. Dancers often play with the presentation of social and aesthetic values to convert them into political symbols and statements. While protesters' imprecise deployments open up new spaces for competitive encounters between dancing activists, their common vulnerability to hegemonic violence and oppression and their aim to create an equitable and democratic political space enable them to search for alternative modes of collaboration without congealing their movements into ethnonationalist identitarian notions of difference. Mouffe critiques antagonistic identitarian politics, since it constructs the Other as an "enemy" to be destroyed rather than a worthy "adversary" to be challenged and persuaded to resolve disagreements (2000, 2002). Unlike the ideal of the "unity" of opposing groups promoted in liberal democracy, agonistic pluralism does not aim to domesticate or eliminate antagonism; it instead provokes adversaries to find ways to negotiate their identitarian differences.

Alliances between ethnic, political, gender, and sexual minorities are reflected in the careful choices individuals make about which dances to perform and which songs to accompany them with, as these choices are intertwined with their ideological commitments. Eylem, identifying herself as a Circassian from the North Caucasus, performs, leads, and teaches Kurdish halay in protests to demonstrate her political allyship. "You should learn your allies' culture. To perform their dances is to accept their culture," she said, referring to the importance of cultivating new forms of solidarity with the Kurdish political struggle among other social and cultural rights movements (Istanbul, April 4, 2017). In her view, developing competence contributes to the visibility and dissemination of marginalized cultural and political aesthetics and is an essential component of dissenting political discourse and activist responsibility. Yıldız added that because some marginalized dances are excluded from the national folk dance canon, they are viewed as "radically politicized." Non-Kurdish activists—including Yıldız, who was born in Trabzon and is a competent horon dancer—politically claimed the halay due to the long ban on the Kurdish language and continuous marginalization of Kurdish music and dance in urban public spaces. While Yıldız's Trotskyist political party prioritizes class struggle, she performs and leads halay and horon styles at protests, dances associated with a cultural rights struggle before. Instead of antagonistic politics arising from deep-seated differences

and irreconcilable conflicts between opposing groups, her approach to performing dances of the politically and ethnically minoritized is an effort to create alliances despite identitarian differences. As offered by agonistic political practice, this display of identitarianism aims not to eliminate but to reframe conflict to create a constructive force that enhances democratic practices (Mouffe 2000, 2005).

Yıldız added, with a joyful smile, “There is no protest where I have not stepped into the halay.” Yet she became serious again:

[But] I do have criteria! I don’t step into the dance in songs I find politically irrelevant. If it would seem bizarre to leave the dance at that moment, then I don’t leave, but I don’t sing either. I only join rhythmically. For example, I don’t chant the Kurdish guerrilla song, but I do think it’s a beautiful halay. It communicates that rebellion so well. It demonstrates that resilience so well and is also a bit of a rough dance. Other than that, there is the [Turkish] “Mitrailleuse” song, and I don’t sing that either, because politically you can’t express yourself to the masses through the forms of armed struggle that such songs contain . . . It’s not because it includes violence . . . but because, under current conditions in Turkey, armed struggle has no real political grounding. The guerrilla halay is beautiful, but when I bring my own constituency [*kitle*] there and they say, “Weren’t you opposed to individual terrorism [*bireysel terörizm*], so why are you singing this?” I can’t politically justify it. (Istanbul, May 4, 2017)

Yıldız continued to identify songs and dance styles popular at urban protests, indicating the ones she enjoys leading and those she finds to be politically incompatible with her ideological stance. She likes to dance the halay to the song of “Keçê Kurdan” (Kurdish Girl, in Kurdish).<sup>3</sup> “The lyrics are not politically charged,” she says. “But the dance is often dominated by women dancers because it is associated with the women’s movement in Turkey.” Her political group supports the joint struggle of men and women, but women in her organization participate in protests that center the specific demands of women. The dance enables Yıldız to convert areas of political intersectionality into opportunities for connecting with other grassroots struggles, thereby crafting emergent alliances amid all the ideological and discursive dissonance.

Like the complex consideration of which song lyrics should accompany which dance movements, verbal and corporeal forms of exchange are important in developing personal and political relationships at protests. According to Esma, one may engage in conversation with another dancer during the dance, fostering personal interaction and the possibility of connection. The

dialogue may involve questions about the dance, an explanation of the movements, an affirmation of their execution, or tips about the dance's progression. Both verbal and corporeal forms of communication can convert these nascent personal relationships into political ones, and vice versa:

I have danced the halay with hundreds of people at protests. When you go to a protest, you may bump into someone you remember. During the dance, perhaps you had a conversation. For example, "I can't do it [the dance]!" "What is it [the movement]?" "Do I move my arm like this?" "Should I step in this direction?" It becomes a conversation. When I establish such a connection, I remember them when I see them in another place. I think to myself, "Hey, we danced the halay together." (Istanbul, April 13, 2017)

The intertwining of physical movement and verbal exchange display how forms of political relationality are established. Asking for help and guidance fosters supportive political relationships, making competence a practice of mentoring and inclusion rather than of competition over the most authentic technique. Shared dance practice and verbal communication help diverse dancers find new ways of moving together. By asking questions that unveil their lack of knowledge and experience, activists perform a kind of intimacy. Moreover, in a circle, the dancer, the audience, and the police observe each other, as their gaze is in constant motion to enable them to act on the changing dynamics inside and outside the circle (Bayraktar 2022). Dancers develop an affinity through this moving gaze and their bodily and verbal exchange that establishes relationships of mutual recognition and builds a larger network of solidarity, extending beyond the space of dance and protest.

As demonstrators dance in ever-changing assemblies, they develop familiarity through visibility and recognition, which may create connections in other spheres of life beyond the political activity in the circle. For women in general, and trans women in particular, such familiarity is important to cue support in a public space where heteropatriarchal violence and hostility is endemic. Trans woman activist Dilek explained that due to patriarchal and homophobic violence in everyday life, familiar people, such as those she danced with in a protest, are seen as potential sources of support when it is most needed:

When I bump into someone I've previously danced with at a protest in the street, I am likely to recognize her. I often think, "Oh, she's one of us," and continue on my way. . . . I am comforted by the knowledge that this person is somewhere close by. (Istanbul, April 3, 2017)

The particularly high rates of femicide in Turkey may explain Dilek's and other women's unease in their everyday conduct in public life. Protest is not a safe space for women. State institutions, the police, and state-sanctioned media organizations discipline women by publicly shaming and insulting their bodies when they are detained, captured, and killed. Involuntary manual cavity search of detainees is a common insult. Yet outside the protest space it is also unsafe for women. In 2020, three hundred women in Turkey were killed by their husbands, fathers, and other male family members or acquaintances (Farooq 2021). According to data collected by the Monument Counter (Anıt Sayaç), a digital platform commemorating women killed as a result of domestic violence, 434 women were killed in 2021 and 414 in 2022 (Anıt Sayaç, n.d.). According to the Trans Murder Monitoring Project run by Transgender Europe since 2008, Turkey has the highest rate of trans women murders in Europe (TGEU 2022; Rainbow Europe 2022). The stark visibility of violence in everyday life, the state's indifference to seeking justice, and the normalization of impunity—manifested in a victim-blaming rhetoric and lenient sentencing under the guise of “undue provocation” (*haksız tahrik*)—all heighten the significance of solidarity within the protest. However, even among feminist activists only, there are many points of debate that prevent them from collaborating with ease. As I will show below, tensions and points of contention frequently arise between some cisgender feminists and LGBTI+ activists (Özlen 2020). In some instances, transgender activists have reported being perceived as a “threat” to the feminist movement, facing accusations of disrupting the cause (Togay 2020). Aslı Zengin (2016) suggests that the shared vulnerability of both cis and trans women to state violence and the gendered politics of death is a crucial common ground, with the potential to forge alliances and unite these struggles in solidarity. Folk dance choreographies contribute to developing such relationships through fostering sociability, intimacy, and responsiveness among the dancers, who are both allies and rivals in the restructuring of public space.

#### TACTICAL LEADERSHIP

The lead dancer typically improvises the movement sequences, picks the accompanying songs, and determines the pace and energy of the dance, ideally with the aim of generating joy among the group members and pleasing the audience with the dancers' harmony and synchronization. The followers' abilities determine the leader's choice of sequence and styling. The leader is

expected to pay close attention to the various dancers' needs, communicate to the musician(s) to determine a fitting tempo and style, and make decisions on when to slow down or increase the pace and bodily energy. An environmental activist who is a retired folk dance teacher in Artvin emphasized the leader's role in anticipating the dancers' limitations and facilitating their needs during the dance:

A horon leader carefully observes who is in the group and provides cues accordingly. If there are old people who cannot squat or people who cannot jump high due to uncomfortable clothing, the leader must organize the movement sequences and consider the optimum level of comfort for all members of the group. (Artvin, August 15, 2017)

Leaders are seen as responsive to the group. They should be supportive and find creative ways to develop rapport within the group. The leader's cues could create a surprise effect and therefore lift the dancers' mood and bring energy into the dance. For their part, followers are expected to remain focused and attentive throughout the dance so that they can adapt their movements and energy to these spontaneously changing cues.

The fluid exchange of leadership—stepping forward to guide and gracefully stepping back when the moment calls for it—is a vital social and political dynamic in protest dance. However, some leaders draw criticism for continuously asserting their authority, unwilling to relinquish their role in the spirit of equality. Clutching the banner or handkerchief—whether symbolic or tangible—they resist passing it on, even when doing so would honor the collective ethos of the group. Though they may be skilled and experienced, such leaders are often seen as unsupportive, and their leadership loses value.

Dilek is an accomplished dancer who relishes leading the circle, and she becomes vexed when a leader does not want to give up the handkerchief and simply snaps “No!” in response to others' claims. Infuriated by these incidents, she said, “That kind of pretentiousness! Let it go. Give it up. If someone wants to take the lead, let them take it!” Competent leadership is marked by self-awareness, enabling a leader to take the lead when needed and share it with others when requested. Passing the role to another competent dancer is not just an act of respect but a deeply political gesture, one that cultivates camaraderie and, above all, solidarity. Fahriye, an experienced activist engaging with the labor, environmental, and Kurdish movements, used the metaphor of weaving to describe how shared leadership can generate group solidarity:

We consciously encourage good dancers to take the lead. For example, I will say to someone who performs better than I do, “You do it first, and I will then piece it together.” Right there you weave that solidarity! You block the forcefulness [*dayatmacılık*] . . . the forcefulness of “I’m taking the lead! I’m waving the handkerchief.” (Istanbul, April 13, 2017)

Fahriye finds the latter attitude compatible with her political stance and uses her competence in dance to support others who might want to lead. Similarly, Melek, who is asked to lead at most dance gatherings, objected to those who don’t want to give up the leadership role. In her opinion, the politically correct thing to do is to share the leadership role with others rather than insist on retaining it for oneself.

For Melek, Fahriye, and Dilek, the question whether to pass the leadership on to someone else or claim the role for oneself is a political and ethical one. Protesters who are marginalized within the political movement may claim the leadership role tactically and collectively as a form of solidarity, as when activist women stake claims to leadership in competition with men. At an environmental protest against a mining project in Artvin in 2015, women passed the lead to one another, effectively blocking men from leading the horon for an extended duration. In traditional contexts, the leader must grant permission or signal fatigue for another person to take the lead. At this event in Artvin’s city center, women horon leaders would signal when they became tired so that another woman could take over their leadership before they gave up. This enabled women to take the lead one after the other and not hand it over to the male participants. Activists now remember this event as an example of a successful act of femme solidarity. An environmental activist of this anti-mining protest described this scene to me, emphasizing that they were having fun passing the leadership on to one another, leaving the male dancers empty-handed in each round (Artvin, July 29, 2017). She noted how much she had enjoyed dancing at that event, even if their movement sequences might not have been as precise and orderly as in a staged horon choreography. This act against men’s self-claimed leadership mobilized intensity, responsiveness, and cooperation among the protesting women.

In several interviews, men defended their occupation of the leadership role by resorting to gendered discourses about their biological attributes, claiming that because the average man has a louder voice and a taller and more muscular body than the average woman, other dancers are better able to see and hear his dance cues. Yet many women lead, regardless of whether their voices are louder than men’s. Esma said that men often expect women

to watch them dancing or leading the dance, but that for women spectators, this is like *gücü izlemek*, “watching power,” by which she meant masculinized or patriarchal power. Esma argued that women are louder and more visible in dance circles at protests because they must be: “They don’t want to simply watch power; they want to claim it.” Such claims are made by being open to mutualized forms of teaching and learning, recognizing others’ vulnerable positions within hierarchies of power, and fostering familiarity and support outside the circle.

That the new political relationalities emerging from protest dancing both subvert conventional political and social hierarchies and change across protest events suggests the deployment of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2017) call tactical leadership. If in the twentieth century centralized and vertical forms of political organization gave rise to a political vanguard that took power in the name of “the masses,” the way that people gather, organize themselves, and make decisions in contemporary social movements committed to participatory democracy has given rise to a new form of leadership. These movements are not, as is often surmised, “leaderless,” but rather have “tactical leadership.” While they reject centralized and vertical structures and vanguard forms of political leadership, they need not reject sustainable political organization and institutions. This sustainability is achieved through the relationship that tactical leadership cultivates with the multitude’s long-term decision-making. Tactical leadership is “occasional, partial, and variable” (Hardt and Negri 2017, 19) and contingent on the collective’s long-term developments and trajectories. It “must always remain strictly subordinate to the strategic decisions of the multitude” (291). To be tactical in the sense of sustaining the movement’s political work toward its goals, leadership requires sensitive responsiveness to group members’ needs and the ability to act flexibly and spontaneously. In radical dancing, tactical leadership also aims to make visible a choreographic articulation of the political statement the group is making. The dance leader’s role is tactical inasmuch as the person temporarily occupying the leadership role provides momentary solutions that will sustain the strategic forms of solidarity and allyship so vital to the movement.

In contemporary Turkey, tactical leadership in radical dance circles also aims to foster expression of collective joy and good feelings as a way to disrupt the fear that the state circulates. Women activists asserted that they dance at protests because “It’s fun” (*eğlenceli*). In our conversations, many began by describing the immense joy and pleasure the horon, halay, and improvised belly-dancing styles such as *çiftetelli* bring to participants, and only after thinking a while did they list other uses of dancing, such as gathering

people together, encouraging participation in protest, or leaving the police undecided about using violence against dancers. Several were surprised to be asked to think about how dance facilitates political struggle. Melek asserted that what women want most is “to dance and have fun” at protests (Istanbul, March 22, 2017). Several other women activists stated that while they do not explicitly think of dance as a political statement, they are well aware that displaying joy and laughter collectively at a protest is both a disruptive and a defiant act in opposition to the grim face of power in Turkey.

#### FOSTERING JOY, HOPE, COURAGE, AND GOOD FEELING

Activists’ joyful interactions through dance are a form of political positioning that promotes the “principle of hope” against the hegemonic politics of fear (Bloch 1986). Because hope suggests the possibility of a future, it is sometimes considered to be the flip side of fear and stagnation. Muñoz (2009) bases his conceptualizations of queer failure, future, and utopia on the work of philosopher Ernst Bloch, who sees hope as a horizon of potentiality that ends fear. Bloch (1986) describes hopelessness as a “temporal and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs” and hope as “lead[ing] most efficiently toward the radical termination of the contents of fear” (5). Bloch insists that discontent, as an antidote to a naively optimistic view of hope, is part of hope and that together, hope and discontent defy and resist all forms of deprivation. Drawing on Bloch’s theorized relationship between hope and discontent, Terry Eagleton (2015) argues that we should not confuse hope with optimism, desire, ideals, or modernity’s doctrine of progress. Instead, he proposes, failure is necessary for hope, because it is how we distinguish hope from optimism. By acknowledging the realities of failure and refusing to capitulate to them, we cultivate “an unspecified, nonpurposive openness to the future” (65) and sustain focused action when the ultimate objective is uncertain.

Throughout the period spanning the constitutional referendum of April 2017 and the general and presidential election of June 2018, hope was central to sustaining dissident action. Despite the AKP government’s intensified antagonistic authoritarianism, dividing citizens into “us” and “them,” dissident activists invested in agonistic “spaces of hope” to continue their struggles (Özdüzen 2019). In the face of countless defeats and failures, despite the lack of access to main public squares, and throughout the state of emergency (2016–2018) and the criminalization of democratic dissent, activist women’s

dancing sustained hope by publicly demonstrating forms of patience, courage, perseverance, solidarity, and resilience. But if dancing represents an investment in hope toward the cultivation of antiauthoritarian struggle, it can also be used to spread courage among activists and the general public. In the coercive public spaces of contemporary times, many activists consider their participation in protest dancing to be an act of courage. Regardless of the level of dance knowledge and competence, Burcu said, joining the circle to become part of a collective stand against the government is recognized and appreciated as a courageous act:

If a person goes out there and starts dancing with others, even though she doesn't have enough knowledge of the dance, I never say, "Leave. You're not capable [enough]." Just the opposite. I greatly appreciate those who don't know [how to dance] and who join the halay with great courage. What is important is to dance, to hold hands with us. I am sure she also gets enjoyment from doing this. What is important is to feel good. I think that many people are afraid of doing something wrong and of being embarrassed. But I think [the point of] being in the circle is to show courage and the willingness to act. Why not support her by showing her the steps? If she asked me, I would teach her immediately, right there. It's not important that you do it correctly. It's the being in it [the circle that is important]. It's better to have more people in the halay than out, because it demonstrates how many people share the same thing. (Istanbul, April 11, 2017)

The teaching of dance steps to fellow dancers at a protest could demonstrate appreciation of and support for their courage. This encouragement is crucial, as the bravery of dancing under repressive conditions can inspire others to take action beyond the dance itself. Fahriye noted that the affect of courage demonstrated in the circle inspired people outside the circle, helping courage circulate throughout society:

When you dance in a protest under today's brutally coercive conditions, you are already performing a courageous act and spreading courage in society. Someone who sees you [do it] says, "You know, I could do that too!" You strengthen one another like in a chain. . . . As a woman you dance right then and there [in public space], and for them [the AKP government], this means that you're exhibiting your body. All the dances you perform while [exhibiting your body] are a revolt against the system. . . . If someone who doesn't know how to dance joins in an activity that is performed as a group, it shows cour-

age. . . . She's saying, "I am here, too," and I welcome her with no reservations. She's saying, "I'm different but present." (Istanbul, April 13, 2017)

Activists and the passersby inspired by them dance to spread courage from one body to another. Writing of contagious feelings, Anna Gibbs (2001) notes that in face-to-face interactions, "bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear" (para. 1). For Fahriye, because courage can be contagious in public space, it can also be amplified each time state officials issue statements infantilizing and targeting cis, queer, and trans women who appear in public spaces.

As the affective spreading of courage and joy unsettles the hegemonic politics of fear and exclusion, a politics of good feeling subverts the misogynic and disciplining technologies of the state. The joy that is generated by folk dance is not an end in itself but rather a tool for exposing state violence and challenging state officials who wish to erase women from the public sphere and national politics. In the nationalist discourses so common to deliberative democracies, hegemonic forms of social hope and "public happiness" require that marginalized subjects leave their bad feelings behind and instead embrace a "common good" whose touchstone is the hegemon's "good feeling" (Ahmed 2008). When they refuse to act in compliance with the hegemon, they are typically excluded from the national conversations (1–2). Activist women's deployments of folk dance in Turkey turn this relation on its head. They spread joy and happiness to (re)establish the sociable relations that the state works to sever.

"When I dance in that square, I feel as though all the birds trapped inside my ribcage have been set free!" As Fahriye said this, she quickly shook the back of her hand in the air to release emotions that had been imprisoned in her body like birds trapped in a cage, such as hope, anxiety, and pain. Dancing connects these released emotions and ignites bodies for action. It launches an affective and highly political rebellion against the uneven distribution of anxiety and punitive violence of authoritarianism. For Dilek, demonstrating the possibility of collective joy is therefore an act of resistance:

What do we do when we're happy? Halay. People become happy when they dance [the halay] at protests. They go out to protest in resistance to the things they see as problems in their lives, and displaying happiness becomes part of that resistance. (Istanbul, April 3, 2017)

The aim of folk dancing at protests is not to approximate the staged iterations of these dance forms but to remind participants and passersby of what joyful, sociable interactions are like. In this sense, public dancing offers its audience a glimpse of how to perform joy and happiness as a collective dissenting act against a political atmosphere of fear and mistrust. Built principally on the maximization of the sociable values of “joy, relief, and vivacity” as a vehicle for politics (Simmel 1949, 257), folk dancing works to create dynamic and playful interactions among individuals even in the presence of failure, suffering, and defeat.

The intersubjective performance of a politics of emotion—including the politics of joy, hope, courage, and good feeling as well as those of anger, rage, and lamentation, as shown in Chapter 2—blurs and blends assumed boundaries between the public and the private, reason and emotion, and politics and dance. Activists adjust various movement vocabularies of folk dances that may not be included in the national folk dance canon, in particular the dances of Kurds, Armenians, and Greeks. As they express and debate political opinions with their dancing, protesters mix the different styles and bend the gendered movement qualities of the dances. By engaging with movements of systematically disempowered non-Turkish and non-Muslim minorities, women, and genderqueers, they dissociate their folk dance practice from the institutionalized one and reimagine and reconfigure majoritarian public space. In this way, protesters repurpose the nationalist and heteropatriarchal codes of Turkish folk dance canon to use them against authoritarian antagonistic state power and for their own agonistic pluralist ends.

#### THE GENDER- AND ETHNICITY-BENDING POWER OF MOVING IMPRECISELY

In the early 1980s, feminists, who were predominantly cis, urban, and educated women, many of whom came out of the leftist struggles of the previous decade, opposed government policies intended to restrict women’s reproductive freedom and access to abortion (Torun [1983] 2015) and fought for equal participation of women in politics and social life. In the second half of the decade, feminists focused on political campaigns and street actions against gender violence. In 1987, cis women and transgender feminists campaigned together against sexual harassment and sexual violence against women (Togay 2020) and succeeded in creating a large-scale assembly despite the

post-coup climate of fear. In the same year, trans sex workers staged a hunger strike in Gezi Park against police oppression, and gay, lesbian, and trans activists joined them in support. Today, this event is considered one of the early milestones of trans-inclusive queer feminism in Turkey (Çetin 2015; Togay 2020).

As feminist activism was gradually institutionalized in the 1990s, cis feminist activists also went through a series of self-critiques, resulting in further fractions in the next decades due to “divergent views on transgender inclusion” (Togay 2020, 47) as well as emergent alliances between, for example, Turkish and Kurdish feminists. In the 1990s, mainstream discussions around gender were concerned with secular and Muslim bodily representations of women and continued into the 2000s (İlyasoğlu 2000; Öncü 1999; Sehliskoğlu 2021). The post-military-coup 1982 constitution had politicized the headscarf by banning its use in public institutions such as universities. Muslim women’s subsequent struggle against the ban, the increasing visibility of the headscarf in the public sphere, and the political reactions following the preclusion in 1999 of Merve Kavakçı, the first veiled woman MP in the history of the Turkish Republic, from taking her oath in parliament, sparked bitter and increasingly antagonistic debates about gender and body politics across society.

Starting in the 1990s, LGBTI+ activists increasingly challenged mainstream debates about the secular and religious representations of women in public space. LGBTI+ organizations proliferated across the country, such as the Lambda Istanbul LGBTI+ Solidarity Association in 1993, the Kaos GL/ Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association in 1994 in Ankara, and the Black-Pink Triangle Izmir against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination Research and Solidarity Association in 2001. Kurdish LGBTI+ formations Hevjîn—later Hebûn—in 2010 and Keskesor Amed (Diyarbakır) in 2012 highlighted the genders and sexualities that were invisibilized in mainstream discussions and brought forth histories of queer feminist activism. These activists adopted an intersectional approach to demonstrate that dominant economic, political, and national discourses work together to differentially domesticate and control gendered and sexualized bodies in Turkey.

One central event around which these discussions unfolded was the Feminist Night Marches (see Gürcü 2017). The Feminist Night Marches (Feminist Gece Yürüyüşü) began to be celebrated annually on March 8, Women’s Day, in 2003, when women from different oppositional political groups gathered in İstiklal Avenue with no political signs of their organizations, in search of an independent feminist coalition. Yet feminist political protests are also

spaces where historical controversies resurface between feminist activists. For example, the 2011 Feminist Night March staged a deep tension between trans-exclusive and trans-inclusive approaches, which differently define women-only spaces of protest. Some cisgender feminist activists argued that trans women did not experience patriarchy in the same way as cis women did and claimed that transgender people benefit from male privilege to a certain extent. Trans feminists challenged this argument by emphasizing an unspoken “cis privilege” and criticized transphobia enacted through the imposition of “compulsory femininity” (Gülkan and Aligül 2012, 260) in women-only activist spaces. LGBTI+ activists and their allies, including LGBTI+-inclusive cis feminists, continued to criticize those who define the limits of womanhood (Savran et al. 2011) and underlined the extraordinary impacts of femicide on trans women (Özlen 2020). Some cis feminists on the other hand argued that accusations of transphobia could prevent asking questions about trans subjectivities or discussing their views on a common feminist struggle (Karakuş and Akkaya 2011).

While these debates were ongoing, cis, queer, and trans feminist activists increasingly found themselves being targeted by the state. Since women are expected to appear in the public sphere as mothers and wives, according to the AKP’s Islamist neoconservative discourse, feminists have been “othered” (Bianet 2015), and LGBTI+ individuals have been systematically ignored, criminalized, pathologized, and consequently excluded from political and legal protections (Ergün 2019; Eşsiz 2012). Pride parades were banned in Istanbul and several other cities after the largest parade in 2013, and LGBTI+-themed events were randomly banned and raided by the police. In 2017, for example, the governor of Ankara banned all LGBTI+-organized public events (Human Rights Watch 2019). Increasing femicides and the peripheralization of feminist organizing resulted in strategic alliances between women’s and LGBTI+ organizations, despite their divergent approaches to feminist politics and methods. Cis, queer, and trans feminists have, over the past three decades, at times cooperated, at times fought to make what is commonly considered the private sphere a visible and legitimate site of legal and political regulation. Their demands have varied: recognition of women’s unpaid care work in the home (Acar-Savran 2004), reproductive rights (Toksöz and Barın 2012), the legalization of brothels and better conditions for sex workers (Berghan 2013; Çelik 2013), the punishing of child abuse and child marriages (Uçan Süpürge 2021), adherence to international agreements on women and gender equality (Acar 2010), and legal and political mechanisms to prevent femicides (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu 2022). Despite their

political and ideological differences and privileges and hierarchies, which are continuously reflected on, many cis, queer, and trans women activists have continued to develop political alliances. Importantly, although these activists have distinct ways of expressing their ideologies and putting them into political practice, they engage in dance as a shared space to challenge the heteropatriarchal conventions of political power.

When women dance at protests, their diverse politics are often in dialogue with their choreographic decisions. For example, a staged dance circle typically reflects the heteropatriarchal gender regime's conventional body politic. When one of my Istanbul horon teachers chastised me for not dancing like a woman, he was referencing these conventions, such as women taking smaller steps, performing fewer jumps, and raising their arms less high than men. Men, on the other hand, were encouraged to expand their movement capacities and claim more space. Under such tutelage, women were expected to keep their hips straight, and any horizontal deviations implying "excessive femininity," such as swaying the hips from the pelvic center, could become the object of criticism because of its association with the sexualized body (see Chapter 1). When women dance to protest, like the women who campaigned against the constitutional referendum at the Kadıköy Pier, they alter these qualities of hip, leg, and arm movements that are explicitly gendered as masculine or feminine. As we know, dancers cultivate their bodies through training to extend possible ways of moving and create layers of meaning. In this way bodies do not only reiterate norms; they also modify them, establishing "resonances among distinct categories of normative behavior" (Foster 1998, 5) and also expanding the transgressive and resistive capacities of the gendered and sexualized body.

The video is available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14524804.cmp.16>

As activist women deploy horon and halay choreographies, they modify these dominant ethnic, cultural, national, and gender iterations by tactically employing imprecision. As a primary tool for improvisation, imprecision enables activists to embody both the masculine and the feminine qualities of the dance, opening a public space in which they can intervene in the gendered constructions of the body. It also enables dancers to bring the movements and gestures from ethnically marginalized dance forms into the mainstream discourse, emphasizing a multilayered politics and intersectional identities in contemporary iterations of folk dance at urban protests. I argue that these imprecise deployments of folk dances attentively combine diverse dances associated with particular ethnicities and gendered expressions and therefore enable protesters to, on the one hand, mix the geopolitical move-



Figure 3.3. Women dancing horon during the "Say No to Presidency" rally, Istanbul, April 4, 2017. Still from video by author.

ment vocabulary of dance styles to perform a kind of ethnicity-bending and, on the other, blend masculine and feminine movement qualities to perform a kind of gender-bending.

At the gathering of women from a number of activist groups dancing the horon in front of the HDP pavilion in the Kadıköy Pier in April 2017, activists combined movements from the eastern Black Sea horon and the Kurdish halay (see Video 3\_3.mov). While the song blaring through the speakers came from the minority Hemşin community, the dance style resembled Trabzon horon (quick, light, elevated kick-steps and sharp rotations of the upper body), not Hemşin horon (in which pelvic movements and bent knees counterbalance the forces of gravity and the weight of the body). In institutionalized iterations of the horon, the person on the right typically holds the right hand of the person to their left from above, placing the palm of their own left hand on the back of the partner's hand in an anchoring gesture. At protests, however, palms often touch, and fingers are sometimes interlaced. A casual way of holding hands saves time and energy when participants must think extemporaneously in relation to changing participant and environmental dynamics rather than execute gestures in culture-specific ways. Yet in Figure 3.3, women are seen holding hands in a very different fashion, connecting to one another by hooking their little fingers together. Unlike horon, this way of holding hands is common in Kurdish halay dances. Activist women's use of this gesture draws attention to both solidarity with Kurdish women

and the irrepressible existence of Kurdish culture in Turkey's public space. This aesthetic innovation makes fast-paced horon more difficult to execute collectively, because little fingers easily disconnect at high tempos. While some activists are focused on the footwork, experienced dancers stay alert to developments in the protest area, heads lifted and eyes forward, and still others seem to be enjoying the effort and energy that is being put into the dance. As the tempo of the horon accelerates, activists clasp their little fingers more tightly to maintain their alignment. This cross-pollination of folk dance genres creates an ad hoc norm for the dance, as newcomers work first to hook their little fingers into the circle and only later adjust their steps.

The same horon song continues to play in that square on this date. In each iteration, a different version of the dance can occur, depending on who is leading and who is dancing in the circle. Sometimes dancers' elevated arms rest on each other's shoulders, demonstrating a kind of bonding associated with brotherhood. This "arm to shoulder" alignment is rare in the horon, but typical in Greek and Armenian dance styles. High-energy kicks and jumps become challenging in this position, because the dancers connect strongly through their shoulders. This kind of upper-body connection requires smoother footwork to preserve synchronicity. Just as they negotiate the Kurdish halay by hooking little fingers or the Greek *horo* and Armenian *bar* through arm-to-shoulder alignments, in the execution of this fast-paced horon, activists' choreographic work rejects the crystallization of ethnic and cultural differences that the precise canonical choreographies of these dances demand.

Women dancing in front of the HDP pavilion in Kadıköy Pier also integrated presumed masculine movement qualities into their horon movement repertoire, such as high jumps, deep squats, and aggressive, strenuous, and powerful kick-steps as well as presumed feminine yet "improper" movements, such as hip swaying from the pelvis. Through alternating between these references, dancers highlight and challenge heteronormative constructions of the body and open up possibilities for new movement combinations to emerge. For example, Ayşe mentioned that she purposely opens her legs wide in dance because she feels more grounded and enjoys leading in this posture. Although in institutionalized deployments of the horon women are not supposed to do this, when this activist leads the dance in her preferred position, her bodily comfort instills confidence and strong energy in the group. This does not mean that other dancers have to mimic her; rather, her movements open a possibility for them to dance in between the gendered movements of the body. These dancers' eclectic, gender-fluid, non-disciplined, and ethni-

cally diverse aesthetics and movement formations enabled a deliberate choreographic tactic, namely imprecision, through which they negotiated the social, cultural, and political meanings of these movements.

Such tactics can be used not only in the struggle against nationalist and heteropatriarchal hegemonies but also to challenge like-minded activists and organizations. If during a Hemşin-style horon song dancers active in the Kurdish movement find it important to use gestures from a common Kurdish folk dance as a display of suppressed identity in public space, the gesture may make other participants uncomfortable or require convincing. Such corporeal negotiations among activists may or may not be resolved immediately during that protest; they may continue to be discussed in different forms and contexts. In this way, activists' folk dancing serves the goal of agonistic struggle among multiple opposing groups, namely to never reconcile or "solve" the different positionalities and objectives into one hegemonic vision or dance but rather to renegotiate their expression, mix, and weight anew in each dance and protest.

But there is a clear antagonistic division between two political poles. Supporters of the ruling AKP and the ultranationalist MHP do not easily dance with activists struggling for a counterhegemonic democratic political system. Similarly, ideological discrepancies between two opposing parties may prevent them from dancing together until they overcome hostility and enmity. In this context, when the pro-Kurdish HDP decided to support the Kemalist CHP in the June 2019 municipal elections, supporters of these two political parties danced the halay and the horon together in the streets. This was unimaginable during the 2017 campaign for the constitutional referendum, when they held separate campaigns in a small, shared corner of the square outside the Kadıköy Pier ferry terminal, exemplifying agonistic occupations of public space to demand a democratic politics. Using aesthetic qualities to contest their hegemonic adversaries in the AKP and the MHP, horon- and halay-dancing oppositional political parties and grassroots organizations came together to engage with one another politically in an inharmonious adversarial struggle that nevertheless kept open the possibility of contingent cooperation toward their common objective of countering authoritarianism.

#### IMPRECISION AS A TACTIC OF FAILURE

By using certain dance movements and forms of interaction, dissenting women instrumentalize folk dance for their counterhegemonic politics,

adopting the choreopolitical tactic of imprecision against institutionalized forms of precision and virtuosity that police the boundaries between ethnic, racial, cultural, gender, and sexual positionings. Imprecision references the queer tactics of failure, understood as an intentional refusal to meet the existing parameters of achievement embedded in structural inequalities, and instead to create new realities. In an intersubjective and pluralistic move, the imprecise execution of folk dances during protests requires a careful assessment of the movement repertoires, dance styles, songs, gestures, objects, spatial references, and traditions of multiple political groups and positionalities. Indeed, the ideal in such protest dancing is to create an imprecise choreography to be able to recognize and display a range of different political priorities, promote agonistic debate, and register the common dissenting character of the group.

In their “artistic activism” (Mouffe 2007), dissenting women deploy and mix different qualities of movement to choreograph alternative manifestations of gender and intersectionality. As a subversive politics of emotion, their excessive joy reconstitutes the political in a public space constructed as rational. When activists hook their little fingers together; when they teach, mentor, and lead in dance circles; when they encourage wider participation with their politics of joy; when they intermix dance styles, musical genres, and movement qualities; when doing all this, they rechoreograph the collective in national politics.

As central political agents acting in the public sphere, dissenting women do not ask for permission to raise their voices, make their bodies visible, or claim public spaces for activism. Because folk dancing in Turkey has been used as both a form of dissent and a hegemonic presence in public space, its historical traditions and conditions of possibility are contingent and highly specific. In the past decades, and particularly since the 1980s, institutional decisions about which dances are appropriate for the nation and the female body and which should be viewed as symbols of threats refashioned dance as a political field and created codes through dance styles, song preferences, musical instruments, gestures, symbols, costumes, and props, which made these dances decipherable as hegemonic or dissenting.

Another form of decipherability is rooted in Turkey’s modern history of social movements. Contemporary protesters use their bodies and folk dances tactically in dialogue with a rich leftist dissenting tradition and aesthetic culture that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. Femme activists both draw from and resist this history and the gendered aesthetics of the 1970s revolutionary body in their deployment of the choreographic tactic of embellishment,

the topic of the next chapter. In Turkey, the popular use of folk dancing in the activism of earlier decades, such as workers' factory strikes in the 1960s, left-revolutionary organizing and students' demonstrations in the 1970s, and political prisoners' activities during the 1980s military junta regime, can help us understand how activists then and now engage with folk dance. This engagement provides critical insight into how today's repertoire of resistance is inspired by and negotiates with earlier political traditions.

## Embellishment

### Reclaiming the Revolutionary Body

Dance has played a significant role in the visual landscape and political culture of leftist movements in Turkey. Two illustrations of dancing workers from the 1970s (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) demonstrate the shared characteristics and diverse artistic interpretations of the leftist body politics. Both visuals are associated with the leftist union Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (hereafter DİSK), founded in 1967. DİSK marked its tenth anniversary with a poster competition celebrating the 1977 May Day. The posters were exhibited at the Istanbul Sports and Exhibition Hall (İstanbul Spor ve Sergi Sarayı), the city's first indoor multipurpose venue located near Taksim Gezi Park,<sup>1</sup> as part of the inaugural May Exhibition (Mayıs Sergisi). The exhibition was organized by the Visual Artists Association (Görsel Sanatçılar Derneği) and ran from May 1 to 15 (Politika 1977). Founded in 1975 by a collective of leftist artists advocating for visual artists' rights (Milliyet Sanat 1975, 31), the Visual Artists Association became a key force that shaped the political aesthetics and artistic discourse of this period. Over time, these illustrations became iconic visuals of the 1970s leftist movement.

The 1977 May Day poster illustrations were reproduced as postcards the following year (*Sanat Emeği* 1978). One popular art work by Gürel Yontan (Figure 4.1) depicts three men and a woman dancing as they hold each other's shoulders to form a line. The incomplete left and right edges of the dancers' arms imply that there are more people dancing with them. The two men on the right look toward the sky, while the man on the left turns his face slightly downward. The only female dancer in the line of four is positioned between two male workers and looks straight down at the ground, with its intricately painted pink, white, and yellow flowers. Their mouths are half open, which can be interpreted as them smiling or singing a song. The four figures raise their right feet and stand on their left ones. Under their feet, the grass grows in different shades of green. The female dancer lifts her right leg higher than the others in the frame and gracefully executes a pointe. The male dancers are in work shirts and overalls, and the female dancer wears a factory



Figure 4.1. "1 May." Postcard illustration created for the 1977 May Day celebration by Gürel Yontan. Source: SALT Research, Scared of Murals Archive. Courtesy of Dilek Demirci.



Figure 4.2. May Day poster from 1978 depicting men and women folk dancers, signed jointly by the Union of Food Industry Workers (GIDA-İŞ) and its umbrella organization, DİSK. Source: TÜSTAV-DİSK Arşivi 2006, 39.

work dress and kerchief, signaling their status as laborers. The multicolored ground beneath their feet contrasts sharply with the charcoal illustration of the workers and the empty background. Each dancer firmly holds onto the others, as their left arm reaches across to the person on their left from above the right shoulder, and their right arm holds the person on their right below the shoulder line. Such hand- and shoulder-holding in addition to the open chests, muscular bodies, identical factory clothing, and unity of male and female workers on the front line are common images also depicted in other visual material and illustrations from this period.

Contrasting with Yontan's portrayal of urban factory workers, another illustration depicts workers dancing in baggy pants, garnished vests, flat shoes, and head ornaments (Figure 4.2), signaling a rural context. In 1978, the Union of Food Industry Workers (Türkiye Gıda Sanayi İşçileri Sendikası, GIDA-İŞ) and its umbrella organization, DİSK, jointly issued a May Day poster showing a lively moment of male and female folk dancers, holding hands and dressed in supposedly traditional garb, implying that they are agricultural laborers, and performing with a vertical posture, open chest, and synchro-

nized steps. On the far left of the line, a man is holding a handkerchief aloft as a sign of his leadership. On the far right, a woman raises her arm to mark the end of the line. Like Yontan's urban factory workers, their mouths are open, as though they are singing a song or shouting a slogan as they dance. The dancers' horizontal arrangement, with men and women alternating, points to gender equality in the dance troupe and the food workers' union. Between two iterations of the union logo in blue, the poster reads, "Long Live May Day / Unity Solidarity Struggle" and on the bottom "All Food Workers to DİSK/GIDA-İŞ." Both the text and the folk dancers' bodies implore the viewer to join the food workers' struggle. The dancers lean back and against one another, movements that demonstrate camaraderie.

In this period, a central goal of Turkish leftist visual and performing artists was to connect art and society, which led to the development of revolutionary<sup>2</sup> art (*devrimci sanat*) or socialist realism (*toplumcu gerçekçilik*). These artists' proposals for socialist (*toplumcu*) struggle and values were particularly evident in painting but also manifested themselves in literature, theater, and dance. The common point of the socialist approach was to emphasize local and national power dynamics in such a way that anyone could relate to, evaluate, and consume the art. In this way, artists were seeking ways of "coming down to the people" (*halka inme*) and "approaching the social" (*topluma yönelme*), key terms in the socialist art and literature of the 1970s (Bek 2007).

The social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s profoundly shaped artistic discourse in Turkey. This period marked the height of the Cold War, when Turkey, remaining neutral but also committed to NATO after 1952 and bordering the USSR, was at the forefront of the struggle between East and West. Turkey's admittance to the US postwar European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan)<sup>3</sup> tightened military collaboration with the United States, including the establishment of American military bases in Turkey. The presence of thousands of US military personnel in the 1960s sparked mass student protests (Mater 2022). Leftist movements, uniting student and labor organizations, sought what they referred to as full national independence (*tam bağımsız*) from Western imperialism, symbolized by American forces in Turkey. International political developments were an immediate concern for the Turkish left. Armed radical leftist groups, such as the People's Liberation Army of Turkey (Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu), struggled against imperialist expansionism. Some radical activities included kidnapping American airmen and hijacking a Turkish airliner (*New York Times* 1971). As revolutionary discourse resonated with the masses on the street, the 1970s saw an explosion of political mobilization through strikes, boycotts, and university occupations.

Simultaneously, emerging right-wing paramilitaries violently suppressed leftist influence in urban and rural areas, and even used the *halay* as a means of torture in Kurdish villages (*İleri* 1970). A 1971 military intervention outlawed leftist parties and organizations, imprisoned activists, and executed student movement leaders. Following this, mounting economic instability and increasing unemployment fueled the rise of the ultranationalist and Islamist Nationalist Front (*Milliyetçi Cephe*) coalition (1975–1978), intensifying political violence. Murders of journalists, academics, and politicians became routine (Ahmad 2020; B. Toprak 2002). The 1980 military coup further crushed leftist opposition through imprisonment, executions, disappearances, and forced exile.

Against this backdrop of intensified violence and state oppression in the 1970s, leftist movements and organizations adopted an aesthetic and visual language in which, I argue, hypermasculinity was one important norm governing the body and its movements, highlighting the revolutionary worker as a physically strong body. His strength and rebellion could also be seen as a response to the precarity of the Left, which was dealing with both state violence and the enmity of right-wing groups. Realistic and expressionist styles were particularly used in the artistic material for political agitation. Physical exaggerations were popular in this visual culture (Antmen 2005). These included pumped biceps and muscular and large hands (Figure 4.3) to reflect the strength of the worker and indirectly the potential of the working class to challenge bourgeois society (Aysan 2013).

For example, an iconic *DİSK* banner designed by artist Orhan Taylan, hanging on the facade of the monumental and symbolic Atatürk Cultural Center in Taksim Square for the May Day celebrations of 1977 (Figure 4.3), epitomized the leftist revolutionary image of the worker who has unchained himself. He stretches his muscular arms as if he is embracing and protecting the protesting crowd gathered in Taksim Square on that day. His sleeves are rolled up, drawing the viewer's attention to his extraordinary biceps.

This image speaks to another iconic work that Orhan Taylan created for the 1976 May Day, which received first place in the 1977 May Day poster competition organized for *DİSK*'s tenth anniversary and showcased at the Visual Artists Association's May Exhibition with Yontan's and other artists' works. The poster depicts the two large hands of a male worker, drawn in charcoal and carrying a red globe, symbolizing the world revolution, as flowers overflow from his hands (Figure 4.5). The hands of the worker are strong yet deliberate, presenting the world of May Day as if it is precious jewelry. The muscular hands of the anonymous worker, his significant nails and knuckles, and



Figure 4.3. The thirty-two-meter-wide poster of the worker breaking his chains designed by Orhan Taylan for DİSK in 1976, hanging on the facade of the Atatürk Cultural Center in Taksim Square during the 1977 May Day celebrations (*Cumhuriyet* 1977, 1). Courtesy of *Cumhuriyet* newspaper.

his attentiveness and care are reassuring, showing confidence in the success of workers' world-making against capitalism. The dominant red color in the illustration can be interpreted as the suffering of workers but also as the color of their socialist future. The combination of solemn and serious work, struggle, and suffering with the cheerful flowers spilling out of the worker's hands creates a playful and complex image that nevertheless foregrounds hyper-masculine aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

Starting from the 1960s, leftist visual artists also engaged with theater groups who performed in working-class neighborhoods, at factories during strikes, and in urban and rural public spaces; made masks and stage designs; and joined dance, drama, graffiti, and caricature productions with workers to raise questions about power relations around labor (Bayraktar 2025). In our conversations, many activists mentioned that professional artists were not the only ones using the arts to communicate with workers: Leading members of leftist movements, such as union organizers, also spotlighted the arts, and particularly dance, to show solidarity with workers and support their political mobilization.

The use of dance in workers' movements was a global phenomenon. Since the end of World War I, socialist artists in various contexts developed new dance aesthetics for and with the working class to defy the mainstream aesthetic and cultural values of bourgeois art and society. This took shape through modernist and socialist dance movements in Europe and the United States (Franko 2002; Graff 1999; Hardt 2009; Tomko 1999) as well as through folk dance practices aligned with socialist state projects (Giersdorf 2013; Walsdorf 2018; Wilcox 2019) and labor rights activism (Kızmaz 2015). In Turkey's leftist circles, folk dance was employed to symbolize and promote themes such as labor, productivity, class consciousness, and egalitarianism, with secular men and women participating side by side in the country's social and economic development.

Seda, who was involved in the Marxist-Leninist group Revolutionary Path (Devrimci Yol)—a successor of the Turkey Revolutionary Youth Federation (Türkiye Devrimci Gençlik Federasyonu, aka Dev-Genç)—in the 1970s, underlined that it was common for leftist organizations at the time to have their folk dance troupes create a social space for members, promote party politics, and represent the political group at celebrations and events as well as protests. This served to draw others to the organization and thus forward the political group's call. Dance was particularly crucial for recruiting supporters to the party's or organization's cause (Kızmaz 2015). These dance troupes, often equipped with special costumes and well-rehearsed choreographies,

reflected the norms of the group in terms of bodily aesthetics and political discourse.

Seda primarily danced the waltz at private parties and later began studying folk dances to perform at protests and organize people in her political community. She even founded a dance studio and ran this space for many years. Based on her experiences in these dance troupes and in the leftist revolutionary grassroots movement, Seda argued that folk dancing was a serious activity in leftist circles, showing workers' strength and dedication. It enabled the challenging of existing class hierarchies in bourgeois society through its aesthetics and body politics:

[Folk dance] is danced like a victory. The faces look forward, the body stays straight, the eyes look toward the sky. But here [in Istanbul's public squares] everyone looks down. Everyone tries to learn the steps from one another. That's why that victory feeling does not always appear. . . . There's a revolution [in the sky]. There's the type of life [that] socialists desire. If we don't see this, I think, the rest is meaningless. (Istanbul, April 4, 2017)

Other activists also frequently referred to these gestures—the faces looking forward, the straight position of the body, and the gaze directed toward the sky—as common features of the dancing revolutionary body of the 1970s. Movements involving dancers holding onto one another's shoulders, as in Figure 4.1, or leaning backward, as in Figure 4.2, were thought to indicate solidarity among and the togetherness of workers. The 1970s Dev-Genç journal *İleri* contributed to this imagery, as the authors depicted the desired bodily qualities of leftist revolutionaries—such as having a “straight head” (*dik baş*) and “open forehead” (*açık alın*) (Karaman 1970, 28)—or described workers as being able “to shoulder” (*omuzlamak*) the contemporary revolutionary struggle (Sarp 1970), upholding an ideal of the laborious body with strong shoulders and musculature. In our conversations, other mainstream qualities activists mentioned were wide-open chests, indicating the bravery and pride of workers as well as their readiness to face any and all challenges ahead, and firm hand-holding to show strong bounding. Some activists stated that the leftist revolutionary dance aesthetics of the 1970s idealized a monolithically moving collective body that provided onlookers with a monumental image of the working class, therefore empowering the movement's supporters.

Fascinated by the strong similarities and palpable differences in activists' depictions of the 1960s and 1970s dancing revolutionary body, I wondered where this leftist revolutionary imagery and aesthetics came from and how

it was promoted through visual media as well as dance. How was dancing repurposed by the leftist workers' and students' uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s? And how is this conceptualization of the dancing revolutionary body interpreted and approached by dissenting cis, trans, and queer women activists today?

I argue that protesters challenge the heteropatriarchal conventions that persist within dissenting groups as well as in the state's use of power by using the counterhegemonic tactic of *embellishment*, adorning their bodies with hyperbolic femme aesthetics and revolutionary fervor. Embellishment works at multiple levels and in various modes, including body politics, movement, costume/clothing, and poetry/song lyrics. At the level of body politics, embellishment privileges aesthetics as a key site of "femme politics," foregrounding femme visibility and embodied defiance of normative gender codes (moore and Glover 2024; Story 2017; Tinsley 2022). Jillian Hernandez (2020, 3) defines this creative process as "aesthetic labor," which is an artistic work on one's body to deliberately create excess to go beyond the binary construction of proper and improper femmehood. Performing femmehood as a critical episteme and political positioning and imaginatively engaging with notions of excess and elaboration, Black and Brown femme individuals have been resisting the invisibilization and marginalization of their race, gender, and sexuality in both national political discourse and mainstream feminist practice in different contexts (Dahl 2010; Tinsley 2022).

In Turkey, femme activists draw on similar aesthetic strategies to contest accepted gender conformity as they adorn themselves in protests by choosing to wear elaborate frocks, high heels, and makeup and by adding glitter and shine to their banners to spotlight a femme art of survival. At the movement level, they embellish the slow-paced tempos of commonsensical revolutionary folk dance performances by accelerating the rhythm and increasing their bodily energies, using hip, torso, and shoulder undulations in opposition to the monolithically moving revolutionary body ideal. At the level of poetry and song lyrics, many contemporary activists embellish verbally by changing leftist revolutionary song lyrics or manipulating the slogans iconic of the 1970s leftist struggles. The aim of their femme embodiments and, at times, excessive use of gendered aesthetics is to subvert patriarchal state power and ideals of the default leftist revolutionary body as "naturally" male.

If "femme" is considered an intentional performative femininity (Dahl 2010, 2016), "Femme activism inevitably responds to and challenges heterosexist assumptions about feminine aesthetics and sexuality while also navigating through a queer terrain," in which the politics of recognition and vis-

ibility are key (Dahl 2010, 172). Femme performances disrupt dichotomous categorizations of masculinity and femininity as they blend and blur aesthetics (moore and Glover 2024) and genres. Femme activists perform gender-bending by juxtaposing feminine-coded movements with masculine-coded ones, such as wide-open legs, effortful kicks and high jumps, and deep squats, as discussed in Chapter 3. Therefore, the use of embellishment supports the choreographic tactic of imprecision, which aims to disrupt hegemonic heteropatriarchal and ethnonational regimes and boundary-keeping, enabling activists to negotiate competing political positions among potential allies. As a revolutionary practice that embodies an intersectional political vision, embellishment brings gender and sexuality to the center of folk dance body politics to challenge heteropatriarchy on the left, claim a place in the leftist political history, and use it as a continuing source of inspiration.

Unlike imprecision, embellishment is not about creating something completely new from existing material. Rather, it is about diversifying what is normative within the form, expanding the dances with ornamentations that signify ethnic, gender, and sexual subjectivities and struggles. Embellishment is about better expressing oneself with small touches without changing the structure of the dance and without reforming its movement vocabulary. Kurdish LGBTI+ activist Deniz said it was about performing her Kurdishness with minor additions to the halay: “A small difference [an ornamentation] in the footwork helps me better express myself [as a Kurd] and increase my self-esteem as I politicize [the dance]” (Istanbul, June 25, 2017). This political work of embellishment targets Turkish nationalism and the homophobia that she said is predominant among both Turkish and Kurdish leftists. Embellishment can be likened to “tailoring” a dance movement to highlight racialized, ethnicized, sexualized, and classicized femme subjectivity in public space. As transgender rights activist Dilek articulated it, to present one’s intersectional difference is also to present one’s dissimilarity from those in power, demonstrating the unlikelihood of one resembling the sovereign (Istanbul, April 3, 2017). As a choreographic tactic of dissent against the masculinist and militarist forms that power takes in Turkey, embellishment highlights this dissimilarity to premise a future in which individuals may exist in their difference.

Embellishment is therefore perceived as “a work from within” by many activists I spoke with, because qualities conventionally ascribed to the female body were widely accepted in the radical leftist groups of the 1970s, and this acceptance gradually legitimized the normative framework based on gender division of labor as well. Biographies, writings, and memoirs of leftist revolutionary women from the 1970s bear witness to how a heteronormative gen-

der discourse and body politics predominant in many of these organizations oppressed women and how women had to confront heteropatriarchy in their parties and unions and among their male comrades (G. Akkaya 2011; Berktaş 1989, 1990; Saygılıgil 2021). As highlighted in Asiye Müjgan Güvenli's prison memoirs (2021), women's assumed caregiving roles were taken for granted in some party organizations. Serap's story in Güvenli's memoir is particularly striking in revealing such patriarchal gender oppression: After her marriage to another leftist revolutionary party member, Serap found herself cooking and cleaning not only for her husband but also for other men residing in their communal house. Her continuous domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities were normalized by the party leadership, whereas her deepening psychological trauma was overlooked.

Throughout the 1980s, as leftist women began organizing their own meetings and campaigns, they grew more vocal about patriarchal oppression and the unequal gendered division of labor they had experienced in their former groups, resulting in the emergence of an urban feminist movement (Özdemir and Bayraktar 2011). While some initiated feminist consciousness-raising groups and became outspoken about women's exclusion from their former political organizations' decision-making processes (Berktaş 1990), others, such as a group of feminist women from the Socialist Party, worked "from within" their organizations to defend the inclusion of a feminist vision (Özügürü et al. 1989). In this period, socialist feminist and radical feminist women were organized around publications such as *Kaktüs* and *Feminist* magazines, which assigned a central role to domestic labor in their analysis of women's subordination in society (E. Özdemir 2020, 123). Feminists organized the first large-scale demonstration following the 1980 coup d'état, the March Against Domestic Violence (Dayağa Karşı Dayanışma Yürüyüşü) in 1987 in Istanbul. This demonstration was followed by a campaign against domestic violence (Dayağa Karşı Dayanışma Kampanyası), within which, for the first time, a protest was staged in the form of a festival (*şenlik*) (Ozan 2015). These festivals and campaigns staged new participatory forms of public action. For example, the "Our Body Is Ours; No to Sexual Harassment Campaign" (Bedenimiz Bizimdir; Cinsel Tacize Hayır Kampanyası) or the "Purple Needle Campaign" (Mor İğne Kampanyası), as it was known, began with an action on the Kadıköy ferry in which feminists, acting as peddlers, persuasively introduced the fascinating features of needles with purple ribbons and distributed them to women to prick men who harassed them (Koç 2022; E. Özdemir 2020, 113; Osmanağaoğlu 2015, 349).

Feminists' street activism in the 1980s gave rise to institutional models

in the 1990s that aimed to create sustainable structures to improve women's conditions in the economic, political, and domestic spheres. However, this institutionalization also led to the adoption of a project-oriented approach to solving women's problems and the demise of radical politics (Bora and Günel 2002). Subsequently, organizations such as Women's Shelters, gender and women's studies research centers, women's works library, a state ministry responsible for women and family affairs, and institutions that encourage women candidates to participate in parliamentary politics have emerged. The first national feminist gatherings of women from different political backgrounds took place at the end of the 1980s. Simultaneously, cis and trans women protested together against sexual harassment and sexual violence, pointing out potentials of intersectional feminist politics, as discussed in Chapter 3.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, many Kurdish women organized within the Turkish left along class lines, later joined the Kurdish political movement. Kurdish feminist publications like *Roza* and *Jujin* emerged in the 1990s, but economic constraints led to their closure in the following decade; nonetheless, their anti-racist and anti-sexist vision endured (Işık 2020, 292). In this new context of femme struggles, activists implemented new body politics not only against the state but also against the heteropatriarchal and homophobic practices of their political allies on the left. This double effort has rendered dance a work "both from inside and outside" the dissent, as Kurdish LGBTI+ activist Umut expressed it.

#### WORKER'S MOVEMENTS, LABOR STRIKES, AND FOLK DANCE (1960S–1970S)

One of the earliest documented uses of folk dance as a popular tool of dissenting politics was during the workers' strikes of the 1960s. Labor unions of this period promoted folk dance events to connect with urban workers who had migrated from rural areas in the 1950s and into the 1960s. During these decades of mass migration, new neighborhoods rapidly emerged at the urban peripheries (Baydar 1998). These neighborhoods were largely squatter settlements, or *gecekondus*. The residents were usually low-income migrant families seeking work opportunities and a better life with educational and cultural infrastructure (Karpas 1976). In fact, these migrant squatters' wages were "at least 30 per cent below the average monthly earnings of regular industrial workers" in the 1970s (Karpas 1976, 39–40). These rural migrants developed

new skills and ways of living in the city but also maintained their relations with the village. Folk dance became a form of association with their hometown culture, celebration in social events such as weddings, and leisure in these *gecekondu* contexts. This engagement with folk dance and songs created a national audience with a new understanding of urban culture and enabled rural migrants to transmit their art forms to the next generations, even if they were born and raised in the city (see Karpat 1976, 163).

Folk dance did not remain only a social activity in *gecekondu* neighborhoods but was also deployed when these migrant workers participated in strikes in factories in the 1960s. An earlier law, the 1936 Labor Law No. 3008, allowed unionization but did not recognize the right to strike. When campaigning for the multiparty elections in 1950, the populist right-wing Democratic Party actively sought the support of workers and made the right to strike an election pledge (Zürcher 2017), a promise it never made good on when it won the elections. In 1952, a number of smaller unions united to establish the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu), which took over the struggle for the right to strike. After the 1960 coup d'état, the 1961 constitution recognized the right to strike but did not provide laws to exercise it. But with the growth of the labor movement, organized largely in unions (Koçak 2015), the pressure to enact such laws mounted. On December 31, 1961, hundreds of thousands of workers met at Saraçhane Square in Istanbul to realize the first of a series of large-scale public political assemblies demanding the right to strike (Doğan 2015).

In January and February 1963, the successful thirty-five-day Kavel cable factory strike inspired other strikes and forced the government in July of that year to enact the Collective Bargaining, Strike, and Lockout Law No. 275. The mass strikes of the 1960s set the tone for succeeding decades, establishing a set repertoire for workers' action. The repertoire of stratagems used in the Kavel strike was elaborated in the Istanbul Bereç battery factory strike in 1964–1965, which in turn became the model for the Paşabahçe glass factory strike of 1966, and for many other strikes and boycotts in the next decades (Z. Aydın 2010). In all these strikes, workers gathered daily in front of their factories, blocked the main entrances to prevent other workers, suppliers, or buyers from entering, carried banners and signs emblazoned with their demands, set up tents for eating and camping overnight, lit a fire to show their presence outside of the factory, and deployed folk dance to boost morale and develop solidarity.

The Bereç battery factory strike, which began on December 7, 1964, and continued until January 16, 1965, was important for inspiring other labor

actions during this period, as the Bereç workers ended their strike in victory. Women were predominant, and written and visual narratives of folk dancing were recorded. The factory was located on the outskirts of Istanbul in the Taşlıtarla (later Gaziosmanpaşa) district, where migrant families from the Balkans and eastern provinces of Turkey lived. Located close to newly established factories, Taşlıtarla grew rapidly as a working-class district in the 1960s and became central to leftist political struggles in the next decades. The area went under new gentrification policies in the 2010s, followed by the construction of luxury residences, resulting in an increased economic gap between its dwellers. During the Bereç factory strike, however, it was mainly a workers' district that created an organic relationship between the factory strike and its neighborhood support. Three dance styles appear to have been prominent, aligned with the places from where workers migrated: halay, *bar*, and *hora*.

Figure 4.4 depicts union leaders dancing at an event where a group of university students affiliated with the National Turkish Students' Union (Milli Türk Talebe Birliği) had come to perform the halay and *bar* dances from Gaziantep, Erzurum, Bitlis, Van, and Elazığ, all eastern provinces of Turkey, in solidarity with the striking workers (Yici 2010). The union newspaper, *İşçi Postası* (The Worker's Post), shows male union leaders and representatives, including the general president of the umbrella Petroleum, Chemical, Rubber Workers' Union (Türkiye Petrol Kimya Lastik İşçileri Sendikası, or Petrol-İş), enthusiastically dancing together during this performance, which the union organized as part of an evening program. The photograph of the all-male union leadership dancing is juxtaposed with a four-line headline celebrating a high rate of female participation on the picket line and at the forefront of the strike. Feminist unionist Necla Akgökçe calls this strike a "women's strike" due to women's persistent work in organizing and maintaining the struggle. Out of 1,010 workers at the factory, 900 were female manual laborers. Of these, 790 joined the strike and fulfilled important roles, such as strike picketing. Despite all their efforts, the strike was overwhelmingly run by their male colleagues and unionists (Akgökçe 2020).

While the headlines in *İşçi Postası* demonstrate that women participated in the workers' struggle in large numbers, dancing male union leaders and workers are found in the photos. Another photograph featured in *İşçi Postası* on January 18, 1965, depicts striking workers performing a dance captioned as a *hora* in celebration of their strike victory. The shoulder-holding, vertical stance, closed legs with little knee-bending, and, on the left, the lead dancer's forward motion toward the camera provide a vivid depiction of this semi-circle for the union's newspaper (İşçi Postası 1965, 4; see Bayraktar 2024, 71).



Figure 4.4. The headline reads, “With the participation of 790 women workers at the Bereç strike, women are on picket duty. The boost to morale was great.” Below the photo of four dancing men, the caption reads, “Petrol-İş general president and Türk-İş representative, following the wishes of union members, participate in the national dance performance.” Source: İşçi Postası 1964, 1.

Although *hora* is associated with Turkish emigrants from the Balkans (And 1976, 22) it also indicates a dance movement that marks stomping the foot on the ground and therefore can be found in many dance sequences (Demir-sipahi 1975, 259–60), particularly those associated with Greek circle dances (Öztürk 2017). Dancers’ energies seem to vary, and they look in different directions: some to the side, some at the ground, some toward the camera positioned near the ground. To the left of the circle, two women spectators standing on the sidelines watch the men dance and are also looking at the camera. The camera angle marks the heroism of the men, making the dancing workers look bigger at the center of the frame.

These representations of the dancing body in public political assembly as male were clearly out of sync with reality on the ground. Young women, many

from poor families with lower-status jobs, organized and participated in strikes, rallies, and protests in large numbers. Despite playing essential roles in these struggles, they were often sidelined in the unions' political decision-making mechanisms (Yılmaz and Kurşuncu 2020). The women's struggle has been twofold, fighting capitalist exploitation and heteropatriarchy in their workspaces. Sixty years after the Bereç strike victory, Petrol-İş continues to organize workplace strikes, but this time with women highly visible at the forefront of these struggles. For instance, in 2022, the majority women workers at the Pas South factory, a producer of electromechanical, cable, and plastics equipment for world-famous brands like Bosch, were filmed as they danced during their strike (Yol TV 2022). In the video, six workers perform the three-step halay in front of the factory, struggling to stay upright on the snow-covered ground in the Çerkezköy Organized Industrial Zone (Çerkezköy Organize Sanayi Bölgesi), located north of Istanbul just outside the city limits. Workers' layered clothes reveal the harsh weather conditions and determine their pace. They dance to recorded music—the melody combining rhythmic marches and folk music. By deploying the halay in its three-step style, dancing the routine to a song with an anti-capitalist message, combining agitative marching and *bağlama* tunes, and carrying the signs of a union active for over seventy years, these women workers seem to relate their current struggle to the histories of Turkey's left.

Men's narratives of heroic resistance against capitalism dominate historical accounts of the labor movement. Female workers remained invisible in the mainstream labor history of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic (Balsoy 2009). But research based on women's oral histories has filled the gender gap over the past two decades, shedding light on women's labor struggle and activism in union organizing and leftist uprisings (Acar-Savran 2004; G. Akkaya 2011; Pervan 2013; Saygılıgil 2021). Since the nineteenth century women staged important strikes, such as the 1910 strikes in the thread/yarn factories of Bursa, in which at least three thousand workers demanded higher wages, shorter work hours, and a proper lunch break (Van Os 1997). Women workers even performed Luddite protests to stop the machines that threatened their jobs (Balsoy 2009, 64; Güzel 1996, 35, cited in Saygılıgil 2018, 78). Today, women workers continue to demand better working conditions, stricter health and safety measures, and the right to be organized in trade unions to effectively fight against the regulation and control of their bodies. In the 2000s, women workers of the UPS (2011), Bericap plastic closures (2011), Serapool ceramics (2015), and LC Waikiki clothing (2016) factories made important gains. An almost-all-women group of strikers of the

Novamed factory for medical equipment organized in 2007 against gender-based discrimination in the workplace (Saygılıgil 2018). A decade later, in April 2018, women workers of the Flormar care and beauty products factory, partially owned by French firm Yves Rocher, began their resistance against the factory management's prohibition on unionization and continued for 297 days. Women workers gathered in front of the factory in the Gebze Organized Industrial Zone (Gebze Organize Sanayi Bölgesi) located south of Istanbul, performing sit-ins, shouting slogans, giving numerous press statements, and dancing the halay to regain energy and activate participants (Mackreath 2018). In the gap between the heteropatriarchal and hypermasculine myth and the many-gendered reality, folk dancing in protest is a way to bring to the surface the otherwise invisibilized histories of femme struggles that drive today's protests.

#### EMBELLISHING THE REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN'S BODY

Folk dance has been an important tool in not only workers' strikes and demonstrations but also union organizing and pragmatic party politics. İlke Kızmaz's oral history research with professional folk dancers from the 1960–1980 period demonstrates that different political groups were inclined to perform different folk dance styles. Folk dance teacher Ömer Işık explained to Kızmaz how left- and right-wing groups distinguished themselves through the use of their dance styles. "In those times, for some reason, during leftist [events], [dances from] Diyarbakır [and] Tunceli were widespread. Particularly Diyarbakır. But right-leaning events highlighted the Kars area. Or Turkish dances from abroad" (interview with Ömer Işık in Kızmaz 2013, 106), such as "dances from Azerbaijan" (interview with Ekber Yeşilyurt in Kızmaz 2013, 102). Other teachers active during those decades confirmed Işık's observation that leftists preferred to work with halay and rightists performed *bar* dances, which were by then seen as characteristic of the interior towns and cities of Anatolia (Kızmaz 2013), despite the historical association of the *bar* genre with Armenian culture in the east of Turkey (see Chapter 1).

Musician Musa Uzunkaya, who accompanied most of the dance troupes during this period, noted that the halay was particularly popular at leftist gatherings because those coming from the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey where halay is rooted were very active in leftist organizations. To him, this is why halay gained more visibility at protests, strikes, and other dissenting political events (interview with Musa Uzunkaya in Kızmaz 2015). In our talk, Dilek, who has experience in leftist and Kurdish movements, sup-

ported this point, noting that because Kurds and Alevis were active in leftist struggles and predominantly danced the halay and its various stylings, what could be thought of today as “leftist dance” is a Kurdish halay.

Although particular folk dances were generally associated with left- and right-leaning groups, with halay usually identified with the Left, these boundaries were not always clear-cut and could be ambiguous and complex. During the 1965 party congress of the right-wing Republican Villagers’ Nation Party (Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi)—the predecessor of the ultranationalist far-right MHP party—in Ankara, Diyarbakır party deputies appeared on the front page of a national newspaper dancing the halay (*Milliyet* 1965). The photograph captures the dance from above, revealing a moment where five male dancers in a closed circle squat together, gravitating toward the floor while holding hands.

This kind of versatile enactment of halay can also be seen when professional leftist dance troupes perform it. HASAD, a Marxist contemporary folk dance troupe associated with the leftist Brechtian theater company Friends Theater (Dostlar Tiyatrosu),<sup>5</sup> joined in the 1977 May Day rally in Taksim Square (Sinematek.tv 1977; see Video 4\_6.mov). In the footage (08:30:00–09:50:00), the troupe is performing a folk dance known as “Meryem,” from the town of Antep in southeastern Turkey. They wear jeans and bell-bottomed pants in various shades of blue, plain T-shirts, and scarves, representative of the urban fashion of the 1970s. Their outfits match in style and color, perhaps to illustrate their solidarity with laborers and their identification with the city’s residents. The skillful and trained dancers’ bodies execute complicated footwork and sudden, frequent squats in unison. The dancers perform three quick skip-steps starting on the right foot, then three with the left foot, repeating this pattern for four rounds. After the fourth round, they jump a little to gain momentum and go into a squat position, where they immediately spin around before standing upright to once again begin the rounds of walking and skipping. To execute these movements in unison, group members were devoted to developing synchronization, attentiveness, and stamina (conversation with HASAD dancer Alev Akçin, March 10, 2023).

By using the vocabulary and styling of various folk dance movements to compose contemporary dance works, HASAD created three pivotal choreographies in the 1970s: May Day halay (*1 Mayıs halayı*), also known as the workers’ halay (*işçi halayı*); the war play (*savaş oyunu*); and a compilation of *semah* performances choreographed for Nazım Hikmet Ran’s “The Epic of Sheikh Bedreddin” (Şeyh Bedrettin Destanı), an epic story by the iconic leftist poet in exile that praises people’s rebellion against state authority. These dances were performed in a wide range of venues, from the Istanbul Open-Air The-

ater to factories in various towns of Anatolia where workers were on strike; from the stages of municipality theaters to nightlong events of the Turkey Workers' Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi). Unlike these innovative choreographies made for agitprop staging, the *Meryem* dance in the May Day film footage was rehearsed as a "precise copy of how it was danced in local settings" (conversation with HASAD dancer Serdar Türkkan, March 10, 2023).

The video is available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14524804.cmp.23>

Precision as a choreographic strategy disciplines the dancers' bodies, synthesizes their movements as part of a unified collective, and makes the authenticity claim viable. Dancers' sudden squats and dynamic turns in synchronization, their hands interlaced to form shoulder-to-shoulder alignments, their positioning so that a man and a woman dance side by side, showing gender equality, and their unisex matching clothes choreograph precision to imply a harmonious, robust, celebratory, and unified leftist body in movement and body politics.

These qualities of collective movement also combine moral imperatives and gender expressions. Women's oral accounts shed light on how participation in folk dancing was conceived both as a responsibility toward the political organization and a duty of the revolutionary subject. Precise movements arguably demonstrate a capacity to fulfill the revolutionary responsibility toward the organization and society. Seda noted that while the collective movement, reciprocity, and joy generated by folk dance troupes was important for leftist organizing, folk dancing's true contribution was its personification of the ideal revolutionary subject's everyday attitudes. In the 1970s, folk dance was thought of as the bodily manifestation of revolutionary discipline, modesty, and morality:

Revolutionaries were considered role models for society, so we were always careful and modest. In my political group back then, if someone performed improperly in the dance, they were expected to undergo self-criticism [*özeleştiri*]<sup>6</sup> in front of the group because their undisciplined attitudes were assumed to be against "revolutionary morals." (Istanbul, April 4, 2017)

This 1970s notion of "modesty" encompassed the aesthetic values and qualities of a specific kind of morality called *revolutionary morals/morality* in Turkish (*devrimci ahlâk*). This moral attitude is conveyed choreographically through the precise execution of the footwork and postures that present a disciplined body. It featured a slow-paced rhythm, vertically organized small movements, and a plain facial expression to mitigate explicit or extreme

emotional displays that may accompany the dancers' energy and seriousness. In this strategic framework of precision, a revolutionary body was expected to be restrained and unembellished—a body in control of itself, a body that was “neutrally” and “naturally” male.

Seda continued to explain that when dancing at today's political protests, she performs without any concern whatsoever for the assigned “authenticity” of the dance. But in the past, she worked hard to adhere to the revolutionary rules of proper performance. “In the 1970s, we worked so hard on performing folk dances correctly. People who didn't know the steps couldn't join the dance. . . . What's the problem with her joining the dance? She can learn it in the circle” (Istanbul, April 4, 2017). Her retrospective critique highlights the strictures of the body politics and the undue stress placed on personifying a specific understanding of morality corresponding to a gendered bodily regimen.

Many women active in leftist politics in the 1970s asserted that they wore loose-fitting clothes in plain colors, sneakers, and pants to create more comfort in protest. To signal their refusal of the bourgeois values of femininity in public space, they wore no makeup. The comfort afforded by loose-fitting pants and sneakers was twofold: comfort during protest and comfort of being free from the sexualized male gaze. Comfortable and sports clothing worn to a protest enabled women to run quickly from the police or join in the fight against a right-wing, or a rival left-wing, political group or party. Pants and sneakers make moving on the uneven pavements and cobblestones of Istanbul more comfortable. Such clothes were also worn as a shield against the male gaze in public space. Gülseren Pusatlıoğlu, at the time active in the People's Liberation Party (Halkın Kurtuluşu Partisi), describes the function that baggy clothing performed for revolutionary women who did not want to expose their bodies to the male gaze:

Clothing was typically approached without differentiating between genders [*cinsiyet ayrımı*]. If I talk about the years 1975 to 1980, we were, first of all, girls who carried *heybe*.<sup>7</sup> Our distinctive trait was to have a *heybe*. Perhaps handbags were not yet popular, I don't remember. . . . For pants, we used to wear corduroy in both winter and summer. In the warmth of the summer, imagine, we had corduroy pants and button-up shirts we called *mintan*. I wore several button-up shirts pinched from my father as my *mintan*. I did not want my breasts, hips, or the contours of my body to be seen. All of us women behaved like that. We were all the women in shirts over pants. We rarely wore skirts. But I used to enjoy wearing skirts, too. (Pusatlıoğlu, in G. Akkaya 2011, 323–24)

Comfortable clothing was a response to the heteropatriarchal objectifi-

cation and sexualization of women's bodies in public space. Feminist scholar Sherine Hafez (2014, 22) argues that "women's bodies in the Middle Eastern region have often been viewed as the terrain of cultural, moral, and political subjection." Hafez analyzes the corporeality of an iconic photograph from the 2011 Egyptian revolution, which depicts a young woman lying near Cairo's Tahrir Square, with her hijab and long black *abaya* cloak open as soldiers are about to kick her naked abdomen. Although the image aimed at discrediting protesters through powerful idioms of public morality and patriarchal family codes, women's bodies become "disruptive, destabilizing, and transformative" (Hafez 2014, 22) by making their vulnerability into symbols of resistance that can reverse stigma and shame.

In the 1970s, clothing choices reflected leftist morality and patriarchal family conventions and resulted in women's avoidance of exposing their bodies to the disempowering male gaze. This was compatible with Turkish leftists' rejection of ornamentation and femininity, which were seen as bourgeois values. Fatmagül Bertay (1989) notes that among Turkish leftists of the time, women were seen to be at greater risk of "bourgeoisifying" because of their gender (49). This view rationalized and legitimized heteropatriarchal male control over leftist women's clothing and attitudes. Considered guilty until proven innocent, women had to constantly "prove" themselves as activists; until they did so, they were considered "bourgeois." For Bertay, while leftist organizations monitored all their members closely to keep them in line, the supervision and control of women was multilayered and could easily have turned into forms of gender oppression. Revolutionary women were required to embody the revolutionary value of modesty, prized in these organizations as a repudiation of the perverse and ostentatious relations of capitalism (Bertay 1989). In her memoirs about Turkey's prisons during the 1980s, Asiye Müjgan Güvenli (2018, 125) emphasizes that while wearing stylish clothes and makeup and practicing self-care were considered "bourgeois attitudes" and approached as "taboo" among left revolutionaries, after the 1980 coup, many did this to "camouflage" themselves and avoid recognition by the police.

#### SOUND, MOVEMENT, AND BODILY RESILIENCE

The 1980 coup d'état and the military government period (1980–1983) inflicted irreparable wounds. As explained in the introduction, hundreds of thousands were denied passports, detained, blacklisted, and tried, with thousands facing the death penalty, of which fifty were executed. Hundreds died in prison,

of which 171 died from documented torture. Tens of thousands of dissenting groups and associations were shut down. About thirty thousand people left Turkey seeking political asylum, and fourteen thousand were stripped of their citizenship (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi 2012). This political violence profoundly impacted the lives of millions and continues to resonate in contemporary political activism.

The sensorially torturous experiences people endured in prison were imposed and resisted via sound and movement. Activists continued to dance even under brutal conditions, and professional dancers active in artists' collectives taught dances in prison. Gönül, member of the former Marxist-Leninist political organization Liberation (Kurtuluş), spent a year in prison after the coup. She noted how those who had been professionally engaged in dance and theater taught folk dances to the other women on their ward or led them in performances of skits about their everyday life in prison, their struggles, and comical stories about prison life. University students on the ward also offered seminars in their fields of expertise, including music, literature, and history. Gönül learned a wide variety of folk dance styles in these prisoner-organized education sessions.<sup>8</sup>

During this period in prison, many leftist women, including Gönül, spent consecutive days and nights under torture. Revolutionary women were first sent to an investigation compound called the Collection and Research Laboratory (Derleme Araştırma Laboratuvarı). Gönül stayed there for forty-five days before being sent to a school building converted into a makeshift prison and then to the notorious Mamak prison in Ankara. During our meeting, she told me how important dance had been for her and her fellow female political prisoners from across the leftist political spectrum. Though they came from different organizations and held different political beliefs, they lived and danced together on the same ward as a form of resistance to their torturers. Dancing was a way to demonstrate bodily resilience and a form of mutual emotional support:

Before being placed in a ward at Mamak, you stay in a cell called the cage (*kafes*) and are beaten repeatedly. This [beating] continues later in the wards, too. I stayed in the ward for one year and was beaten every day until my release. The reason for the beating was that we rejected some of the things imposed on us. For example, they wanted us to count [out vocally the number of prisoners on the ward]. Count like 1-2-3. They wanted the last person to say, "That's the last one, sir" [*sondur komutanım*]. You don't say, "That's the last one, sir," and you get beaten for it. . . . After each beating, we would

always dance a halay, sing a song, shout. . . . They also wanted us to perform physical conditioning exercises, but we refused to do that, too. Most of the men did these exercises, but [the prison military guards] couldn't make us do them. We only counted. . . . We were in our twenties. There were younger women who were sixteen, seventeen years old, and a very few women in their thirties. . . . Sometimes it could be a 100, 120 women to a ward. . . . When we danced, everyone [on the ward] would join in. No one refrained from joining the halay. Only those friends suffering from too much torture did not join the dance. But they would accompany it by making sounds or clapping. Of course, those were also forbidden. Because they were forbidden, we used to get beaten after the halay, too. . . . In the free periods when we were not being beaten, we would also perform theater plays. (Istanbul, March 22, 2022)

This bodily memory of torture and resistance continues to mark Gönül's experiences in the present, similar to many other political prisoners who were tortured and maimed by the 1980s military regime. In her prison memoirs, Neyyire Özkan (1986) mentions that prisoners were severely beaten by the soldiers of Mamak prison because of their noncooperation with military orders, and after coming back to their ward feeling extremely exhausted, they danced the halay to bond and restore their elation and enthusiasm. Other memoirs of women political prisoners also recount how these women rejected the military-like discipline imposed in the prison by refusing, for example, to shout, "Yes, commandant" to military officers of any rank or carry out drill commands such as "attention" and "at ease" (Horuz 2020, 168). Performing theater plays and dance were other ways to resist this militaristic organization of prison life and demonstrate a persistent noncooperation with the coup authority. Because many activities in prison wards were arbitrarily banned, including "talking among each other . . . making jokes, being busy with creative things, dancing, and singing" (Özkan 1986, 134), political prisoners' creative engagements demonstrated resistance to such prohibitions. These performances also helped increase the number of participants in collective activities and bolstered morale under extremely difficult carceral conditions and torture sanctioned by the coup regime. Sometimes, theater enactments staged spontaneous encounters between performers in the cell and soldiers outside of it, who tried to learn about the theater play to prevent its realization (H. Ünlü 2020); sometimes the reality and the play—the enactment of the oppressor and the oppressed—became indistinguishable, leaving the soldiers confused and repelled (Pala Akalp 2020). Often, these moments were followed by more brutal punishments.

Vivid memories of sounds and movements are common in the testimo-

nies of female political prisoners who have endured similar experiences in different contexts. Movement and sound may help to give form to experiences and traumas that are otherwise beyond words. Women's exposure to incarceration and torture is often accompanied by such "inarticulate speechlessness" (Slyomovics 2005, 76). In her ethnographic work with leftist Moroccan women political prisoners who were illegally detained, tortured, and forcibly disappeared as political opponents of King Hassan II's regime in the 1960s, Susan Slyomovics describes women's silence as an argument rather than a sign of ignorance. The torture, sexual assault, abuse, harassment, rape, and mutilation these women experienced at *Derb Moulay Cherif*, Morocco's secret detention center, gave rise to the first women's revolt there, when the disciplining code of silence was broken and the women began screaming as one about their rapes. Despite the threats of rape, humiliation, and silencing, these political prisoners—who had been gendered as submissive, feminine, and disposable—became political agents of protest against an otherwise inarticulable collective experience of victimization.

Sound as well as silence can be both resistive and torturous. Gönül recounted how the prison military guards at Mamak used sound and music as tools of torture to push prisoners to their sensorial limits. At times, military marches blared through the loudspeakers in the women's ward at such mind-numbing decibels that it was impossible to hear one another, particularly at strategic moments such as New Year's Eve, to prevent celebrations and merriment.<sup>9</sup> The "trrrrrrrrr" sound of a police baton swiping against iron bars as the military guard walked along the cell corridor announced that someone would be taken for a torture session. The dull sounds of water drip-drip-dripping or the high-pitched whistle of pressurized water meant that someone was being tortured.

Carceral violence and acoustics are often intertwined. In her memoirs of the women's prison in Egypt, Nawal El Sa'adawi (1986, 34) describes the soundscape of the prison as one where the power of sound is amplified in the prison cell: "Voices shrieking and wailing. Buckets and tins clinking against one another. Metal colliding with metal, and doors opening, shutting, slamming. Knocking across the walls, coming from below and above." Maria Ristani (2020) digitally reconstructs the interior of the Saydnaya Military Prison in Syria based on survivors' "ear-testimonies" to demonstrate the integral role sound plays in the dynamics of power. At Saydnaya, acoustic violence, silence, extreme listening, and deliberate sensory deprivation were used for surveillance and torture. Paradoxically, sound in the form of acute and focused listening was mobilized by the victims of such torture to survive and resist the carceral brutality of weaponized silence and acousmatic

violence.<sup>10</sup>

Sensory, physical, and psychological torture in Turkey's prisons intensified after the 1980 coup d'état. As they continued to refuse to cooperate with the military guards' orders, women political prisoners in this era were exposed to more violence—bodily, acoustic, and verbal. They used clamoring and joyous sound, music, movement, and dance to survive and resist the strategic use of movement and sound for torture. By not counting but singing, by not exercising but dancing, regardless of the beatings to come, women political prisoners refused to be subdued by the carceral system's brutal order. Their refusals of military-style forms of vocal counting and physical exercise served to disrupt the disciplining and debasing surveillance of and control over their bodies. Faced with the possibility of death or despair by torture, their dancing performed resilience and marked their determined aliveness. In their ephemeral but repeated acts of dancing the halay and other dances together, leftist women prisoners with differing political beliefs and backgrounds sometimes kept their distance and sometimes chose choreographic solidarity.

#### TACTICAL EMBELLISHMENT AND INTERSECTIONALITY

In the 1990s and 2000s, debates around the liberalization of the economy and the public sphere, the effects of globalization, and Turkey's position in the new global market of culture and consumption emerged alongside the increasing visibility of ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities in leftist organizing. The gendered political values around leftist morality began to change in this period, as Turkey's attempts to integrate its cultural, political, and legal bodies and policy requirements in the context of European Union accession proliferated identity politics in public space (Toktas and Aras 2009). As the Kurdish feminist movement intersected with the struggles of Turkish urban feminists, LGBTI+ activists developed coalitional politics with migrant minorities, and environmentalists raised their voice against land dispossession and poverty, leftist organizations began to reorient their political discourse, including questions of diversity, inclusion, difference, and the visibility of ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities. This shift had a considerable impact on the presentation of dissenting leftist bodies in public space.

Melek, a longtime activist in the labor movement, recognized the impact this shift had on her own activist life. Currently involved in a women's coalition that protests violence against women, she spends her time as an ally of the Kurdish Peace Mothers. Since the 1990s, Melek's protest attire has

changed to reflect her current participation in disparate intersecting struggles in Istanbul. In her earlier activist years in a leftist organization, she used to wear blue jeans and plain dark T-shirts to not attract attention. Now, she makes a point of wearing red lipstick and high heels to protest:

We would not have worn high heels at protests because we might have to run or fight back. But now I adorn myself particularly before going to a protest. I put on red lipstick, something I don't normally wear. (Istanbul, March 22, 2017)

For Melek, her earlier protest attire of blue jeans and sneakers reflected the practical assumption that she might have to run from the police. She said that even while getting ready before the protest, the decision on wearing “comfortable clothes” made her anxious. Today, she no longer assumes that she will need to run; even if she does have to run, she can run in high heels. She rejects the ideal of the leftist woman's body dressed in colorless, loose-fitting outfits and unadorned by makeup to highlight her modesty. Rejecting this default “neutral” activist body gendered as male, she now chooses to embody the diverse qualities of gender presentation, purposefully embellishing her usual choice of clothing with items conventionally coded as feminine.

Many femme activists today wear makeup, colorful clothes, and skirts to perform what Didem Havlioğlu (2017) calls “strategic gender essentialism” at protests. Havlioğlu examines a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century female poet of the Ottoman court, Mihri Hatun, and the literary trappings of her gender identity. Mihri used traditional gender codes in her poetry and therefore disrupted the poetic discourse, in which men usually performed both the lover and the beloved and women were assumed to be ignorant and therefore silent. Havlioğlu argues that Mihri did this not because she had fixed gender values but because using such codes enabled her to subvert a male-dominated poetic tradition that forbade her, as a woman poet, from expressing her love to a man who was not her husband. Strategic gender essentialism often becomes necessary when women are systematically excluded from social agency on the basis of gender alone. Contemporary cis, trans, and queer women activists subvert heteronormative discourses in the male-dominated public space by using and elaborating those qualities of the body conventionally coded as feminine. Many femme activists sometimes dance solo and couple improvisational styles derived from belly dance forms such as *çiftetelli* in public demonstrations and gatherings, contributing to the polyrhythmic movement and sound texture of protests. Dilek confirms such

gender essentialism that is communicated through dances that involve belly, hip, and torso accentuations. She mentions that *lubunya* love belly dance as their bodies claim wiggling that is typically perceived as something specific to cis women and dominant cultural norms of femininity. Through their chant, dance, and resistance, which refer to multiple moments in Turkey's dissenting history and multiple dance styles that are often decipherable in cultural context, dissenting women from leftist, feminist, and environmental movements work to cultivate femme spaces together, even though not everyone performs embellishment tactically.

At protests, on rare occasions, there may be a stage set up for speeches and live performances. In that case, popular dance songs—chosen for their lyrical content, rhythm, and the artist's political position—are played, and the rhythm escalates to a moment in which people burst with high energy and enthusiasm. Additional acoustics from the soundscape of the protest sometimes dominates the music: shouts, cries, ululations, whistles, applause, police sirens, announcements from megaphones, a call to prayer, or the whistles and trumpets of activist music groups. Such a “cacophonous soundscape” as a political potential for solidarity and allyship of diverse politics can be observed in Feminist Night Marches since 2003 (Akdemir 2022). Women who adorn and embellish their bodies and sing, chant slogans, drum, clap, and dance together create a strong noise against the disciplining of their voice by the patriarchal social norms that assume that loudness and excess is inappropriate for women (Akdemir 2022; Özgün 2012). To amplify the “excessive” audibility of their voices, many embellish their songs and slogans with gender-specific messages; to highlight the visibility of their bodies, many adorn themselves with glitter and makeup.

Like their revolutionary predecessors clamoring in prison, contemporary activists' innovative use of folk dance under the prevailing conditions of a public space constrained by authoritarian policing avails itself of a wider historical frame through which passersby and onlookers may link the present moment to the large-scale resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s. When I asked dancing activists if they considered what they do to be something traditional, people often responded with another question: “Which tradition do you mean?” A leftist activist asserted that they perform and teach a dance tradition to increase the visibility of a repressed ethnic culture in the national public sphere. Some Kurdish activists claimed ownership of the tradition on the grounds that dance is an integral part of Kurdish daily life and thus an indispensable component of the Kurdish struggle against cultural assimilation. Others asserted that their dance has roots in Turkey's leftist tradition from the 1970s. Yet the performance of a political tradition does not

mean that activists were uncritical of this political history. Through elaborate chanting, singing, and dancing, their critique manifests the central role of gender and sexuality in politics.

The video is available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14524804.cmp.24>

In July 2018, the AKP-appointed Istanbul governor banned LGBTI+ activists from celebrating their annual Istanbul Pride Parade in Taksim for the fourth consecutive year, citing the possibility of “negative effects to general public morality,” despite the parade having been held peacefully since 2003. LGBTI+ groups decided to go ahead with the parade, gathering as in previous years at Taksim and then marching down the entire length of İstiklal Avenue. In 2017, Pride Parade activists “dispersed” in the city to be able to utter their collective statement, but on the appointed day in 2018, police barricades filled Taksim Square and blocked every side street along İstiklal Avenue, making dispersal very difficult. People shared short videos on social media showing activists trying to use backstreets to reach Taksim. One video (see Video 4\_7.mov; Şık 2018) shot by a phone camera captured dancing activists from the top floor of a building looking down on Mis Street, a narrow street hosting cafés friendly to protesters that connects İstiklal Avenue to Tarlabası Boulevard. The dancers have found a moment during their escape from the police, tear gas canisters, and rubber bullets in which to gather, grasp each other’s hands to form a semicircle, and begin dancing. At a medium tempo, they take three steps forward and pause on the fourth, then go back three steps. As the dancers move forward into the center, the semicircle shrinks, and as they move back, it expands. Repeating this three-step (*Delilo*) halay sequence, the dancers move slowly in a counterclockwise direction. Their shoulders move up and down. Someone in the group starts singing, and other dancers echo the lyrics. This call-and-response pattern, in which the lead sings the first line and the others repeat it, resembles a political chant. The song is a well-known leftist song from the 1970s, but with new lyrics improvised for the 2018 Pride Parade to draw attention not only to the contrast between the peacefulness of their parade and the excessive police brutality with which it was met but also to the politics of gender and sexuality at the heart of their contemporary political struggle:

Ellerinde lolipolar  
Geliyor lubunyalar  
Kalkın ayağa kalkın  
Eşcinsel bu çocuklar

Lollipops in their hands  
The *lubunyalar* are coming  
Get up on your feet, stand up  
These kids are homosexual.

The song was “Ellerinde Pankartlar” (Placards in Their Hands), written originally to commemorate the fatal attacks on university students protesting the American Sixth Fleet in 1969. It became emblematic for the leftist struggle in the 1970s and was sung decades later by leftist protesters at the Ankara Labor, Peace, and Democracy Rally of 2015 (see Chapter 2). Because the 2018 Pride marchers retained the melody, the song was instantly recognizable by those on the balconies and in the cafés lining the side street. By drawing on a song (performed with the most common halay sequence) that resonates with a wide range of political groups on the left and then changing a few key words in the lyrics, the Pride marchers were able to launch a sharp critique of approaches to gender and sexuality in leftist political discourse and practice.

The altering of the noun in the first line of the original song (changing *Ellerinde pankartlar*, “Placards in their hands,” to *Ellerinde lolipoplar*, “Lolipops in their hands”) to reflect a group’s political objectives and means of struggle is a classic practice among leftist groups. In another iteration, the first line of the song is changed to “Molotovs in their hands” and continues with “These kids are setting it on fire,” referring to protesters with Molotov cocktails setting the city on fire to fight the police’s use of force. Another version sung by a group of leftist women begins with “Sticks in their hands / These women are coming.” An activist singing the song explained to me that women are coming with sticks in their hands because they are ready to fight back.

At the Pride Parade, when LGBTI+ activists chanted the first line, “Lolli-pops in their hands,” they were referring both to the sugary objects of gustatory desire and to the round cardboard signs mounted on sticks that many Pride marchers carry in protest. But they alternated this line with another, “Dildos in their hands,” amplifying their claim of public visibility with an object for private pleasure that is expected to be kept indoors. The repeated second and fourth line of the original song, *Gidiyor bu çocuklar*, “These kids are going,” was replaced with *Geliyor lubunyalar*, “The *lubunya* are coming.” As mentioned earlier (see the introduction), the term *lubunya* historically refers to gay men and trans women and is currently employed by a larger queer community for those who are not afraid to express their queer identity publicly. The new lyrics announce that queer activists are coming with the intention of visibilizing their minoritized sexualities in public space. Whereas in the original song, the protesting “kids” are going or marching forth (depending on the interpretation of the word *gidiyor*), the *lubunya* are *coming* to claim space, ushering in hope for the future of the dissenting struggle. That they come from unknown, because unspecified, places announces the power of their

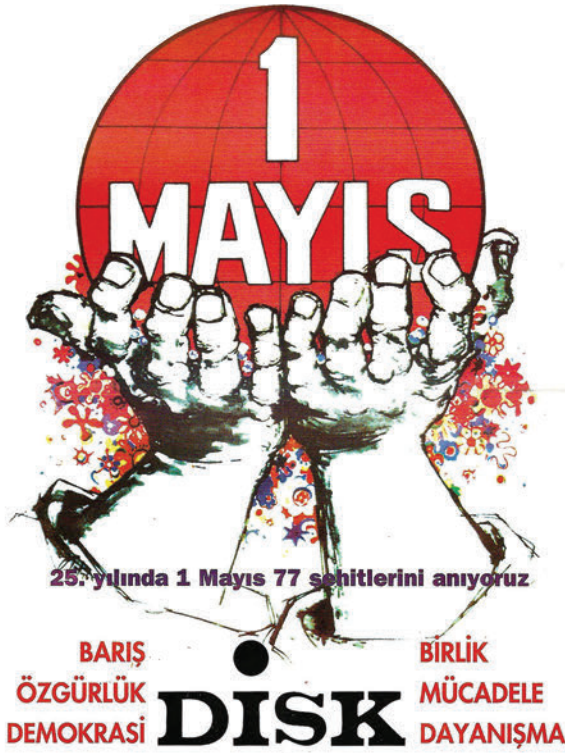


Figure 4.5. May Day poster (1976, 1977) by Orhan Taylan for DİSK, showing a worker's hands holding a globe inscribed with "1 May." Reproduced for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1977 May Day massacre; slogans read "peace, freedom, democracy" (left) and "unity, struggle, solidarity" (right). Source: TÜSTAV-DİSK Arşivi 2006, 26.

potential assembly in the square. In the third line, the song invites bystanders to "stand up" and demonstrate their support for the *lubunya* and their cause. The last line asserts that the "kids" who are coming to fight for their rights are gay. By giving the song a radical makeover and altering it to suit their political purposes, the Pride marchers ensured the song's continued relevance and use for today's queer and feminist politics.

Visual material complements the movement and sound, connecting the 1970s struggles and today's activism and also embellishing their difference through the use of femme aesthetics. In an illustration for the 2021 May Day



Figure 4.6. In dialogue with Orhan Taylan's May Day illustration, Kahraman Turan's work spotlights trans workers' labor in celebration of May Day in 2021. © Kahraman Turan. Reproduced with permission. Source: Turan 2021.

(Figure 4.6) with her folded sleeves, red stiletto nails, and strong, laborious hands, an anonymous transgender worker carefully holds a globe in rainbow colors, symbolizing queer labor in the May Day revolution. The illustration by Kahraman Turan (2021) was featured on the Kaos GL website together with signs that read, "Trans workers' rights are human rights" (*trans işçilerin hakları insan haklarıdır*) and "Queer labor will defeat bosses" (*kuir emek patronları yenecek*) (Turan 2021).<sup>11</sup> In direct dialogue with Taylan's May Day poster (Figure 4.5), Turan's work qualifies labor as queer in opposition to the universalization of male labor in the mainstream leftist discourse of the 1970s. The red stiletto nails speak to the red in socialism and also criticize it by emphasizing femmeness and bringing forth the trans worker's labor. A queer world rising on the hands of the trans worker offers another possibility, with the

queer subject at the center of the revolution, both leftists and trans, queer, and cis women with a life worth living.

For the small group of Pride marchers gathered in the backstreets of the cordoned-off area of Istiklal Avenue and Taksim Square, the combination of the altered song and three-step halay was an intelligible political statement about the links between current femme struggles and earlier leftist struggles in the 1970s, including a critique of the masculine revolutionary body and language.

Dilek told me that she was once involved in a radical leftist party where she experienced homophobic oppression and had to conceal her intersectional transgender identity. In some cases, she intentionally made her Kurdish identity visible within the political group by highlighting it through the performance of specific dance movements, which she experienced as an affirming expression of her existence. Kurdish circle dances are famous for their dazzling shoulder bounces, which are often performed twice as fast as the tempo of the footwork. Dilek's expertise in the execution of these complex shoulder movements is a way of expressing her self-identity as Kurdish. "If their shoulders don't bounce up and down, I feel that I can't express myself well enough while dancing with them" (Istanbul, April 3, 2017). Dilek said that the use of the shoulders is a sign of competence, because although other steps can be learned relatively easily, the skill of the dancer is disclosed more by upper-body undulations and shoulder movements than by the step pattern.

At Kurdish community events and social gatherings where heteronormative values prevail, Dilek feels marginalized and prefers not to dance. But at protests, she feels free to highlight both her Kurdish identity by bouncing her shoulders up and down and her trans visibility by leading dance circles. Her intersecting ethnic, gender, and sexual positionings converge in the tactical embellishment of shoulder-bouncing, enabling her to obtain recognition and visibility as a Kurdish trans woman activist.

Dilek is not the only person who uses the embellishment of shoulder-bouncing tactically. Leman, an independent feminist who is involved in the Kurdish and Turkish feminist alliance Women's Initiative for Peace, also emphasized the importance of the shoulder movement. She observed that in leftist iterations of the halay, the shoulders remain fixed and static. To counter this fixing of the body at public protests, Leman's shoulders bounce enthusiastically up and down, highlighting her political allyship with the Kurdish feminist movement. Leman noted that the imposition of strict order and discipline she experiences in leftist group dances prevents participants

from improvising. This restriction of individual expression, she said, reproduces the fixed organizational hierarchies in these groups (Istanbul, March 13, 2017). Moreover, to her, the leftist fondness for unified movements in circle dances works to enforce a homogeneous Turkishness. To intervene in the hegemonic reorganization of public spaces and latent ethnonational and heteropatriarchal spaces on the left, both Dilek and Leman insist on embellishing the dance in their own way to underline their intersectionality and multilayered political positioning.

Folk dance becomes an important political praxis to elaborate intersectionality, despite the risks and radicality that such hypervisibility in public space entails. Members of Rainbow (Keskesor, in Kurdish) from Diyarbakır favor halay that expresses both their Kurdish and their queer subjectivities as a way to challenge the landscape of leftist activism. During the week of the June 2017 Istanbul Pride Parade, Rainbow organized a Kurdish dance workshop in Maçka Democracy Park (Maçka Demokrasi Parkı), a large green park directly adjacent to the mostly secular, upper-class Nişantaşı neighborhood of Istanbul. The park became popular among anti-government activists in the aftermath of the Taksim Gezi Park resistance, as it was used as a neighborhood forum. In an interview following the workshop, Umut, one of the instructors, told me that one goal of these workshops is to create an opportunity for people, including leftists, to dance with those who they may see as different from themselves:

Halay in Turkey's left means mutual contact (*temas etme*), dialogue, [and] organization . . . One has to hold hands with the next person [even if] this person [is] a trans woman or Arab refugee. You have to be together [in halay] like the links of a chain. (Istanbul, June 25, 2017)

Umut argued that because folk dancing encourages participants to challenge themselves to move together with marginalized others, it also shows them how to live with these others—with queer and trans individuals, migrants, sex workers, and members of other peripheralized groups. In our interview, Rainbow activists further discussed the heteronormative approach prevalent in long-established leftist political groups and gave examples of Turkish and Kurdish leftists who are so afraid of being perceived as gay that they will only reluctantly hold hands with a queer or trans individual in a protest dance circle. As LGBTI+ activists, they teach Kurdish folk dance styles not only to queer individuals for the purpose of community-building but also perform with Turkish and Kurdish male radicals as a way to challenge their potential homophobic attitudes and organizational culture.

Umut continued by saying that halay is “a work of struggle both from the inside and from the outside.” By the “outside,” Umut went on, they mean that the state criminalized the halay in the same way it criminalized the term “peace,” which for leftists sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle signifies the long-awaited peace between the Turkish army and the Kurdish guerrillas. By the “inside,” Umut means that Kurdish halay styles are used by women and *lubunya* activists to increase the visibility of their own agendas within the Left. According to Deniz, another Rainbow activist, Turkish leftists typically dance the three-step halay, which she argues is a form permitted by the government because it has been purged of the distinctive features of Kurdish identity and culture. The pedestrian quality of the three-step halay may erase the deliberate footwork, bodily undulations, and shoulder-bouncing that mark Kurdishness. Umut called out leftists who continue to perform the three-step halay for not making the effort to learn the many forms that Kurdish dances can take. Deniz added, “They also think that *lubunya* don’t know how to take a dance step. They say, ‘They only know how to sway.’ And that prejudice is called homophobia” (Istanbul, June 25, 2017).

#### ELABORATING AESTHETIC LABOR

The artful embellishment of the leftist tradition can be traced choreographically through dance movements, sonically through a cacophony involving shouts, whistles, sirens, and music, verbally through song lyrics, or materially through adorned attire and props. It can also be traced to the body politically by highlighting women’s vulnerability and beauty as integral to their resistance. Embellishment accomplishes a kind of double work: It repurposes folk dances to counter the authoritarian state and the latent, hegemonic, heteropatriarchal and ethnonational tendencies among a dissenting group of potential allies. Some women activists who do not prefer to adorn or embellish themselves due to their leftist and queer positionalities coexist and stand alongside those who embellish their corporeal, choreographic, and discursive labor. If the discourse of aesthetic excess and adornment has been associated with bourgeois social and moral values in conventional understandings of the idealized leftist body, femme activists artfully trouble the body politics of dissent through their creative and aesthetic labor of excess (Hernandez 2020). Chapter 3 examined how protesters adopt the choreographic tactic of imprecision against hegemonic institutionalized forms of folk dances, in which precision and virtuosity are foregrounded to define and police the boundaries between ethnic, racial, political, cultural, and sexual identifica-

tions. This chapter has framed how dissenting women deploy the choreographic tactic of embellishment to create a kind of leftist public assembly that defies both nationalist and leftist discourses of gendered “modesty” and “morality.” I have argued that embellishment enables femme activists to create connections with Turkey’s history of dissent, claim new spaces in it, and bring alternative aesthetic qualities and body politics into dance circles.

These dissenters’ hyperbolic emphasis on the shoulders, hips, and chest and their elaborate outfits, at times complemented by high heels and carefully applied makeup, contest the myth of the hypermasculine and heteropatriarchal revolutionary body, which often appears as a strong and muscular worker or an idealized unified formation of similar bodies. Rather than a precise execution of dance movements or an erasure of emotional expression, they invest in embellishing sociable, joyful interactions as a subversive politics of public space.

The counterhegemonic choreographic tactics of imprecision and embellishment may be used simultaneously or separately to resist institutional constructions of identity and invite fellow dissenters to meet in the kinesthetic space of pluralistic political participation. They also redefine boundaries to negotiate their differential oppression within these dissenting groups’ fold. In privileging the struggle against heteropatriarchal gender representations and body politics across all sections of society, activists’ aesthetic labor creates imprecise and elaborate actions that disrupt the legitimate representations of womanhood in Turkey.

In the next chapter, we will see how activists countering the ecological damage brought about by neoliberal development projects in the Black Sea region recontextualize the *horon* as a shared ground of activism among rural, regional, and urban publics. Drawing on their deep knowledge of the *horon* genre and the tools of grassroots organizing, they deploy the counterhegemonic choreographic tactic of reassembly, which enables protesters to deliberately bring together disparate elements in new ways.

## Reassembly

### Reconfiguring Horon Across the Rural, Regional, and Urban Diaspora

In the wake of Istanbul's 2013 Taksim Gezi Park protests, I came across an environmental call-to-action flyer depicting three male horon dancers in traditional attire (Figure 5.1). The dancers are portrayed as identical upright black silhouettes, holding hands at chest level, their right feet raised to knee level. They dance at the far end of a fractured cliff ledge that is about to collapse. The tips of their left toes barely touch the ground, as though the ledge will break off should they apply more weight. It is clear from their upright postures and identical, tightly controlled movements floating in the air that they share a high level of mastery of the dance technique. This tight, identical control makes it seem as though the three men are holding onto one another so that they can jump to safety at the same height and with the same upright posture at the moment the ledge breaks off. Against the bright yellow background, the cliff, the collapsing ledge, and three dancing men are all in a uniform black, conjuring the necropolitical effects of environmental destruction. The flyer does not mention a political organization, meeting time, or meeting place, but only an appeal to the left of the precariously perched upright dancers that reads "Against Ecological Devastation, DANCE UPRIGHT!" The performers enact the appeal through their upright dancing bodies. The flyer makes an analogy between the *dik* (upright) horon style and resistance against environmental exploitation.

In *dik horon*, the dancer's body stays vertical while the shoulders and torso create an almost visceral shimmying movement and both knees are released and then pulled back in tightly controlled, small, sharp movements, such that the dancers slide ever so slightly to the left, keeping the circle going.<sup>1</sup> In the context of protest, the symbolic imagery of the upright body is associated with maintaining a solid political stance despite hardships and challenges. Gülin, an ecology activist and member of The Black Sea Is in Revolt, a solidarity platform that collaborates with local environmental groups in their strug-



Figure 5.1. Call-to-action flyer depicting upright dancers perched precariously on a collapsing cliff ledge, reading “Against Ecological Devastation, DANCE UPRIGHT!” Shared with author on social media.

gle across the Black Sea region (M. I. Aksoy 2016), elucidated the significance of the standing posture in protest as well as in the horon:

You have to have a strong spine to dance the horon. We have a horon called “upright horon,” and we should dance it correctly! Whatever happens, when you dance the horon, you know that you shouldn’t bend down. (Istanbul, April 9, 2017)

She identifies the strong and straight spine the dance requires with the vigorous, spirited, and principled protester who does not hesitate to take a stand against injustice and oppression. Similarly, Esra, a *tulum* (bagpipe) musician and environmental activist, maintained that standing straight on both feet denotes a defiant body that does not kneel to power. A dancing body can be dragged by the police or lie down on the ground to block construction machines and police vehicles. But since the body does not submit to power, its spine remains straight. A straight spine signals resistance. Both Gülin and Esra live in Istanbul and have family in eastern Black Sea towns. They travel between Istanbul in the west and the region’s rural areas in the east of Turkey. Their transregional movement is foundational to their environmental activism and their understanding of horon. Their comments cast light on the flyer’s meaning: the three men dancing on a collapsing cliff ledge not only signal the urgency of environmental destruction in the region but also suggest that dance is a form of resistance to which the region’s public can relate.

The call-to-action flyer illustrates three men dancing, but environmen-

tal resistance movements in the eastern Black Sea have been predominantly led by women. Historically, women in this area worked intensively during tea-planting and harvesting times in addition to carrying out their domestic labor, such as gathering herbs and plants for cooking, carrying water from wells and springs for cleaning, collecting and carrying wood, making dairy such as butter and cheese, and drying fruit, vegetables, and seeds to consume in the winter months. Some environmental activists argued that this gendered division of labor rendered women more knowledgeable about the possible impacts of a lack of natural resources on everyday life. Female residents of Rize, Artvin, and Arhavi have effectively resisted highway construction, mining activities, and hydroelectric power plants (*hidroelektrik santraller*, hereafter HEPPs) proposed by national and international companies since the 1980s. When women participated in these movements, their daily habits changed, as did the extant social and patriarchal relations in their local communities (D. Çınar 2019). Women gave press statements, performed night-long vigils in construction zones, carried banners and signposts for political action, and put their bodies at risk to stop machine operators and prevent demolition. Their increased self-efficacy and political agency have had substantial effects on sociocultural structures in the area (Şendeniz and Yıldırım 2018). Women, and in particular Hemşin, Laz, and Georgian women whose residential, agricultural, and grazing lands are targeted, have negotiated not only patriarchal norms and values but also their intersecting identities and different capacities and forms of oppression (Kolivar and Çelik 2007; E. Yıldırım 2017).

This chapter examines the processes through which the horon is reassembled to bridge transregionally dispersed environmental movements and create a shared praxis of resistance in both major Turkish cities and rural areas of the eastern Black Sea region. The reassembly of horon through the skillful use of traditional and political knowledge enables a young generation of activists in big cities to connect with the region's marginalized ethnic and cultural communities and learn from their narratives about land, belonging, and the past. Unlike the choreographic tactic of imprecision, in which activists bring together different ethnic- and gender-coded dance styles and movement vocabularies to create an amalgamation, the choreographic tactic of *reassembly* that is discussed in this chapter involves the masterful compilation of governing principles and components of the dance with dissenting tools into a single frame that generates new social and political meanings.

Activists have dismantled, repurposed, and reassembled the horon by carefully recycling, juxtaposing, and improvising its different components:

its group choreography and individual stylings; its musical accompaniments and call-and-response patterns; its poetry structure and recitation; its objects of clothing, color schemes, and props; and its myths and mythic imagery. This performative process juxtaposes and reassembles a range of available elements culled from not only traditional but also nontraditional materials: call-to-action flyers, hashtags, statements, banners, and other creative acts of dissent. For example, environmental activists embed political slogans into poetic recitations and anonymize the lyrics to avoid individual legal punishments. They may issue a press statement or make a verbal commentary as they dance the horon, pausing a few minutes to speak before resuming the performance—thereby enabling multiple events to unfold simultaneously within the horon during a protest. In their reassembly of the horon, protesters' knowledge of the genre enables them to meticulously integrate aesthetic and performative elements from dispersed contexts and sources to create dissenting discourse and practices that can travel effectively between the city and the country.

The horon was reassembled across Black Sea environmental resistance movements spanning a period of more than twenty-five years, from the 1990s to the 2010s. Three of those form the main sections of this chapter through which horon poetry, music, and movement compositions are discussed: popular struggles against the Green Road highway project crossing over the mountains and connecting the high plateaus of Rize province with national transportation hubs, the Cerattepe mining project near Hatila National Park in Artvin province, and the Arhavi HEPP project on Orçı River running through Rize and Artvin provinces. As dissenters moved across the Black Sea region and between the rural Black Sea area and central Istanbul, they reassembled the horon as a transregional genre of collective resistance.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLE AND DIASPORA ACTIVISM

The Black Sea has been the main supplier of tea, tobacco, and nuts to the national market since the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 exposed northern Black Sea coast residents, flora, and fauna to radioactive fallout. The government rejected any claims regarding the contamination of agricultural crops. Cahit Aral, who cofounded the center-right and neoliberal Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) in 1983 and was minister of industry and commerce during the 1986 incident, drank a cup of tea in front of television cameras to prove that the Black Sea tea crops were not contaminated (*Milliyet* 1986). Despite such assurances, a public health crisis unfolded in the next

decades, marked by particularly high rates of cancer (Acar et al. 2011; Gökmen et al. 1996; Wise 1996). Turkey's Green Party (Yeşiller Partisi) was established in 1988 in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster and prioritized an antinuclear stance as central to the conservation of the country's natural and historical heritage. Although the party has since been disbanded, reestablished, merged with others, and split off from them several times, its various institutional incarnations and activists have remained important players in environmental and antinuclear struggles across the country.<sup>3</sup>

Under the influence of Turkey's adoption of a free market economy in the 1980s and shift toward foreign investment and global capital in the 1990s, the region's rich natural resources have been targeted by a number of national and international companies. Post-1980 governments prioritized economic growth over environmental protection, leading to poorly designed infrastructure. For example, a Black Sea coastal highway project was initiated in 1987 but gained momentum in the 1990s, particularly after the opening of the Sarp border gate between Georgia and Turkey in 1988. Starting in 1997, Mesut Yılmaz, then prime minister for the Motherland Party, sought to complete the road with the help of foreign loans. It took two decades to complete the project due to poor infrastructure planning, insufficient consideration of the region's geographical conditions, and resistance from the inhabitants of the area. Since then, the 542-kilometer-long coastal highway has collapsed and flooded frequently. Governments claimed that the highway project would facilitate trade and tourism in the area, but its residents repeatedly protested the construction, arguing that the project would block access to the sea, pave the shoreline with concrete, create rapid urbanization, pollute rivers flowing into the sea with urban waste, and provide mobility for upper classes only. Despite all this opposition, construction of the highway continued, and ultimately, in 2007, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then prime minister for the AKP, inaugurated the controversial road.

Since the AKP's ascension to power in 2002, an increasing number of developmentalist projects across Turkey have been implemented through a system of state concession, revealing the relationships between the state and private companies. For example, among the companies awarded construction contracts to finish the Black Sea coastal road in the early 2000s were Limak, Cengiz, and Makyol, pro-government capital groups that, together with Kalyon and Kolin, were dubbed the "gang of five" by the AKP's opposition parties. One of those crony capitalists, Turkish businessman Mehmet Cengiz and his company Cengiz Holding (Cengiz İnşaat), expanded his portfolio during the AKP governments to include the management of several megaprojects: the Ankara–Sivas high-speed train (2008–2021), the new İstan-

bul Airport (2013–2019), and the construction—with Russia’s Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation—of four reactors at the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (since 2017). In 2012, Cengiz Holding was granted a mining license for Artvin’s Cerattepe hilltop; in 2015, it bought the majority rights to the Green Road highway project in Rize’s Çamlıhemşin highlands (Sendika.org 2015); and in 2016, it was awarded a license to build the Rize-Artvin Airport, which opened in 2022 (Birgün 2017).

State-administered action plans and institutions facilitated these megaprojects. In 2010, the Eastern Black Sea Tourism Master Plan (Doğu Karadeniz Turizm Master Planı), part of the Turkey Tourism Strategy Action Plan, 2007–2013 (Türkiye Turizm Stratejisi Eylem Planı, 2007–2013), targeted the eastern Black Sea region as a single unit of tourism development (Kültür ve Turizm 2007). The plan provided a regulatory framework for resource extraction and infrastructure projects by private companies to realize various megaprojects, including airport and highway construction, mining facilities, and hydroelectric, thermal, geothermal, and coal-burning plants (Figure 5.2). State institutions, such as the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (Devlet Su İşleri), have been subordinated to the AKP’s technocapitalist megaprojects, such as those aimed at the privatization of water resources. In this system, the state leases portions of streams to companies for an extended period, allowing multiple companies to control different sections of a stream to produce energy. The upshot has been the conversion of long stretches of riverbed into busy, polluting zones of construction, restrictions on water access, and the privatization of water resources. Smaller stream-type HEPPs across Turkey proved deeply damaging to the environment and caused wide ranging dispossession of inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

The government promoted technocapitalist projects as necessary for the development of the region and creation of job opportunities. This framing divided communities and pitted supporters and opponents of these projects against each other, preventing the area’s residents from raising a common voice.<sup>5</sup> One example of this is the planning of a dam project in Yusufeli near Artvin, which was promoted with a future-oriented vision of secure “employment, high compensation payments, and new and better settlement area” (Evren 2014, 413). Similar to the government-sponsored large-scale urban planning and real estate projects in big cities, which demolished lower-class neighborhoods to create luxury residences for higher-income residents, these rural development projects were made possible by the destruction of natural areas and the extraction of resources that historically oppressed religious and ethnic communities relied on (Evren 2022).

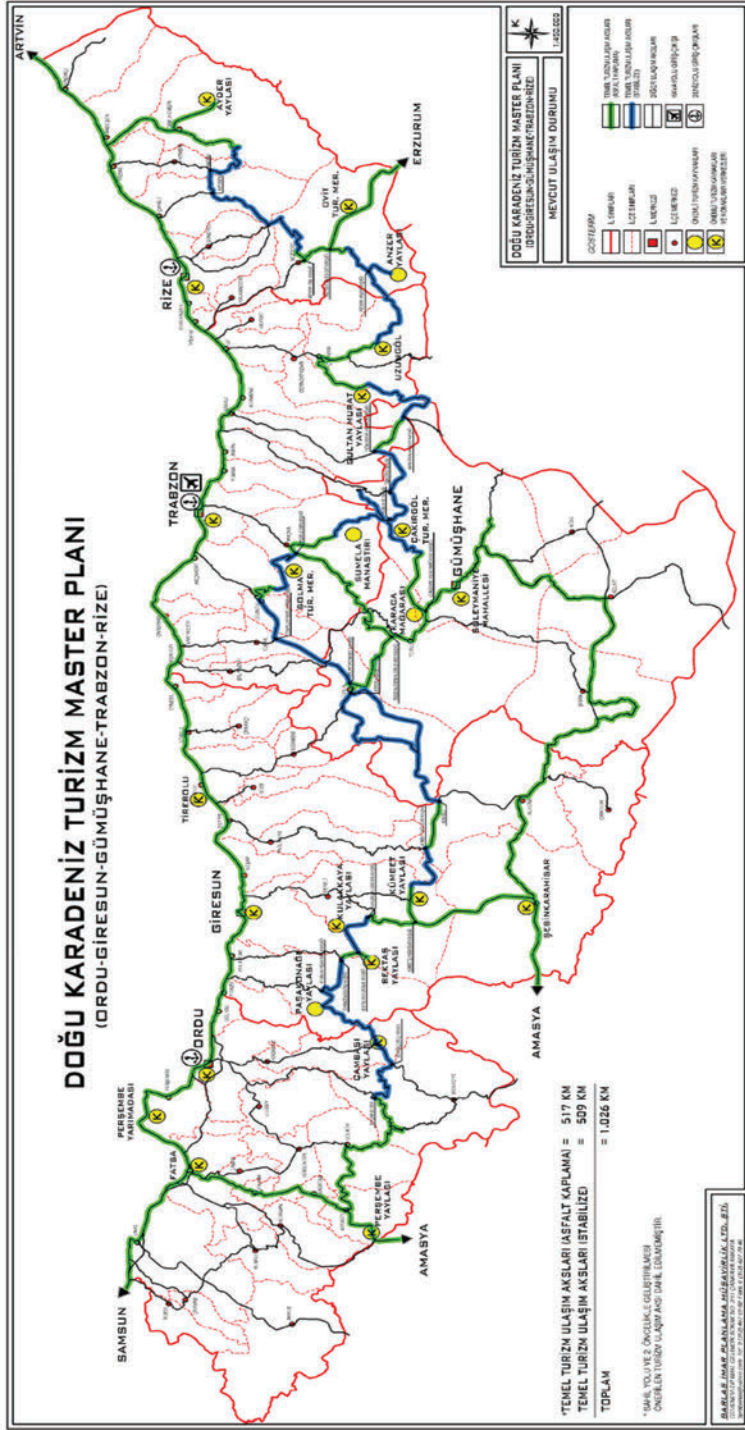


Figure 5.2. The Eastern Black Sea Tourism Master Plan as of 2010. The green and blue lines depict the planned motor vehicle roads for tourism purposes. The provincial capital cities of Rize and Artvin are on the right side of the map. Source: Barlas İmar Planlama Müşavirlik Ltd. Şti. 2010, 48.

While the area's residents were divided around these projects, environmentalists were also criminalized and hit with charges ranging from violation of the freedom to work to aiding terrorism. In 2012, Veyssel Eroğlu, then minister of forestry and water affairs, declared a "war against environmental activists," even going so far as to claim that energy companies were using environmentalists to harm the government (*Cumhuriyet* 2012). Following suit, the Turkish media accused activists of aiming to undermine national unity (*Star Gazette* 2016). Some protesters were taken into custody, some lost their business licenses, and others faced heavy fines as a result of their participation in environmental campaigns and protests.

This centralized and forceful developmentalism nevertheless encountered popular opposition in the Black Sea, developed in connection with many other rural and urban resistance movements across Turkey. Environmental grassroots activism had in fact been on the rise since the 1990s. Formed in 1993 by environmental grassroots organizations, professional chambers, and labor unions, antinuclear platform used a number of tactics, including signature campaigns, festivals, and symbolic referenda (Adem 2005). Judicial action has since become a form of struggle, and the tactical use of the law and jurisprudence increased in the ensuing decades, paving the way for new forms of allyship by encouraging the involvement of lawyers and academics who provided expert opinions on relevant areas of law and environmental policy. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, generations of environmental activists organized their struggle transregionally in mobile, flexible, and horizontal structures. Horizontal governance and democratic participation were not new for residents of the eastern Black Sea region. Many towns, such as Fatsa, Şavşat, and Hopa, were central for leftist movements and labor activism in the 1970s (Aksu 2012) and staged experiments with direct democracy and self-governance until the 1980 coup.

The environmental movement has succeeded in diminishing the ruling party's unwavering power in the area. From my observation, this shift has been driven by three types of actors who cooperated with one another: *urban activists* living in the cities of the Black Sea region, *rural activists* living in small Black Sea towns and villages, and *regional diaspora activists* living outside the region in major urban hubs such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir who have extended family in the Black Sea region. Because regional diaspora activists travel between different locations and contexts, they are able to access rural and urban as well as regional and national resources and networks to organize their environmental campaigns. They organize synchronized events in big cities outside the Black Sea region to raise national public awareness about regional ecological problems and demonstrate solidarity with local

resistance movements. Urban activists visit different cities and villages in the region to support local resistance, and rural activists share their experiences and forms of struggle in national environmental organizations.

Between 2005 and 2016, the regional protests and the organizational capacities of rural activists spurred Turkey's grassroots movements to recognize the "environment as a political problem" (Aksu and Korkut 2017, 9). These resistance movements succeeded in linking environmental policy and ecological justice with general debates on developmentalism, cultural and gender identities, democratization, transparency in decision-making, and citizens' right to access information (Adem 2005; Aksu et al. 2016, 11). These debates and, in addition, the death of Metin Lokumcu, a teacher who lost his life after police made excessive use of pepper spray during an anti-HEPP protest in Hopa in 2011, transformed the nature-conservation approach of earlier decades into a politicized environmental movement.

Throughout the 2010s, small activist groups in the Black Sea region formed larger umbrella structures. The Rivers' Solidarity Platform (Derelerin Kardeşliği Platformu) aimed to unite transregional struggles against stream-type HEPPs, and the Highland Plateaus Solidarity Platform (Yaylaların Kardeşliği Platformu) organized resistance to trans-plateau construction projects. The Black Sea Is in Revolt Platform cooperated with various environmental struggles across the Black Sea. The Firtına Initiative (Firtına İnisiyatifi) targeted technocapitalist projects in the Firtına Valley. The Green Artvin Association (Yeşil Artvin Derneği), established in the 1990s, centralized anti-mining struggles in the area. These networks aimed to attract popular support and therefore highlighted their independent character, refusing to be associated with any political organization (Knudsen 2016; Yavuz and Şendeniz 2013, 55). Nonetheless, they have been pivotal in reorganizing dissenting politics on a larger scale. Their solidarity networks created connections across the Black Sea region, opened spaces to talk about processes of dispossession, economic precarity, and cultural suppression, and fostered political participation and social mobilization.

#### HORON IN THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE EASTERN BLACK SEA REGION

The Black Sea region has marked by a multiethnic and multilingual cultural geography, with Pontians who speak the Greek dialect of Romeika, Laz who speak the Caucasian language of Lazuri, Hemşin who speak an Armenian dialect called Homshetsi, and Georgians who speak the Caucasian language of

Kartuli. This cultural geography has been decisively shaped by the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey, which resulted in over a million Greek Orthodox citizens of Turkey leaving for Greece and about four hundred Muslim Turkish citizens of Greece leaving for Turkey (Hirschon 2003). Only the Greeks of Istanbul and the Imbros (İmroz) and Tenedos (Bozcaada) islands and the Muslims of Eastern Thrace were exempted from this compulsory exchange (Alexandris 2003). Displaced from their homelands, most of these *mübadil* (exchanged people) were made refugees, suffering discrimination and hatred in their new societies (Hachikian 2007; Iğsız 2008). These peripheralized communities have been demanding more visibility for their culture and language, mobilizing a discourse of cultural rights and political participation. These mobilizations have been in dialogue with the region's artists, particularly since the 1990s.

Kazım Koyuncu, an iconic folk-rock musician and Laz environmental activist from the eastern Black Sea region, engaged artistically with the multiethnic diversity of the region and reassembled its cultural history and linguistic and musical heterogeneity with Western rock music tunes. After being diagnosed with cancer, Koyuncu died in 2005 at the age of thirty-three; his illness was popularly associated with the fatal radioactive contamination of the Chernobyl disaster. Sung in Turkish, Lazuri, Homshetsi, Romeika, and Kartuli, and featuring instruments such as the *kemençe*, the accordion, and the *tulum*, Koyuncu's songs seek to establish links across the region's ethnic minorities while presenting the diverse cultures that constitute its political and cultural geography. This vision has been taken up by other music groups from the region, such as Marsis, Vova, and Karmate, which combine a wide range of languages and musical styles.

Koyuncu devoted much of his time to protests against the megaprojects in the region, especially the campaign to block the construction of the Black Sea coastal highway. In the next decades, Koyuncu's environmental activism influenced other singers—including Turkey's pop star Tarkan, *tulum* musician Gökhan Birben, and singer Bayar Şahin—who used their artistic platform in the service of activism through public statements and benefit concerts, individually and collectively raising their voices against the destruction in the Black Sea region (Hürriyet 2015a). But Koyuncu's linkage of the horon to environmental struggle, his use of horon music and dance to emphasize the shared cultural heritage of minority communities, is his most enduring legacy for regional diaspora activists. In our conversations, young activists emphasized that they use this dance more than any other because of the unique connection between the horon and Koyuncu's vision bridging Black

Sea minority rights advocacy and environmental resistance. Horon performances thus serve to root participants in the land, expressing both environmental claims and their cultural histories.

The association of horon with environmental, ethnic, and political activism has not gone unchallenged. Some members of these minoritized communities argue that this connection of the dance with an anti-state positionality may lead to further marginalization of Black Sea ethnic groups and their forms of cultural expression; they therefore insist that the horon is a nonpolitical and quotidian activity. Yet because horon is also perceived as a kind of verification of the continuity of everyday life and culture, it marks the cultural resilience of suppressed subjectivities. Zeynep, a Hemşin woman in her 50s and accomplished horon dancer from Çamlıhemşin in Rize province, explained to me that in her village, horon has been part of the normal course of life for centuries and that dancing it at a protest is no different from dancing it on other occasions:

Dancing horon in front of the bulldozer means that these mountains are ours. We graze our animals here. And we also dance the horon here. This is something we've done for centuries. And even as they try to deter it, we will continue to do what we always do, which means to continue to dance horon. . . . We dance the horon whether there is a wedding, a celebration, or a festival. When the police come in Robocop uniforms, we also dance the horon. (Çamlıhemşin, August 31, 2017)

Zeynep described the horon as an expression of belonging and claim of ownership to the land as part of one's heritage. The dance connects history, land, and people and shows resilience in the face of material dispossession, cultural erasure, and assimilation. Together with other residents of the area, Zeynep's family stood against the Green Road, a mountain highway project. Using multiple methods of political protest—marches, rallies, nationwide petition campaigns, lawsuits, judicial processes, road blockages, vigils, and site occupations—they persistently resisted construction companies, the police, the mayor, and local businesspeople between 2015 and 2022. Zeynep depicts the dance as an ordinary yet resolute and resilient practice that continues despite challenging circumstances and barriers.

Another way of expressing resilience is through the association of horon with a divine practice. Some Laz activists see horon's importance in Laz society and culture as a representation of the conscious relationship the Laz developed with their surroundings and the forces of nature before they were

converted to monotheistic religions under the Roman and then Ottoman Empires. They claim that the Laz continued dancing the horon as a corporeal memory of their polytheistic worship. Therefore, the reenactment of the dance in public spaces today represents their collective history and a counter-movement against enforced monotheism. A Laz intellectual and cultural rights activist said this about the horon:

Nature shapes the human: hard land, rough sea, harsh mountains. . . . Well, you have to be practical, solution-oriented, and strong because you need to transform these conditions. Horon is shaped by these qualities of nature. . . . In a popular etymology from before the Laz, it means *yakarış* [an appeal to nature]. . . . Horon is *ibadet* [prayer, worship] . . . and *isyan* [revolt]! We have been saying this since the 1990s. (Istanbul, June 20, 2017)

According to these Laz activists, the dance's pre-Islamic polytheistic origins also define its contemporary character as a practice of resistance against hegemonic monotheistic and authoritarian political systems. Indeed, this understanding was not limited to contemporary activists; beginning in the 1920s in Black Sea towns, horon dance and music were denounced as religiously inappropriate, and *kemençe* and *tulum* musicians were accused of violating the rules of Islam (Gazimihâl 1929; Topaloğlu 2004).

These accounts show the multiplicity of meanings attributed to horon as a form of cultural heritage, a practice of everyday life, a special ceremonial ritual, and a praxis of resistance against cultural and economic oppression and dispossession. This productive ambiguity prevents the dance from being seen solely as a signifier of anti-state activity and can protect already vulnerable ethnicities from becoming targets of accusation and censure. In this space of ambiguity, new politico-aesthetic values are produced and circulated through improvised horon choreography, music, and chanted poetry, which support protesters' sit-ins, vigils, judicial campaigns, and marches.

The transregional mobilization of horon and its bilateral transfer as a protest dance between the eastern Black Sea plateaus and Turkey's major urban hubs invites us to revisit folk dance's association with an "authentic" rural culture and its tactical reassembly. Once activists had reassembled the dance as a political protest and direct action, the horon could serve various purposes: a human barricade against construction vehicles, a call for participation in a protest, an energizing bodily practice to prevent fatigue and enervation, or a diverting activity during the long hours and days of vigils.



Figure 5.3. Green Road protesters dancing in front of the Rize provincial governorship (Rize Valiliği) office. Still from video. Source: Sırlı 2015.

#### THE GREEN ROAD PROTESTS AND THE REASSEMBLY OF IMPROVISED ORAL POETRY FOR DISSENT

The video is available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14524804.cmp.28>

In a YouTube video from August 2015 (Sırlı 2015), environmental protesters are seen holding hands and forming a circle to dance in front of the governor's office in Rize (Figure 5.3). At the center of the circle, a musician accompanies the dancers with a *tulum*. Performers extend their arms forward and bouncing in the syncopated rhythm that forms the backbone of horon. On the leader's cue, performers alternately tap the ground with their right and left feet. In this sequence, colloquially called *fora*, participants sing songs in chorus and sporadically shout out with enthusiasm. The shared rhythm and collective movement highlight inclusivity and accessibility, yet the leader changes the movement phrases frequently. On the leader's cue, participants speed up to execute a running movement in three counts, then stomp their right or left foot forcefully toward the center of the circle on the fourth count. They repeat this sequence until the next cue. The rhythmic variety of the movement sequences helps participants with different physical capacities to join in the action. Rhythm and movement develop into a call-and-response pattern, in which the dancers sing songs to invite Rize's governor to "come down" and join the protesters in their dancing and their stance on the Green Road.

In this video (see Video 5\_3.mov), two young women have taken the hands of the older horon leader, located in the middle of the group of women dancing in red velvet dresses and black aprons. They bounce energetically in their sneakers, the silver coins ornamenting their headscarves, jingling from the forceful movements of their bodies. Some hold signs and banners protesting the ongoing highway construction. Others carry plastic bags or backpacks containing everyday necessities for their half-day trip from the Firtına Valley to Rize's town center.

The participants' quotidian demeanor make the circle flexible, porous, and open to surprises. Many in the audience enter and leave the moving circle, joining in the dance by separating the hands of two dancers and positioning themselves in the newly created space. Sometimes the forward, backward, and sideways steps exist simultaneously, yet bodies seem calm and easy. As in the video (02:02:00–02:23:00), the lead dancer spontaneously removes herself from the circle to give a press speech, and others applaud her words or chat as they dance. Dancers' improvisational capacity to respond to these multiple events occurring in the dance circle, their simultaneous attentiveness to the changing cues, and seamless transitions between sets with different movements, energies, and tempos demonstrate their knowledge of the form.

This horon was to urge Rize's governor to put a stop to the Green Road highway project meant to connect eight highland plateau towns located along a 2,600-kilometer stretch of the eastern Black Sea mountains. The construction company and state agents promoting the venture claimed that the road would create new job opportunities for residents and expand the economy by increasing infrastructural capacity and making the plateaus more accessible for tourists. But many of the region's residents, regional and national civil society organizations, professional chambers, academics, and environmental activists banded together to oppose the megaproject with a variety of concerns: The Green Road would endanger farmers' livelihoods by restricting their access to grazing lands, covering the plateaus with concrete, increasing pollution from motor vehicles, causing inevitable landslides and erosions, and drastically harming ecological diversity (Durmuş 2016). Experts also warned that the project would facilitate future mining and energy projects (Üstün 2016). Supporters of the plan, conversely, clung to the assurances of new income-generating opportunities and infrastructural improvements and accused their opponents of opposing regional development and growth.

Horon played a central role in protests against the Green Road. In summer 2015, the bulldozers reached Çamlıhemşin, the town that lay closest to the road construction site, but they were stopped in their tracks by local opposi-



Figure 5.4. The Green Road project was completed, despite being ruled illegal by the Council of State in 2020. Its groundwork was laid, but the road remained incomplete. Kavrun Plateau, Çamlıhemşin, Rize, August 14, 2022. Photo by author.

tion. Later, bulldozers closed the road to prevent protesters from going to the construction site on Kavrun Plateau. Residents then carried stones up the mountain to build a curved bypass road around the roadblock. After national newspapers featured photos of older women carrying huge stones and leading the resistance, environmental organizations from Istanbul and Ankara became more involved in the protests, organizing nationwide campaigns to emphasize the highway's negative outcomes. But construction soon began again on another section of the planned route, on Samistal Plateau. On July 11, 2015, protesters staged a vigil in the area that would continue for fifty days. The next day, hundreds of protesters gathered in Istanbul's Istiklal Avenue and danced the horon to show their solidarity with the Green Road's opponents (*Haberler* 2015). This enabled activists to bring horon music, dance, and chanted poetry together with the tools of social movements, such as flyers, graphics, protest signs, graffiti, documentaries, and social media campaigns, which amplified and multiplied the voices of opposition. On July 13, the court in Rize decided to stop the roadworks following a court appeal by the protest-

ers' lawyer. National newspapers acknowledged the struggle and announced the court's decision as the "First Victory Horon" (İlk Zafer Horonu), publishing photographs of residents dancing on the spot (Hürriyet 2015b).

Despite the court ruling, the planned work resumed once again shortly afterward. Protests in the eastern Black Sea region and Istanbul also resumed, emphasizing horon as the collective voice of popular opposition against the top-down project. Although construction had restarted in defiance of court orders, it was the opponents of the project who found themselves accused of violating the construction company's freedom to work. Thirteen Green Road opponents endured a four-year-long court case until they were finally acquitted in September 2020. In July 2020, the court ruled that the Green Road was illegal (Ekoloji Birliği 2020), but in the meantime, most of it had already been built and was already used by the public (Figure 5.4). In 2022, the annulment decision was lifted once again, leading to new lawsuits by the opponents' lawyers (Pehlivan 2022).

To connect the urban and rural movements, regional diaspora activists of the Fırtına Initiative circulated a solidarity action announcement. A Facebook event call commanded, "Give the *tulum* what it deserves!" (*Ver tulumun hakkını!*), inviting supporters to meet in a "solidarity horon" in Istanbul's Abbasğa Park to support Green Road protesters who were at the time holding a vigil in the highlands of Çamlıhemşin to stop construction machines. When the solidarity horon came to life on the given date in the park's amphitheater (Figure 5.5), many joined the circle, while others watched from their seats surrounding the stage in a semicircle. The green Fırtına Initiative banner behind the dancers read "Nature Has the Last Word!" (*Son Sözü Doğa Söyler!*) and #saystoptothegreenroad (#yesilyoladurde), the campaign's social media hashtag that eventually became the movement's motto.

The resourcefulness of horon as a protest dance lies in the adaptability of its choreographic structure. In our interview, Hemşin activist Harun Aksu argued that the horon is composed of four stages that depict the motions of the sea across the four seasons, with each season corresponding to a certain pace, effort, and structure in the sea's movements and humans' reaction to these movements. The *tiksir* (sneeze) moment of the dance is when the tempo accelerates to its highest speed, at which the dancer briefly suspends her motion (signaled with the command *khenə hecha* in Homshetsi, or "go and sneeze") (Gül 2010, 28). Aksu suggested that *tiksir* comes at the end of the dance sequence and represents the end of the year, like winter, after which a new cycle starts as the season turns to spring. In his interpretation, if horon leaders want to shift the sequence toward the summer season, they



Figure 5.5. Solidarity horon against the Green Road, Abbasağa Park, Beşiktaş. The banner reads, “Nature Has the Last Word!” Istanbul, 2015. Courtesy of the Fırtına Initiative.

command *alorta*, which indicates a ship heading straight as the sea calms down. This calm situation requires slow-paced movements and is sometimes accompanied with the command *doza* in Homshetsi (*yerinde* in Turkish, or “at your place”). In fall, nature provokes melancholy, and thus the *salino* segment (also called the *fora* segment in the Hemşin and the Laz horon styles) is performed with improvised poetry. But then, following *yüksek* (high) in Turkish and *ver hağa sira* in Homshetsi (*çık siya* in Turkish, meaning “all together” in this context), dancers perform at an accelerated pace and raise their arms to shoulder level, changing the balmy climate to the stormy weather of early winter once again (Hopa, September 1, 2018).

In protests, the *fora* (*salino*) segment is particularly useful. In this segment, a call-and-response pattern is set up in which one person sings and the others echo the verses or respond to them using funny, ironic, or sarcastic turns of phrase. In *fora*, the dance proceeds at a slower pace, with the dancers taking a moment of rest, relaxing their arms on the sides of their bodies as they continue walking and undulating their upper bodies with a bottom-up momentum. They face the center and step to the right for two counts and to the left for three counts, which creates a limping quality to their walking.

Whether it was young urban activists performing the horon in Istanbul’s central Abbasağa Park in solidarity with Green Road opponents (Figure 5.5) or residents of all ages in the Çamlıhemşin highlands dancing to block a Cat-

erpillar from reaching its target in the mountains (Bayraktar 2020), a *tulum* musician was always present at the center of these horon circles. *Tulum* is underrepresented in the national folk music repertoire, but when played at protests, it signifies not only the loud presence of the opposition but also the erasure, assimilation, and exclusion of, particularly, the Hemşin, and to some degree the Laz and the Pontians. By centering the *tulum* in horon choreography and dissent, environmentalists visibilize neglected cultural geographies and evoke the imagery of their lives in the Black Sea region under the challenging conditions of its natural landscape. Ali, a professional *tulum* musician and environmental activist, described what he experiences as the relationship between the *tulum* and the mountainous regions of his home:

It [the *tulum*] reminds me of the harsh conditions of the mountainous Black Sea landscape. I blow the *tulum* while doing other things at the same time as I walk in the hills tending the flocks [of goats] and paying close attention to my surroundings so I can move safely in nature. That *tulum* gives me some opportunity to look around, interact with others, and catch my breath while walking with the flocks in steep areas. (Çamlıhemşin, July 28, 2017)

This pastoral role of the musician in rural communities is reflected in the duties of the *tulum* player during political protests, especially when a musician is placed in front of a marching group or at the center of a spontaneously created horon circle. In this sense, the instrument's centrality in protest can be an aesthetic or a practical choice, but more importantly, it is a reiteration of the *tulum*'s prominence in the cultural life of the region's residents.

The *tulum*'s centrality also relates to its facilitation of a robust call-and-response pattern that is a key feature of the horon. Burcu, from the Istanbul-based Northern Forests Defense, explained the effects that the *tulum*'s powerful, high-pitched sounds create in the dancers: "Because the sound of the *tulum* is already powerful, we have to shout louder to make our cries heard from outside [the circle]. To me, the shouting thunders out a war cry. It inspires us and intimidates the others" (Istanbul, April 11, 2017). In this case, the others she refers to are the police and local authorities standing by. The loud sounds of the *tulum* can compete with and even overpower the mechanical sounds of amplified police announcements over a loudspeaker. Once the instrument is accompanied by the chorus, it contributes to the potent non-mechanical, embodied human force of the call-and-response chants.

In urban grassroots movements, however, the *tulum* is controversial because of its use of the whole skin of a goat for its bag. The openings of the

goatskin at the neck and forelegs are tied up firmly or used for the pipes. The musician inflates the bag by blowing air into it and controls the wind in the bag by pressing it down and playing the wooden pipe. Animal rights activists, a group that often protests in alliance with environmental groups, typically oppose the use of *tulum* in protests. Environmental activist Ayşe stated that while she can empathize with vegan activists in Istanbul who refuse to join protests involving a *tulum*, for her own part, she appreciates the emotions that the instrument evokes and enjoys its public visibility as a signifier of the peripheralized Hemşin culture (Istanbul, July 21, 2017).

If the *tulum*'s volume and powerful pitch produce an aesthetic quality of resistance that resonates with many activists, it also furthers the improvisation of choreography by bridging bodily movements and oral poetry. In this poetry style, historical narratives and the emotions of love, anger, longing, and sorrow are conveyed, enabling dancers to interact verbally through the recitation of and improvisation on a chanted poem. A call-and-response pattern of chanted poetry is performed by the chorus, anonymizing the lyrics and collectivizing the act of chanting. This improvisational back-and-forth enables participants to develop forms of resistance by conveying feelings and languages that may otherwise be considered subversive (Abu-Lughod 1990; Slyomovics 2014).

In the eastern Black Sea region, horon dancers use the performativity of the dancing body and improvised poetry to create corporeal and verbal agencies. Activists convert traditionally improvised song lyrics into political chants and statements by using performative language (Austin 1962) to denounce companies, curse the agents of dispossession, and hope for a better future.

A popular rhyming poem used in horon is the *türkü* (song), often appearing as a quatrain called *atma türkü* (thrown song) that is composed of rhyming couplets. The most common style of *atma türkü* is call-and-response, performed by two individuals or groups, each provoking the other to respond with another couplet. Respondents to the call may exert their agency and draw attention to themselves by responding individually with improvised verses, or they may anonymize themselves in the crowd of activists by echoing the call verbatim along with the rest of the chorus. In *türkü* singing, each verse is usually repeated by the chorus. The participants may sing a well-known *türkü* to different *tulum* melodies, or one melody can be used to accompany several different *türküler*.<sup>6</sup>

At protests, activists improvise the content of the accompanying poems, while the traditional rhyming scheme and compositional logic remain the

same. According to the emic logic of a traditional stanza, the first line defines the location of the event by providing place names or signifiers. The second line depicts a memorable scene or the natural beauty that is associated with this place. The last two lines make a statement, reveal a feeling, disclose an unpleasant situation and curse its originators, or define a desired end. The *atma türkü* sung for Rize's governor in the August 2015 protest against the Green Road reflects this compositional structure:

|                      |                                |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Samistal'den geçiyor | Passing through Samistal       |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Alageyiğin izi       | Trace of the deer              |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Sana sesleniyoruz    | We are calling you             |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Vali duy sesumuz!    | Hear us, oh Governor!          |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Samistal'un deresi   | Samistal River                 |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Aksun aksun çağlasun | Should run and gurgle          |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Yeşil yolu yapanlar  | Those who build the Green Road |
| Chorus               |                                |
| Cehennemi boylasun   | Should go to hell              |
| Chorus               |                                |

Although they are recited one after the other, each quatrain performed during the *fora* segment has an independent narrative, and both follow the traditional rhyming scheme. The first line reveals the location: the Samistal Plateau, where the environmental activists' vigil was held to protest the destruction. The second line provides important facts about this place and blesses its natural life and resources: its wild and abundant nature and strong river currents that run free. The third and fourth lines of each quatrain define the desired end: The first calls for the governor to halt construction work; the second calls on a divine power to punish those in charge of the construction. By alternating these two lines, protesters express the wish that if a secular power fails to carry out justice, a divine power will punish those responsible for the devastation.

Based on the traditional structure of improvised poetry, activists recite new lyrics that promise to fight injustice, order government actors to justly implement the law, or even curse those companies responsible. By binding the speaking subject to the power of their utterances, these recitations become performative acts that do not merely describe the promises, demands, and curses but actually carry them out.

Through recitation, protesters reveal businesses' "dirty plans" in the area and deliver political statements. A group of young rural and regional diaspora activists mobilized the *destan*, a genre of epic recitation about important historical events, for the Green Road protests, composing a *Green Road Resistance Destan* (*Yeşil Yol Direniş Destanı*) (Fırtına İnisiyatifi 2015). The *destan* indexes oral history by conveying individual concerns and political criticism as a way to throw official accounts of events into question. The verses of the *Green Road Resistance Destan* create a link between a communal past, landownership, and resistance. The activists use a play on words to paint the hyped-up "green road" as a "pink lie," Turkish for an emotionally tinted form of lying, like sugarcoating a bitter truth, on the part of the construction company. This "pink lie" aims to placate opponents of the project with claims that it will work to the advantage of the region's residents by contributing to the area's development. The name "Green Road" already gives the impression that the road is being built to safeguard green areas from potential destruction brought on by tourism infrastructure, thereby greenwashing the environmental damage. But the *destan* divulges the "truth" behind the lie:

|                       |                                          |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Uzaklardan geldiler   | They came from far away                  |
| Almaya yayleları      | To take our <i>yayla</i> [plateaus] away |
| Zannetmeyom veruruz   | I don't think that we will give          |
| Bu güzelum dağları    | These darling mountains away             |
| Chorus                |                                          |
| Yeşil yol dedüğünüz   | What you call the Green Road             |
| Pembe bir yalan gibi  | Seems like a pink lie                    |
| Dedelerden kaldı hep  | They remain our grandfathers'            |
| Biz dağların sahibi   | We are the owners of these mountains     |
| Chorus                |                                          |
| Bu gençluk direnecek  | These youth will resist                  |
| Dağlar bizim evumuz   | The mountains are our home               |
| Çekun ellerunuzi      | Keep your hands off                      |
| Bunlardur son sözümüz | These are our last words                 |
| Chorus                |                                          |

Via these *Green Road Resistance Destan* verses, the young activists promise to defend the mountains as ancestral lands. They warn the company against destruction and dispossession and letting foreigners into the region and tell them to keep their hands off the land. The activists claim ancestral ownership of the land and demand the just recognition of their claim against this distant adversary. The *destan* also contains some elements of *türkü*, particularly in its chorus. The women chant the first quatrain, which the men then echo. In the last quatrain, the singers add a third chorus, which the men and women sing together. By adding the chorus to every stanza, the typical solo performance of the *destan* is anonymized, collectivized, embodied, and amplified with multiple voices singing together. The poetry generates collective potency and anger at the government's ill-conceived policies, state officials' phony promises, and court judges' prejudiced conduct.

The circulation of lyrics between resistance movements and from past to present struggles keeps them in a constant state of recycling. One of the first deployments of horon against an extractive project occurred in 1998, during a campaign targeting a HEPP project in the Fırtına Valley. Local resistance in Çamlıhemşin was soon supported by a group of mostly university students in Istanbul, and over two hundred people showed their solidarity against the HEPP project by dancing horon to *tulum* tunes in Kadıköy Pier (Özışık 1998). The students later traveled to support the resistance in situ. Professional members of civil society, lawyers, and academics also visited the valley. Following the protests, the Trabzon Administrative Court annulled the environmental impact assessment (*çevre etki değerlendirme*) report that had been approved by the Ministry of Environment.<sup>7</sup> By 2000, the Council of State (Danıştay) had canceled plans for the Fırtına Valley HEPP, and it annulled another environmental impact assessment report in 2004, to the relief of the project's opponents.

In the 1998 protest of the Dilek-Güroluk HEPP in Çamlıhemşin, a group of residents danced the horon next to the construction site as a way to pass the time during the long hours of monitoring machine movement in the riverbed. One participant in that horon told me that a female dancer in the group had improvised a *türkü* with the following lyrics, the second and fourth lines rhyming (Çamlıhemşin, March 27, 2019):

Bu Fırtına deresi  
Aksun aksun çağlasun  
Bu dereyi kurutanlar  
Ömür boyu ağlasun

This Fırtına River  
Should run and gurgle  
Those who dry up the river  
Should cry forever

The *türkü* lyrics, cursing those who “dried up” the river, offended a group of HEPP supporters standing nearby. Following a heated argument over the lyrics, the dancers had to stop the dance. But this *türkü*, improvised to a Hemşin horon, has continued to inspire environmental activists. As shown above for the case of the Green Road protests, various iterations of this chanted *türkü* have continued to accompany activists’ actions. Like this *türkü*, which has circulated across generations of environmentalists, rural and regional diaspora activists work together to develop common political signifiers that function transregionally. Regional diaspora activists prepare banners, catchphrases, hashtags, and song lyrics with performative power. At the same time, rural activists, who are masterful at improvisation, demonstrate how to make the most fitting and piercing statements using the call-and-response pattern of *türkü*.

Women played a prominent role in leading the Green Road protests, frequently mobilizing elements of local material culture to make political statements. Hemşin and Laz women, for instance, wore traditional garments and two-piece headscarves during demonstrations (see Figure 5.3). These headscarves are made of black chiffon (*şifon*) and a colorful cotton fabric called *puşi*, knotted across the forehead. The *puşi* also gained visibility among young Hemşin women activists in Istanbul, who adopted it not only as a critique of environmental policies but also as a means to visibilize their marginalized culture. At a protest in July 2015 in Çamlıhemşin, a group of female activists emphasized their dissent against the Green Road project through the use of this headscarf (Diken 2015b). Across both the Black Sea region and large urban centers beyond it, activist Hemşin and Laz women continued to deploy the *puşi* to signal resistance to cultural assimilation as well as neoliberal land dispossession.

Protesters resisted at Kavrın and Samistal plateaus, with concurrent protests in Çamlıhemşin and in cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. In front of the Rize courthouse or the governor’s office, horon and *tulum* served as a noisy show of and call for solidarity with the human and nonhuman agencies residing in the areas targeted by the megaproject. By performatively bridging urban, regional diaspora, and rural activists and juxtaposing, recycling, and reproducing horon material using a contemporary protest toolbox, activists deployed a choreographic tactic of reassembly to create new social and political meanings.



Figure 5.6. A call-for-action flyer by Artvin Solidarity, reading “Horon is resistance! Continue the struggle for Cerattepe. Kadıköy Pier. Sunday, February 28, 6 p.m.”

Source: Kuzey Ormanları Savunması 2016.

#### THE CERATTEPE ANTI-MINING PROTESTS AND THE REASSEMBLY OF DIRECT ACTION

Another call-for-action flyer (Figure 5.6) depicts protesters dancing a horon at a protest against a gold- and copper-mining project targeting the Cerattepe hilltop located in Artvin, near Turkey’s northeastern borders with Georgia and Armenia. The image references the idyllic scenery of the region by presenting the group dancing in a valley surrounded by mountains with lush forested slopes. There are no buildings in the background, only trees being safeguarded from state and private development by the people in the frame. Above the mountains, written in the sky, are the words “Horon is resistance! Continue the struggle for Cerattepe. Kadıköy Pier, Sunday, February 28, 6 p.m.” Signed by Artvin Solidarity (Artvin Dayanışması), an umbrella organization of grassroots groups active in the area’s anti-mining resistance, the flyer calls activists to a solidarity protest in Istanbul in support of those resisting at the Artvin mine site. Reminding the viewer that “horon is resistance,” the flyer asks activists to join those protesting in Cerattepe and dance the horon at Kadıköy Pier.

The Cerattepe hill, with a peak elevation of 1,700 meters, supplies water to Artvin city. Its neighboring Hatila Valley National Park is home to a dense Neolithic-era forest and a unique biodiversity boasting 1,400 plant species, 165 of which are endemic and many of which are rare and in need of preservation according to one of the founders of the Green Artvin Association, Neşe Karahan (Artvin, August 2, 2017). The area also requires migratory habitat conservation, as it is situated along one of only two wild bird migration routes in Turkey. Rich in copper, gold, and silver deposits, the area has attracted the interest of international mining companies since the 1980s. In 1985, Mining Law No. 3213 limited the activities of the state-administered General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration (Maden Tetkik ve Arama Genel Müdürlüğü) and granted international companies licenses to explore mine fields in Turkey (Engin and Özkan 2005). In 1998, a report published by the Directorate emphasized that mine construction in the area's volcanic sedimentary rock, a landslide-prone geological formation, "heightens the risk of landslides" (TMMOB 2014, 14). Despite the report's findings, the first drilling was conducted in the early 1990s by Canadian mining company Cominco. Artvin's residents resisted the mining project only after it became known, in 1994, that the project had contaminated Cerattepe hill's water supply, leading to multiple animal fatalities. In 1995, the Green Artvin Association was established to organize the public struggle against the mining project. The following year, the association invited scientists to present findings on the negative impacts of the mining project to Artvin's governor (Yeşil Artvin Derneği 2016). As a result, the Artvin governorship published an unfavorable report on the environmental consequences of mining in the area in *Official Gazette (Resmi Gazete)* No. 22553. In 1997, the association collected around ten thousand signatures and secured cross-party support for its opposition to the mining project, presenting the signatures to the Turkish parliament in Ankara in 1998.

As a result of the Green Artvin Association's continuing mobilization of scientists, residents, political parties, and the Artvin governorship, Cominco withdrew from the mining license in 2002 and transferred it to another Canadian company, Inmet. A series of events led to the temporary cessation of mining: In 2006, faculty at the Karadeniz Technical University's School of Forestry prepared a public opinion on the negative impacts of the construction (Tüfekçioğlu et al. 2006). In 2007, members of the Council of State visited the region (Hopam 2007). In 2008, the Rize courts revoked Inmet's license, citing the harmful effects of mining on the unique landscape, the increased risk of landslides, and the risk to the region's diverse flora and fauna. In 2009, the

Council of State approved the local court's license revocation, thereby terminating mining operations and all future plans for mining in the region.

Yet, despite the scientific warnings and legal censures, in 2011, the AKP's Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources announced the auction of 1,343 new mining areas, granting the license for Cerattepe to Özaltın (Pure Gold), owned by one of the government's crony businessmen, Mehmet Cengiz. On April 6, 2013, environmentalists in Artvin town square protested the environmental impact assessment report that had supported Cengiz Holding's Cerattepe permit. In 2014, the Council of State again canceled the company's license, prompting a public celebration.

Importantly for this work, the protests involved dancing the horon and showcased a recent tactical shift in the movement's protest repertoire. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, activists worked through the courts, writing petitions, collecting signatures, filing lawsuits, and issuing press statements. But from the 2010s, performative forms of protest, including the horon, began attracting public attention. Women in particular took on pivotal roles in such protests during the anti-mining resistance. Similarly to the Green Road protests, in the Cerattepe struggle, women put their bodies at risk to stop machine operators and prevent demolition, with some women being injured or hospitalized during police and gendarmerie attacks. Neşe Karahan describes the shift from a strong reliance on petitions to more radical forms of resistance as a tactical response to prevailing circumstances:

When we began our struggle in the 1990s, our protests were very different from those of the Bergama people [in western Turkey] who were good at performing attractive protests to highlight their anti-mining struggle. They were also close to the big cities in the west and staged successful protests. But we took a different path. Because our court cases were going well, we didn't want to be as visible. But given that the judges would simply be replaced until they [found someone who] would issue biased decisions, we had no choice but to change our tactics. (Artvin, August 2, 2017)

In Karahan's view, it was the bending of the legal process that finally prompted Cerattepe activists to shift from legal pressure campaigns to performative protest tactics in order to gain national visibility, taking inspiration from the Bergama resistance. The residents of Bergama, a village near Izmir in Turkey's Aegean region, began their environmental struggle in 1990 against Eurogold, a French-Canadian gold-mining company that planned to

build Turkey's first modern gold mine (Environmental Justice Atlas 2019). During their fifteen-year-long struggle, the Bergama villagers mobilized the public around resistance to mining activity and the importance of the democratic rule of law against the alliance of state-backed mining infrastructure and international capital, highlighting the incompatibility of top-down megaproject planning with environmental protections (Özen 2009; Uncu 2012). To hinder the mining company's operations, in particular its open-pit methods, the residents used direct action and civil disobedience tactics such as road blockades, mine field occupations, sit-ins, and naked protests.

On June 21, 2015, Cerattepe protesters occupied the hilltop worksite to prevent machines from entering and initiated a 24/7 collective "guard duty" action. The action was a response to the granting of an environmental impact assessment license to Cengiz Holding by an AKP-appointed judge, allowing mining in Cerattepe. The vigil lasted for 245 days and drew participants from diverse economic, political, and cultural backgrounds, including scientists, businesspeople, students, villagers, and politicians. In response to this growing public attention, President Erdoğan became involved in the debate, calling the Cerattepe protesters *yavru Gezici* (juvenile Gezi-ers), referring to the dissenting citizens who had participated in the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park resistance and who endured detention and yearslong criminal prosecution. With these words, Erdoğan not only infantilized the Cerattepe protesters but also criminalized them in the court of public opinion (CNN Türk 2016). Following his statements, pro-AKP media outlets called the Cerattepe protesters "terrorists" and accused them of being "German spies" (Z. Şahin 2016).<sup>8</sup> The *Star*, a conservative national newspaper, announced on its front page that the Cerattepe activists were "Not Environmentalists [but] German Converts" (*Star* 2016) who aimed to divide the country. The word "convert" (*devşirme*) is a trigger word that denotes so-called "crypto" non-Muslim and non-Turkish communities who, during the Ottoman Empire, negotiated survival by publicly converting to Islam. They were believed to have secretly continued to adhere to their original faiths and traditions. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, renouncing their beliefs and converting to Islam were no longer sufficient to guarantee citizenship and property rights for non-Muslims, as the state became increasingly paranoid about this group. Those who had converted to Islam were often considered during this period as untrustworthy troublemakers who could betray the empire, given the opportunity (Deringil 2012). This prejudice continued after the inauguration of the republic (Ekmekçioğlu and Altuğ 2019). The branding of environmental protesters



Figure 5.7. Activists dance in front of the police at a protest against the Cerattepe mining project. Artvin, February 21, 2016. Still from video by Dolunay Genç from Çekim Yapan Kadınlar. Courtesy of Çekim Yapan Kadınlar.

as “German converts” was thus a deliberate attempt to mark environmentalists as untrustworthy insiders who secretly worked against national unity.

The video is available at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14524804.cmp.33>

On February 15, 2016, after 245 days of vigil to block work at the mining site, the police declared that force will be used to disperse vigil participants and close off the area. The activists’ response to the evacuation order began that night; they closed off the road to Cerattepe and continued blocking it until February 21. On the last day, a critical moment occurred when the police broke through the activists’ horon circle. A documentary activist group of women captured this moment (Figure 5.7). In the video (see Video 5\_7.mov), we see a group of young protesters deploying horon to prevent the police from moving up the hill and closing off the area where the vigil had been. Some dancers are carrying Turkish flags and others are covering their faces with cloth or surgical masks. The police make their way up the hill, but their truck-mounted water cannon is still parked at the lower end of the road, and they are separated from it by the dancing activists. While the activists are performing the horon to accordion tunes, a police officer comes over to ask their permission to back up a police vehicle. A young woman immediately responds, “No! [You] cannot pull back the vehicle. We are dancing horon here!” After standing her ground, briefly pausing her dance, and telling the

police to stop bothering them, she continues dancing with other women (Çekim Yapan Kadınlar 2016, 24:55–26:33). Although both women and men are in the circle, a number of women gather closer to one another and hold hands with the woman arguing with the police.

Other people call out to the accordion player to play a different tune to energize the crowd to stand firm against the police, who seem threatening with their shields and gas masks. Some activists ask the musician to play the upbeat Hemşin horon. Others call for the popular *Vazriya*-style *düz* horon from Artvin. Another accordion player steps in and changes the tune to *Vazriya* horon. As the police maneuver the vehicle to bypass the protest, some dancers go to negotiate with the police while others take a number of consecutive backward steps, causing them to move away from the right side of the road where the police vehicle is parked. The horon circle breaks apart and the empty space enlarges as they dance. The police vehicle uses this opportunity to move up the hill, and the police simultaneously attack the protesters. Trying to escape from rubber bullets and pepper spray, dozens are injured.

During these brief minutes, the semicircle, which had been formed to invite more activists to join in and block police movement, was breached, creating an opening for the police and quickly shifting the balance of power. These spatial negotiations operated together with activists' decisions about the horon's style, sequence, energy, and vocabulary. The police eventually dispersed the Cerattepe anti-mining protesters, yet the latter assembled once again in both Artvin and Istanbul in 2017 to celebrate the anniversary of the resistance. Despite heavy police presence in both locations, activists held hands and danced the horon, now a sign of endurance (HaberTurk 2017).

At the solidarity rally for the Cerattepe resistance anniversary in Istanbul, a small group of urban and regional diaspora activists from the Artvin Youth Association (Artvin Gençlik Derneği) met in Abbasağa Park (Figure 5.8). Since the police greatly outnumbered them, the activists decided not to read the press statement they had prepared. Instead, they danced horon, creating a tiny assembly under restrictive conditions—the heavy rain, the small number of protesters present, the absence of an audience, and the heavy police presence. Composing a semicircle, they danced to not only *tulum* but also *kemençe* tunes. Nermin, an activist of the youth association, later explained to me that the *kemençe* was chosen to demonstrate their political movement's openness to different ideological perspectives and the Black Sea region's solidarity with the Cerattepe cause, independent of ethnicity and cultural-geographical divisions (Istanbul, March 30, 2017).



Figure 5.8. Activists from the Artvin Youth Association dance the horon on the first anniversary of the Cerattepe resistance. Abbasağa Park, Istanbul, February 19, 2017. Still from video by author.

Experienced dancers cobble together dance styles depending on the availability of instruments in a protest. When the Cerattepe resistance was ongoing, on February 20, 2016, activists protesting in Istanbul in solidarity with the vigil met in Tünel Square at the far end of İstiklal Avenue, adjacent to Taksim Square. A *tulum* player stood in front of a banner in support of the resistance. With the *tulum* melody amplified through a megaphone, the dancers performed a *Vazriya* horon, which is typically accompanied by the accordion. As the music and dance continued, the protesters chanted and carried banners that read “Don’t make me mess up your mine” (*Siçturma madenuna*), a catchphrase of the resistance uttered by an older protester in Cerattepe that inspired the public due to its directness and humorous condescension. During the anniversary of the resistance in 2017, Artvin Youth Association members in Abbasağa Park improvised a chant where they recycled this phrase:

Artvin’in dereleri  
Karadeniz’e aksın  
Karadeniz’e aksın  
Aksın Karadeniz’e

Artvin’s rivers  
Should run to the Black Sea  
Should run to the Black Sea  
To the Black Sea they should run

|                       |                                 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Artvin'un yeşilliği   | The green of Artvin             |
| Dünyalara bedeldir    | Is worth the world              |
| Ha bu işi yapan da    | The one who does this work      |
| Gavur oğlu Cengiz'dir | Is Cengiz, son of the infidel   |
| İlişme Artvin'uma     | Don't touch my Artvin           |
| Cerattepe bizimdur    | Cerattepe is ours               |
| Başlatma madenuna     | Don't even speak of your mine   |
| Siçturma madenuna     | Don't make me mess up your mine |

While the last line circulates across various anti-mining movements, all lines in the third quatrain are read as slogans of the Cerattepe protests. In this case, the activists preserved the chanted poetry structure of horon. But unlike the poetry improvised at Green Road protests, each quatrain here is treated as a single line, which is then transformed into political protest. The first quatrain mentions the prevailing local conditions before development: The rivers should run to the sea rather than being collected in reservoirs or put through pipes. The second quatrain reveals a truth about the landscape and its devastation, cursing the company owner's name and accusing him of the destruction of Artvin's forests. The last quatrain warns the mining company that the hill is theirs and promises continued action.

Nermin believes that "throwing songs" during the horon gives protesters the chance to freely express their outrage at the exploitation of the land and natural resources. By chanting their political slogans within the horon as part of the traditional choreography, activists can impact politics without being an explicit threat to the government:

When we throw a song cursing a company or disclosing their dirty business, we in fact shout out political slogans without being seen as so political. At the end of the day, we say whatever we want to say, but the police have no reason to arrest us! (Istanbul, March 30, 2017)

Traditional *türkü* lyrics modified by activists circulate at environmental protests in both the eastern Black Sea region and Istanbul. By reworking traditional poems as performative utterances, activists are able to act politically without appearing overly political, at the same time anonymizing and collectivizing the slogans of the resistance. Through call-and-response and choral patterns, the lyrics are memorized on-site while dancing.

The dance, music, and poetry of horon are mixed with the political content of the flyers, graphic images, and slogans to disorient the police and provide other activists with a renewed awareness of the political issues and stakes. As a choreographic tactic, reassembly is deployed by the improvisational recycling of traditional and popular songs and melodies for political use. By cobbling together a handful of choreographic and artistic elements, anti-mining activists in Cerattepe stood firm against pressure from national and international companies and the developmentalist interventionism of the state. In the narrowed spaces of protest available to them; at road openings near the construction site; in public parks and squares available only for spontaneous action; on uneven slopes negotiated with a heavy police presence, armored vehicles, rubber bullets, and tear gas canisters—activists performed a carefully curated grab bag of actions. Direct action vigils, marches, and sit-ins were combined with legal pressure campaigns, lawsuits, and petitions. At virtually all of these public actions, rural, urban, and regional diaspora activists danced the horon as a space of gathering and being in solidarity with one another.

#### THE ARHAVI ANTI-HEPP PROTESTS AND THE REASSEMBLY OF THE CHORUS AS A COLLECTIVE VOICE

In addition to highways and mining facilities, the intensified exploitation of natural resources to meet Turkey's growing energy needs and the de facto commercialization of mineral potable water have resulted in the widespread planning of HEPP projects of different sizes across Turkey. Arguing that free access to water is a human right, environmental activists launched popular mobilizations against hydro- and thermal power plants in 2007 and 2008, with the most widespread public participation in the recent history of the Black Sea region (Hamsici 2012, 291).

In Arhavi, people struggled against the MNG Holding Company, one of those well-connected businesses receiving government infrastructure contracts, often with especially favorable stipulations such as annual passenger guarantees at airports and payment in foreign currency. The protests against the company's HEPP projects began in 2011, when the newly created Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning, established that year by reorganizing the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, n.d.), approved

a plan to carry spring water from the Orçi River in Kamilet Valley to a HEPP storage station to be constructed in the town of Arhavi in 2012. In response, environmentalists established the Arhavi Nature Protection Platform (Arhavi Doğa Koruma Platformu), known by the acronym ADAKOP. Sociologist Sinan Erensü (2016) describes ADAKOP as a “typical anti-HEPP organization” in that it unites rural and urban activists, particularly those who migrated from the Black Sea region to urban hubs, with the purpose of working together against the HEPP project (484). Other regional network organizations, such as the Fraternity of Rivers Platform and The Black Sea Is in Revolt Platform, also cooperated with residents in their protests. The campaign against this new HEPP project in the village of Kavak (in Lazuri, Yakovit) on the Orçi River mobilized similar forms of protest, including legal pressure campaigns, lawsuits, and petitions; direct action vigils, sit-ins, and work machine blockages at HEPP sites; and synchronized solidarity actions, public marches, and press statements, where graphics, flyers, and songs circulated.

As with the Green Road and Cerattepe protests, women proved pivotal to Arhavi’s anti-HEPP struggle. A group that emerged from ADAKOP early on called themselves Hawk Women (Atmaca Kadınlar), referencing the region’s mythical hunting tradition. Some Hawk Women activists were injured trying to stop construction vehicles from accessing the worksite, while others were threatened and assaulted by company representatives and several were targeted by the company with lawsuits. Nazlı Demet Uyanık (2018), a Laz environmental activist and community organizer, explains this central role of women in protests through an account of women’s dependence on natural resources for everyday housework and their resulting understanding of the hardships of living without such resources.

In 2018, during the anti-Kavak-HEPP campaign, Hawk Women recycled a popular song from the region to chant at their anti-HEPP protests. The song, “Hala’nın Dereleri” (Rivers of Hala), was first recorded by Uğur Yazıcı for his 2007 album *Dinle Tulumu* (Listen to the *Tulum*). While Yazıcı’s record featured traditional instruments and melodies, the band Karmate introduced nontraditional instruments, such as the guitar and percussion, in its 2010 recording of the song. Later, another artist, Gökhan Birben, rearranged the piece as a rock song and recorded it as an anonymous Hemşin song on his 2017 album *Yağmurların Ardındaki Ezgiler* (Melodies Behind the Rain). The popular quatrain of the song lyrics is as follows:

|                   |                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Hala'nun dereleri | The rivers of Hala               |
| Karadeniz'e aksun | Should run to the Black Sea      |
| Karadeniz'e aksun | Should run to the Black Sea      |
| Aksun Karadeniz'e | To the Black Sea they should run |

As a protest song, “Hala'nın Dereleri” often begins with this quatrain. The chorus repeats several times, making the already catchy phrases much more memorable. While there are many quatrains, activists usually sing a total of three, applying a similar structure as that used in the Abbasağa Park protest for the anniversary of the Cerattepe struggle in 2017. For the protest version of this song, the setting in Hala, a village in Çamlıhemşin, is often changed to the town in which they are protesting, and the town's river (e.g., Artvin or Arhavi) is then released from the clutches of the HEPP to run freely to the Black Sea. The next quatrain divulges truths about the possible consequences of the project. As shown above, when this song was recited by the Artvin Cerattepe anti-mining protesters, they adopted the lines in the second quatrain to reveal Cengiz Holding as the responsible party for the environmental destruction. But in the Hawk Women's version, the second quatrain presents a dystopian vision of the future. The third quatrain is a performative declaration, with the singers warning that they will not let the machines enter the village:

|                   |                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Arhavi dereleri   | The rivers of Arhavi             |
| Karadeniz'e aksun | Should run to the Black Sea      |
| Karadeniz'e aksun | Should run to the Black Sea      |
| Aksun Karadeniz'e | To the Black Sea they should run |

|                     |                                           |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| İndum dere duzina   | I went down to the riverbed               |
| Baluklar ölmüş idi  | Fish had died                             |
| Findugi zaten sorma | Don't even ask about the chestnut [trees] |
| Onlar yok olmuş idi | They have disappeared                     |

|                   |                               |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Deremizi vermeyiz | We won't give our river       |
| Suyumuzu satmayız | We won't sell our water       |
| Makinalarunuzi    | Your machines                 |
| Koyumuze sokmayız | We won't let into our village |

Hawk Women sang this song when experts came to Arhavi to assess the potential environmental impacts of the HEPP project (Hürriyet 2015a).



Figure 5.9. The blue-and-yellow structure on the Orçi River is the HEPP construction. The riverbed is occupied by concrete, stones, and rubble, sparking protests in 2015. Arhavi, September 1, 2018. Photo by author.

By singing the song, they contributed to the collective tactic of preventing expert discussion; the project cannot legally proceed until the field assessment is completed. By disrupting the company meeting, activists gained valuable time in which to file lawsuits against administrative bodies and the power plant company's national and international representatives.

Despite this setback, MNG Holding Company did not wait for the court's decision to continue its operations, prompting the protesters to file another lawsuit against the illegal work undertaken and begin a 24/7 vigil at the site. They accused MNG owner Mehmet Nazif Günel, an Arhavi-native businessman, of betraying his community by spearheading the power plant projects (Figure 5.9) and destroying the land he now leased from the government, sparking heated antagonism between pro- and anti-HEPP supporters. In summer 2014, a group of Arhavi businessmen held a pro-HEPP protest in the town square of Arhavi that was facilitated by the mayor's office. They declared their support for "local business" and criticized anti-HEPP activists for holding back the development of their own town. To show their support for MNG, these businessmen danced the horon (Erensü 2014), wresting it back from

the protesters as a symbol of regional belonging. Only two days earlier, after learning that the court had issued a verdict in their favor against the company, the HEPP opponents marched into the same town square in celebration. At the end of the march, they formed a large horon circle of hundreds of dancers, which became known among activists as the Victory Horon (Zafer Horonu) (Ekin Danışmanlık 2014). The dance involved elements of a typical *tulum horon* structure, with *fora*, *savuş*, *al oyna*, and *içeri bas* segments. To accompany the horon, they chanted the lyrics previously sung by Hawk Women. Other *türkü* lyrics urged MNG not to harm the river and declared the activists' dedication to preventing the company from doing so:

|                       |                                              |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Dere özgür akacak     | The river will run free                      |
| O MNG batacak         | Oh, MNG will lose                            |
| Arhavi'nin uşağı      | The son of Arhavi                            |
| Dereyi satmayacak     | Won't sell the river                         |
| Kamiletten aşağı      | Below Kamilet                                |
| Yolu birleştir(il)miş | They said they'd unite the road              |
| Dereyi satturmayan    | The thing that doesn't let the river be sold |
| HESleri yaptırmayan   | The thing that doesn't let the HEPP be built |
| Yaşasın bu direniş    | Long live this resistance!                   |

In footage of this horon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC3v-AsVOrAk>), two male horon leaders are seen singing the lyrics, which the dancers echo. One of the leaders wears a white T-shirt with a printed hand gesturing “stop,” inviting more hands to unite against the capitalist big hand. Above and below the hand, the slogan reads, “Hands Off My Water” (*Suyuma Dokunma*). Behind the leader, a giant placard reads “HES'E HAYIR” (NO TO HEPP).

The horon leader attentively organizes the movements to enable the shouting of slogans. He commands the dancers to execute an *içeri bas* (stepping into), a fast section during which the dancers make a running movement in three counts with an accent on four as they stomp their right or left foot toward the center of the circle. Because this movement energizes the dancers, he shouts short phrases that are outside the melody but still within the rhythm. Next, he changes the sequence and commands a *bas yana* (step aside) to help the dancers rest a bit before once again starting the fast sequence of *içeri bas* with a lyrical phrase. These phrases are like couplets, but they do not form part of a *türkü*. They rhyme artistically but are action-oriented, cursing the company or wishing for a revolution:

Omuz, omuz  
MNG domuz

Shoulder, shoulder  
MNG is a pig

In the first line, the word “shoulder” provides a word to rhyme with and indicates the solidarity that pervades the dancers. The second line curses the construction company. In between each line, dancers shout collectively “Aha!” in affirmation. The “shoulder” line of this couplet is also used at other environmental protests in the region, but the targeted company in the second line is changed for each context. In these instances, the performativity of the lyrics is intertwined with the choice of the horon movements, because the lyrics and the movements are improvised in such a way that they complement each other to bolster the effect. As the horon accelerates, the activists cultivate more energy to shout and chant together, forcefully loud.

At rural and urban public political protests, horon poetry and chants are used to generate a collective voice. In singing and chanting, protesters write and perform the group’s manifesto together on the spot with each collective resounding of the chorus. This collective embodiment of sound through the nonmechanical amplification of marginalized, counterhegemonic voices makes these recitations emblematic of the group’s political statements. A similar embodied amplification tool called the “human mic” (Kim 2011) was used during the antinuclear rallies of the 1980s in the United States (Kunreuther 2018) and reused in the global social movements of the 2010s, including the Occupy Wall Street protests that began in New York City’s Zuccotti Park in 2011; the 25 January revolution that began in Cairo’s Tahrir Square in 2011; and the Taksim Gezi Park resistance in 2013.

The human mic technique involves the delivery by one individual of a speech or chant uttered in short segments in front of a large audience and the subsequent repetition by this crowd of each sentence after the speaker, so that the utterance is anonymized, amplified, and embodied by great numbers of people. Because the human mic emphasizes the collective voice over the sovereign individual voice, it functions as an enactment of democracy (Kunreuther 2018, 2). The human mic is also an innovative tactic for confronting mechanical police announcements and subverting the various legal technologies of control that have long sought to restrict the soundscape of dissenting public assembly (Radovac 2014). As part of the reassembly of horon’s chanted poetry for Turkey’s agonistic grassroots protests, the human mic enables activists to wrest back the

monopolization of amplified public speech and perform the democratic values of collective anonymity.

#### REASSEMBLING THE HORON

In recent environmental protests against massive infrastructure projects in Turkey's eastern Black Sea region, activists' deployment of the horon genre highlighted a shared transregional space of cultural knowledge that links Turkey's western cities with its rural and regional sites. The horon's migration and portability as a dance of environmental resistance has paved the way for the formation of new aesthetic values and dissenting positionings. These developments have left some anxious about political retaliation and others proud of how certain horon styles have now gained visibility and recognition in national public space.

The public meaning of horon is contextual, as it oscillates between an activity of everyday life, a residue of an ancient ritual, and a contemporary form of political resistance. Its democratic choreographic qualities—the absence of a fixed leader, the horizontal placement of bodies in a linear or circular shape, the encouragement of individual expressions within the collective, and its use of call-and-response patterns that are amplified by the human mic—provide activists with bodily counterhegemonic resources that can be used against the top-down developmentalist megaprojects. By masterfully using material available to them in the moment to create new alignments and relationships in public space, activists reassemble both the horon and the political assemblies they create, despite the efforts of the state and private companies to disperse people and destroy the land of marginalized communities. This reassembly vitally denotes historical belonging and cultural heritage.

Horon's improvisational structure helps merge dance, music, and poetry into a coherent and potent political act. Through improvisation, protesters reassemble traditional citations of poetry into political chants whose choral responding, anonymity, and vocal amplification create a collective voice of popular opposition. These chants complement the horon's choreographic qualities and turn it into a performative political action. In this space, activists combine aesthetic and political repertoires from urban and rural resis-



Figure 5.10. Protest against Cerattepe mining project. A horon circle is accompanied by an accordion player. The banner in the background reads, “Welcome to Artvin Meeting for Cerattepe.” Artvin, August 19, 2018. Still from video by author.

tances and reassemble movements, music, songs, props, mottos, and imagery to create political assertions (Figure 5.10).

This chapter has provided overview of the larger history of environmental resistance in Turkey, particularly in the eastern Black Sea region. The struggles are not over, as extractive projects continue. Although the Green Road was ruled illegal by the Council of State in 2020 and remains incomplete, its groundwork has been laid with a gravel road that cuts into the mountains (Figure 5.4). As activists reported in follow-up conversations, the gravel road poses further dangers to the region, as international mining companies are currently lining up to exploit the now more accessible mountain ranges. The current generation of activists has nevertheless paid a hefty price for its resistance, facing lawsuits and the revocation of business licenses. In the more radically authoritarian climate of the 2020s, where dissent has been renamed “terrorism,” persecution by the government and lawsuits against activists based on retrospective social media tracking have turned their legal public expression in the 2010s into a political crime. While the short-term prison

sentences imposed for such purported “offenses” can be deferred, once an individual’s accumulated prison time reaches two years, it cannot be deferred any longer, threatening activists with the possibility of years long imprisonment. Despite the criminalization of these nonviolent protesters, their continued reassembly and meticulous reworking of the aesthetic values of the horon’s dance, music, and poetry suggests horon—and also halay and other dances—will continue to have a central role in generating new social and political meanings for dissenting action.

# Coda

## Stepping Out of the Dance Circle

The history, culture, and politics of folk dance continue to shape its reconstruction as a powerful form of protest. A new wave of public demonstrations, which began on March 19, 2025, has persisted for over a month as I write these pages. Sparked by the detention and subsequent arrest of Istanbul's popular CHP mayor and presidential nominee, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the protests have also been fueled by the detention of over a hundred opposition figures. The current uprising has been the most widespread protest since the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park resistance. Hundreds of thousands of protesters, the majority of them university students, have poured into the streets and squares to oppose the authoritarian rule of the AKP party, entrenched since the 2017 constitutional referendum and now described by some international observers as in "a transition to a consolidated dictatorship" (Schenkkan 2025). In addition to street demonstrations, students organized academic boycotts, pausing university classes and activities in public and private universities.

The government responded with mass detentions, purges, and proscriptions against those who joined the protests, intensifying once again the necropolitical undercurrent of Turkey's political regime. Nearly two thousand people were arrested, including journalists who were covering the protest, and almost two hundred trials of mainly students are ongoing. Human Rights Watch has condemned the trials, highlighting their rushed process and mass scale, combined with the lack of evidence for criminal conduct, as undemocratic and arbitrary violations of the right to assemble (Human Rights Watch 2025). At the same time, many of those on trial, particularly women and LGBTI+ individuals, have testified that sexual harassment is systematically used as a form of police violence under detention. A social media campaign has drawn public attention to and sparked widespread criticism of this issue (Çatlak Zemin 2025a). However, police and government authorities have responded by targeting those who shared related posts with lawsuits and threats.

As arrests and mass trials were ongoing, performing arts students and dancers mobilized their art to organize solidarity campaigns (Birgün 2025; T24 2025). Footage from protests showed how dance once again fostered resilience and solidarity. A dancer dressed as a Sufi whirling dervish stood and whirled solo in front of the police; couples danced swing, polka, and ballroom dances; crowds moved with Turkish rap song lyrics; and halay and horon were at work whenever protesters held hands to resist, celebrate, and amplify their voices against the arrest of their democratically elected representatives.

### DANCING AGONISM

Protesters have worked hard to maintain their agonistic relationships in the fragile atmosphere of deep social and political polarization. Although protests were organized by the main opposition party, CHP, it was not only the CHP electorate who filled the streets. Photographs from the demonstrations capture a striking tableau: Kemalists, various factions of the Kurdish and leftist movements, ultranationalists, feminists—groups with divergent, even conflicting, political visions—temporarily coexisting in a shared resistance against the AKP’s rule. Yet the fractures within this uneasy alliance became starkly visible at times during these protests. In Ankara, groups of young men dressed in black, identified as nationalists, chanted slogans denigrating the imprisoned and isolated PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, many also displaying the Gray Wolves’ hand sign—explained in the opening scene of this book as an ultranationalist symbol. In Istanbul, protesting men similarly shouted racist and sexist slogans and carried offensive signs, actions that unsettled many demonstrators and prompted immediate pushback, with calls for greater solidarity across political differences. Feminists challenged the legitimacy of these groups, pointing out that their sexist, discriminatory, homophobic, and racist slogans in addition to lynching threats aimed to exclude women and *lubunya* from public spaces, rendering the streets unsafe for them to protest (Çatlak Zemin 2025b). In Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, and other cities, feminists announced that “women and *lubunya* are not the object of profanity but subject of resistance” (Çatlak Zemin 2025b), and these misogynist attitudes would not be enough to end the “strong stance and joyful resistance of women” (Kadın Savunma Ağı 2025). Femme bodies—through their intelligent acts, ephemeral interactions, and meaning-making processes—continue to challenge these efforts at denigration, invisibilization, and exclusion not only

to reveal the violent authoritarianism of the state but also to criticize fellow demonstrators when they fail to create inclusive and safe spaces for everyone joining the protest. Despite their incompatible political perspectives and practices, dissenters create alliances, form inclusive political platforms, and make a huge effort to act in solidarity against centralized state power. Dance—as a historical, transregional, and bodily connection between different grassroots movements—also continues to contribute to the creation of agonistic political spaces where nonviolent and nonhegemonic struggles can be nourished.

### IMPROVISATIONAL CHOREOGRAPHIC TACTICS

Unlike the 2010s, Turkey in the 2020s is mired in a deepening economic crisis and spiraling inflation, with a systematic repression of democratic rights and freedoms, creating a pervasive sense of hopelessness among youth from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Today's demonstrators were children during the Gezi resistance a decade ago, yet they have inherited its spirit, learning from the tactics used by earlier activists to move, organize, and connect with one another. The 2025 protests have also adopted and modified improvisational choreographic tactics against strategic maneuvers of the police and state authorities. During my fieldwork for this book in 2016 and 2017, protesters in Istanbul mainly focused on the spatial politics of *dispersal*. They experimented with how to create fugitive assemblies when the usual forms of public political assembly in major squares were banned. In the 2020s, dispersal is still used by activists as an improvisational tool against the centralized power of the police. But in addition, despite a protest ban and police disruptions, tens of thousands of people poured repeatedly into Saraçhane Square next to the Istanbul Municipality building in the historical peninsula, which served as the focal point of protests right after the mayor was taken into custody. Protesters are still exiled from the iconic Taksim Square. Their continuous effort to regain this place as a major space of dissenting activism is regularly met further police brutality, most recently on May Day 2025. Activists continue to disperse into street intersections and other areas in the city. At the same time, by gathering in large numbers at Saraçhane Square, a central site of labor-centered political movements in the 1960s—and a historical stage for the popular use of folk dancing in party politics (Bayraktar 2024)—they amplify the political history of Turkey's dissent.

In the 2010s, activists utilized *imprecision* as an improvisational tool to

blend and blur different folk dance components and encompass both masculine and feminine movement qualities of the staged folk dance choreography, establishing a public platform for challenging ethnic and gender norms. Sometimes, conventional codes of femininity were highlighted to critique the heteropatriarchy pervasive in state institutions, society, and many dissenting groups. The tactical use of imprecision also challenged rigid ethnic classifications by resisting institutionalized folk dance forms that associate precision and virtuosity with ethnic authenticity and national identity. Today's protesters are imprecise in their organized movement and performance techniques in different ways. In the 2020s, the work of blend and blur consists of combining traditional material with global popular culture. Soon after the Istanbul mayor was arrested, the surprising figure of the popular anime character Pikachu emerged from the protesting crowd in Antalya and was captured on camera while fleeing from a police attack (*New York Post* 2025). This instantly went viral on social media, where users remixed it into memes, GIFs, and digital posters. AI-generated representations of the Pikachu images also blurred the lines between reality and fabrication. The image spread far beyond Turkey, appearing in solidarity marches and new protests, such as in a Washington rally against the Trump administration and a rally in Tel Aviv against Netanyahu. The choice of Pikachu was not accidental. The protesters—many of whom are part of Gen Z and grew up in the digital age—understand the power of memetic symbols to carry substantive political critiques. Pikachu embodies qualities like energy, agility, and the ability to transform under pressure. This artistic activism blends the graphic clarity and exaggeration of anime with the immediacy and humor of street art. The tactic of imprecision continues to serve as a nonnormative form of successful attunement, aligning with radical creativity and speculation.

This book formulated the improvisational tactic of *embellishment* as an intervention in gendered body politics to contest heteropatriarchal mandates. By embellishing their bodies and their dances, women and LGBTI+ activists struggled not only against the AKP's Islamist, conservative, and neoliberal authoritarianism but also against heteropatriarchal discourses and practices among their allies on the Left. Strikingly, as mentioned above, the protests of March 2025 staged embellished masculinities, as groups of men performed anti-Kurdish, anti-queer, and anti-migrant positions; echoed masculinist slogans and phrases ignoring the multigender political actors in the crowd; and physically demonstrated masculine codes of power such as push-ups next to the police barricades. Women and *lubunya* protesters deci-

sively expressed their discomfort with and concerns about discrimination and safety in protests (Demir 2025).

Today's protesters also continue to *reassemble* songs, slogans, bodily gestures, props, and dances from different periods of Turkey's history of political activism to express their demands and combine these with their contemporary aesthetic tools of expression, including rap music, fashion, and global pop culture and gaming references. In reassembly, they performatively bring together various elements with local and global references, insert unfamiliar expressions into familiar compositions, juxtapose different components to create new relationships, and reconstruct gestures of the contemporary protest culture. Such complex reassembly work helps activists confuse the police during confrontations, counter online surveillance and censorship, and create new political meanings.

Protesters also keep borrowing, embellishing, and reassembling political symbols of the earlier decades of activism. For example, a protest sign in Istanbul modified the abbreviation of the 1970s left radical youth organization, Dev-Genç (Revolutionary Youth) to "Dev-GenZ," indicating Gen Z as the main actor in today's protests but also referencing the past struggles of youth as a powerful political actor. By using one tactic at a time or multiple tactics simultaneously, protesters continue to move critically and creatively in public space.

## FEMME POLITICS

Dance and dancing bodies matter in many parts of the world where people live under the authoritarian states and the weight of war and conflict. In some cases, professional female dancers position their knowledge about the body and movement against the occupation by another state. For example, Ukrainian dance teachers and contemporary dancers taught in their communities bodily defense against the injuries and fatalities of war: bodily and mind-body awareness, healthy ways to carry out everyday movements under stress, and how to use the body effectively in fighting or under conditions of physical constraint (Kourlas 2022). They call this "tactical choreography."

Dancing in protest has become synonymous with resistance to authoritarian regimes. In 2022, following the killing in Tehran of twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Jina Amini by the regime after she was detained for allegedly violating Iran's mandatory hijab law, women took to the streets in

transnational solidarity to protest Amini's murder and patriarchal state control over women's bodies. Animated by the popular Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* (Women, Life, Freedom), indexing women's importance in the Kurdish movement, women chant, sing, and dance in public spaces, actions outlawed in many places as indecent, once again raising their voice and moving their bodies against the arbitrariness of masculinist and sexist brutality (Kazemi 2022). Women have continued to dance regardless of Iranian authorities' persecution and forced public confession strategies (Walfisz 2023). These incidents continue to spark protests, where women are seen dancing in solidarity against gendered politics of oppression. Iranian women are not alone in their dancing protests. In 2019, the Chilean feminist collective Las Thesis performed a mass choreography to their song "A Rapist in Your Path" (Un Violador en Tu Camino), targeting the use of sexual violence by the Chilean police and accusing the government of being complicit in this violence. Their song and choreography were reiterated numerous times across the world, including in Turkey's parliament. In 2020 in Poland, striking women danced the rave in the streets to increase solidarity and support for their protest against the government's antiabortion laws (Lula 2020). In today's world, with highly misogynic and authoritarian governments stretching from the United States to Turkey, from India to Russia, femme politics of dignity visibilize how violence and oppression are deeply gendered and why women's struggles should be at the center of democratization movements. Dancing bodies create new spaces of femme politics and mobilize public opposition through organized collective action.

#### POTENTIAL ACADEMIC AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

This research registers different folk dance styles, mainly within the larger category of horon and halay but also touching on *çiftetelli*, *zeybek*, *hora*, and other dance forms, in mostly urban political protests. While I have zoomed in on the historical reconstruction and dissenting reassembly of horon between urban and rural contexts (Chapters 1 and 5), I also discussed the political meanings, social memory, and complex embodiments of halay (Chapters 2 and 4). Questioning their deliberate and tactical deployment to negotiate political positionings (Chapter 3), I pointed to danced possibilities of antiauthoritarian solidarity and alliance. This book did not aim to extensively analyze one folk dance genre in the making of social, cultural, and political communities, which could be another fruitful research project. Halay has a great potential for this kind of research due to its importance in Kurdish political

movements and social life, symbolizing a bodily manifestation of collective agency, interdependence, peace, and rich cultural heritage. There are several Kurdish halay styles associated with Kurdish resistance, such as *bablekan* and *şexani*, with some recreated in the past decades, like *guerrilla halay* (*govenda gerila* in Kurdish), in symbolic opposition to the Turkish government and for multiple practical purposes, such as bodily training, collective harmony, and emotional support. Recently, important research was published on Kurdish dance in the diaspora (H. Şentürk 2021) and gender and community roles performed through Kurdish halay (Islán Fernandez 2024). Additional valuable fieldwork material gathered as part of dissertation research in Turkey's conservatories is waiting to be analyzed for a comprehensive study on halay and its political, social, and historical contexts.

At a protest in Istanbul, I heard that horon is also danced in support of the Kurdish armed struggle against ISIS in Rojava. A videoclip on YouTube (Anony Kurds 2020) that was popular among activists in 2017 shows a group of people calling themselves the Rojava Internationalist Freedom Troop (Rojava Enternasyonalist Özgürlük Taburu) dancing the horon on the roof of a building in Kobanî, a city largely destroyed during the ISIS siege between September 2014 and March 2015. They wear military uniforms, and their faces are covered with balaclavas predominantly in red and black. On the roof, a large satellite dish painted with the sign of a hammer and sickle drawn in red forms the dancers' background. All other buildings around this terrace are demolished. A few children hold hands on the ground below and jump playfully, imitating the dancers on the roof. The music is the "Hopa Hemşin" song of Marsis, a band from the Black Sea that plays regional songs with rock tunes, and provides the dance with a dynamic quality. This particular style of horon indexes the leftist cultural history of the eastern Black Sea town of Hopa, the only town in the region to host a pro-Kurdish HDP party office.

When I asked horon enthusiasts to interpret the dancers' movements for me, some did not want to answer my questions. Others abruptly covered my phone screen with their hands to prevent passersby from seeing the clip for fear of being associated with "terrorists." A few agreed to interpret the dance for me, but with varied and often contradictory readings of the dancers' movements. For some, the swaying motion of the arms at a particular moment during the dance indicated the dancers' ethnic and cultural background belonging to the Black Sea region. Others looked at the wrists to see if they were moving inward or outward, letting the whole hand dangle freely. Others speculated on the dancers' gender based on the execution of the jump. These meticulous interpretations of complex dance movements showed once again

the discrepancies in and debates around folk dance authenticity. The popularity of the horon video among activists, some of whom learned this dance through the video on YouTube, also demonstrated the importance of the circulation of folk dance beyond the borders of Turkey to have an impact within the country. While this book looked at how folk dance is reproduced to create political communities locally in Istanbul and transregionally between the Black Sea region and the cities in the west, future research on transnational dissemination, cultural histories, reproduction, and repurposing of specific folk dance genres would advance our understanding of how dances circulate meanings across the borders of nation-states.

This potential can also be seen in my theorization of dispersal as a diasporic movement. In opposition to the hegemonic national unity discourse, dispersal aims to irregulate and interrupt unity in the national public space. The violent maneuvers of the state forcefully disperse activists, whereas tactical dispersal converts this act of violence into a positive political action of networking and connectivity. My theorization of the term joins both Arendt's ([1958] 1966) conceptualization of "separation," which she formulates as a hegemonic act of isolation, and the work of performance theorists (e.g., Gilroy 1994; Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 1994; George-Graves 2014), who have approached the term as a diasporic act of connection and interconnectivity. Further work on this choreographic concept could enable us to study dispersed migrant dancers and dance communities to highlight possibilities for interconnect-edness outside Turkey.

This study aimed to document a particular time in Turkey's contemporary history and used archival sources and historical analysis and argumentation to understand contemporary actions by activists. Comprehensive archival research on nineteenth- and twentieth-century dance history in the Ottoman and Turkish states could significantly support the ethnography and interpretative framework of this book. Particularly, in-depth research on folk dance education and dissemination starting from the 1930s until the establishment of the first folk dance department in the 1980s would significantly improve our knowledge about the pedagogy, technique, and repertoire of folk dance through networks of students, urban migrants, and teachers as well as changing institutional structures and policies on dance education.

Protesters' counterhegemonic improvisational tactics create a flexible mode of assembly using the cultural, political, and historical particularities of Turkish folk dance and gendered body politics. These tools that enable bodily negotiations in collective movements have a promising potential to be explored choreographically and artistically in the studio space. Artis-

tic research questions how dancers take immediate decisions in consideration of individuality, group dynamics, collective movement, and external impulses. Each of the choreographic strategies and tactics suggested in this book—precision, dispersal, imprecision, embellishment, and reassembly—can be developed through choreographic practice with dancers and dance students to work on improvisational questions such as changing leadership, forms of bodily negotiation, adaptability, flexibility, synchronicity, and group statements while communicating through complex syncopated rhythmic structures. In the past years, I have been conducting studio practice, where participants were invited to explore the improvisational principles of different choreographic tactics while learning the movements, rhythmic complexity, and cultural history of a given folk dance, coming from the ad hoc repertoire I observed in contemporary protests. Through practicing a specific movement vocabulary and improvisational compositional systems, dancers learn from each other in a circle formation, understand dance's cultural specificity but also its potential for a broadened political connection, challenge themselves through rhythmic layering and polyrhythmic embodiment, search for connection in a group while remaining aware of their individual decision-making, and, last but not least, examine dynamics for supportive leadership and followership in collective action. I believe that these aesthetic and artistic discussions would disseminate multiple stories and struggles of activists and femme space-making in Turkey, and also give new lives to their movements, music, and words in a process of artistic research and transmission.

Throughout the book, as the reader follows dancer activists contesting mainly the state but also one another, moving through failure and victory in the precarious political climate and intensifying necropolitical environment of Turkey, it is my hope that their words and movements encourage those struggling elsewhere against patriarchal and authoritarian control, and that their choreographic tactics of dissenting dance-making will be circulated and deployed beyond this book.



# Notes

## Introduction

1. The CHP was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and ruled as Turkey's sole party until 1946. It played a pivotal role in establishing Kemalism as the dominant state ideology, articulated around six core principles: nationalism, secularism, populism, statism, revolutionism, and Westernization. Mustafa Kemal's state-centered republicanism was upheld by a constellation of military, political, and intellectual elites. Over time, Kemalist republicanism demonstrated an ideological rigidity; in the name of preserving national unity, successive governments employed authoritarian measures that excluded liberal, socialist, conservative, and Islamic oppositions. The resurgence of political Islam in the late 1980s and the electoral success of the AKP in the 2000s further intensified the ideological divide between Kemalists and Islamists (see Turnaoğlu 2017, 1–2, 252).

2. I apply Zeynep Korkman's terminology on secularism (*laiklik*), which refers to "a historically state-sponsored modernist nationalist ideology and social engineering project" that has shaped social and political subjectivity in Turkey (Korkman 2023, 225). My use of the term secular likewise refers to individuals who may identify as Muslims or believers but for whom religion does not serve as a central reference in everyday life.

3. The 2017 referendum, which took place under a state of emergency, resulted in a hard-fought and narrow victory for the AKP: 24.3 million voters (51.2 percent) cast their ballot for yes to the presidential system, and 23.1 million voters (48.8 percent) voted no (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017, 13).

4. The Turkish alphabet does not include the letter *q*, and accordingly the English word "queer" is often included in Turkish LGBTIQ+ statements and written documents as *kuir*, taking the English word *queer* as a calque and replacing the English *q* with a *k*. LGBTIQ+ activist news outlets in Turkey typically use a modified version of the international abbreviation, namely *LGBTI+ ve Kuir*, sometimes dropping the word *kuir* because the term "LGBTI+" signifies all those with diverse sexual identities, including queer. In this text, I therefore use the term LGBTI+ to indicate the English LGBTIQ+. Similarly, I sometimes use the terms "women," "femme," and "women+" interchangeably to refer to the diversity inherent in the category of women.

5. Known as Pippa Bacca, performance artist Guiseppa Pasqualino di Marineo was on tour to promote world peace, symbolically wearing a wedding dress and hitchhik-

ing from Milan to Jerusalem, when she was raped and murdered in Gebze, Yalova, in 2008 (Povoledo 2008).

6. The Rabia sign was invented in 2013 to symbolize the political motto of the AKP, which originally read *Tek devlet, tek din, tek millet, tek bayrak* (One state, one religion, one nation, one flag) and currently reads *Tek millet, tek bayrak, tek vatan, tek devlet* (One nation, one flag, one homeland, one state). The sign was also used by pro-Morsi protesters during the 2013 protests in Egypt's Rabia al-Adawiya Square (Perlmutter 2013).

7. *Lubunya* is a Turkey-specific term identifying those who visibilize their femme and queer subjectivities in public space (see Chapter 4).

## Chapter 1

1. Women's outerwear in the public sphere of the Ottoman Empire evolved in response to political and social transformations. In the classical and early modern periods (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), the primary outer garment worn by urban Muslim women was the *ferace*, a long, loose outer robe, which was complemented with a *yaşmak*, a two-part head cover. As state policies encouraged women's participation in public space in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the *ferace* was gradually supplanted by the more concealing outer garment known as the *çarşaf*, which was combined with a facial veil, the *peçe* (Os 2013, 213; also see Faroqui and Neumann 2004).

2. Ballet, which was introduced to the Ottoman palace in the nineteenth century, was taught in private schools in the early years of the republic. Dame Ninette de Valois, a famous ballerina and ballet teacher and the founder of the British Royal Ballet, was invited to Istanbul to establish the National Ballet School in 1947–1948. In 1950, this school was integrated into the State Conservatory in Ankara.

3. Originally founded in 1914 as the Darülbeydi (House of Beauty), it was later renamed the Darüelhan (House of Melodies) in 1917. After the inauguration of the Turkish Republic, it underwent restructuring in 1925 and became the Istanbul Conservatory (İstanbul Konservatuvarı). It was renamed the Istanbul Municipal Conservatory (İstanbul Belediye Konservatuvarı) in 1944. In 1981, the post-coup military government established the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu) to centralize education, which integrated conservatories into universities under Law No. 2547. Consequently, the Istanbul Municipal Conservatory became part of Istanbul University State Conservatory (İstanbul Üniversitesi Devlet Konservatuvarı) in 1986.

4. The Istanbul Conservatory's field collections were compiled in fifteen notebooks (*defter*). The first two notebooks (*Chansons Populaires Turques* 1926) consisted of songs sent from Anatolian towns in response to the conservatory's survey call. From the third notebook onward, the conservatory's fieldwork expeditions in Anatolia in 1926, 1927, 1928, and 1929 were documented. The first seven notebooks were published in the Ottoman alphabet. Starting from the eighth notebook or the third field expedition (Halk Türküleri 1929), all songs were published in the Latin alphabet under the

name of Istanbul Conservatory Publications (İstanbul Konservatuvarı Neşriyatı). The fourth expedition of the Conservatory, the 1929 Black Sea expedition, was registered in the thirteenth notebook. Up to 1931, fourteen notebooks were published. Adnan Saygun (1937) added the fifteenth and last notebook, containing transcriptions of Black Sea melodies.

From 1937 to 1952, the Ankara State Conservatory conducted extensive field research, with seventeen collection trips to 246 settlements across Anatolia, involving over two thousand performers and resulting in a large compilation of song transcriptions, recordings, and other documents (Kaya 2014, 21).

5. Founded in 1927 as the Anatolian Folklore Society (Anadolu Halk Bilgisi Derneği).

6. Founded in 1912 by the nationalist Young Turks (Genç Türkler), Turkish Hearths worked to raise awareness of Turkish cultural heritage, language, and race and disseminated ideas of national independence through its branches across Anatolia after World War I (1914–1918). Many members of this organization were educated state employees, including İsmet İnönü, the president of the CHP in the one-party state and the second president of Turkey (1938–1950), who succeeded Mustafa Kemal.

7. Ulaş Özdemir's study (2019) on the life and works of Kurdish musician and revolutionary Koçgirili Alişer, who was accused of being a "traitor" in the official documents and popular newspapers of the 1930s, shows how his songs circulated among his supporters in prison, creating lasting impacts on Turkey's popular music history and proving the complicated nature of prison collections.

8. The 1965 state ballet production of *Çeşmebaşı* is a landmark example of such mixture. The title refers to the fountain typically found in a Turkish village center, with the ballet featuring Turkish folk stories, shadow play characters, and folk music instruments. It toured internationally, representing Turkey in cultural diplomacy (Başar 2022). Fashion modeling also served as a state-sponsored performance that fused nationalism with Western modernity, casting women's bodies as symbols of the secular republic. Through fashion shows, the state mobilized cultural and artistic production as soft diplomacy, projecting a distinctively Turkish yet Europeanized image to both domestic and international audiences (R. E. Altınay 2013).

9. In another account, her name is claimed to have been Eliza Ölçüyan (Berberyan 2016).

10. Such changing discourses can be seen in the alternative social and regional categorization of horon in the 1940s (Çilingiroğlu 1949, 43–44).

11. According to Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, fourteen thousand village names were changed to Turkish through 1985 (Ölmez and Yenihayat 1985, 58).

12. In his essay for the same 1961 folk dance festival, Tahir Alangu (1983) notes that women's prominence on stage did not reflect actual practices. He argued that coed dancing was historically rare and limited mostly to Yörüks, Caucasus migrants, and isolated Black Sea communities, and therefore criticized the growing number of women and mixed-gender dances in festivals as stage arrangements that distorted tradition.

13. For example, female students' hair had to be either short or pulled back in braids or ponytails. Short hair was preferred because it fit well into the officially promoted hygienic image of the "modern woman" (Z. Arat 2000, 168). Makeup and any headwear or accessories were forbidden. "Plain uniforms were complemented with dark color stockings and included hats that resembled those of military officers. Any reflection of femininity was scrutinized and often resulted in a scolding or an insult, if not punishment" (169). In some cases, the teacher wiped girls' cheeks in public, mistaking their natural color for makeup (170).

14. Genç's horon is based on Maçka Soldoy village's horon style and aesthetics, marked by small, light, and quick steps (A. S. Genç 2018).

15. This understanding of the authentic echoes the standardized procedure of folk-dance collection at universities. Barbaros Ünlü notes that current folk dance collection projects incorporate into the repertoire the oldest accessible forms of the dances by conducting and analyzing fieldwork recordings of performances by elderly dancers (2009, 56).

16. Similar dynamics can be observed in the *âşık* tradition, referring to oral poetry and music performed with a *bağlama* lute. Studies drawing on the experiences of female *âşıklar* in the second half of the twentieth century (S. Çınar 2008) reveal how women have been peripheralized in mainstream music historiography and cultural narratives. While men are typically regarded as the primary performers of the *bağlama*, women have often been relegated to the role of vocal accompanists (Eroğlu et al. 2017, 148). This presupposition is closely tied to gender-based limitations, including restricted access to the master-apprentice tradition, limited opportunities to perform in mixed-gender settings, and constraints on women's ability to travel (135).

## Chapter 2

1. Political scientist Ayşen Uysal (2017) examines Turkey's social movement repertoire and finds that most protests since the 1990s have been in the form of press statements (*basın açıklaması*), often accompanied by marching and occasionally sit-ins. Provisions in the 1983 law governing public meetings and protests (Meetings and Demonstrations Law No. 2911) significantly curtailed the right to peaceful assembly. Press statements as a form of protest in Turkey were "invented" in the lacunae in this law, because they do not require permission prior to the event. By asserting that they are simply reading a statement to the press rather than demonstrating, activists can defend their actions in court and often secure acquittals.

2. Digital participation is seen as complementary to physical engagement in the protest (Aydemir 2011, 378). Mobile, web, and social media communication technologies have decentralized the dissemination of information and hybridized digital and physical spaces used at protests (Castells 2015; Gerbaudo 2012; de Souza e Silva 2006). For example, during the Gezi Park protests, social media tools and digital activism methods such as creating popular hashtags (Balaban and Güzel 2015) facilitated participants' mobilization and organization in urban space. Given the absence of free

mass media, social media also filled the gap in freedom of expression (Vatikiotis and Yörük 2016, in Suren 2019, 41).

3. I developed this argument in an earlier article through an in-depth engagement with Hannah Arendt's conceptualizations of politics, action, and appearance (Bayraktar 2019).

4. The Atatürk Cultural Center, initially opened as Istanbul Cultural Palace in 1969, reopened in 1978 after a fire. Debates over its fate in the 2000s led to its restoration in 2008 before its eventual demolition in 2018. Rebuilt between 2019 and 2021, it now stands opposite Taksim Mosque, constructed from 2017 to 2021. The mosque, Taksim Square's tallest structure, symbolically overshadows the Republic Monument and Atatürk Cultural Center, landmarks of Kemalist secularism.

5. Gülmen started her sit-in on November 9, and Semih Özakça, an educator, joined her on November 23, 2016, to protest their and other civil servants' dismissals via emergency decree, eventually turning their action into a hunger strike. They wore red vests emblazoned with the words "I want my job and students back." Their hunger strike lasted 324 days, during which time they were repeatedly taken into custody, hospitalized, and released. Despite having mobilized substantial public support, they were not reinstated in their jobs. Gülmen was arrested in 2020 and sentenced to ten years in prison in 2022.

6. Ruhi Su was born in Van in 1912 and never knew his parents. He was named Mehmet and was sent to Adana, a town in southern Turkey, to be adopted by a poor Turkish family. However, the family had to flee due to the occupation of Adana by British and French armies after World War I. Subsequently, Mehmet was sent to Dar-ül Eytam, an orphanage in Adana that had been opened in 1909 for Armenian children orphaned during the April 1909 Adana massacre, during which an estimated twenty to twenty-five thousand Armenians were killed in urban riots (Suny 2015).

7. The June 7, 2015, election marked a turning point in Turkey, as the HDP surpassed the 10 percent electoral threshold, a barrier introduced after the 1980 coup to limit parliamentary representation for smaller parties. However, in the snap election on November 1, called by President Erdoğan after a hung parliament failed to form a coalition, the HDP retained its parliamentary presence but lost significant seats. Meanwhile, the AKP increased its vote share to nearly 50 percent and regained a parliamentary majority with 317 seats out of 550. Although this fell short of the supermajority needed to unilaterally amend the constitution, it revived discussions on presidentialism and constitutional reform (Bargu 2019b).

### Chapter 3

1. The Hemşin in Turkey often refer to their language as *Hamşetsna*, a term also used in language teaching materials. For consistency with international scholarship, I use *Homshetsi* in this book.

2. In 2014, an additional paragraph was added to Article 11 of Law No. 2911, the 1983 Meeting and Demonstrations Law, allowing police officers to legally and visibly record

protesters' voices and appearances during protests. These recordings and visuals serve to identify suspects and provide evidence of offenses.

3. The song "Keçê Kurdan" was featured by Kurdish singer Aynur Doğan in 2004 on her album of the same name, produced by Kalan Music, an independent record label company that archives and supports Turkey's musical heritage outside of the canon. The album was banned with the accusation of propagating the Kurdish armed struggle and was removed from music markets in 2005 (CNN Türk 2005). The ban was lifted in 2009, but the album continued to be excluded in mainstream music markets. As a result of the ban, the song became symbolic among dissenting activists and was played frequently, particularly during women's protests.

#### *Chapter 4*

1. In 1988, the building took the name of the mayor who broke ground for the venue in 1948 and became the Lütfi Kırdar Sport and Exhibition Hall. During Kırdar's mayoralty, French architect Henri Prost was invited to devise the city's urban planning (1936–1948) based on European standards. The exhibition hall, open-air theater, and Gezi Park were planned as an urban cultural hub.

2. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, "revolutionary" signified both various factions of radical leftist movements and a radical leftist political subjectivity, as well as certain forms of embodiment associated with it, which this chapter investigates.

3. To prevent Soviet geopolitical expansion in Europe, the Truman Doctrine (1947) outlined an American foreign policy in support of "democracies against authoritarianism." It was expanded to include Turkey and Greece to prevent these countries from forming alliances with the USSR. Turkey, concerned about Soviet expansion, also sought to develop closer relations with the United States.

4. Workers' daily life conditions, forms of oppression, and resistance to capitalism were commonly highlighted, yet leftist artists and intellectuals might have different opinions on how to depict these themes (M. Belge 1977). Leftist female artists particularly highlighted women's conditions and criticized the patriarchal perspective and the commodification of the female body. For example, Gülsün Karamustafa's 1977 May Day illustration portraying a woman worker continuously sewing a red flag offered a feminist perspective, intersecting with gender and labor (Karamustafa 1977).

5. Dostlar Tiyatrosu (Friends Theater) was founded in 1969 by Genco Erkal and Mehmet Akan to research, experiment, and create "progressivist-socialist art." The theater company had different units, such as the HASAD contemporary folk dance troupe and Dostlar Korosu (Friends Choir music ensemble under the leadership of Ruhi Su). These two professional groups combined Western modern music and drama techniques and traditional arts of Anatolia (Sözen 1987), whereas the İşçi Kolu (Worker's Branch) performed theatre pieces together with workers.

6. In this context, "self-criticism" refers to a practice of the leftist tradition in which group members evaluate their individual acts and everyday relationships in terms of moral principles and rules defined by the group.

7. Used in rural towns and villages to carry everyday products on an animal's back, a *heybe* is a handmade sack made of cotton or wool, typically with two pockets.

8. In her research on a women's prison, sociologist İlkey Savcı (2004) observed various courses offered to female inmates, including folk dance courses. In her interviews, female prisoners expressed their enthusiasm for folk dance and music courses, which they believed would help “uplift their spirits” (193). Savcı found that performing arts courses enabled both competitive interactions and the cultivation of forms of solidarity and provided unique opportunities for sociability, as they were open to both political prisoners and other inmates.

9. Özkan (1986) elaborates that these military marches (including Ottoman military band music, *Mehter Marşı*) were played at such high volumes that the only way to sleep for prisoners was to sing the marches out loud while in bed.

10. “Acousmatic” refers to a sound with no visible source (Ristani 2020, 277–78).

11. KAOS GL is an LGBTI+ news portal that has produced participatory journalistic content since 2007 (see <https://kaosgl.org>). Access to the KAOS GL website was blocked, and its social media accounts were shut down in the summer of 2025. These restrictions remain in place into 2026.

## Chapter 5

1. Both the Turkish word *dik* and its Pontic Greek version *tik* (τίκ) imply the perpendicular body. In an interview, Alexandros Kevrekidis, a second-generation Pontian person in Greece, defined many variations of *tik* horon: the *Tonya tik* and *Machuka tik* refer to the styles performed in towns surrounding Trabzon city, whereas *tik omal* qualifies the dancing body as smooth and calm (Thessaloniki, August 9, 2017), highlighting a variety of *dik horon* dance styles.

2. Starting from the 1950s, tea cultivation, which spread as small-scale family farming through state-supported economic policies, became a significant area of production in the region and was relatively successful in preventing migration from rural areas to major cities. Until the 1980s, the state monopolized the sector by purchasing tea from producers and processing it. From the 1980s onward, with the rise of neo-liberal economic policies, private tea factories increased, and producers' security in selling their crops weakened. Additionally, the arrival of seasonal agricultural workers from Georgia, Azerbaijan, and central Asia led to the formation of new classes.

3. The Green Party was shut down by the Constitutional Court in 1994 on paperwork technicalities and reemerged in 2008 to call for continuous antinuclear actions until such time as Turkey's first AKP-backed nuclear power plant project in Akkuyu was canceled (Hürriyet 2008). It merged with the Equality and Democracy Party (Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi) as the Green Left Party (Yeşiller ve Sol Gelecek Partisi) in 2012, and became a participant in the Peoples' Democratic Congress. The party then split and reemerged in 2016 and 2020, respectively, to face resistance to being registered as a party by the Ministry of Interior on renewed grounds of paperwork issues.

In the 2023 parliamentary election, members of the HDP ran on the Green Left Party list because of a threat of a ban.

4. Small HEPPs are unlike conventional dams in that “they lack a reservoir in which water is collected” and “their install capacity usually does not exceed 10 MW” (Erensü 2016, cited in Evren 2022, 28). A small hydropower plant involves kilometers-long pipes to capture and then release water after it passes through turbines (Evren 2022). As of 2024, Turkey operates 764 HEPPs, of which 617 are stream-type (Enerji Ekonomisi 2025). In comparison, 246 HEPPs were active in the Black Sea region as of 2021 (Bianet 2021), highlighting the region’s significant share in the national hydro-electric infrastructure.

5. The AKP won 44.6 percent of the votes in the eastern Black Sea region in the 2002 general elections (D. Yıldırım 2016, 25) and remains the strongest party in the region.

6. Couplet improvisation is a common mode in Turkey’s music-making cultures and given names such as the *düzme* (arranging), *giydirme* (dressing), *aşk atmak* (throwing ritual songs), or *yakıştırma* (fitting). My analysis here is based on how the genre is executed at public events and protests and on its emic vocabulary of meaning-making as explained to me by its practitioners.

7. Since 1983, the Turkish environmental impact assessment code ensconced in the Environment Law No. 2872 has undergone numerous amendments, each time introducing significant regulatory changes that favor development project investors. With each amendment, the report quality has diminished, turning the assessment into little more than a bureaucratic process. The ministries responsible for the environment and forestry have likewise undergone significant changes. From the early 2000s, ministries related to the environment and urban planning were renamed, merged, and split several times. These institutional shifts resulted in frequent changes to the ministry’s scope of authority, leading to a lack of continuity in environmental governance, where decisions made by one administration were often revised, neglected, or reversed by its successor.

8. The author, Zafer Şahin (2016), a pro-AKP columnist for the newspaper *Yeni Asır*, claimed that German foundations in Turkey not only mobilized environmentalists against the Bergama gold mine but also cooperated with the alleged Fethullah Gülen terror organization, which was accused of orchestrating the 2016 coup attempt. At the time, the mine was operated by Koza Gold, a company owned by the İpek family, whose assets were later confiscated by the Turkish government due to their alleged ties to the Gülen movement. Following the coup attempt, the company’s shares were transferred to the Turkish Sovereign Wealth Fund (Varlık Fonu) as part of the broader state seizure of Gülen-affiliated holdings.

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